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"Well, she was a woman": Female characters in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson

Weil, Eric A., Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1993

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"WELL, SHE WAS A WOMAN": FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE POETRY OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

by

Eric A. Weil

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1993

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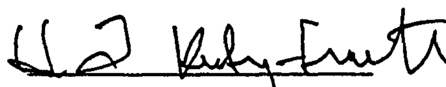

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Herbert W. Weil.

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ABBREVIATIONS

For the long poems, the first reference will be designated by prefixing *CP* before the page number, and additional references will be designated with only the page number. For the short poems, all quotations are taken from the *Collected Poems*, unless otherwise indicated. Where there may be some confusion about the sources of Robinson's letters, I have used the other abbreviations listed below.

CP Robinson, Edwin Arlington. *Collected Poems*. New York: MacMillan, 1937.

EB Cary, Richard, ed. *Edwin Arlington Robinson's Letters to Edith Brower*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1968.

SL Torrence, Ridgely, ed. *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson*. New York: MacMillan, 1940.

US Sutcliffe, Denham, ed. *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry de Forest Smith 1890-1905*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1947.

WEIL, ERIC A., Ph.D. "Well, She was a Woman": Female Characters in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. (1993) Directed by H.T. Kirby-Smith. 243 pp.

American poetry began to change during the early modernist period, becoming less generalized and less sentimental in its portrayal of people and the situations they encounter in daily life. E.A. Robinson was one poet whose characterization of women demonstrates a variety of notions about the status and roles of women in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

Over 65 poems, including all but one of the book-length poems, involve women in some way. The first half of this dissertation is a socio-historical feminist investigation of literary, personal, and social influences that shaped Robinson's views of women, addressing nineteenth-century expectations for women and their expression in the magazine poetry, Robinson's friendships with women, and his wide reading in Victorian novels. The second half groups poems according to the roles in which Robinson portrayed the female characters. Chapter VI treats single women and Chapter VII treats mothers. Chapter VIII is the longest chapter, as it explores Robinson's women in relationships with men. Robinson's several widows appear in the poems discussed in Chapter IX. Chapter X expands on Robinson's capacity for sympathy for the disrespected and the despairing -- prostitutes and suicides. Chapter XI examinies the poems with biblical, imaginary, and allegorical women figures.

It would be a mistake to hypothesize "progress" in Robinson's attitude toward women coincident with the women's movement of the 1890-

1930 period. Some poems exhibit the prevalent stereotypes of women and their roles from the stock literature of the 1890's (and these stereotypes are not limited to his poems written in that period). However, many of Robinson's poems, from throughout his career, portray women in roles as individuals, fresh and unique characters whose struggles remain a valuable indicator of women's concerns in a patriarchal society.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"To any man, woman, or critic who will cut the pages -- I have done the top."
-- epigraph to The Torrent and the Night Before
Robinson's first book, 1896

With these words, Edwin Arlington Robinson invites a wide audience to enter the world of Tilbury Town and its environs, a world of strugglers and failures and generally lost individuals wondering if they can make any connection at all with other human beings. The invitation is somewhat ironic, in that apparently none of the 312 copies of the first edition of The Torrent and the Night Before was sold but all were given away. Robinson sent them to friends, family members, editors, critics, and fellow poets at his own expense, simply to get some reaction to his work. The critical response was meager but generally favorable, and his career spanned another forty years, including periods of constant rejection and privation, labels of both "too experimental" and "old fashioned," and finally the accolades of both critics and general readers along with enough money to discharge his debts and to live comfortably. He persevered. That Robinson included women in his hoped-for audience is important for reasons beyond the fact that women

made up the majority of the poetry-reading public of the 1890's. Although Robinson's male characters have garnered more attention because their names serve as the titles for many poems both long and short, his female characters also deserve attention, not simply because a few of them also lend their names to titles, but because Robinson included women as well as men when he wrote poems describing the difficulties of modern life.

Over the years, scholars and critics have disagreed considerably regarding E.A. Robinson's views toward women and his depictions of women in his poems. While Robinson is generally given credit for creating realistic characters caught in the shallowness of materialism or in an artistic or psychological Slough of Despond, some reviewers during his lifetime and some scholars since have faulted him for the narrow range of problems and situations afforded to female characters in the poems. The purpose of this dissertation is not to take sides in this debate, but to point out that Robinson's characterization of women demonstrates a variety of notions about the status and proper roles of women in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. I believe that in a sense, both sides are correct. Robinson poems can be found that exhibit some of the worst stereotypes of women and their roles from the stock literature of the 1890's (and these stereotypes are not limited to his poems written in that period); and Robinson poems also can be found that exhibit women in roles as individuals in the modernist era of 1900-30, when some notable rights victories were won. In other words, it would be a mistake to hypothesize "progress" in Robinson's attitude toward women coincident with the women's movement. This dissertation will not

be arranged chronologically, but according to the various roles played by the female characters. It is not surprising that through most of the twentieth century, criticism of Robinson's work focused on the male characters instead of the female; the majority of critics as well as main characters were male, and modes of inquiry that paid little attention to gender were privileged, such as biographical criticism and later the New Criticism. Furthermore, no significant studies of Robinson's female characters have appeared since the growth of feminist literary criticism in the 1970's, and it is time for a fresh angle of inquiry into the poems.

Two reviews from late in Robinson's career exemplify aspects of the critical split in responding to the poems. In his 1929 review of Robinson's Collected Poems, Henry Morton Robinson wrote that any three of Roman Bartholow, Dionysus in Doubt, The Man Who Died Twice, Tristram, and Cavender's House "would form a trio of masculine studies without parallel in twentieth-century poetry" (60). H.M. Robinson praised E.A. Robinson for the psychological depths explored in the male characters: "The poet anatomizes the psychic flaw that dooms men to suffering and defeat. He is apparently interested in men only; in the dramatis personae of his poems, no woman is accorded a principal part" (60). The reviewer was both incorrect and correct; Gabrielle Bartholow, the two Isolts, and Laramie Cavender certainly do suffer at least as much as their husbands do -- two are murdered, one commits suicide, and one is abandoned by her husband -- yet, the women are not the main focus of the poems' psychological actions, and the narratives are developed only momentarily through their points of view. H.M. Robinson did not

consider the emphasis on the male psyches alone a deficiency in the poet's productions, as he might have, considering the emotional trials through which the women also are driven.

On the other hand, Eda Lou Walton, while agreeing that E.A. Robinson slights his female characters, disagreed strongly about the relative importance of these alleged slights. In her review of Talifer in 1933, she castigated Robinson for never developing a female character as rounded as some of the male characters: "Never, so far as I can recall, does Robinson use a woman's mind as the sensitive lens whereon the scene and action of a poem and their inner meaning are inscribed" (415). Walton's memory and attack are most accurate if we consider only the long narrative poems (although even these generate some debate, as will be seen later), but she ignored some of Robinson's finest short and medium-length poems when she asserted, "Obviously, he does not consider women the proper vehicles for the interpretation of such speculative and synthetic philosophizing as he, the artist, must present" (415). I would say that obviously Robinson did use women's minds as interpretive lenses in such poems as "Rahel to Varnhagen," "An Evangelist's Wife," and "Aunt Imogen."

One of Robinson's most anthologized poems, "Aunt Imogen" provides a single case of adjustments in Robinson's concept of female character. The poem is unusual in that it underwent some revisions between initial publications and its final form. It is also unusual because these revisions demonstrate a somewhat more enlightened attitude toward women. "Aunt Imogen" appeared in Robinson's third volume of poems, Captain Craig, published first in 1902 and reissued in 1903. The book was

published yet again in 1915. There were no revisions in the text of the poem between the original publication and 1915 (in fact, it appears that the same plates were used), but there were significant revisions between 1915 and the first edition of Robinson's Collected Poems in 1921. These revisions demonstrate that Robinson became less interested in essentializing his female characters, or generalizing about the behavior and ideas of all women from the characterization of one woman. Essentializing characters meant molding them to fit the poetry-reading public's expectation that a woman belongs only in the home (a expectation he always said he was unable to fulfill in the first place[1]); rather, he tried to make both Aunt Imogen and her sister Jane stand as individuals.

The most important revisions were made in the third stanza. The following nine lines occur in the versions from 1902 to 1915:

> Even her big bewhiskered brother Giles
> Had called her in his letter, not long since,
> A superannuated pretty girl;
> And she, to do the thing most adequate,
> Had posted back sarcastic sheets enough
> To keep the beast in humor for a month.
> But her sister Jane -- the mother of little Jane,
> Sylvester, and Young George -- may, after all,
> Have known; for she was -- well, she was a woman.
> (CC, 1915, 110-11)

What Jane is presumed to have known in these lines, simply through the fact of her womanhood, is Imogen's feeling of incompleteness at not having children of her own. The brother's letter is clearly condescending in its assertion of Imogen's appearance as an insufficient

cause for her continued maiden state and in its implication that all good things come to those who are patient. The "little sonnet-men" that Robinson had complained about in his own early sonnet, "Oh for a Poet," were happy to provide many poems idealizing women's patience prior to marriage as well as their virtue during marriage,[2] and Robinson echoes those poets' sex-role ideology in this part of the poem.

In the Collected Poems of 1921 (and in all subsequent collections), the first six lines of the above quotation are excised, and the last three lines read:

> Her sister Jane -- the mother of little Jane,
> Sylvester, and Young George -- might make herself
> Believe she knew, for she -- well, she was Jane.
> (CP 186)

Here, the brother disappears, and the poem is left with no reference to any siblings other than Imogen and Jane. This deletion benefits the poem in two ways: first, it keeps Imogen's struggle internal -- she is under no overt pressure to "prove herself" through marriage and motherhood, and second, it keeps the relationship simple between the sisters -- neither must be concerned about what Giles, or any other third party, will think. Men, as the voices of society's expectations for women, are removed from direct consideration.

The revisions of the last line and a half of the selection also are important in seeing Robinson's reduced dependency upon stereotypes for his female characters. One revision is the substitution of belief for knowledge; by making Jane a little less certain of Imogen's motivations

and emotions, Robinson particularizes her. Further particularization occurs in the revision from "well, she was a woman" to "well, she was Jane." The simple substitution of the name for the gender designation keeps the poem individualized and keeps it from trying to include all "old maids" and all wise matrons in its scope.

Even the iambic rhythm of the lines contributes to the change from a generalization about Jane as a woman with any woman's intuition, to the specific woman, Jane, with her own intuition about her sister's struggles. "Have known; for she was -- well, she was a woman" is read with stresses on "known," "she," "well," "was," and the first syllable of "woman." The rhythmic emphasis on the otherwise unimportant "was" serves to emphasize the all-inclusive connotation of "woman" as meaning "all women." This version of the poem implies that all women have the same desire for motherhood and the same ability to recognize the effects of that desire when it remains unfulfilled. The stereotypical effect of an unfulfilled longing to bear a child included characteristics such as premature aging and a consuming jealousy which, if incorporated in the poem, would undercut the vitality of Imogen's personality and would elicit more enmity than sympathy in Jane.

The revised line, "Believe she knew, for she -- well, she was Jane," has the ten syllables of the normal pentameter line, rather than eleven, and the result is a tighter line. The stresses of the straight iambic rhythm, which fall on the second syllable of "Believe," "knew," "she" (#2), "she" (#3), and "Jane," serve to emphasize Robinson's new focus on the intuition of just one woman, Jane, regarding her only sister, Imogen. The relationship between the sisters, rather than the

travail of all unmarried women, is established as one of the poem's main subjects.

Two other revisions of "Aunt Imogen" were made between 1915 and 1921. One is a very minor change and is mentioned simply to complete the record. In the second stanza, "And she had stilled the clamor of Young George / By letting him go `pig-back' through the hall" in the 1915 and earlier versions becomes "And she had stilled the clamor of Young George / By giving him a long ride on her shoulders" in the 1921 and later versions. Both versions depict the excitement Imogen's arrival elicits from the children and Imogen's happiness at being out of the city and with her sister's family.

The revision in the fourth stanza is more important. Imogen realizes and comes to accept the idea that the best role for her is that of the joy-bringing "Aunt Imogen" when Young George tells her the world is "a good place" with her in it and then:

> The language, or the tone, or something else --
> Gripped like a baby's fingers on her throat,
> And then went feeling through as if to make
> A plaything of her heart. (CC, 1915, 111-12)

Although a baby's fingers might grip tightly, the image is usually a positive one, and in this poem Imogen must realize that she will not be having any babies of her own. Also, "feeling through" is simply too vague. In the Collected Poems versions, the lines read:

> The language, or the tone, or something else --

> Gripped like insidious fingers on her throat,
> And then went foraging as if to make
> A plaything of her heart. (187)

"Insidious fingers" are more likely to choke off Imogen's speech than a baby's fingers, and "foraging" is a verb that implies a more specific action than "feeling" -- the search is more intent on finding her emotional vulnerability. Altogether, the revisions place a greater emphasis on Imogen as an individual struggling with her fate of remaining unmarried and childless than on Imogen as a representative of a class of women.

Robinson's life-long reticence around women is well known and is a foundation of any biographical writing about him. Critical consensus always has acknowledged "Aunt Imogen" as an autobiographical poem based on Robinson's relationship with his brother Herman's children.[3] The similarity between Imogen's character and Robinson's arises from the fact that he seems to have known relatively early that marriage was an institution to be avoided because it would get in the way of his poetry. In a letter dated October 28, 1893, Robinson congratulates his friend Arthur R. Gledhill on his marriage and remarks, "This itch for authorship is worse than the devil and about spoils a man for anything else" (SL 9). The biographies are not precise on this matter, but he seems to have purposefully avoided attending the weddings of his Gardiner friends such as Gledhill and Harry Smith. He rejected outside pressure to marry, and he pursued only professional relationships with women who expressed an interest in his poetry. For example, Edith

Brower was one of the most enthusiastic readers of his first volume, The Torrent and the Night Before, but prior to accepting her invitation to visit he felt it necessary to assure her that he would arrive with no romantic intentions.

Those few critics who spend more than a sentence or two discussing Robinson's treatment of women acknowledge some variety and some individualization such as in "Aunt Imogen," but they almost always confine their remarks to the poems that revolve around the class of married women or women like Vivian, who are in an ongoing relationship with a man. Louis Coxe cites the influence of George Meredith's Modern Love and other works when he asserts that both Meredith and Robinson understood "the complexity of, and the necessity for, establishing a new relationship between the sexes" (133). Louise Dauner, in her essay, "The Pernicious Rib: E.A. Robinson's Concept of Feminine Character," focuses exclusively on the longer poems of the 1920's and '30's as a way of demonstrating her thesis that the problems of Love and Fate are intertwined and essentially tragic in their representation through the Female (140, 142). Ellsworth Barnard notes that Robinson saw sex as a biological fact rather than as a social imperative or the all-consuming force outlined by Freud; moral behavior and marriage need not be connected in any way (252-3). While women in male-female relationships provide the tension and the motivation for action in most of the Robinson poems in which women characters appear, these are not the only women depicted, nor are they all alike.

In this project, in order to investigate the full range of Robinson's expression regarding women, married or unmarried, lovers or

haters, I plan to explore all of the Robinson poems which describe women or use female characters. Over 65 poems in the Robinson canon, including all of the book-length poems except <u>The Man Who Died Twice</u>, involve women in some way. As Judith Fetterley points out in <u>The Resisting Reader</u>, it is important to consider the underlying generalizations and assumptions about maleness and femaleness when interpreting literary works (xx). I want to understand the literary, personal, and social influences that shaped Robinson's views of women, accounting in some way for all of the roles that women play in both the long and the short poems, detailing where Robinson succumbed to stereotypes, where he created fresh or unique characters, and where, as in "Aunt Imogen," Robinson exchanged stereotypical representaton for individual characterization.

The dissertation is divided roughly into two halves. The introduction and chapters two through five form the first half, and chapters six through thirteen form the second half.

Chapter Two will survey the history of critical writings about Robinson and his poetry, noting that although many female characters appear in his poetry, little has been written about them. Then Chapter Three will survey the nineteenth century's expectations for women and their expression in the magazine poetry dominated by women authors. It will also include feminist critical writings which deal with male authors' creations of female characters; this discussion will provide a basis for determining the extent to which Robinson utilizes the stereotypes about women prevalent in his day and where he departs from the stereotypes, creating female characters that appeal as individuals

with their own trials brought on by the modern condition, as Robinson depicts his male characters. Chapter Four will be a rather biographical chapter, an inquiry into Robinson's relationships with women. Because he mever married and there are many stories about his monumental shyness around women, it is necessary to investigate the nature of his several friendships with women. Another somewhat biographical section, Chapter Five will speculate about Robinson's wide reading in Victorian novels, the female characters he is known to have appreciated, and possible parallels between those characters and his.

The chapters of the second half of the dissertation will group poems according to the situations in which the female characters act. Chapter Six will deal with single women, decidedly a minority in Robinson's poems, and Chapter Seven will deal with mothers, another minority. Chapter Eight will be the longest chapter of the second half, as it explores Robinson's women in relationships with men. Robinson's several widows appear in Chapter Nine. Chapter Ten will expand on Robinson's capacity for sympathy for the disrespected and the despairing among us, the prostitutes and the suicides. Chapter Eleven will explore the unusual poems, such as those with women drawn from the Bible; Laramie Cavender, who could be discussed in Chapter Eight on wives and husbands but who appears only as a figment of Cavender's imagination and conscience; a poem about a child; and Robinson's few allegorical figures, which are scattered early and late in his career: Amelia Watchman, a writer in Amaranth, and Zoe, a symbol of life in King Jasper, and a few other poems. The conclusion will use this study as an opportunity to call for a new edition of selected poems, one that will

include two or three of the narrative poems that exhibit a greater range of Robinson's abilities and interests.

NOTES

[1]See for example, Robinson's letter to Daniel Gregory Mason, dated July 7, 1901: "I continue to be a vagabond and to squeeze out a modicum of metrical stuff that may or may not be amusing to somebody when I am boxed up and stowed away. I don't take this course from any silly notion of `art for art's sake,' but because I find no other" (SL 43).

[2]Carlin T. Kindilien, in American Poetry in the Eighteen Nineties (Providence: Brown UP, 1956) summarizes the contents of the average volume of poems in the 1890's as having a "sterotyped title, a laudatory or self-effacing preface, a moral or didactic poem, one discussing religion more concretely, a nature description, a sentimental verse, one idolizing women, a humanitarian reflection, a patriotic poem, and one or more tributes to famous men" (12).

[3]The three main biographers agree with each other. See Neff, 95-6. Hagedorn, after describing the mutual adoration between "Uncle Win" and his nieces, writes "Robinson made `Aunt Imogen' salvage for him as much of inner quiet as he seemed for the time destined to achieve" (146). Chard Powers Smith, with his usual confidence, asserts that "'Aunt Imogen' represents with near literalness Uncle Win and his three nieces" (178).

CHAPTER II

A SURVEY OF CRITICISM ON ROBINSON'S WORKS

"They don't read me!"
-- to Esther Willard Bates

With this statement, Edwin Arlington Robinson was complaining about critics labeling his poetry "obscure," a judgement that he felt was due to their own careless reading. Criticism and reviews of his poetry always distressed Robinson because he generally believed that anyone who read one word after another would understand his point. Whether or not readers actually liked the poems seems to have been secondary, in that disagreements were to be expected; however, he was certain that critical disparagement of the poems was the result of misreading.

Disagreements could be responded to. Neglect, on the other hand, was particularly troublesome because it reduced his potential audience. While Robinson disliked Gardiner, Maine's, emphasis on money as the symbol of success, he desired poetic success because it would pay something and it would keep people from asking him when he was going to get a job. Reviews were his evidence of that poetic success. It is safe to say that although Robinson was not greeted as the next Great American Poet, neither was he entirely ignored when his first vanity-published volumes, _The Torrent and the Night Before_ and _Children of the Night_, appeared in 1896 and 1897, respectively.

Richard Cary's Early Reception of Edwin Arlington Robinson: The First Twenty Years is a collection of comments and reviews that exhibits the range of critical response to these first two books as well as to Captain Craig (1902) and The Town Down the River (1910). Evaluations range from Harry Thurston Peck's well-known disapproval of The Torrent -- calling Robinson's world "a prison-house" (49), to A.G. Chase's assessment that the poetry contains "nothing but the brightest optimism and deepest faith" (191). There is Trumbull Stickney's "These people are all queer" (155) -- although he appears to have enjoyed the poems very much, and Edward Eggleston's sincere thanks for "a book that I cannot help reading" (52). The Children of the Night was dismissed by one unknown reviewer as containing "a most disheartening amount of chaff" and "the rudest twaddle" (92), while at the same time, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson's first editor, praised Robinson's ability to pack "a whole life" into one of his sonnets (101).

Certainly, the first reviews of Robinson's work were varied in their appraisals; one would expect as much. Richard Crowder, in "The Emergence of E.A. Robinson," noted two factors that set Robinson's first published poetry apart from that of his contemporaries. One factor is Robinson's reliance on spare, prosy language rather than traditional poetic diction. The other is his thematic departure, depicting "failure and resignation" rather than "nature and sentimentality" (91-2). There is much that was new in these poems, and the surprising fact is that the majority of the reviews were positive. Because Robinson brooded over the negative reviews and responded in writing to some of them, later scholars and biographers have accepted the notion that his work was

usually ignored or deprecated by newspaper and magazine reviewers, but this does not appear to be the case. I do not think that Robinson ever was satisfied with the number of reviews his early books garnered. More reviews meant more readers. The truth is that despite the generally positive responses, only a small number of poetry buyers in the late 1890's and early 1900's were willing to endure Robinson's assaults on their comfortable sensibilities.

After the early reception, there are roughly three periods to Robinson criticism. The first is that written during the remainder of his lifetime, mostly in praise. Reviews and articles grew in praise and appreciation as his reputation increased through the 1910's and grew even more as he began winning Pulitzer Prizes. Amy Lowell, Charles Cestre, and Lloyd Morris wrote books dedicated in whole or in part to Robinson's work. Two brief, laudatory biographies, by Ben Ray Redman and Mark Van Doren, were published in the 1920's at the height of Robinson's career.

The second period encompasses the first twenty years after Robinson's death in 1935. Despite their disagreements, the books and articles of this period still form the basis of how we think about Robinson and his work. Seminal works by Yvor Winters, Ellsworth Barnard, and Edwin Fussell make somewhat more dispassionate assessments of the poetry than had been written during Robinson's lifetime. The two main biographies were published, one by Robinson's friend, Hermann Hagedorn, and one by Emery Neff.

In the third period, after the 1950's, fewer books were written about Robinson's work, until the 1969 centenary of his birth approached,

when books or reprints by Wallace Anderson and Louis Coxe appeared, along with Barnard's edition of Centenary Essays and Richard Cary's Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson, a collection of previously published essays. Chard Powers Smith published his controversial biography in 1965, and articles by Richard Crowder, Richard Cary, D.H. Burton, and others appeared throughout the 60's, 70's, and 80's. The Colby Library Quarterly, from Colby College in Waterville, Maine, near Robinson's boyhood home, published many articles on Robinson's life and works from the 1940's through the 1980's.

There is a long and distinguished history of scholarly inquiry into Robinson and his poetry. Nearly every examination of twentieth-century American poetry acknowledges in some way the importance of his contribution. This chapter will survey the three periods of criticism of Robinson's poetry to determine the extent of critical investigation into Robinson's poetic treatment of women. While the female characters have not been completely ignored, neither have they been fully examined for the societal roles they represent nor, in some cases, for their ability to carry major Robinsoniam themes such as discontent, emotional isolation, and disillusion.

1

Critical assessments of Robinson's poetry begin with two women, Amy Lowell and Harriet Monroe, although gender issues are not their concern. Lowell's Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (1917) devotes more space to Robinson than to any other poet. While the imagist breakaway poet decried Robinson's "tendency to long-windedness," particularly in

"Captain Craig," she was nevertheless happy to read of "a world which contains at once such realities as apples and tired legs," referring to "Isaac and Archibald" (37, 13). She praised his "tenderness" and defended him against those readers who expect only gaiety in poems (60, 74). Harriet Monroe published several of Robinson's poems and reviewed most of his books in _Poetry_. _Merlin_ seems to be the main point of issue for critics who wrote during the zenith of Robinson's career. While Lowell thought the book was wonderful, Monroe despised it as fully as she despised any modern long poem that retreated through time for its subject. Robinson accepted her complaints with equanimity, treating her dual approach to his poems with a sense of humor. Three years after _Merlin_, when _Lancelot_ was approaching publication, Robinson enjoyed contemplating Monroe's revulsion at reading the poem. Except for the Arthurian poems, Monroe had the highest respect for Robinson's work. In "Mr. Robinson's Jubilee" in 1920 (actually, she missed his fiftieth birthday celebration in December 1919 by a couple of months), she wrote: "He struck his own path, and found, no doubt with surprise, that he had blazed a trail for others" (267).

Not all critics of the 1920's thought that Robinson's path was the one to follow. Bruce Weirick worried that Robinson's "narrowness and stinginess" were symptoms of a lack of "national destiny," which he thought the country badly needed to maintain following World War I (191). Gorham B. Munson was even more disheartened by Robinson's work, which he decided "suggests that bleak monotonous season that lies between the dying brilliance of autumn and the white death of winter" (65). Taking an opposite view, Lloyd Morris wrote with almost

unremittingly exuberant praise, ranking Robinson with Whitman for his "invariable dramatic power," achievement, and positive effect on younger poets (13, 78). A more centrist evaluation was made by Marguerite Wilkinson, who refused to consider Robinson "a poet of the people;" nevertheless, she praised his "sure sense of personal values" (354-55).

Conrad Aiken was one reviewer who managed to change his opinion about Robinson's poetry. In a 1921 review of Avon's Harvest, Aiken decried the general "hint and gleam" that appears throughout Robinson's work as consistently too vague; he was amazed by the success of Merlin (ABC 339-40). But nothing succeeds like success, as they say, and in his 1922 review of Robinson's Collected Poems, which won the Pulitzer Prize, Aiken praised the "hint and gleam," and he wrote that "Merlin and Vivian have here all the dim subtleties and delicate mutual awareness of the people, let us say, in The Wings of the Dove" (342-3).

In his 1926 biography of Robinson, Ben Ray Redman agreed with Aiken about the merits of Merlin; in fact, he considered it Robinson's best work to that date (73). Redman praised Robinson's "sympathetic patience" in dealing with many individual characters and their struggles (34). Mark Van Doren also emphasized human difficulties in his 1927 biography, which was published by the Literary Guild in conjunction with their edition of Tristram: "The struggle between sun and shadow is studied by him in the characters of men. . . . What interests him is the fate of an ideal once it has lodged in the brain of an individual and becomes mingled with his memory and desires" (33). Note that Van Doren, as so many critics did, focused exclusively on Robinson's male characters, despite the prominence of female characters in the Arthurian

poems as well as in so many other poems. He summarized Robinson's vision of men as "essentially tragic" (34).

Allen Tate disagreed with Mark Van Doren about Robinson's "essentially tragic" vision. Tate always preferred Robinson's shorter poems over his long poems, and he wrote that Robinson actually relied on "tragic sentiment; and the result is the pathetic tale of obscure ambition or thwarted passion; not tragedy" (194). It was Robinson's tough luck to be a poor playwright, or American literary history might be considerably different; not until Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman in 1949 would acceptance grow for the notion that "thwarted ambition" could be the subject of American tragedy. In his 1933 review of Talifer, Tate wrote of the narrative poems: "It requires constant reviewing by Mr. Robinson's admirers to keep these poems distinct" because all of the main characters are doomed to defeat (196). Tate ended his review with the wish that Robinson would return to his forte, the lyric poem, a return for which Robinson expressed his desire throughout the 1920's, but couldn't accomplish. He felt that when he was writing in top form, he was a kind of conduit for a power that was beyond him, and the short poems just would not come to him any more, much to his regret.

The longer poems intrigued Charles Cestre, a French critic whose Bryn Mawr lectures became a book that Robinson thought highly of. Cestre asserted that Robinson's "strong sense of the spiritual unity of man," even the rejected among us, was the source of his humor (156-7). The key to the long poems, and to many of the shorter poems as well, lay in "pensive mystery" (198). Robinson was pleased by Cestre's analyses

(Hagedorn 366); in reading his letters, I felt that he always intended more humor, certainly more irony, than readers usually found, and Cestre's book, which draws some attention to humor, gave Robinson some assurance that his work would "live" beyond his own lifetime.

2

Since his death, Robinson's poetry has languished in a sort of canonical purgatory, "in anthological pickle," as he characterized such treatment during his career. He is not ignored, as scholars have continued to write about him, any critical survey of twentieth-century poetry acknowledges his contributions, and each decade a few graduate students have seen fit to write dissertations on his work. But his poetry is seldom taught in American literature classes beyond the general surveys, and I suspect he is read even less often. The trend toward ethnic and sexual diversity is one explanation, but what aspects of Robinson criticism have contributed to the fading of his work from course syllabi?

One explanation may lie in the criticism of the first twenty years after Robinson's death, which sought to explain the man and his work and to situate both in a permanent place in literary history. This goal is easy to understand because Robinson's outlook, themes, and techniques appear to have changed little throughout his career. In 1937 Vernon Loggins was already satisfied to assert that Robinson "had positively fixed his program" by the time he brought out The Town Down the River in 1910 (52). At the same time, David Brown summarized Robinson's later poems as "but illustrations of a truth" always depicted in abstract

symbols and meant to illuminate "moral problems of men" (489, 501). Brown implies that women were relatively unimportant to Robinson's vision of a world in decline. Floyd Stovall disputed such pessimistic readings, using Robinson's numerous assertions of optimistic intentions to create an argument that "the growth of the human mind in its pursuit of truth through time and change" is the most prevalent theme in Robinson's work (5). Whether the poem depicts a troubling imbalance in love, such as in Roman Bartholow, or a society-wide message such as Democracy vs. Art in "Demos and Dionysus," Stovall based Robinson's optimism in the individual's capacity for change (23).

The 1940's brought a considerable increase in critical interest in Robinson and his poetry, and the continued emphasis on him as a poet whose main concern was embodied in his white male characters may be another reason why his work is marginalized in today's emphasis on ethnic, racial, and gender diversity. Hermann Hagedorn's 1939 biography was supplemented by Emery Neff's 1948 volume, which concentrates as much attention on the poems as it does on the life. Neff viewed Robinson's entire career as an attempt to defend poetry, to regain an audience (especially a male audience) that had been lost during the "twilight period" of sentimental magazine verse printed late in the nineteenth century (252-53). Richard Crowder made Robinson's male characters the focus of his doctoral dissertation and of the first of his many articles on Robinson. Crowder used male psychological profile-categories to classify and discuss the male characters in the late narrative poems, dismissing the female characters with a footnote:

> . . . since nearly all of Robinson's heroines are concerned with some phase of love, it would appear that the poet saw the world of action and of public life as belonging to the men, and women's chief function as being the development of their capacity for love, that men may find nourishment there for their duties in the world.[1] ("`Here are the Men'" 348n)

I will argue that, although the main characters of the late poems are indeed men and even the titles are derived from the male characters' names, Robinson's heroines (in many of the short poems as well) are more than mere helpmates. Many of them have their own individual struggles to deal with, as well as those of their male counterparts. Like Crowder, Louise Dauner focused on Robinson's late narratives, but her emphasis was on the female characters; rather than as helpmates, Dauner summarized them as "the tragic instrument for man's fall, his deflection from an individual purposing" ("Pernicious Rib" 157). This oversimplification cannot possibly account for the experiences of Cavender and of Nightingale, to name just two, for whom women are a means to a kind of redemption, as later chapters will show. Dauner did acknowledge Robinson's ability to portray women without either condescension or worship, but she saw dependence as a central motivating factor for Robinson's female characters (157).

Other critics of the 1940's did not approach gender issues, as Crowder and Dauner did. Estelle Kaplan, in Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, asserted that Robinson's themes centered on defiance in the face of materialism (31), which he acknowledged in some fashion at several different times during his life while at the same

time denying that he had any formally thought-out philosophy at all. Kaplan was among those such as Stanley T. Williams and Frederick William Conner who granted Robinson a more tragic vision than he ever admitted and which Stovall asserted he did not have.

Perhaps the most well-known writer on Robinson was Yvor Winters, who published his Edwin Arlington Robinson in 1946. Winters outlined strengths and weaknesses of Robinson's poetry, and his statements remain sources of critical departure today. Some of Winters' assessments had been made before by others but never with the confident sternness Winters brought to his pronouncements: the long poems have little to recommend them, with the exception of Lancelot; most of the lyric poems are only fair to good, excepting a short list of poems that are great enough to rank with the best poetry in English literature -- "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," "The Three Taverns," "Lazarus," "John Brown," (all four poems, ironically enough, for which anthologists have not found space for preservation) and a few others (141). Winters' main objection pertains to the frequently-made charge that Robinson's work suffers from obscurity. He accused Robinson of "withholding information about the subject under discussion, so that one never understands the nature of the (presumably) important emotions which are (apparently) being analyzed" (128). This book has been a touchstone for all following criticism on Robinson and his poetry.

Louis O. Coxe began his article, "E.A. Robinson: The Lost Tradition," by pointing out that Winters detailed Robinson's poetic faults but remained vague about the qualities that made Robinson's great poems great (164). Coxe located Robinson's qualities in a tradition of

form and theme that modern readers find problematic because it does not demonstrate the kind of "progress" that readers have come to expect: "The best poems work toward a condition of total communication by means of suggestion and statement, with no regard for the poet as speaker;" in other words, a poem's irony is external to its text, "constituent of a cosmology that sees the human condition as cosmic in the largest sense," demonstrating life's unchangeable nature and making the poet's personality unimportant to understanding the poem (165). Thus, Robinson has the "we" of Tilbury Town to contrast with the individual poet-observer evident in many poems by Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost.

Criticism of the 1950's is centered on two books: Ellsworth Barnard's _Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study_ and Edwin S. Fussell's _Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet_. Barnard's 1952 volume remains the most complete analysis of Robinson's poetry to date. He cited Robinson's personal understanding and sympathy as the cornerstones of the overall message (23), and he examined in greater detail than Winters the techniques that sometimes cause misunderstanding, such as oblique verbs and overcompression of language. While other critics were willing to place Robinson's entire canon under one label, such as "Failures," Barnard provided several categories, the most important of which for our purposes is "those condemned for no apparent reason to a solitary confinement of the soul" (134). In this category he placed many of the poems with female characters, such as "The Poor Relation," "The Evangelist's Wife," and "Late Summer." Barnard devoted several pages to reviewers' disagreements over Robinson's characterization of women, and

he concluded that while there are no great artists or philosophers among the female characters, they generally see clearly when the men "see too much" for their own well-being (250). The love relationship between men and women is depicted in Robinson's poems without regard for prevailing moral standards because "he finds for the love between the sexes a role in the general human drama that is more than merely romantic or domestic" (255). For the first time since Louise Dauner's essay, Robinson's women were treated seriously and systematically.

While Barnard focused on Robinson's poems, Edwin S. Fussell concentrated on Robinson's reading and the influence it may have had on his poetry. Fussell used Robinson's letters, comments recorded by others, and his own readings of the poems in order to attempt to trace influences from the Bible to Thomas Hardy. After reading Robinson's poems and all of his published letters, I believe that the poet read too widely for any direct connection to be discerned, except where the contact is specifically mentioned. The Bible[2] and Shakespeare were read and re-read many times, but so were Dickens, Meredith, and Hardy, as well as many poets. In one of his comments on classical influences, Fussell oversimplifies Robinson's view of men and women: many poems, "though they are concerned with man's sexual relations, are centered in the marriage relationship; nearly always Robinson was interested in the social and ethical implications of love, not in its sentimental or sensual aspects" (138). Barnard had already noted that the same ethical principles are at work in the non-marriage relationships as in the marriage relationships. In his review of Fussell's book, Denham Sutcliffe complained that Fussell stretched his case too far, finding

too many "influences" (137). Despite its weaknesses, The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet will provide a starting point for Chapter Five, which will explore Robinson's love of Victorian novels and speculate about connections between the female characters in those works and in Robinson's poetry.

3

The 1960's saw an increase in the number of scholarly articles on Robinson and the turn of the century, just as scholarly activity increased for authors and works of other literary periods. The Robinson "industry," however, unlike that of many other major American writers, has tended to attract relatively little fresh "capital," to continue the business metaphor. Often, older ideas were recycled. For example, the notion that Robinson was more spiritually- than worldly-oriented was restated in a variety of ways. David H. Burton traced this tendency back to Robinson's Puritan heritage, warning readers not to over-emphasize psychology because it is simply a manifestation of spiritual foundations ("Intellectualism" 575). Wallace L. Anderson, in Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction, and H.H. Waggoner, in American Poets from the Puritans to the Present, then emphasized the Emersonian segment of this development. Scott Donaldson concurred, writing that the poems originate in "philia, not eros" (49), an idea that already had been expressed by Roy Harvey Pearce as "communitas -- of ego-transcending human relations" (265). Yet Pearce persisted in the vein of Estelle Kaplan, finding more "philosophy" in Robinson's poems

than the poet ever dreamed of. Richard P. Adams was another critic who agreed with Kaplan's point of view, calling Robinson an idealist searching for self in a materialistic world; he found more "resistance" than love in the poetry (102, 105).

While older ideas were recycled, the claim of a new approach to Robinson's poetry was no guarantee of finding new insights. In his introduction to Morton Dauwen Zabel's edition of Robinson's Selected Poems, published in 1966, James Dickey wrote that we must read Robinson as if we had never read him before, but he labeled Robinson's approach as one of:

> making a refusal to pronounce definitively on his subjects a virtue and of speculation upon possibilities an instrument that allows an unparalleled fullness to his presentations, as well as endowing them with some of the mysteriousness, futility, and proneness to multiple interpretation that incidents and lives possess in the real world. (xxviii)

This may be another way of exonerating Robinson from the earliest critical charges of "obscurity," or, if it were stated more clearly, this would be praise of Robinson's denial of simple, single interpretations of life's experiences. James G. Hepburn used a letter Robinson wrote to Harry Smith in 1894 to define an "imperfect and inconsistent" "system of opposites" meant to distinguish Robinson's own poetic voice from "objectivity and realism" (266, 269). W.R. Robinson, in A Poetry of the Act, warned against determining any oppositional system in E.A. Robinson's poetry, focusing on change in a thematic movement from passion to conscience and compassion (135). In another

redefinition, this time of Robinson as a regional poet, Paul Zietlow strove through a contrast with Robert Frost to find more of the city than the country in Robinson, citing the "we" narrators of such poems as "Richard Cory" and "Eros Turannos" as townspeople (199). Of course, Robinson had long been called a New England poet, and no one ever accused Robinson of limiting his characters to farmers.

Another critic who compared Robinson and Frost was M.L. Rosenthal. He found similarities in the way they portrayed women, as betrayed by a life that destroys their beauty and their idealistic visions of romance and motherhood, citing "The Gift of God" and Frost's "The Lovely Shall be Choosers" (109-110). While this thematic coincidence may be accurate, many of Robinson's male characters also are betrayed by life -- Miniver Cheevy and Eben Flood, to name two. It is dangerous to generalize any of Robinson's attitudes from a single poem. Denis Donoghue oversimplified the male/female relationships in the long poems. If we "make conscience male and joy female" as he suggests, we can not account for Karen's chilly intellectuality in _Talifer_ or Natalie's suicide in _Matthias at the Door_ (142). Louis Coxe, like Conrad Aiken and others before him, saw plots involving women similar to Henry James's and wrote of them: "When his women have any life at all, they have vastly more than the men and give off an atmosphere of vitality, passion and generosity of heart and spirit the men usually lack" (135-6). Richard Crowder also discussed some of Robinson's female characters in "E.A. Robinson and the Garden of Eden." He noted poems in which women are mentioned as temptresses or as sources of sin, such as in

"Rahel to Varnhagen" and "Genevieve and Alexandra" (530). Crowder also pointed out Robinson's admission of the mystery men find in women, as in King Jasper (530), but he wisely did not try to generalize the Eden myth and Eve throughout the Robinson canon.

After the Robinson Centennial in 1969, production in the Robinson industry abated somewhat, but scholars willing to continue writing about Robinson trod some of the same avenues of investigation. Sybil Korff Vincent added to Louise Dauner and Louis Coxe's comments on Robinson's women by writing "Flat Breasted Miracles: Realistic Treatment of the Woman's Problem in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson," a very brief essay outlining the various roles which Robinson's female characters play, but omitting details. Thelma J. Shinn continued the Henry James connection by analyzing Robinson's late narrative poems through The Art of the Novel; although characterization was her main focus, she omitted discussion of the women in these poems. R. Meredith Bedell extended Floyd Stovall's emphasis on Robinson's optimism by analyzing "Hillcrest" and other poems as illustrations of the notion that positive change can come about through pain; "Eros Turannos" becomes "not a poem of final despair, but a poem of possibility" (30-1).

I remain unconvinced of any positive worldly message in "Eros Turannos," and also unconvinced was Joan Mannheimer, who used "Eros Turannos" and other poems to demonstrate her thesis that Robinson had a unique narrative strategy, keeping his poems from achieving the completeness that readers naturally want in a story; Robinson required readers to finish the poem in some emotional doubt (253). In a wider discussion of American poetry, Bernard Duffey used Shopenhauer's

philosophy to call this goal of doubt a tendency toward incoherence; this incoherence is based on an "arrest of will," an inability to act due to the knowledge that coherence, or an understanding of the world and one's place in it, is impossible (187). H.R. Wolf viewed this tendency as an attempt on Robinson's part to make the reader "see in [his poems] a limit to the quest and an understanding, from where we stand, of the ideology of the arbitrary and the floating ego" (46). The scholars of the 1970's credited Robinson with being among the first twentieth-century writers who valued an avoidance of definite meaning in their work.

By the 1980's, fewer scholars were writing about Robinson, and they were trying to retain his position of importance in the history of American poetry despite the broadening of the canon, which has tended to further marginalize his contributions. William H. Pritchard, in Lives of the Modern Poets, placed Robinson with Hardy and Yeats as developers of modernism, in spite of the fact that he apparently did not find as much material in his personal experience as the other two did (85). Pritchard used a phrase from Frost's introduction to the postumously-published King Jasper, "prince of heartachers," as a source for the poet's distance or separation from his characters. General surveys of American poetry, such as those by Richard Gray or Alan Schucard, rearranged the insights of previous scholars without adding anything new. Harold Bloom introduced a collection of essays on Robinson mainly by combining the ideas of Waggoner and Winters concerning Emerson's influence. John Lucas asserted that he would "unsettle some of the suavely held convictions about Robinson" in order to keep his work alive

(27). Lucas's main strategy was to acknowledge Robinson's faults but to point out that they pale in importance when compared with his storytelling and his mastery of language, praise that echoes some of the earliest reviews.

There was one new book on Robinson published in the 1980's, David H. Burton's Stages in a New England Poet's Search. Burton took a somewhat biographical approach in order to analyze Robinson's relationship to contemporary intellectual history, and he found that while much of the poetry is a response to society and culture, Robinson was not a reformer (no surprise, given his customary reticence), "dwelling instead on the first principle, man's nature" (127). Burton had written an earlier article called "E.A. Robinson's Idea of God," and this book would have benefited from a consideration of both humankind and God, as Robinson felt that this relationship, with its tension between faith and doubt, is one source of humanity's troubles. Anna Sobol Blumenthal also used biography along with early letters to Harry Smith to demonstrate a central ambivalence in Robinson's work, the tension between Gardiner's expectations that he would get a "useful" job and Robinson's seemingly genetic inability to do anything but write poetry. Yet he still had two deep desires: to make enough money that he could avoid the necessity of his friends' charity and to win the townspeople's respect. In general, the more recent critical writings on Robinson have not made use of the more recent critical approaches.

Respect, and sympathy for all people, even the apparent failures, seem to form a keystone to Robinson's poetry. And while his career was

young, personal failure was an ever-present possibility for him. Women, as well as men, helped Robinson, despite his nearly paralyzing shyness around them, supporting and inspiring and working for him in a variety of ways. They must have become part of his thinking about women and about relationships between women and men. As distant from his poems as Robinson the author often seems, nevertheless, the poems demonstrate careful attention to character. Although he failed as a playwright and never succeeded in turning either a poem or a play into a novel, he needed the craft of characterization for what he called his "blank verse novels." Both the male and the female characters of these poems, as well as those in the short poems, exhibit a wide range of personalities, attributes, strengths, and weaknesses. Traditionally, feminist critics have focused on the way women are depicted in novels written by men. They search out "unexamined ideologies," as Josephine Donovan puts it in her introduction to Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, and they prescribe change or reassessment (xiii). Robinson's work deserves to be examined in the same way many novels are examined. He is generally given credit for creating "real" characters, yet the growth of feminist critical inquiry does not seem to have affected the general neglect of his work since the collection of Centenary Essays of 1969. The next three chapters of this project will examine Robinson through his social, personal, and literary influences, building toward speculations about ideologies examined and unexamined in the poems that portray or deal with women.

NOTES

[1]These male character types are from the work of Eduard Spranger (Types of Men: The Psychology and Ethics of Personality. 5th ed. trans. Paul J.W. Pigors. New York: Holt, 1928) and Gordon W. Allport (Personality: A Psychological Interpretation. New York: Hafner, 1941). Spranger postulated six kinds of men and Allport added a seventh: theoretic, economic, aesthetic, social, political, religious, and sensual. While it seems to me that at least two "types" are unaccounted for ("athletic" and "apathetic" come to mind as possibilities), it is easy to see that Robinson's male characters could be distributed among the seven categories provided.

[2]See Nicholas Ayo's article, "Robinson's Use of the Bible" (Colby Library Quarterly 8 (1969): 250-265) for more. Ayo argues that Robinson isn't very imaginative with Biblical material, yet his use of it shows a religious side of the poet not often considered.

CHAPTER III

ROBINSON AND GENDER

Edwin Arlington Robinson was no feminist, yet he developed a deep and abiding sympathy for women, both in the world of work and in their relationships with men, as his poems demonstrate. He never married, and apparently never had more than a brief adolescent fling at romance, yet some of his closest and life-long friends were women. He is guilty of misogynistic statements, having no tolerance of either the suffragettes or the temperance workers of his time, whom he viewed as members of extremist groups. Yet, individual women characters in his poems are generally depicted not as members of some group threatening the patriarchal establishment, but as individuals with their own troubles and shortcomings, much as the male characters are presented with their own troubles and shortcomings. Everyone, both men and women, lives in a world that is "a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks," as he responded to an early charge of pessimism, a charge he was to hear and deny through most of his career.

This chapter's major focus will be the 1890's, for two reasons. It was a decade of tremendous social pressures in the United States, as temperance, suffrage, and labor movements gathered force to achieve the

victories won in the first twenty years of the twentieth century. And the 1890's was a pivotal decade for Robinson: he attained the age of majority, his parents and one brother died, he spent two years at Harvard, his only romantic suit was rejected, and he began his forty-year career as a poet. This chapter will begin an exploration of women's desires for social equality, of women's poetry of the time, and of Robinson's life and ideas. It will also examine notions of gender and expectations prevalent at the turn of the century. The chapter will establish the foundation for the readings of the poems in Part Two, which will show that, while Robinson held rather typical views of women and their roles in society, he understood that the unfortunate second-class status of women was not necessarily natural or unchangeable, at least not for individuals. His sympathies were always with the individual person, male or female, who imagines that this life holds more possibilities than we can ever hope to achieve or who is destroyed by the insensitivities of others.

Underlying a great deal of Robinson's early poetry is the social ferment produced by the Woman Movement, as it was called. In working both for the right to vote and for better treatment in the workplace, this movement was attracted to seemingly oppositional poles. Should women argue for change on the basis of their sameness to men, their sharing the general problems of the human condition, or on their difference from men, their biological characteristics and abilities? As Nancy F. Cott points out in _The Grounding of Modern Feminism_, the two arguments were often voiced together: because of the fact that ". . . women were variable human beings as men were, had the same human

intellectual and spiritual endowment as men, and therefore deserved the same opportunities and rights to advance and develop themselves . . ." laws needed to be changed (19). But this need for legislative change also was based on motherhood; the fact that women's biological role and social expectations included child-bearing and child-rearing provided an impetus for compensatory, as well as egalitarian laws.

Robinson did not take a public position on women's issues; he merely described the social conditions he saw or presented women characters in situations that illustrated the difficulties of the human condition. For example, he has Captain Craig complain about the difference between nature's beauty and human suffering, and about the exploitation of women in both industry and the home:

> . . . women working where a man would fall --
> Flat-breasted miracles of cheerfulness
> Made neuter by the work that no man counts
> Until it waits undone; . . . (CP 126)

The adjective "flat-breasted" seems at first to be a rather unfortunate choice, but I believe that Robinson intends for the reader to see that the unceasing demands of work and home strip all aspects of femininity from the woman, perhaps even her secondary sexual characteristics, and that the cheerfulness appears to be a miracle but is actually a mask.

Sympathy is at the root of Robinson's poetry. Both male and female characters are in need of sympathy because the major questions of existence have answers that we can't know. This is why endurance is important, and it is why Robinson asserts in poems such as "Credo" and

The Man Against the Sky that the only justification for the difficulties and pain of this life is that something better must lie ahead, presumably for all of us.

But this sympathy did not develop early, at least not for women. Robinson delivered the class poem at his graduation from Gardiner High School. This no-longer-extant piece exhibits the common male attitude toward women as interested only in simple, non-intellectual pursuits. Called "Mulieria," the poem was a Swiftian satire about a man lost in a land of women; he escapes their clutches by thrusting a fashion magazine into their midst and fleeing during the ensuing fight and confusion. Entertaining, perhaps, at the time, but Hagedorn's sources told him Robinson read so badly and so quietly that few people could hear and fewer understand (44-5). This may have been the first and last time Robinson read his work publicly; he rejected all requests after he began publishing.

Robinson's juvenilia probably met the approval of at least the men in his audience who could hear it; however, the sexes at this time were considerably polarized. Men seem to have been defensive in the face of women's reform movements, and this early poem, "Mulieria," may have represented Robinson's youthful discomfort and reaction, conditions he grew out of to some extent. In Civilization in the United States, Harold E. Stearns tried to explain the "extraordinary feminization of American social life" which occurred during the 19th century (135). Stearns's assessment is unlike Captain Craig's: the men work hard all day accumulating wealth; the women are granted time for arts and culture. Indeed, as Marie Therese Blanc asserted in her 1895

investigation, The Condition of Women in the United States, it was the wife's duty to keep her husband informed about "the world of leisure," books and news (45-6). On the other hand, Sara M. Evans reminds us in Born for Liberty that increasing numbers of women also entered the workforce outside the home in the second half of the century, living and working in squalid, poverty-maintaining conditions (130-1). The split between these views is formed by the class difference that demonstrates itself in the fiction that treats the American business aristocracy by Henry James and Edith Wharton on the one hand and Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser's depictions of lower class life on the other. In both cases the women are faced with a struggle to achieve some kind of self-determined life, whether in the family or in the workplace.

Robinson's poetry spans the two classes. The difficulties of the working woman are depicted or alluded to in poems such as "Captain Craig," "The Poor Relation," and "Aunt Imogen." But more of Robinson's poems deal with the upper class, or at least with situations in which the woman apparently need not work outside the home, such as in "Eros Turannos" and almost all of the long narrative poems. Of course, as a male writer in a male-dominated society, Robinson created more main characters who are male than female. No attempt is being made here to argue that Robinson's female characters are more important than the males, only that women do play some important roles in Robinson's poems and they deserve the kind of investigation that the male characters have inspired in the past. Androcentrism is a term used to describe writings by men that assume the male point of view is also a universal point of view. Such writings ignore or fail to ascribe any importance to a

female world view. Ernest Hemingway, with his male characters who embody a face-death-with-grace philosophy, is an oft-cited example. But is Robinson an androcentric writer? My answer is that for the most part he is not. Women are included in Robinson's world view, as will be seen more clearly in Part Two.

The majority of feminist writings that attempt to ferret out male prejudices analyze fiction as the surest source of androcentric expressions of the patriarchal status quo. It will be appropriate to discuss Robinson's poems in terms of both poetry and fiction because his narrative techniques, character development, and the sense of place evident in the poems echo the strategies of fiction.

Nina Baym, in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," and Jane P. Tompkins, in "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History" examine the antagonistic relationship between male and female novelists through most of the nineteenth century, and they make a case for the centrality of the sentimental novel in the American culture of the time. The women were, for the most part, home-oriented or "sentimental" and were popular with the mostly female audience; the men were frontier-oriented or "serious" and received less attention from the same audience. In the poetry, the Brahmins (apparently an exclusively male label) such as Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Whittier remained popular with all audiences and were granted a great deal of anthology and textbook space (perhaps because of their connections in the publishing houses), but the bulk of the poetry was as home-oriented as the fiction and was produced and consumed mostly by women. Being

neither a woman, nor a fiction writer, nor a Brahmin (two years at Harvard could not elevate Robinson from the Maine business/upper middle class to the Boston aristocracy, not that he wanted it to), Robinson developed his own brand of fin de siecle dilemma, in which the individual character feels separated from society even while functioning, however marginally, within it.

Many writers on Robinson, from H.H. Waggoner to Richard Crowder, acknowledge the part played by what Perry Miller called the "New England Conscience," that is, a continuing examination of the soul, applying one's conscience before as well as after an action, allowing little chance for inner peace. Miller sums up this self-examination as "abstinence, self-denial and worry about internal motives" (57); I believe that Robinson's view held that the world, or at least the United States, was becoming ever more materialistic, and this materialism meant that there was a continually-diminishing chance of being rewarded for considering and acting upon the values of self-examination. As Ann Douglas has pointed out in The Feminization of American Culture, the Calvinism of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England, which required "a toughness, a sternness, an intellectual rigor" from its ministers, had been diluted through the Unitarianism of the nineteenth century to become evangelism, an alliance of ministers and upper- and middle-class women that dominated American culture through the promotion of sentimentality in the arts (18). In "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," George Santayana traces the same change through Emerson's transcendentalism in order to argue that the lack of appreciation for the works of Walt Whitman and William James stems from

their spontaneity and their acceptance of life's inherent difficulties: the evangelical "genteel tradition" disallowed one's admission of unhappiness, forcing the intellectual imagination, poetic or religious, to flee (96). The Calvinists' earlier toughness was equated with masculinity, and its disappearance into a more emotional appeal from the pulpit was equated with femininity. This emotional appeal then became characteristic of much of the poetry published in popular magazines. Despite the stylistic and thematic changes wrought in fiction during the rise of realism and then of naturalism, magazine verse continued in its sentimental expression of simple religious pieties. While Robinson's poetry had to compete for space against this material, the man did not envy the ladies who churned out the verses, rather he castigated, albeit privately in letters to friends, the editors who chose these poems over his.

It will be useful to make a brief survey of the situation of the women's poetry through the 19th century, as women dominated both the readership and the production of popular literature from before the 1850's, when Hawthorne condemned them as "a d---d mob of scribbling women," to the end of the century. Robinson's task when he began his career was to attempt to break into print through the expectations supported by these conditions. In a number of letters to friends during the 1890's, Robinson condemned magazine editors for being unable to perceive the difference between his poems and the verse they normally published. I would suggest that it is because they did indeed see the difference that the editors refused almost universally to print

Robinson's poems. These poems about quirky, struggling individuals did not fit the mold, as has often been pointed out.

The mold produced poems of hearth and home, of familial love and lovers' sorrows, and of Christian patience and reward. Anthologies of women's poetry were published in the late 1840's by Caroline May, Thomas Buchanan Read,[1] and Rufus Griswold and were popular in reprints and expanded editions throughout the century. While May, in her introduction to The American Female Poets, asserted that some poems of quality could be found among the vast quantity of women's verse, both she and Griswold agreed that the highest literary assessment a woman could hope for was to be accounted best of the second rank of writers. Both editors concurred with the stereotypical division of gender abilities: male/head and female/heart. Male writers had long placed women on the proverbial pedestal, as Katherine M. Rogers notes in The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature, making self-sacrifice women's profession (189), but a reading of these anthologies shows that women writers also chose the pedestal of selflessness on their own. May located the source of female poetic inspiration in the home, partly because the home is the most typical environment for "ladies in this country," and also because the home is the source of women's emotional development: "And where should women lavish most unreservedly, and receive most largely, the warmest, purest, and most changeless, affection, but in the sacred retirement of home, Where love is an unerring light / And joy its own security?" (v-vi). It is interesting to note that most of the biographical introductions to the "poetesses" in May's volume relate first their husbands' names and

professions, or if unmarried, their fathers'. Typical poems are "A Mother's Prayer in Illness" by Frances S. Osgood, in which the speaker asks that her children be taken to heaven before her, and "There is No Such Word as Fail," a piece of Christian inspiration by Alice B. Neal.

Griswold's volume, The Female Poets of America, contains many of the same poems as May's and Read's anthologies. Although willing, as Fred Lewis Pattee notes in The Feminine Fifties, to profit handsomely from the many editions of his beautifully-bound giftbook (99), Griswold was not as willing as May was to grant women any real ability at writing poetry:

> It does not follow, because the most essential genius in men is marked by qualities which we may call feminine, that such qualities when found in female writers have any certain or just relation to mental superiority. (3)

Nevertheless, Griswold is willing, like May, to grant that women are not given much time for such leisure pursuits as poesy. He notes that one was a slave and others were housewives, teachers, or invalids:

> These illustrations of the truth, that the muse is no respecter of conditions, are especially interesting in a country where, though equality is an axiom, it is not a reality, and where prejudice reverses in the application all that theory has affirmed in words. (5)

It is unfortunate that Griswold could use his 1848 introduction in order to blast a salvo at the political acceptance of slavery but could not see the weaknesses in his theories of the relative mental and artistic

abilities of men and women. Pattee calls Griswold's volume "an amazing scrap-heap" (98), an appellation that Robinson would probably apply to any anthology. R.H. Stoddard expanded the scrap-heap in 1873, asserting "more force and more originality -- in other words, more genius -- in the living female poets of America than in all their predecessors" (7). One must wonder whether Stoddard actually believed his words or whether he was simply enamored of the continuing production of, and the avid market for, home & hearth poems. Another 120 years has blurred the difference Stoddard saw between the poetry of the early and later 19th century women. With the exception of the occasional choice of a classical subject rather than a kitchen one, I see little to distinguish the periods.

In Speaking of Gender, Elaine Showalter calls the fin de siecle a critical period for gender theory: "With the rise of the New Woman, and with the decline of patriarchal authority and imperialism, transformations of gender and genre are significant elements in literary practice" (9). This shift became evident in E.C. Stedman's An American Anthology, which appeared in 1900 with five of Robinson's poems. It was unique for its inclusion of women writers among its male ranks. Stedman's earlier work of criticism, Poets of America, granted a scant three pages to the achievements of women, dismissing them as "a sisterhood of song" (50). In his introduction to his Anthology, Stedman acknowledged the necessity of including women poets, but with the warning that "thus far the sex's achievements, in a time half seriously styled `the woman's age,' are still more evident elsewhere" (xxviii). Just where that was, Stedman did not detail, but I must believe that a

certain amount of jealousy for the popularity, and, I assume, the financial reward, of women's writing informs Stedman's judgement. Just as writers like Jane Tompkins and Leslie Fiedler have pointed out the difference between popularity and critical acceptance of 19th century novels, so the same distinction holds true for much of the poetry. Nevertheless, the same topics that fed the ladies' poetry mill when Caroline May collected her anthology were current when Stedman collected his. Larzer Ziff explains that the "preciousness" of women, the necessity of protecting them and placing them on a pedestal was especially prevalent in American poetry continuing through the 1890's (276). Two quotations will illustrate the continuing female bent toward hearth and home. Katharine Lee Bates ends her poem called "A Song of Riches" with this mortal quatrain:

> Homeward the weary merchants pass,
> With the gold bedimmed by care.
> Little they wis that the barefoot lass
> Is the only millionaire.
> (Stedman, Anthology 648)

And from "The Cry of the Young Women" by Helen M. Bullis, in the Atlantic Monthly in 1900:

> Each holds a dream within her heart
> Of future or of past,
> A dream of mother, lover, child,
> Too poignant-sweet to last,
> A mirage dim in dimming eyes,
> We know, -- but hold it fast.

Robinson held fast to his own poetic ideas, rooting his questions about humankind's spiritual make-up in the exigencies of everyday life, and this stubbornness kept him out of poetry's woman-dominated mainstream in the 1890's.

In fact, there was considerable disagreement about the value of this poetry at the time. For example, in back-to-back articles in the Atlantic Monthly in 1901, J.D. Logan and Josephine Dodge Daskam sparred. In "American Prose Style," Logan argued that "American poetry is unoriginal, imitative, desultory, occasional; except in theme, it has contributed to the poetry of the world nothing distinctly American" because it lacks the "manliness" which is the central characteristic of American prose (689). By "manliness," Logan means "practicality." Prose is American and masculine, poetry foreign and feminine, and therefore impractical and lesser. Daskam defended American poetry: "It is not a starved, unwholesome asceticism; it is healthy, wind-swept, rain-washed, -- a vital delight" (701). While considering Walt Whitman unconnected with the development of American poetry, Daskam praised the popular female poets Louise Guiney and Lizette Woodworth Reese for continuing the tradition of Emersonian trascendentalism in a more classical mode. She cites a stanza of Guiney's that comes directly from Emerson's "Brahma":

> Jaffa ended, Cos begun
> Thee Artisteus; thou wert one
> Fit to trample out the sun:
> Who shall think thine ardors are
> But a cinder in a jar? (703)

It is easy to see that Robinson fits neither Logan's scheme nor Daskam's. He wrote about matters that Logan might call manly in such early poems as "Aaron Stark" and "Fleming Helphenstine," but in the sonnet form. And except for "Credo," he did not express his version of Emerson in abstractions or symbols in the manner that Daskam would approve, but through his trademark characterizations.

But the Emersonian female poets such as Guiney and Reese were the exception. More typical were the poets of home life and the poets of the social movements that were either woman-led, such as temperance, or of, by, and for women, such as suffrage. Of course, the poets of these movements inspired equally-fervid opposition poets. In chapter six, "Wine and Women, A Song of Reform" in his book, The Poet and the Gilded Age, Robert H. Walker describes the ferocity and silliness of much of the verse published in favor of prohibition, temperance, and suffrage. The evils of drink, the fallacy of feminism, and the political fitness or lack of fitness of women seemed to provide bottomless pools of images for these writers. And the increasingly sensational vitriol of the attacks and counter-attacks found more and more magazine space available to it. It is no mystery, therefore, that by leaving woman-bashing poems like "Mulieria" behind, Robinson should have found his poems virtually shut out of the magazine market and hence, excluded from the poetry-reading public.

While Robinson never publicly joined in the fray, his attitude as he expressed it in letters to his best friend, Harry de Forest Smith,

demonstrates neither sympathy nor support for either temperance or suffrage. In fact, he seems to have combined the two into one threat:

> We are not all rakes, and there is such a thing in the world as a good woman, excluding those angular spinsters who preach about woman suffrage and diseased ballots until they rope in honest men's wives and teach them to desert their families and husbands until the poor devils get drunk out of sheer disgust (God never intended man and woman both to wear pants).
> (Sept. 27, 1890; US 3)

Smith's response is unknown. Apparently for Robinson at age 21, a good woman was one who stayed home away from politics and social reform. His attitude in this letter is a summary of anti-feminist cartoons and essays like those in Walker's book, and he does not demonstrate any thought of his own on either issue.[2] A few years later, temperance continued to trouble him. In 1895, he wrote out for Smith part of one of his never-published Tavern Songs:

> Look at Edward Alphabet
> Going home to pray!
> Drunk as he can ever get,
> And on the Sabbath day!
> and so forth. You may not think it from the first lines but the poem is an argument against the present attitude of females.
> (US 238)

Since the temperance movement was engineered primarily by women, they encountered his scorn for their attempts to infringe upon his right to imbibe. Over 25 years later, after Prohibition became law, he wrote "Dionysus in Doubt" and "Dionysus and Demos," not against women, but

against the power which democracy grants to the majority, a power which he felt had been abused in the debate over alcohol.

The same era brought the power of the vote to women, but society has historically said that women matter less than men do in the grand scheme of things, and literature has followed the cue, usually granting secondary and often stereotypical roles to women. Josephine Donovan and others insist that the goal of feminist literary criticism is to keep in mind the political aspects, the "unexamined ideologies" of historical male domination (xiii). "In the negative mode the feminist critic observes the text's absences, gaps, and omissions as well as the reified, destructive forms that are inscribed therein; s/he relates the text to its ideological context (patriarchy)" (xvii). In other words, the roles, actions, characterizations, and other aspects of literary production must be set against what is known about the social beliefs generally held at the time the work was written. This mode of inquiry can be a depressing process, as many feminists have noted. It is an investigation which exposes in literary works a pattern of consistently negative female stereotypes, an unwarranted blaming of women for the world's ills, and a seemingly inevitable doom for female characters. On the other hand, there is a positive mode for Donovan, one which "identifies the text's liberatory dimension and delineates its utopian horizon" (xvii). Despite the contributions of feminist literary criticism, Showalter, Donovan, and other feminist critics continue to feel that they are marginalized to a token representation in literature departments, their writing mostly unread by their male colleagues.

Nevertheless, it seems necessary for male critics to apologize for "using" feminist criticism. Annette Kolodny questions male dominance of literary criticism because men have tended to see male experience as universal when clearly it is not (89). And indeed, some feminists have asserted that because men are raised with the assumptions of domination they cannot develop the sort of underdog mentality required for feminist criticism. As Jean Baker Miller notes in Toward a New Psychology of Women, society developed dominant and subordinate relationships between men and women, and the role of the subordinate is to serve the dominant (6-9). The general argument is that men will not match the insights of women in interpreting the subtleties of literary depictions of women because those in dominant posititons have less insight into the subordinate position than those in subordinate positions of power have into the dominant. The master/slave relationship, with its stereotypes of the happy slave, is the precursor to this argument. K.K. Ruthven, a male scholar of feminist criticism, agrees that the main problem for men is to stop seeing male experience as universal and to see it simply as male (64-5), but he clearly believes that the shift in point of view is possible. Men have not had to make the effort of "immasculation," as Judith Fetterley calls the seemingly unconscious ability developed by women who find they must learn "to read like men" in order to join the intended audience of the patriarchal literary canon and of literary criticism (xx). But Ruthven argues that men as well as women must "unmask the oppressive nature of stereotypical representations" given as role models (70). The process of this unmasking has been labeled "socio-historical feminist criticism."

The advent of French feminist criticism, with its emphasis on writings by women instead of on men's writings about women brought an accusation that American socio-historical criticism was naive, even old-fashioned (Todd 69). But there's still a place for it, especially when dealing with male writers. More than exposing and ridiculing male assumptions about women, what is needed is a completion of the history of the depiction of women. In trying to fill in a small portion of that history, I am also trying to avoid having the discussion of Robinson center only on stereotypes versus rounded characters, which is why I am concentrating on the variety of roles that Robinson sets out for women. I am not trying to expose sexist ideology per se, which must be conceded as a fact of Robinson's era, but to investigate how Robinson operates within the constraints of his ideology.

It is granted that misogynism is at the center of the patriarchal canon. To what extent is Robinson misogynistic? Moderation seems to be the key. It is apparent in some poems that he accepted society's expectations of passivity and domesticity for women, yet other poems demonstrate his sympathy with women caught up in and limited by these expectations. Perhaps Robinson felt that the patriarchal system was the natural order of things, as was widely believed through most of his lifetime, and that nothing could change it. As Judith Fetterley writes of Henry James's The Bostonians, sympathy for the subservient role of women may have been the most reasonable response at the time (151), a response we might call a sort of passive misogynism.

Some scholars have hypothesized a connection between misogynism, celibacy, and men's theories about creativity. Elaine Showalter, in

Sexual Anarchy, her study of gender at the fin de siecle, notes that male celibate creativity was especially prized. She cites Gerard Manley Hopkins in particular, who considered writing to be "a kind of male gift" or a "begetting" superior in kind to women's biological capacity for reproduction (78). Several best-selling novels incorporated the theme of male creation, such as Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, and Rider Haggard's She; however, there is no evidence that Robinson read them. Despite having celibacy in common with some of these writers and characters, Robinson does not seem to have compared literary creation and biological procreation. He was as likely to call his creations "things" as "poems." Nor was his avoidance of women in his personal life a Balzacian fear of diminished creative powers; celibacy was a practical matter for Robinson; more than once he expressed the opinion that being a writer made a man unfit for other endeavors, such as business or marriage. Characteristically, he wanted to write without making another person's life miserable.

Nevertheless, many women were attracted to Robinson, especially after he began summering in New Hampshire at the MacDowell Colony, but he avoided all entreaties that might have led beyond a speaking acquaintanceship. He saw these women as stereotypically emotional, smitten more by the poetry than by the poet. The stereotypes of women are many and have been delineated in a number of different ways. For example, Mary Ellman, in her spirited and witty book, Thinking About Women, categorizes and defines nine traditionally stereotypical characteristics of women in western culture: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality,

irrationality, and compliancy; she also remarks on two "incorrigible figures" who appear repeatedly: the Shrew and the Witch (55). Questions about contradictions, such as how women can be both too material and too spiritual are answered by noting that a presumed male norm of behavior is centrally located and that women tend toward extremes. Feminist critics write of the necessity of escaping binary oppositional descriptors attached to female characters. These oppositions have been accepted for so long that they appear to have the sanction of Nature. Some are used to distinguish abilities of men and women, such as strong/weak, rational/emotional, and rough/smooth, in which the first term of the binary relationship is assumed to be both male and positive, the second female and negative. Other oppositions are formed through assumptions about the extremes of female character or roles, such as virgin/whore and materiality/spirituality. Marcia Holly, in "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," summarizes stereotypes of female characters: "silly, flighty, shrill, illogical, concerned only with childrearing and recipes, inactive -- in sum, domestic" (39). As Mary Anne Ferguson notes in Images of Women in Literature, well-rounded characters are only recognizable in their deviation from the stereotype (9). And yet, positively-drawn characters have been the targets of complaints by male critics and reviewers. Holly summarizes their remarks: "Intellectual females must be neurotic, unfeminine, deviant" (39). Indeed, "unfemininity" seems to be one of the most serious charges leveled against any author's female characters. As Ferguson's investigation showed her, differences are always stressed

over similarities (7). K.K. Ruthven sees opportunity in this indexing of differences:

> "Where an images-of-women approach gets its purchase is by being able to show that what is offensive in representations of women is not so much having them defined in relation to men as the fact that such relationships are often exploitative of women" (73).

Exploitation occurs when one group exerts force over another, treating that group as not only inferior but as completely unlike the more forceful group.

Feminist critics describe male writers as treating women as Other, and this Other-ness as the cause of most of the misunderstandings between men and women. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir traces this treatment back to Babylon to assert that "man never thinks of himself without thinking of the Other" (69), and Kate Millet connects this other-ness with literary misogyny in twentieth-century fiction throughout Sexual Politics. This Babylon-to-Norman Mailer misconception on the part of men persists in spite of the findings of researchers like Nancy Chodorow, whose study, "Being and Doing: A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Socialization of Males and Females," asserts that there is no biological basis for perceived differences in male/female psychology or personality, despite centuries of thought otherwise; psychology and personality are culturally derived (173). Either way, differences develop and are accepted as normal.

In Robinson's poetry, in addition to the gulf between men and women, there is a real sense of almost everyone being mysterious,

everyone as an Other to all others. And Robinson occasionally took on the role of Other as a disguise, that is, using a female persona or narrator in an autobiographical poem, such as "Aunt Imogen." In some poems, God is the most important Other, as the source of all mystery. I think that because of Robinson's view of the spiritual nature of humanity, his we-are-all-kindergartners- with-the-wrong-blocks outlook, woman is less distant from man than God is.

Of course, a major goal of literature is to define and struggle with this distance in various ways -- the distance between human beings and between human beings and God. As Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson write in "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue," both male and female characters are most valuable when they exhibit the human condition and not just some perceived male condition or female condition (66). I believe that Robinson created a number of valuable characters, both male and female, as well as some stereotypical ones. While part of Robinson's characterization of women may be the result of his observation of general social conditions and of publishing history, there are more personal influences which also require consideration.

NOTES

[1]Thomas Buchanan Read might have been the most honest of the three anthologists. He wrote no introduction, thereby avoiding both the self-serving pieties of May and the sexist deprecations of Griswold. Neither did he provide biographical information on the poets. He simply presented the poems.

[2]See two works by James McGrigor Allan, "On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women" (1869), and _Woman Suffrage Wrong in Principle and Practice_ (1890), cited by Katherine M. Rogers in _The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature_ (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1966).

CHAPTER IV

FEMALE FRIENDS

A writer's friends may influence him, and in considering Robinson's treatment of women in his poems, it is appropriate to take an approach that is at least partly biographical. Who were Edwin Arlington Robinson's friends, the ones close enough to call him "E.A."? And especially, who were his closest female friends? What influence might they have had on his poetry, his publications, and his thinking about gender? What did he think about relationships between the sexes, and especially about marriage? Answers to these questions as they appear in the poems will be dealt with in later chapters; this chapter will deal with these questions as they figure in his personal life.

Among men, Robinson seems to have made three fairly separate sets of friends: those he grew up with in Maine, those he knew in New York, and those he knew at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. With the older friends, one of the main concerns evident in Robinson's letters is how to remain true to artistic ideals and still support oneself in an America dominated by materialism. This battle between art and money produced ambiguities that show up as "habitual reversals of position" in the Tilbury Town poems and in the letters to Harry de Forest Smith, as Robinson struggled to write the poems he felt he must write while still

retaining the respect of Gardiner folk (Blumenthal 88). News of impending marriages was particularly disturbing to Robinson, as he realized that such a major change in the circumstances of his friends would disrupt their own relationship, especially since he never stood at the end of a church aisle during a wedding march. With the later friends, those of New York and of MacDowell, the main concern expressed seems to be coping with fame and the concomitant attention, but another anxiety is the necessity to continue putting out the product, so to speak -- more books of poetry, one per year after Tristram. Considering Robinson's reputation as a loner, the number and variety of friends and the fact that there was apparently little overlap between the various sets is somewhat surprising.

Observation appears to be the key. Robinson learned about people by observing his married friends and their trials, triumphs, and tragedies, as his letters attest. Of course, there were others whose circumstances touched him because they had less choice about living in poverty: the man on the street corner from whom he bought the apples that were nearly his entire sustenance when he first lived in New York, the wives in the boarding house hanging out the laundry, the laborers in the subway. Hagedorn relates that even on his deathbed Robinson was pained by the human situations that he knew too well. Welfare Island was visible from his hospital room, but he refused to look in that direction: "Think of the old men down there, think of what is going on, the suffering, the crowded, dingy quarters, the loneliness" (375). The suffering of all human beings intrigued Robinson, but he seems to have found the situations of women especially poignant because of the

limitations imposed by society and marriage. In addition to observation, a willingness to place his poems in front of other writers for their evaluation characterizes Robinson, and his professional and personal involvements with women serve as evidence of his reliance upon them for inspiration and criticism.

Robinson's reticence, however, when faced with women is well known. Although he did have a small number of friends who were women, he was particularly distressed by women who were attracted to him only through reading his poetry. He refused to give public readings of his work, and he discussed poetry only in the most informal settings among friends and acquaintances such as those at MacDowell. Perhaps the most famous anecdote about Robinson's disinclination toward involvement with women is the story of his utter refusal to be swayed by the charms of Isadora Duncan, the dancer, choreographer, and legend of romantic intrigue, who accepted the challenge of Robinson's celibacy one evening in New York about 1908, and failed.

Sex might have been too material an activity to hold Robinson's interest for long. His reputation for emphasizing the spiritual side of life over the physical was established early, and Wallace L. Anderson notes that all three collections of Robinson's letters were edited by men who did not want that austere reputation tarnished. For example, there is at least one 1892 letter to Harry de Forest Smith that Denham Sutcliffe did not collect in Untriangulated Stars because Robinson alludes to "anatomical investigations" in the "midnight palaces" of Boston ("Sampler" 54). Yet, the letter is ambiguous; Chard Powers Smith points out that letters of the same period express disgust toward men

who engage in sex only for physical pleasure (116). Whether Robinson's disgust was formed through experience or observation remains open to debate, especially since it is common for young men to talk and act as if they are more sexually experienced than the truth would support. It is certainly possible that Robinson experienced sex only vicariously or intellectually. These "investigations" occurred during Robinson's short stay at Harvard (1891-93), and all of the anecdotes relating his avoidance of sex take place after this time. More about Robinson's sex life or love life may be learned when his letters to Rosalind Richards in Harvard's Houghton Library are opened to readers in the year 2007 (although I would rate it as unlikely, as her mother, Robinson's friend and supporter, Laura E. Richards, makes no mention of any relationship between them). Only Chard Powers Smith is willing to speculate in his memoir/biography that Robinson might have had "some lady" that he visited in New York during occasional weekends away from the MacDowell Colony (56). Smith admits there is no evidence supporting this speculation; indeed, none of the other memoirs of Robinson at MacDowell (by Frederika Beatty, Esther Willard Bates, and Rollo Walter Brown) mention his absences or any reaction to women other than the reticence for which the poet is famous.

Because Robinson is known to have lived a celibate, or very nearly celibate, adult life, some investigation is appropriate into his friendships with women. After his mother,[1] there are five women who may have had some influence on his poetry and/or on the publication of his books. They are Miss Caroline D. Swan, Mrs. Laura E. Richards, Josephine Preston Peabody, Edith Brower, and Esther Willard Bates. A

sixth woman, in a category of her own, is Emma Shepherd Robinson, the wife of Edwin's older brother, Herman.

Although Dr. Alanson Tucker Schuman, a part-time physician and full-time versifier who lived in Gardiner, is credited with being Robinson's earliest poetry mentor, Schuman's teacher, Miss Caroline D. Swan (1841-1938), should receive equal credit. Miss Swan was devoted to French poetry and the French poetic forms such as the roundel and the villanelle, as well as the sonnet, much like the minor Victorian poets in England at the time. A small group of poets and poetry admirers met at Miss Swan's house to read and discuss both French poems and their own; she thought Robinson was too young either to contribute or to benefit, but Dr. Schuman persuaded her to let him attend a session. Schuman must have needed even more of his persuasive abilities to overcome Robinson's congenital hand-wringing at the mere contemplation of a gathering that would require not only talking about poetry but simultaneously overcoming his disinclination to talk with women. Nevertheless, the two reluctant parties were brought together, and Robinson's poems, with their display of technical prowess despite the author's youth, apparently convinced the elite and accomplished Miss Swan to keep him as part of the group.

A perusal of Swan's verses collected in The Unfading Light reveals many aspects of nineteenth century poetry against which Robinson reacted with some violence. There are many archaisms such as "O!," "Yea," "Thy," and "Thou" sprinkled liberally throughout the poems. Many poems, such as "Sweeter than All" and "The Mission Field" carry overtly Christian themes and were first published in Catholic World.

Occasionally, the syntax is skewed in order to make a rhyme fit. And yet, there are indications of some themes with which Robinson clearly had an affinity. The wariness about money in Robinson's "Dear Friends" and "Cassandra" is echoed in part of Swan's "On the Kennebec" (which also shows some of the conventions Robinson detested). Workers in Maine's premier winter industry, the ice-cutters, are depicted as:

> Intense their effort; blaze of torches, blown
> To scarlet flaming, darkest nights bedeck
> With fiery gems, lest accidental check
> Should end their toil, their hope of gain o'erthrown.
> (20)

In addition to this exposure of greed, the theme of Light as representative of some unknowable force beyond this world informs Swan's title poem, "The Unfading Light." Although Swan places a specifically Christian interpretation on this "Light," Robinson used the "Light" throughout his career to stand for what could not be seen in this life.[2]

While Schuman and Swan churned out verses in the French forms like a modern day print shop, Robinson ached over his often-revised poems. We can be thankful that he was not influenced by the rapid-fire production of these older poets, but by their love of technique. Although he published and later collected only one villanelle, "The House on the Hill," it is a poem that has been often praised and anthologized. It is easy to imagine many previous tries at this difficult form. The practice of fitting poetry into forms also shows up in the compact "Octaves" of 1897, and in his many sonnets. <u>Sonnets</u>

1889-1927 collects many of Robinson's most important poems, such as "The Clerks," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," and "Monadnock Through the Trees." We might also attribute his life-long disapproval of free verse to the strictures of Swan and Schuman. Later, in 1921, he wrote to Witter Bynner: "I am pretty well satisfied that free verse, prohibition, and moving pictures are a triumvirate from hell, armed with the devil's instructions to abolish civilization" (SL 128). Still later, an interviewer asked him why he never wrote in free verse, and his reply was, "I write badly enough as it is." But Miss Swan was not the only Gardiner resident whose influence on Robinson seems to have endured throughout his career.

About twenty years older than Robinson, Mrs. Laura E. Richards (1850-1943) lived near Miss Swan, and although the two ladies apparently never were close friends, she came to know the young poet through her sons around the time of the publication of his first book. Mrs. Richards had published many books of children's poems and girls' stories, and at her home she held meetings of various high school student clubs dedicated to history and modern languages. However, no inducement could get Robinson to join these meetings until after he was able to present her with a copy of The Torrent and the Night Before. Even then, according to two letters to Harry Smith, Robinson got as much pleasure from scratching the ears of the Richards' dogs as from the literary small talk that went on there (US 284, 286). Although he left Gardiner for New York seldom to return, a friendship and appreciation was established that would help Robinson's career.

In her autobiography, Stepping Westward, published in 1931, Richards recalls her excitement in reading Robinson's first two books, feeling that a "New Voice" was on the scene (378). In at least three ways, direct and indirect, Richards promoted Robinson. Before the turn of the century she wrote a number of letters on Robinson's behalf (and apparently without his knowledge) to Edmund Clarence Stedman, the Wall Street broker, poet, and editor. Stedman accepted "Luke Havergal" and four other poems for the American Anthology he was putting together.[3] The two men did meet later and formed a rather tenuous acquaintanceship -- the editor's enthusiam for the shy poet was not altogether returned. Secondly, Mrs. Richards and another Robinson friend, John Hays Gardiner, then guaranteed Houghton Mifflin against loss in the publication of Captain Craig in 1902. Perhaps most importantly, Richards' son, Hal, was a teacher at Groton School at this time, and he read parts of Captain Craig to his class. One student was Kermit Roosevelt, who sent a copy of the book to his father, Theodore, the President, who set in motion the patronage that gave Robinson a sinecure at the New York Customs division of the Treasury Department for the duration of Roosevelt's term in office.

While Roosevelt may have been responsible for keeping Robinson physically alive between 1905 and 1910, the poet's spirit went through the shadows of some dark valleys because Captain Craig was not especially well received. Robinson wanted to isolate himself in his misery, but Mrs. Richards refused to let him cut off their correspondence. Robinson did not keep his friends' letters, and he asked his friends to destroy the letters they received from him. Mrs.

Richards followed orders for the most painful letters of this period, but she kept his later letters, which demonstrate his desire to please her with his poetic production. Clearly, they exchanged opinions on many of Robinson's poems. Whether he took her advice about any particular poem is hard to say since we do not have any of her letters, but Robinson defends his themes and plans in a number of letters to her.

Laura Richards continued her supportive correspondence with Robinson throughout his life. The Selected Letters contains many of his brief notes on a variety of subjects from 1922 on. Since Robinson's repuation was well established by this time, fewer of the letters deal with his poetry and more with literary likes (such as Thackeray) and dislikes (such as Meredith). An exception is in the early 1920's, when he was writing his Dionysus poems against Prohibition. He had quit his rather heavy drinking sometime earlier, but when the Volstead Act was passed he resumed on the principle of personal freedom. In a letter to Mrs. Richards he defends the freedom to drink with "Oh no, I don't want the world drunk. On the other hand, I don't want a world tyrannized by Henry Fords, W.J. Bryans, and Charles W. Eliots -- which appears to be on the way" (SL 140). For the most part, the letters are friendly and conversational in tone. In 1930, to the rumor that "The House on the Hill" refers to the Richards' home in Gardiner, the "Yellow House," Robinson assures her that the poem refers to "no house that ever was, and least of all a stone house still in good order" (SL 161). Mrs. Richards also received one of Robinson's last letters, written from the New York hospital before he died, in which he tried to persuade her that he was on the mend. Her final word on him comes in her brief tribute,

E.A.R., published the year after his death. The book is a fond remembrance, covering the period from the poet's childhood through the publication of his first volume of poems. It has been a valuable resource for all of Robinson's biographers.

Josephine Preston Peabody (1874-1922), poet and dramatist, was another woman and literary friend with whom Robinson maintained a correspondence. They met in 1899, some weeks after Robinson wrote a review of her first collection of poems, The Wayfarers, which was published in 1898. In the first of a very small number of book reviews that Robinson would ever write because he found the chair of judgement so exceedingly uncomfortable, he gave Peabody's work faint praise: the poetry shows "more of the real thing than mediocrity" and the author stands above "art for art's sake," a phrase that Robinson admits means nothing to him (Uncollected 62). He complained about some of her diction ("glamourie" and "enringing"), but he predicted more successful publications from her (65-6). After delaying his visit because he suffered a brief illness, he finally succeeded in meeting her.

She was vivacious, confident, talkative; in short, she was much that Robinson was not. According to Hermann Hagedorn, Peabody enjoyed his occasional visits, prepared to do most of the talking, happy to hear whatever she could elicit from him (151-2). Although of Robinson's several female friends she was the closest to his own age, Miss Peabody apparently was never considered as a candidate for romance. There's no mention of "sentimentality" (Robinson's euphemism for sexual attraction) in the letters to Harry Smith or to others. Even Chard Powers Smith avoids speculating about a liaison between the two poets. Later, any

romantic attraction between Robinson and Peabody would have been beside the point, as she married an engineer named Lionel Marks, and Robinson never would have made himself an emotional wedge in the marriage of a friend.

The composer Daniel Gregory Mason (another of Robinson's correspondents) was friend to both Robinson and Peabody. Mason recalls her as extremely loyal to artists and passionate for the arts, so friendly and outgoing that she sometimes confused those who cared for her; ". . . with her full share of feminine vanity," Peabody dominated any social gathering with her charm (Music 119). And apparently Peabody's presence could cause Robinson to put aside his usual avoidance of social gatherings, at least on occasion, as Mason relates a Halloween party during which he, along with Robinson, William Vaughn Moody, Ridgely Torrence, and Rodman Gilder "twined our brows with grape wreaths and looked like tipsy pagans for the admiration of our women-folk" (Music 145). It is difficult to imagine Robinson loosening his inhibitions as thoroughly as this scene indicates, but it seems that the right group of men and women could induce him to put aside his differences in personality for a short time.

Perhaps observing these differences provided poetic material for Robinson; however, there are interesting similarities (though still tinged with difference) between Peabody's and Robinson's artistic outlooks and critical receptions. In a number of his letters, Robinson calls himself an optimist, usually responding to critics' charges of pessimism, hence the famous quotation: "The world is not a `prison-house,' but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of

bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks." He was certain that only something better to come justifies the meanness of this life. Peabody saw the same bleak surface of life that Robinson saw, but she wanted to present the best possible face of that bleakness. In her diary for March 1900, she writes:

> If you are a creature born to gather and turn over in your mind human experience, for God's sake, give the positive crumb, the positive, the positive, the positive! Treat of faults and failures, hate, brutality, and despair; but keep the proportion of things. (130)

Typical of the magazine writers of the turn of the century, Peabody strives to present a proportionate optimism marred by a minimum of sentimentality. Robinson felt that his optimism was based on what could not be presented, but only believed -- "the Light," as he names it in "Credo," _Lancelot_, and many other poems. Part of their relationship was spent in defining this variation in their outlooks. He tells her to be less philosophical and more objective, but she resists: "Want to, but how can I without being D----d pessimistic" (_Diary_ 131)? She did not want to open herself up to the same criticism that Robinson received on his first two volumes.

The early critical reception of both poets was similar in that both felt overlooked and misunderstood. Each was charged with obscurity, but they maintained confidence in their work. Robinson always felt that insofar as the public misinterpreted his poems he must be doing something right (while at the same time, he professed keen

disappointment in such misinterpretation). In some form or another, he stated several times during his life the idea of a kind of literary immortality. One example is the line that ends "John Brown," a poem which appeared in _The Three Taverns_ in 1920: "I shall have more to say when I am dead" (_CP_ 490).[4] He was sure that his time was yet to come. In her own effusive way, Peabody jotted her confidence in _The Wayfarers_ into her diary in November 1898: "But the heart of that book I know: and it is beautiful. I dare hold it up as high as I can lift it, and say it is Beautiful" (101). The critical neglect of their poems and the reliance on self for assurance formed a basis for their friendship, as Robinson felt he could identify with such apparent failure. Many of his poems, such as "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" and _The Man Who Died Twice_, represent this tension between private acceptance and public disregard which both Peabody and Robinson keenly felt.

As he did with most of his friends, Robinson preferred correspondence with Peabody to direct contact with her. Most of the letters deal, not unexpectedly, with writing and publishing poetry, and they were written while Robinson was writing the poems to be included in _Captain Craig_. He depended on Peabody, as he did with Edith Brower, for specific comments on the poems. For example, after William Vaughn Moody talked Robinson into cutting two stanzas from "Twilight Song," he sent the poem to Peabody, begging her to find more lines to be excised. With the title poem of the volume, he warns her against taking the old gentleman too seriously and asks whether some of the phrasing is delicate enough to be acceptable to the critics; he thanks her for suggestions on "The Book of Annandale" (although de does not say that he

actually incorporated any of them) and reports progress on that poem and on "Isaac and Archibald" (SL 31, 33, 39, 41). He responded in kind to her poems, with criticism of word choices that disrupt the meter and of overusing exclamation points to tell the reader that she knows she has written a good line (Neff 108, SL 46). As with his other literary friends, Robinson used the give-and-take of the letters with Peabody to sharpen his poetic decision making.[5]

At about the same time Laura E. Richards was writing to E.C. Stedman, Peabody wrote to her acquaintance, Mr. Maynard, of the publishing house of Small, Maynard, in order to get a sympathetic reading for Captain Craig. Although Small, Maynard did not bring out the book (indeed, the manuscript was inadvertently left for several months in one of Boston's houses of prostitution, where the madam preserved it until the reader's return visit), the effort expended by Miss Peabody did not go unappreciated by Robinson, and along with Mrs. Richards' efforts, it shows the lengths to which his friends would go to help him gain publication and a wider audience.

During Robinson's dark and ill-fated period of play and novel writing after Captain Craig, their correspondence diminished, at his request. While Richards was able to continue her communications with Robinson, Peabody was not. Even later, when Robinson's fame and affluence had grown, the two poets did not resume their letter-writing. As was the case between Robinson and other correspondents, once his fame increased, his requests for criticism and his dependence on that type of support decreased.

Six years after Josephine Preston Peabody's untimely death in 1922 at the age of 48, Robinson expressed his admiration for her work in a typically Robinsonian way; in a letter to Edith Brower he praised Peabody's attempt to present life truthfully: "She insisted on giving bread to people who wanted cake -- as I told her once and was nearly slain for my good intentions" and he felt that she would retain a prominent place in the history of American poetry (EB 195). Clearly, as one who also found more bread than cake to eat, Robinson was impressed with some aspects of Miss Peabody's poetry. Certainly part of this admiration is attributable to the fact that he was indebted to her for making him support the ideas he depicted during the early portion of his career.

Perhaps an even more fruitful correspondence and friendship than the one with Peabody was Robinson's long exchange of letters with Edith Brower (1848-1931), an essayist, story writer, and poet who lived in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She was an immediate fan of Robinson's poetry when she read The Torrent and the Night Before; Titus Coan, a poet and friend of hers, was one of the poets Robinson selected almost at random to receive his first book. Coan gave the little volume to Brower; she read it and fired off an admiring letter which surprised Robinson. He wrote to Harry Smith: "I have received a letter (4 pages) from an unknown female who seems to be in a very bad way over my verses" (US 270). Brower's letter broke through Robinson's usual barriers of reserve toward female poetry admirers, and it started an ongoing discussion of individual poems and broad literary topics that lasted until her death.

Characteristically, Robinson's early correspondence with Edith Brower encourages her to temper her enthusiasm for his poems. He was grateful for the appreciation, but he was embarrassed by the fuss. Nevertheless, her letters were the best part of his winter and spring of 1897, a fact that he admitted to Harry Smith in more effusive tones than to Miss Brower. And most fortunately, he found she was not a threat to his personal life:

> My female correspondent has done wonders for me, and has proved to me that I possess the power of helping others, which, after all, is about the greatest thing a man, or a book, can do. She is infernally bright and not at all ugly and has something of a literary reputation. The best of it all is, she is too old to give me a chance to bother myself with any sentimental uneasiness. It's a queer experience for a man like me, but it has done me a world of good. (US 281)

Several times, he speaks of her in these terms of wonder and thankfulness, not the least of which was his relief at being able to avoid a romantic entanglement. After having his poems almost universally rejected by the major magazines, Robinson often joked that the most questionable part of anyone's intellect was his or her fondness for his poetry, and this attitude kept him wary, for a time, of Brower's attentions. Nevertheless, he was able to persuade himself to leave New York a couple of times to visit his intriguing Pennsylvania pen pal.

In Wilkes-Barre, Edith Brower was an upper-crust spinster who enjoyed her involvement in town politics and apparently also enjoyed being seen as a troublemaker by the men who ran the town and who preferred to keep the channels of local power closed. She chose the

aesthetic life over the practical, an attitude that immediately endeared her to Robinson. Nevertheless, there is an earnestness and an anxiousness in his letters to her, just as there is in his letters to others. He is constantly concerned that their friendship will be ruined through his negligence. He always apologizes for not writing frequently enough, while at the same time beseeching that his letters should be destroyed after they are read or certainly after they are answered. He never felt that the "real" E.A. Robinson came through in the letters, and he wanted to avoid causing others pain should they read his occasional flippant comments. Yet, the letters do provide a sense of the real man; they are literary without being pretentious, full of concern for the art and sympathy for the person, qualities on which all who wrote about him from personal experience agree.

Edith Brower was one friend on whom Robinson came to depend for criticism and advice, and like Miss Peabody, Harry de Forest Smith, and so many others, she can be thanked for not following the orders that she destroy his letters. Robinson's dependence on Brower was based at least in part on what he called her "feminine criticism," which she called her "womanishness" (_EB_ 101, 32). The period in which he wrote the poems for _Captain Craig_, roughly 1898-1901, was one in which he wrote to her frequently, because several of the poems' main characters are women ("Aunt Imogen," "The Woman and the Wife," "The Growth of 'Lorraine'"):

> I hope to see you often and to get your feminine criticism of some female things that I have done. They seem to come quite naturally and I fancy there may be some truth in them. Still, you might detect a false touch where I might not know the difference. This

> sounds very elementary, but I think you will be generous enough not to read it the wrong way. (101)

Their terms "feminine criticism" and "womanishness" naturally remain undefined in the letters; apparently both writers mean that Brower, as a woman, would be able to tell Robinson whether or not his female characters were thinking, speaking, and acting in ways that a woman of the time might be expected to think and speak and act. With his concern that Brower not see his request "the wrong way," Robinson seems worried that Brower would feel he was condescending to her. This phase of their correspondence occurred in August 1899, a year and a half into their friendship, but I suspect that this was enough time for Brower to know Robinson well enough that such condescension would be virtually impossible for him to feel or exhibit. By all accounts, such behavior just was not part of his personality.

The typical personalities, the relative abilities and interests of men and women, appear to have been subjects that intrigued both Brower and Robinson. It is interesting that Peabody and Brower seem to be given entirely different emphases in Robinson's letters asking for criticism. While Robinson asked Peabody for a critique of any poem, he went to Brower specifically for insight into his poems in which women are the main characters. Perhaps this difference is based on the fact that Brower wrote articles about the differences between men and women.

In 1894, Brower published an essay in the Atlantic Monthly entitled "Is the Musical Idea Masculine?" Robinson read this essay in 1898 and expressed his enjoyment of it in a letter to her. From the title, a

reader might assume that because of Brower's strength of personality and her involvement in Wilkes-Barre politics her answer to the question would be an unqualified "No" accompanied by an argument supporting the Woman Movement of the 1890's, which called for more women's involvement in all spheres of work, but such an assumption would be incorrect. Instead, Brower's answer to her own question is a rather qualified "No." According to her, because women are naturally more attuned to the concrete aspects of life and men are more attuned to the abstract, men have a natural capacity, which women lack, for composing large and great musical works such as operas and symphonies. While women have the ability to set "simple words" to music, men compose the works that will endure (338). Brower's choice of imagery is especially unfortunate, as we look back almost 100 years; faced with the "chilly uncertainty" of the abstract, a woman is "a child in the dark" (338).

There is an interesting coincidence here, in that Robinson's second book, published in 1897, is entitled _The Children of the Night_. For Robinson, to his credit, all human beings, both male and female, blanch when encountering the "chilly uncertainty" of abstract ideas, but in his poems he dramatizes this encounter in the psyche of an individual rather than an entire race or gender group. What Robinson found most intriguing about Brower's essay was the number of story ideas suggested by a theoretical difference in musical ability between the sexes. In October 1898 he wrote to her:

> . . . it seems to me that with the woman who would compose great music but can't and a man who can but doesn't until he meets her, we might conjure up a dozen plots in as many hours. A "happy"

> ending would be rather unnatural, but a mental or even a moral tragedy need not give an effect of weakness or despair. (84)

Of course, part of this plot shows up more than twenty years later in Robinson's poem, The Man Who Died Twice (1924), in which the self-wasted composer Fernando Nash is allowed a vision of the great symphony he might have written, although instead of writing it, he accepts a less glorious life playing the drums in a Salvation Army band. This work is unique among Robinson's book-length poems in that no female character appears in it. For Robinson, the artistic struggle was an individual, lonely one. Nevertheless, he strongly encouraged Brower to try the "great undertaking" of the "musical novel" he postulated from her essay (84).

While he gave Brower this sort of general advice, he welcomed her specific advice on his poems; however, he seems seldom to have taken it. For example, they spent April and May of 1900 arguing about whether the last line of "The Woman and the Wife" should read "Do you ask me to take moonlight for the sun?" (Robinson's position) or "Do you ask him to take moonlight for the sun?" (Brower's suggested revision). From the time he first sent her a draft of the poem until its publication he changed a couple of other lines, but never this one. Clearly, he is correct -- the wife is addressing her husband, not the other woman. He completed this phase of their correspondence in June 1900 with a somewhat testy note demonstrating his exasperation with women's advice. He just could not see what Brower was seeing in that poem. Nevertheless, later that summer he sent her more poems; however, he wrote that the poems ". . .

were not sent primarily for criticism, but wholly out of friendship and overwhelming esteem for your cerebral activity. . ." (123). Perhaps he was hinting that he would prefer that she not criticize, but simply enjoy the poems, but Brower's personality meant she would not take the hint, even if she recognized it. She continued to respond to the poems, apparently in detail (again, we have his letters but not hers), until his reputation became firmly established. Their late correspondence deals mostly with his complaints about critics' misjudgements of his work and with his concern for her deteriorating health. Clearly, as Robinson's career was beginning, his friendship with Edith Brower was most important in its continuing discussion and debate over his poems, forcing him to express cogent defenses of his themes, particularly those involving women.

While Swan, Richards, Peabody, and Brower were Robinson's friends from early in his career, Esther Willard Bates (1884-?) did not meet the poet until after he began summering at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire in 1911. Her slim remembrance, <u>Edwin Arlington Robinson and his Manuscripts</u>, is a valuable resource for the last twenty years of Robinson's career. Bates was a playwright and a novelist for young people who came to the MacDowell Colony for the first time in 1913. She volunteered to be Robinson's typist, or it might be more accurate to say that she won the position by virtue of being able to read the minuscule, very difficult handwriting of his later years. She typed most of the book-length poems written at the MacDowell Colony, from <u>Merlin</u> to <u>King Jasper</u>, the final volume. For her, it must have been a labor of love, as his usual payment seems to have been a trip to a symphony

performance. Later, he gave her a number of his manuscripts, which were growing increasingly valuable.

Although Bates modestly tries to diminish the importance of her role as Robinson's amanuensis, it is clear that the two writers' friendship extended further than her typing service, to include discussions of Robinson's work at least, and perhaps Bates's. Bates felt free to ask questions about his poems, which he answered in a patient and kindly way (13). She also notes that his usual method of revision meant cutting many lines; to her queries or even to her defenses of certain lines, he detailed how the lines no longer fit the poem or his intention for it (20). He counted on her as an uncritical first reader, one who would respond as kindly as possible so as to avoid activating his hypersensitivity to the idea that he may have disappointed a friend (27), an emotion he may have developed when writing to Peabody and Brower. He seems to have been painfully aware of his works' weaknesses, but wanted confirmation of his works' strengths. After all, he said on more than one occasion that if people wanted to keep reading his blank verse "novels" he could keep writing them.

A frequent turn of conversation between Robinson and Bates was toward women and his women characters. Once, she provoked him into calling women "illogical and contrarious" (10). She writes that he:

> . . . both liked and trusted woman [sic] . . . It did not always seem, however, that he really had a very complete understanding of them. He had a fixed conviction of woman's inhumanity to woman . . . He suspected nearly all women of guile . . . He thought they had sharp tongues, whether or not they were in use at the moment. (28-9)

Perhaps Bates expects that all good writers have or develop special insight into the opposite sex, but I suspect that few of those writers and few feminist critics would agree with her. It should not be surprising that stereotypes about women prevalent in the nineteenth century would color Robinson's view of women; nevertheless, in many instances the poet demonstrates a sensitivity that crosses gender lines and creates enduring female characters. However, Bates seems to have enjoyed piquing Robinson about his women. Their disagreements about individual characters and poems will be dealt with in later chapters; it is enough to say at this point that she must have forced him to think deeply about the characters that inhabit the poems, especially the later long poems which she typed for him.

In addition to the five friends already discussed, there remains one woman who, after a fashion, overlaps the categories of friends and lovers, Emma Shepherd Robinson (1866-1940), Herman's wife. Apparently, Edwin and Emma never had a physical relationship, but he seems to have anticipated that she would accept a marriage proposal. But Herman complicated the situation. If Miniver Cheevy, with his desire to live in a bygone era, is at least partly Robinson's self-portrait, as many scholars surmise, I can imagine that in Edwin's mind he and his brother played out a kind of drama of Palamon and Arcite from Chaucer's _Knight's Tale_. Edwin knew Emma first, and they "walked together," as the saying goes; however, Edwin made the mistake of allowing his brother to see the woman -- he introduced them. Herman, closer to her age, then won her hand, only without the temple-building and bloodshed of the legend.

Nevertheless, the friendship between Edwin and Emma continued and was close enough to foment jealousy in Herman.

Although there is no evidence that Emma read and responded to Robinson's poems with the kinds of comments and suggestions that Edith Brower or Esther Bates offered, her personality and her struggles with the alcoholic Herman provided Robinson with characters and situations he modified for his poems. Certainly, her marriage was one of several friends' marriages that might have provided insight into the institution. She was attractive, caring, and stubborn; the last two attributes Robinson saw as essential to to anyone's survival in this messy world, and the first he felt would always be advantageous to a woman. Emma ran the Robinson household for a time after Mary Robinson's death in 1896. Later, Edwin was a frequent visitor to his brother's household, until his move to New York in October of 1899; it is certainly possible that through his own observation or through Emma's unburdening herself on him, he would have material for such poems as "But for the Grace of God" and "The Clinging Vine." Emma and her three daughters are supposed to be the models for the supporting characters -- the sister Jane, young Jane, Sylvester, and George -- in the autobiographical poem, "Aunt Imogen."

What Robinson saw as the female's particular capacity for sympathy and the ability to persevere attracted him to Emma. She maintained a stoic dignity in the face of declining family fortune through the Panic of 1893, when Herman's business investments in St. Louis were devastated, and she helped to care for Mary Robinson in her final illness. Sympathy and perseverence are attributes that Robinson must

have felt he had in common with women, and Emma's situation with Herman gave him the opportunity to exhibit his own forms of these feelings. Sometimes it did not work out as intended. There's a story that Herman once chased his brother out of the house after finding him sitting on the steps with his arm around Emma's shoulders. Some critics feel that in "The Book of Annandale" the apparent promise of the widow Damaris never to remarry is an example of life imitating art. The poem was published in 1902; Chard Powers Smith maintains that after Herman's death in 1909 Edwin twice proposed marriage to Emma but was refused. While Damaris decides to ignore her promise, Emma, if she ever made such a promise, kept hers. It is probable that Emma had an indirect influence on more poems than we will ever know, although Smith makes the relationship between Emma and Edwin the basis for interpreting almost all of Robinson's poems. This approach discredits Robinson's imagination to an extent that I am unwilling to follow.

Observation, and the imagination working on the people and things observed, were Robinson's two most powerful tools in poetic composition. He knew and observed men and women, separately and together. He certainly had many more friends among women than have been mentioned in this chapter. A glance at the biographies will turn up several more, such as Jean Ledoux, the wife of Robinson's long-time friend, correspondent, and literary executor, Louis V. Ledoux; Mabel Daniels, a composer and MacDowell colonist; and Mrs. Edward MacDowell, who established and ran the Colony after her husband's death. But none of these women seems to have influenced the subjects, themes, techniques,

or publication of his poetry in the ways that the six women discussed in this chapter influenced it.

Robinson also knew himself, and although he realized that he was too single-mindedly dedicated to poetry to allow himself to become seriously involved with a woman, he was nevertheless able to benefit from friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. For example, in an unpublished letter to Miss Peabody dated March 28, 1901, Robinson writes of a couple familiar to both of them: "Sometimes it looks to me like one of those cases where the woman is fated to pay for the man's salvation" (qtd. in Barnard, 303). It is possible that the situation intimated here is one that Robinson might have imagined for himself had some poor woman found a way to marry him. The assumption of patriarchal authority rather than a more equalitarian relationship would have been an obvious choice for him considering his family and the marital norms of the time, but he would have been uncomfortable. The guilt that the poetry-obsessed writer would have felt in such a situation would have been too much for him to bear. It was better for this poet at times to play a stereotypical role himself as the lonely man in a garret looking out on the world as it reverberated in his mind.

NOTES

[1]The influence of Mary Palmer Robinson on her son will be discussed with "For a Dead Lady" in Chapter Six.

[2]Caroline Davenport Swan published The Unfading Light in 1911, well after Robinson was finished attending the poetry sessions at her house, but many of the poems were first published in magazines in the middle 1890's. These dates are close enough to the time of Robinson's interaction with the group to allow us to believe that he was present at their first introduction to scrutiny.

[3]See Robert J. Scholnick's article, "The Shadowed Years: Mrs. Richards, Mr. Stedman, and Robinson" (Colby Library Quarterly 9 (1972): 510-30) for a more complete depiction of the correspondence Mrs. Richards undertook to benefit Robinson. The other four poems in Stedman's American Anthology are "Ballade of Dead Friends," "The Clerks," "The Pity of the Leaves," and "The House on the Hill."

[4]This line also appears on the bronze commemorative marker in the studio Robinson used at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. The historical irony of this statement as it relates to Robinson will be discussed in the Conclusion.

[5]The sparring by pen also helped Miss Peabody's poems, although World War I probably had as great an impact on both poets. While Robinson was writing Merlin, his allegory of the fall of western civilization, Peabody was cutting the archaic language out of her poems and joining the twentieth century. While The Wayfarers (1898) contains many tears,

roses, larks, and shepherds, Harvest Moon, published in 1917, the same year as Merlin, has almost none. The titles indicate her desire to retain the "positive crumb," but the subtitles demonstrate her awareness of reality: for example, "Full Circle [The Bandage Makers]" and "Men Have Wings at Last [The Air Raid]."

CHAPTER V

LITERARY INFLUENCES

> "I prefer men and women who live, breathe, talk, fight, make love, or go to the devil after the manner of human beings. Art is only valuable to me when it reflects humanity or at least human emotion."
> -- Letter to Harry de Forest Smith, June 3, 1894
> (US 160)

> "Qui pourrai-je imiter pour etre original?"
> -- Francois Coppée, quoted by Robinson on the title page of The Torrent and the Night Before

One activity which Edwin Arlington Robinson enjoyed in every garret where he resided was reading and re-reading novels published during the nineteenth century. The plots and characters appealed to him when he found in them a mimetic representation of life, as the first quotation indicates, and he often sprinkled his letters to friends such as Edith Brower and Josephine Preston Peabody with recommendations and brief evaluations. With very few exceptions, these were the only brand of critical assessment he ever made. Edwin S. Fussell, in Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet, sketches the entire panorama of Robinson's reading, from the Bible and Greek classics to the reign of Victoria, and the influences this reading may have had on the poems. In this chapter, I will investigate a much narrower spectrum of Robinson's reading. There are five nineteenth-century

British novelists whose work Robinson praised to at least one correspondent: George Meredith, Emily Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy. He enjoyed many of their works, and the female characters that populate the novels formed part of the interest for him. The attitudes toward women that seem to be shared between Robinson and the writers he enjoyed extend from protectiveness on one hand to the desire for individual initiative on the other, and they provide some indication of the nature of Robinson's treatment of female characters and the situations that beset them in the poems. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Robinson's women exhibit some of the prevalent stereotypes such as passivity and compliancy, as well as more unusual characteristics for literary representation of women such as assertiveness and independence.

Robinson also read widely in continental literature, especially French novels. But as the quotation from Francois Coppée indicates, he was wary of influences, and he avoided conscious imitation. Therefore, the two quotations at the beginning of this chapter must be considered together. Robinson, as we all do, incorporated his reading in some way, but he tried to prevent himself from drawing directly upon that reading in creating his own poems and characters. I also believe that, in addition to writing poems, reading European novels was a way for Robinson to distinguish himself from others; his commitment to literature functioned as a safeguard against materialistic American mainstream culture. He relished novels that challenged American tastes. Among the French writers, he especially enjoyed the novels of Coppée and Alphonse Daudet. Both were among the writers of the

naturalisme of the 1890's, and their sympathetic depictions of people trapped in trying situations found a fellow sympathizer in Robinson, the creator of characters such as Miniver Cheevy and Eben Flood, for whom life has become a trial.

Because speculating about literary influences is only part of an investigation of Robinson's thinking and writing about women, I have been quite selective in choosing works for discussion. In general, I have chosen novels which Robinson praised at one time or another, usually early in his career, but which Fussell did not emphasize in his book. I defer to Fussell's overall outline of Robinson's reading; the poets Robinson read, and his opinions of them, are well delineated. However, Fussell did not focus on female characters in particular, either in Robinson's poems or in the fiction the poet read. Bernard Duffey is another scholar who attributes Robinson's use of character to his reading of fiction, which, it must be remembered, had already become a more popular medium than poetry by the 1890's. Duffey locates Robinson's character development in the technique of "anecdote," or letting his characters or poems tell only part of the whole story: "Character might be prosaic, melodramatic, quizzical, or downright obscure, but the procession it made moved through his pages from a source in reading and in the framing of experience by the implications of story" (151). This chapter is meant to be a brief elaboration or addition to Duffey's and Fussell's careful suppositions and suggestions.

I agree with Duffey in believing that a comparison with fiction is appropriate in discussing Robinson's poems, the short as well as the long, because so much in them depends on character and point of view,

whether it is the individual with his or her struggle, or "we," Tilbury Town's spokesperson, who narrates so many poems. For example, Thelma J. Shinn has compared Robinson's poems with Henry James's fiction and The Art of the Novel because of a common interest in character and certain similarities of technique such as the interior monologue, reliance upon detail, and a tendency toward verbosity. Other critics have mentioned James and Robinson together for their psychological subtleties. But it is the Victorian and French fiction that Robinson loved which exhibits the same spectrum of female characterization, the stereotypical as well as the exceptional, as appears in his poems.

In his introduction to The Emergence of Victorian Consciousness, George Levine writes that both the successes and the failures of the major Victorian writers originate from ". . . an admirable if naive ambition to do things on a large scale" (2). And E.D.H. Johnson writes in his introduction to The World of the Victorians that ". . . they thought about themselves constantly, out of an intensity of self-consciousness which has no analogue in earlier periods" (3). These two characteristics, large-scale ambition and introspection, also apply to Robinson, who despite being an American, looked across the Atlantic for much of his literary inspiration and began his poetic career during the final years of Victoria's reign. His poetic production shows both a wide range of interest and an unwavering self-consciousness about people's relationships with each other and with God. He saw limitations placed on humanity by mental and emotional abilities and limitations placed on women by society's expectations. Individuals straining against both sorts of limitations characterize the Victorian novels

Robinson loved and his own poems. Of course, because of Robinson's range of reading it would be lunacy to assert a direct correspondence between any single novel and one of his poems; nevertheless, I hope to show that many of Robinson's characterizations of women have their beginnings or have analogues at least partly in the pages of nineteenth-century British and French novels.

George Meredith is one novelist whose satirical view of the follies of Victorian society appealed to Robinson. Of course, Robinson rarely achieved the humor Meredith made a significant part of his works. The manners and rituals of the Victorian upper class were, in some ways, an easy target for a social satirist, because so much depended upon the contrast between surface appearances and the underlying reality of class or gender dominations. Robinson concerned himself with the interior, or the psychological effects of the distancing created by such a difference between appearance and reality. Meredith is perhaps most Robinsonian in the long poem, Modern Love, in which a husband struggles with jealousy and time's inevitable changes in love and marriage, and the speaker's satire is most often directed at himself. Although Robinson appears to have read virtually all of nineteenth-century British poetry, he did not record an opinion on Modern Love. What is clear is that Meredith's novels seem to have had a great appeal for Robinson.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel depicts primarily the difficult relationship between a father and his son. Sir Austin Feverel torments Richard emotionally and psychologically with his own educational System, keeping Richard at home for his education when he would rather be in a school with friends, and keeping him away from girls in the belief that

women have provided only disaster for generations of Feverel men. After Richard's defiant marriage to Lucy Desborough, an unaristocratic girl he loves over Sir Austin's objections, Sir Austin engineers their separation, making them await his forgiveness, which is granted only after the birth of a son conceived during their elopement. Lucy demonstrates the patience of Griselda while Sir Austin teases Richard, who tries to effect a reconciliation. A sentimentally-drawn character, Lucy is an unspoiled, unworldly, young woman unlike any other Richard has ever met. Marriage is just what she has been waiting for ever since her military officer father's death; it provides the ideal safety and security her dependence requires, but tragically for her, only for a short time.

Lucy's death at the end of the novel, coupled with Richard's survival, has been criticized by some readers, but as Renate Muendel has pointed out, Meredith enjoyed thwarting readers' expectations (61); even reconciliations have consequences, as everything that happens to Richard, including his wounds received in a duel with Lord Mountfalcon, who desired Lucy, are the indirect result of Sir Austin's System, which requires marriage, but not necessarily fidelity, at least not from the man. A foil to Lucy is Bella Mount, an independent woman with a tainted reputation; she seduces Richard, and his guilt drives him to remain separate from Lucy even longer than Sir Austin prescribes. Of course, Lucy forgives Richard before she dies.

Marriage is the central goal of all women in Richard Feverel, and Meredith examines the abuses of such limited expectations. Once married, women can be left isolated; or, as happens to Richard's cousin,

Clare, young women can be forced into an unsuitable marriage. The notion that some "system" corrupts the personality has echoes in Robinson's poetry. Roman Bartholow has, at the beginning of the poem, just been "cured" by his friend, Penn-Raven, of an ambiguously described mental illness that seems to involve the delusion that he has complete control over his life, and both the illness and the cure seem to distance him from his wife. Of course, the drama of marital tensions brought about by outside forces has many analogues in Robinson's work. The deaths of Clare, who is forced to marry an older man against her wishes, and Lucy, who is completely dependent upon Richard and who dies at the emotonal shock of his wounds, demonstrate the dual faults of the Victorian emphasis on marriage. Marriage was considered the ultimate achievement for Victorian women, even though, as Jenni Calder points out in Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, women often had so little to say in the matter of their marriage that they merely ". . . exchanged the control of a father for the control of a husband" (20). In much of Robinson's work, control is not the issue so much as the appearance and growth of some ambiguous emotional chasm between the marriage partners. The suicides of Natalie in Matthias at the Door and Gabrielle in Roman Bartholow stem at least in part from disappointment in marriage, and death appears to be the best way to unshackle oneself from the restrictions a relationship imposes. "The March of the Cameron Men" is a poem in which a woman rejects a second marriage because of her experience in her first.

A woman's avoidance of the shackles of marriage in the first place is central to Meredith's The Egoist, a comic novel focusing its satire

on Sir Willoughby Patterne's attempts to get a bride, more or less as he would select a new set of dining room furniture. Patterne, like Sir Austin Feverel, is a man with a system of perfection, only its object is himself (and, in his view, already achieved) rather than a son as in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. He feels that because of his money and good taste all sensible women will be attracted to him and eager to marry him, but he has been rejected by one woman before the action of the novel begins, and his engagement to Clara Middleton is broken off after she has a vision of her impending captivity in Patterne Hall, his ironically-named "paradise" of patriarchal control.

While Sir Willoughby is the egoist of the title, Clara asserts her own ego as well, as a mode of rebellion against his self-assumed superiority. Her growth is from simple acceptance of Sir Willoughby's attentions to psychological freedom through rejecting him despite society's outrage at her behavior. In "An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit," Meredith deplored the fact that society taught women to be "pretty," "passive," and "adorable" -- in short, sentimental. The best comic characters are more complex:

> The heroines of comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted; they seem so to the sentimentally reared, only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. (433)

This attitude makes it all the more disappointing that Meredith follows the comic prescription of matrimonial endings and has Clara disappear

into the identity of "Mrs. Vernon Whitford" at the novel's close. Of course, with no money and no means of employment because of her class status, she is finally reduced to requiring "a captain or a pilot."

Two of Robinson's women characters who are not crying for a captain are Pamela of "The Tree in Pamela's Garden" and Karen of Talifer. Both poems rely on the same sort of irony Meredith used; the other characters do not have sufficient insight to understand the true nature of these women. Pamela apparently has known love and now is satisfied with its memory and with living alone, but the townspeople believe she is lonely and in need of at least a bird or a cat for companionship. Karen is a rather emotionless intellectual who attracts the male characters in the poem but whose inner turmoil (if there is any turmoil) remains a mystery to both the reader and the other characters.

Robinson liked Meredith's novels, but he did not like what he knew of the man. Biographies formed another significant portion of Robinson's reading in addition to novels, and he felt after reading a biography and other accounts of Meredith that the novelist had a misanthropic personality, which showed through the wonderful prose of The Egoist. While Meredith appears sympathetic toward Clara and toward women in general, Sir Willoughby, as patriarch of the claustrophobia-inducing Patterne Hall, has no great love of people except for their potential to yield to his control. Interestingly, Robinson's accusation of misanthropy stems from Meredith's cutting portrayal of the monied classes, the British equivalent of the American business successes whom Robinson portrays as fatally or short-sightedly materialistic in such poems as "Richard Cory," "Cassandra," and The Glory of the Nightingales.

Both The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and The Egoist question the ability of science to reveal anything of what Robinson considered humanity's true nature, that is, its spiritual nature. Sir Austin Feverel's System and Sir Willoughby Patterne's Ego are completely worldly in their orientation. Robinson doubted science's ability to locate ultimate truths, and he expressed these doubts in some of his prose and in some poems, such as "The Flying Dutchman" and Matthias at the Door. In a letter to Will Durant, Robinson reminded the philosopher that progress in material science had still not proved either the existence or the non-existence of the soul, and he questioned whether science could ever attain such knowledge (SL 163-65). One of the first tenets of feminist criticism concerns determining the extent to which a male writer's work demonstrates an androcentric or specifically male world view, and the extent to which his world view includes women in a more universal portrayal of human problems. Certainly Meredith writes sympathetically of the plight of women in a society seemingly unconcerned with spiritual values except in how they might manifest themselves in material goods or in social status. I believe that despite his occassional reliance on stereotypes for depicting women, Robinson generally included both men and women in his world view, believing that whatever spiritual nature men possess, women also possess. Social differences and restrictions were another matter entirely for Robinson, and a much less important one.

Another closed society, but one considerably darker than that of Patterne Hall, is detailed in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, one of Robinson's two favorite novels. He praised this novel in 1899 to both

Daniel Gregory Mason and Edith Brower, and he was still recommending it over twenty years later to Esther Willard Bates and other friends. Its "force" was its appeal. The mystery, the strangeness of the opposed houses of Earnshaw and Linton, and the theme of thwarted love were familiar to Robinson, as was the idea of the disadvantages of single-minded purpose, exemplified in Heathcliff. The ambiguous narrative stance of Nelly Dean and the preference for scene over authorial statement also have their parallels in Robinson's Tilbury Town narrators and in unnamed narrators in the longer poems; one difference is that many of Robinson's scenes are interior, while the majority of Brontë's are exterior, and more violent.

The women of Wuthering Heights are uniquely characterized, and the world in which they act is so narrow, that it is difficult to imagine them as "representative" in the way that George Meredith's female characters represent the condition of Victorian women. It is the atmosphere of Brontë's novel, more than the characters, that seems to have affected Robinson. Structures containing strange or enigmatic rooms, especially libraries, appear in The Glory of the Nightingales, Cavender's House, and Avon's Harvest. In fact, any house in Robinson's narratives echoes the darkness and mystery of gothic or gothic-inspired novels such as Brontë's. Within the overwhelming setting of Wuthering Heights, Catherine Earnshaw Linton makes the kinds of decisions that are later reflected in Robinson's poetic work.

Catherine Earnshaw, who grew up relatively isolated and deprived at Wuthering Heights, learns about an easier, more materialistic life while convalescing from a dog bite at Thrushcross Grange, and she allows her

love for Heathcliff to be displaced by the economic advantages of marrying Edgar Linton. This choice is the central cause of the novel's conflict, motivating Heathcliff's desire for revenge on the houses of Linton and Earnshaw by possessing both the Heights and the Grange, either through gambling with Hindley Earnshaw or by forcing younger family members to intermarry. Catherine tries to affect a justification of her choice by forcing her husband, Edgar, to face Heathcliff's violent nature, or perhaps she desires widowhood so that she would be free to marry Heathcliff, but Edgar is unable to defeat the outsider, nor is he killed by Heathcliff, and Catherine is the first of the three to die. Robinson depicts the aftermath of a choice similar to Catherine's in The Glory of the Nightingales, in which even before the poem begins, Agatha had chosen to marry Nightingale, a more successful businessman than Malory, his one-time partner, later his ruined rival. She has died some time ago, but Malory is returning in order to take vengeance upon Nightingale, whom he feels is responsible for his lifetime of problems. Of course, there are many love triangles in Robinson's poetry, and while this plot device is one of the most common in our literature, Robinson had to have learned about it, seen it operating somewhere, and Wuthering Heights and other novels provided plenty of opportunity. One aspect of Brontë's characters that Robinson emulated is their awareness that they are buffeted by emotional forces beyond their understanding, racking them with doubts, such as Catherine's loss of peace until, dying, she realizes she is the same as Heathcliff.

Robinson mentioned Pendennis, by William Makepeace Thackeray, a novel very different from Wuthering Heights, as his favorite more than once. Money, rather than passion, motivates all the action in Pendennis, and the squabbling over dowries and inheritances makes the novel easy to follow. In 1895, at age 25, Robinson recommended it to Harry Smith, saying he had already read it four or five times and would like to read it again (US 220). Twenty-five years later he told Laura Richards he had read it twelve times (Fussell 89). Like so many Victorian novels, Pendennis deals with courtship and marriage and finding one's way in the world. A Kunstlerroman, or a Bildungsroman about a writer, Pendennis has an admittedly autobiographical main character, Arthur Pendennis, who eventually writes articles and novels in the popular style of the day. There are some parallels between the young adult lives of Arthur Pendennis/Thackeray and E.A. Robinson. Neither knew what to do with himself in the world of work, and both went to college for a time, studying and partying but not staying long enough to earn a degree. Of course, as a Victorian novel, Pendennis had to depict and discuss courtship and class in a way that the modernist Robinson never had to in his work. The main plot revolves around whether the young Pendennis will marry the "right girl." Pendennis nearly marries twice, and neither woman would be an appropriate mate; one is a poor, pretty actress socially his inferior, Emily Costigan, and the other is wealthy and attractive but a shrew, Blanche Amory. Finally, after enduring rejection by her once, Arthur marries Laura Bell, the girl with whom he had grown up and whom his mother always intended for him to marry.

All three of the young women seem to me to be rather stereotypically drawn. Emily Costigan, as the actress Fotheringay, attracts Arthur's first adolescent sexual yearnings. She has been raised to be a fortune-hunter, to see marriage to a well-dressed man who makes a habit of theater-going as her opportunity to leave behind the poverty of acting and to climb into the carriage-and-four of a higher social milieu. But when Arthur's uncle, Major Pendennis, informs Emily and her father that Arthur will gain only a pittance of an inheritance upon reaching the age of majority, the actress shrugs off the young lover. Arthur is typically adolescent in his wild sorrow until he becomes acquainted with Blanche Amory. Like Emily, Blanche is a fortune-hunter, but she is also a dissembler, and she begins with the advantage of already being rich; her wealth is the main attraction for Arthur, especially after the Major procures an excellent dowry from her stepfather, Sir Clavering. Even "Blanche" is a mask, as her given name is Betsy. On the verge of marrying her despite the revelation of Blanche's actual parentage (she is a convict's daughter), Arthur is rescued by his old friend, Foker, whom Blanche has been entertaining without Arthur's knowledge and who neither needs her money nor quibbles over her parentage. Emily and Blanche function as temptations, stereotypically depicted young women whom good-natured if somewhat innocent young men like Arthur are better off avoiding at all cost, as the narrator makes clear.

Laura stands apart from Emily and Blanche; she is the "proper girl" for Pendennis all along, the patient girl. She waits for Arthur to exhaust his youthful infatuations, discover his vocation, and decide he

is ready to settle down. She is unconcerned about his lack of money because she has more than enough on which they can live comfortably. Laura demonstrates some pride and individuality in her initial rejection of Arthur, as his intentions are not honorable -- he had proposed only to please his mother. Later, he comes to love her. Althea, in Talifer, is probably Robinson's most Laura-like character. She is the "right" woman for the title character to marry; however, she must wait patiently while he first fails in a marriage that seems intellectually exciting when compared to the "safe" marriage with Althea, but which proves to be emotionless. The trouble with Althea, as with Laura, is that, presented as a kind of womanly ideal -- patient, quiet, forgiving -- neither is given much to do, for action would necessitate reasoning and self-assertion, which would disrupt the male assumptions about the feminine ideal. Laura enjoys wealth, which absolves her of much action because it makes her a prize to be won; wealth is not a factor for Althea, as Talifer has money but is trying to find love. Karen, Althea's rival, is attractive to Talifer for her intellectual ability rather than for her appearance or her money. I believe that Robinson appreciated Pendennis, as well as many other Victorian novels, for its presentation of a hero who is confused by the number of moral choices he must make or that are made for him. The women are necessary foils in this confusion and struggle.

Robinson enjoyed Charles Dickens' novels almost to the extent he enjoyed Pendennis. Our Mutual Friend made the top of several lists of works Robinson considered important, and as in Pendennis, the relationship between marriage and money motivates the plot. One

difference is that John Harmon, the hero of Our Mutual Friend, unlike Arthur Pendennis, spends little time confused about his moral choices. It is interesting that Robinson, the ultimate anti-materialist, should enjoy this novel so much, consumed as it is with money through blackmail, inheritance, and deception. To its credit, the novel explores the relationship between money and character, especially through Bella Wilfer. Unfortunately, men are presented as in complete control of this relationship, and especially in control of the characters of women, by keeping secrets from them. Mr. Boffin, Bella's guardian, appears to change his personality from humble to haughty, driving Bella out of the house and into John (Harmon) Rokesmith's arms. Harmon does not reveal his true identity or his wealth to Bella, holding back both in a scheme for her "improvement."

Bella Wilfer and her foil, Lizzie Hexam, represent two main types of women in Victorian literature. Lizzie is the perfect, Bella the perfectible woman. Lizzie is the daughter of a man who trawls the Thames for bodies, and she is forced to help him, sickened though she is by the condition of the bodies and by contemplating their demise. Always kind and correct, she rejects the hot-tempered school teacher, Bradley Headstone, in favor of the lazy-but-salvagable solicitor, Eugene Wrayburn, whom she marries on his deathbed and then nurses back to health. Lizzie presents the same image of idealized Victorian womanhood as Esther Summerson of Bleak House and Agnes Wickfield of David Copperfield. Bella, on the other hand, becomes increasingly dependent on money and fashion for her happiness while living with the Boffins, who have inherited great wealth while John Harmon, the actual heir, is

thought to be dead. Harmon's inheritance depends upon marrying Bella, whom he does not care for while she demonstrates her materialistic weaknesses. Only after Bella recognizes her own shortcomings in Boffin, who has begun acting like a miser, does she reject the trappings of wealth and fall in love with Rokesmith/Harmon, and he with her. They marry and live happily but with little money for three years until John finds her sufficiently "improved" in humility and contentedness to reveal himself, his deception, and his wealth. Of course, she forgives him and all's well that ends well.

Bleak House, which Robinson called "a work of genius" (EB 194), also comes to a happy ending with Esther Summerson's marriage to Dr. Allan Woodcourt. Esther is a part-time narrator, missing child, and superb housekeeper who is affectionate, attractive, and kind. However, Robinson probably admired the intricate plot of Bleak House more than any of the individual characters. In 1928 he wrote to Edith Brower about several of Dickens' novels:

> Dickens fell down worst of all in his photographic -- or rather phonographic -- realism. His women, who seem so silly sometimes on paper, talk just about as they would in really respectable emotional circumstances, without causing any especial comment or surprise, but in art it just won't do. It "did" for the Victorians, but it will never do again -- though the valuable creatures will continue to talk in just about the same way. (EB 194)

Michael Slater, in Dickens and Women, points out that Dickens' attitudes toward women and his writings about women coincide with the basic Victorian ideology that shows through most of the literary writings of

the period: women are primarily intuitive, moral, and domestic human beings whose interests and abilities are intended by God and Nature to remain as narrow as the opportunities society provides (301-2). Lizzie Hexam, Bella Wilfer, and Esther Summerson exemplify, or develop through their respective novels, the positive characteristics of Victorian womanhood. They are not granted, however, the kind of "respectable emotional circumstances," I think Robinson had in mind in his letter to Brower, that is, the moral struggles that are granted to male characters such as John Harmon, who gives up, for a time, an inheritance that would make a virtual slave of a woman, until they can fall in love without the money as a factor in their relationship. Although Robinson probably would have agreed that women are more intuitive and domestic than men, I believe he would have said they have no monopoly on either morality or immorality, in that real people are more complex than literary representation can make them appear. So, while Robinson may have enjoyed Dickens, he did not look to that eminent Victorian for character models, certainly not for his female characters.

Thomas Hardy, like George Meredith, is given credit for creating well-rounded female characters, such as Sue Bridehead and Tess Durbeyfield. Robinson mentions almost all of Hardy's novels, usually with some praise, in his letters to Harry Smith during the 1890's. Robinson thought highly enough of Hardy to send him a copy of _The Torrent and the Night Before_, but never received a reply. Nevertheless, he read Hardy the way he read Dickens, repeatedly throughout his life, and his estimation of the novels rose and fell at various times.

One work that Robinson mentioned fondly in more than one letter is A Group of Noble Dames, a collection of stories that was published in the same year as Tess of the D'Urbervilles, 1891. It is a very different work from Tess, in some ways more like Thackeray than Hardy, and it is a work that Fussell ignores. "These stories are decidedly good," Robinson wrote Harry Smith (US 94). There are ten stories, each about a woman of the English propertied class, each told by one man in a group of men gathered at a tavern. The stories relate a single incident of courtship and/or marriage, perhaps with some twist of hidden parentage and dealing with love and money, either running away for the first or marrying or inheriting the second. The simplicity of the depiction of the women characters contrasts with that of the more famous novels, which Robinson also enjoyed.

Jude the Obscure Robinson called a "mechanical wonder", but he was troubled by what he considered its "false" philosophy (EB 23). Of the twin columns of philosophy attributed to Hardy, that God is playing a joke on humankind and that dignity is nevertheless possible through endurance, Robinson agreed with the latter, as his poetry demonstrates, but he disagreed with the former, as Esther Willard Bates related in a letter recalling a group discussion at the MacDowell Colony in which Robinson asserted that Hardy was too pessimistic (14). For Robinson, as he tried to explain with his earlier kindergartners-with- the-wrong-blocks response to being labeled too pessimistic, life's trials indicated some ultimate purpose or meaning, whereas he felt that for Hardy there was no meaning. Fussell cites "The Children of the Night" and "Kosmos" as two poems explicitly against Hardy's pessimism (109).

Perhaps Robinson considered Jude Fawley's travail overly hopeless, but he wrote to Daniel Gregory Mason of Hardy's work: "I should call *Jude*, with all its misery, his one book that is true" (*SL* 45). Certainly Robinson was unlike Jude in that no woman ever distracted him from his drive to write, while Jude's studying and his desire to become a priest are thwarted by his attachments to Arabella Donn and Sue Bridehead.

Arabella is sensuous and tricks Jude into marriage through the ancient ruse of pregnancy, a condition about which she turns out to be mistaken; Sue Bridehead is a more complex character, both rebelling against and condemned by the institution of marriage, yet finally submissive to it. She is consumed by the guilt she feels over her rejection of her husband, Phillotson, who, because he was her first lover, remains her only "true" husband, as she feels the church has taught her. Hardy had earlier used another version of this device in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, when Tess struggles with the sexual double standard, refusing for a time to marry Angel Clare because of her secret affair and child with Alec D'Urberville, then suffering estrangement from Clare when she admits the truth on their wedding night. As Penny Boumelha notes, Hardy's female characters are intriguing because of their ". . . resistance to reduction to a single and uniform ideological position" (7). Tess's sexuality and ambivalence toward motherhood, and Sue's motherhood and rigidity in the confrontation with the institution of marriage, provide neither an endorsement of marriage nor a complete rebellion against it.

In Hardy's novels, marriage always complicates matters. Tess's marriage to Clare prevents a reconciliation with D'Urberville. The

common law marriage of Jude and Sue produces more and more children, limiting all growth and movement of the adult characters until the psychological as well as the physical weight of the children causes Little Father Time to hang himself and his siblings. Robinson kept children out of his poems of marriage, a state which, from his outsider's view, he considered difficult enough without children. He reserved children for their ability to reveal the truth to others through their innocence and spontaneity, as in "Aunt Imogen." Marriage, however, was a recurring subject for Robinson's poetry. The distances between partners, and the people and emotions that can split partners, are protrayed in many poems, from "But for the Grace of God" to Matthias at the Door. But few of Robinson's poems deal with sexuality as overtly as Hardy handles it in Tess and Jude; therefore, with his usual emphasis on the emotional impact of an action that has already happened, Robinson did not create characters that appear to be as complex as Hardy's. Damaris, in "The Book of Annandale," might be an exception, as she struggles like Sue Bridehead in determining her loyalty to her husband, but as a widow, she comes to the opposite conclusion, reneging on her promise to her husband and marrying George Annandale.

Many French novels, like Hardy's, also do not refrain from acknowledging the role of sexuality in human situations, and because this acknowledgement tended to upset many American reviewers, it appealed to Robinson. Fussell outlined Robinson's interest in French novels and especially his uncertainty about Emile Zola; despite his attraction to sexuality, Robinson was greatly concerned that the distinction between love and lust should be maintained in literature,

and he felt that Zola crossed a line of propriety. Yet, he also appreciated Zola's use of exact and common language, which he felt was indebted to Wordsworth, and he praised Zola's faithfulness in describing the sordid and unpleasant conditions besetting the poor. The sonnet, "Zola," expresses this appreciation by contrasting Zola's willingness to describe "the human heart / of God" with the sqeamishness or sentimentality of "Christian faith" (CP 85).

Two French writers whose work meant more to Robinson than Zola's but who did not have sonnets written in their praise were Francois Coppée and Alphonse Daudet. Coppée seems to be nearly forgotten, but Robinson apparently read all of his work, praising especially Toute une Jeunesse, published in English as Disillusion, and a short story, "La Soeur de Lait." He wrote that Toute une Jeunesse was "one of the most human things ever written" (US 128). Although Daudet's novels of manners were among Robinson's favorites, little has been written about any effect Daudet may have had on Robinson. One novel that he praised and prodded Harry Smith to read is La Petite Paroisse, which he said ". . . will hold a place with the author's best works" (US 220). As with Hardy, he praised both Coppée and Daudet for their sympathetic and mimetic portrayals of people.

Fussell emphasized Robinson's praise of Coppee's Toute une Jeunesse as having the characteristics of Dickens' David Copperfield, but if he had gone back to the novel itself, he would have discovered that the Dickens comparison was not Robinson's but Coppée's -- in his dedication to his friend Louis Deprét, Coppee wrote that Toute une Jeunesse is no more autobiographical than David Copperfield. The real reason Robinson

enjoyed Toute une Jeunesse may have been the fact that by reading it he felt disassociated from the fictional tastes of Gardiner, Maine. He wrote Smith that the novel is ". . . too thoroughly French to be read sympathetically by the General American reader" (US 128).

Robinson may have thought that Toute une Jeunesse was "too thoroughly French" because of its acceptance of sexual affairs. Coppée depicts both men and women in a way that Leslie Fiedler would later describe as the syndrome of the Lily and the Rose. Amédée Violette, the main character, is a male Lily, holding himself chaste, waiting for the right moment to declare himself to Maria Gérard, a Lily whom he places on a pedestal of purity. In the meantime, his friends, mostly libertines, take one mistress after another. Just as Amédée decides to announce his love to Maria, she is seduced by his best friend, Maurice Roger. The English title, Disillusion, is derived from Amédée's disappointment in love and in his vision of women. Of course, the source of his disappointment is not in the women, but in his own simplistic view of them as otherworldly creatures who, once fallen, cannot be redeemed. I do not believe that any reading of Robinson's poems can demonstrate a case for the sort of virgin/whore dichotomy that figures in Toute une Jeunesse; Robinson, as a poet who often thought he was ahead of his time, merely enjoyed fiction that would disturb staid New England sensibilities.

Coppée's story, "La Soeur de Lait," had a different impact on Robinson. In 1897, he was establishing his friendship with Edith Brower, to whom he wrote:

> If you wish to study the power of sheer art, buy a copy of Coppée's Vingt Contes Nouveaux and read, and re-read, "La Soeur de Lait." This is, to me, the greatest short story in the world -- considered as a short story. Aside from his wonderful art (when he chooses to make the most of it) Coppée is the only French author -- excepting perhaps Daudet -- who gives me any spiritual pleasure. (EB 27-8)

"La Soeur de Lait" tells the story of Norine, an orphan adopted by the Bayard family of druggists when her mother, who was their own son's wet-nurse, dies. Norine is more capable than Léon Bayard, heir to the pharmacy; she helps him with his lessons and eventually she starts running the pharmacy. She is quiet, and unknown to all, she is in love with Léon, but he marries another woman. On the wedding night, Norine is driven to madness by the overpowering aroma of the banks of flowers in the house, and she falls out of the window, dying among the blossoms. She has fainted, but the people will think she was suicidal. It is a somewhat sentimental story of a woman dying of a broken heart. My command of French is undoubtedly inferior to Robinson's, but I surmise that in praising the art of the story he refers to the recurring images of the flowers and the memories of childhood. The tale is centered on Norine's character; she is dynamic in every way except in making her emotions known, and this is the flaw that kills her, so that she embodies a certain kind of female stereotype: she is the intelligent, creative woman who hides her true feelings and suffers because of her emotional failings. As for the "spiritual pleasure" Robinson intimates, I imagine it is this willingness to stake all of one's life on one thing, in this case, love. Manic-seeming emotional attachments also

occur in Robinson's poems. "The Clinging Vine" depicts a woman struggling with the sudden realization of her husband's infidelity, and "The Gift of God" shows a mother's refusal to consider the ordinariness of the son she deludes herself into thinking of as extraordinary.

"The greatest artist in fiction now living -- and his art never crowds out his humanity" is the manner in which Robinson characterized Alphonse Daudet in 1895 (US 212). La Petite Paroisse, or The Little Parish Church, is a little-read novel that Robinson praised and that recalls Hardy in its rural setting and its mix of upper- and lower-class characters. The main character is Richard Fénigan, whose wife, Lydie, runs off with her lover, Charlexis. Fénigan is enraged more by Charlexis' casual abandonment of Lydie than by her adulterous behavior. He tries to arrange a duel, but Charlexis' parents scheme to keep him ignorant of the challenge and out of the province. When Charlexis is found murdered, Richard is suspected and arrested; it turns out that the father-in-law of another of Charlexis' lovers shot him escaping a bedroom window, and Lydie and Richard are reconciled.

Neither Lydie, with her emotional struggles, nor Richard's domineering mother, whose heart is softened by a visit to the Little Parish Church, is the focus of the novel. In fact, all of the female characters are one of two types: the suffocating mother or the adulterous wife who is finally contrite. Neither of these women shows up in Robinson's verse; the mothers are more likely to be suffering or devoted, as in "The Gift of God," and the wives are more likely to be the victim, rather than the perpetrator of adultery. If one of Robinson's women characters takes a lover, as in "The Whip," she is

unlikely to return to her husband. The art that Robinson praised in La Petite Paroisse is probably the character of Richard Fenigan, whose interior doubts and questionings of his actions and motivations recall those of Thackeray's Arthur Pendennis and resemble those of Robinson's Merlin in his debate between Vivian and Camelot or Cavender in his struggle to justify the murder of his wife.

The fictions of Daudet, Coppée, and the British novelists that Robinson admired throughout his lifetime demonstrate a variety of characters, female as well as male, who are placed in challenging situations. Institutional or class restrictions and expectations, jealousy, double standards, emotional paralysis, and other problems beset these fictional characters, and many of the same difficulties also figure in Robinson's poems. The genuine-seeming portraits of women in the novels of Meredith, Brontë, and Hardy contrast with the more stereotypically constructed portraits in the novels of Thackeray, Dickens, and the French writers. The appeal to Robinson in these often very different works, I believe, is in the authors' artistic control of the combination of these characters and their situations, rendering them in a way that made mimesis more important than the technical conventions of fiction. Robinson tried to achieve the same results with his poetry; whether a sonnet or a "blank verse novel," his goal was to allow a character to tell or to act out a story unbound by poetic convention. Although Robinson usually chose men to tell his stories, a woman is often the focal point of a story, such as in "Eros Turannos." Occasionally, a woman relates her own story, as in "The Woman and the Wife" and "Rahel to Varnhagen."

Robinson realized that women make up half of humanity, and he seems to have understood the inferior position society granted them. Although he often is thought of as having been just as physically and emotionally isolated as many of his better-known characters, such as Miniver Cheevy or Eben Flood, he was not. He was acutely aware of the struggles and trials of many different kinds of people, women as well as men, and his sympathy for these people is expressed in his poems and is one of the most commonly noted attributes critics cite. While his male characters are generally summarized as demonstrations of moral failure in a material world or as spiritual successes despite material failure, his female characters, while they may not be given the grand roles of artist or philosopher, are given a wider variety of roles, and they are even granted some successes among their struggles and failures.

PART TWO

CHAPTER VI

SINGLE WOMEN

Few single women inhabit Edwin Arlington Robinson's poetry. Female characters who live their lives independently of men are rare, as they are in the writings of most male authors. However, they do exist, and this chapter will analyze those poems in which women live single, independent lives, such as in "The Tree in Pamela's Garden" and "Mortmain." This chapter also will include poems depicting women who lead independent, or somewhat-independent lives but perhaps without choosing to do so, such as "Aunt Imogen" and "The Poor Relation." *Talifer* represents a special case because it is a long poem depicting two main female characters who are both single and married during the poem. In addition, Chapter Six will include three poems which fall into the age-old category in which men are the main characters but women are sirens beckoning them, but in different ways: "Luke Havergal," "John Evereldown," and "Sainte-Nitouche." The female characters in this chapter demonstrate the breadth of Robinson's depictions of single women with varying degrees of independence. Some are unique, vital, and interesting characters, and some are the result of Robinson's occasional

reliance on the stereotypical characterization prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Pamela, of "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," a sonnet that appeared in Avon's Harvest in 1921, is perhaps Robinson's most independent woman character. "The Tree in Pamela's Garden" is one of very few poems about which E.A. Robinson would admit to some obscurity, according to Esther Willard Bates, his friend and part-time amanuensis (22-3). Bates would present her readings of poems, but Robinson would not acknowledge whether or not her interpretation matched his intent. Apparently for this poem, he gave her only a smile to wonder at.

"The Tree in Pamela's Garden" might be open to interpretation in the same fashion in which "Aunt Imogen" often is read, that is, with Robinson switching genders in order to reveal another side of his own psyche and the choices he made for his life. The line of reasoning from Ellsworth Barnard's inclusion of Pamela among those who settle for "contentment in the second best" (135) through Marvin Klotz's assessment of her as "destructively frigid," Elizabeth Wright's belief that she is merely "pathetic," Laurence Perrine's more likely interpretation that she had, or has, a secret lover, and Chard Powers Smith's recitation of the Robinson family's Woodland Girl legend (181-82), either suggest Robinson's presence as "Apollo's avatar" or leave him out altogether.

In Sexual Anarchy, Elaine Showalter discusses the so-called "odd woman" of the late Victorian period, the woman who either could not or would not marry. Unmarried women were "odd" both in the sense of being thought of as superfluous or extra, and in the sense of being unable or unwilling to live up to perceived normal expectations of courtship,

marriage, and motherhood. All manner of medical and psychological problems were attributed to the repression of sexuality deemed necessary for this presumably celibate existence. Gossipers' "concern" for Pamela's health would therefore be the motivation for the townspeople's wish that she had a cat or a bird to care for in addition to her roses. Perhaps the Tilbury Town onlookers deem Pamela unable to achieve their version of romance, while Pamela chooses to be unwilling to submit to the traditional expectations of this small-town, insulated society.

Equating Robinson with Pamela gives this reading an autobiographical slant. The roses, which Pamela raises but cannot deceive, are her art, suggesting that Robinson knew that his own truth lay in his poems. The roses are both figurative and autobiographically literal. Although he spent most of his adult life in New York, Robinson was not a stranger to gardening, as some of his letters to Harry de Forest Smith reveal, written in the 1890's while Robinson still lived at his boyhood home in Gardiner, Maine (Sutcliffe 17ff). And despite, or perhaps because of, his brief but powerful and unrequited infatuation with Emma Shepherd, Robinson asserted several times that marriage was unthinkable for him, that it would ruin him as a writer. Robinson, like a number of other turn-of-the-century writers, remained a kind of "odd man."

The men who can "stay where they are" are the group from which Pamela's singular object of love could come, but they are to keep their distance, even if the true poet is among them, because Pamela has made her choice. I agree with Perrine in supposing that Pamela has experienced love; although her lover is not evident to others, he lives

within her memory and her heart. There is no reason to believe that because Robinson led a celibate life he also led a loveless life. This poem was first published in 1920 in the New Republic, a year after the fifty-year jubilee celebration of his birth. A number of women were attracted to Robinson because of his growing fame, but his usual response was to avoid them, and this was responsible for the reputation of celibacy. Given the legend of Robinson's love for Emma Shepherd, who married his brother, Herman, it is entirely possible that Robinson experienced a love to which he would remain faithful, even if it never attained sexual expression. In this case, the second quatrain shows that Pamela appears to the townspeople to prefer knowledge of the world, represented by the North Star, the symbol of navigation and direction, but actually, she prefers the love she recalls and tells to her roses. As Edwin Fussell has written, the Tree of Knowledge image had more value for Robinson "in manipulating situations involving knowledge and ignorance" than with "philosophical implications concerning the nature of man" (159). Therefore, this tree represents the difference between Pamela's (or Robinson's) knowledge of love and the townspeople's ignorance of the true state of her (or his) heart.

The dichotomy between private feelings and public speculation is reinforced in the sestet, where the neighbors "make romance of reticence." Certainly Robinson's own reticence is well-testified, and this may be the most autobiographically revealing statement in the poem. Robinson spent every summer after 1911 at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and he must have been aware that at least occasionally he and his reticence around women were the subject of

conversation among the other Colonists. "Aunt Imogen" has long been read as Robinson's acceptance of an unmarried and childless life, but Imogen reveals that she does know a special kind of maternal love for her nieces and nephew. Pamela has experienced love, and she has experienced men, and she is content to live with her memories, keeping them secret from the prying gossipers of Tilbury Town. In "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," Robinson trades gender to reveal that he was not a stranger to heterosexual love and perhaps, to follow Perrine's suggestion, not a stranger to sex.

"Aunt Imogen," published in Captain Craig in 1902, was one of Robinson's first attempts at depicting a woman as the main character and center of an omniscient point of view. Chapter One discussed Imogen's relationship with her sister and also Robinson's revisions, which provided a more individualized characterization for Imogen. As a more obviously autobiographically-based character than Pamela, Imogen is less ambiguously drawn than Pamela; Robinson had to subvert the stereotype of the maiden aunt in order to avoid destroying the audience's identification with his main character. Simone de Beauvoir points out the power of the myths western societies have developed about women, noting that if a woman acts in a way that does not fit the "Eternal Feminine," it is the woman and not the myth that is questionable (253). Even when the woman is not directly comparable to the "Eternal Feminine," or the desirable-but-distant woman, western society creates myths or stereotypes about her. In "Aunt Imogen," Robinson battles the stereotype of the bitter, envious, spiteful, shrunken, unloved "old

maid" who has permeated western literature from fairy tales to Miss Havisham.

But Imogen is different; she accepts her fate as aunt, the fact that she will never marry and have her own children. Aunt Imogen can be contrasted with some of Robinson's male characters in the way she accepts her role in a healthier manner than Miniver Cheevy and Bewick Finzer, who are unable to accept their disappointed expectations or downturns in fortune. Her "biological clock" has apparently run down, run out, but she is able to respond to the unconditional love of her little niece and nephews, "who knew no better than to be themselves." It is no easy battle, however, for Imogen. The third stanza reveals that she had dreamed of motherhood and that she struggles to hide the pain of this dream deferred:

> . . . How it was
> That she could make, and feel for making it,
> So much joy for them, and all along
> Be covering, like a scar, and while she smiled,
> That hungering incompleteness and regret --
> That passionate ache for something of her own,
> For something of herself -- she never knew. (CP 186)

So society's expectations and the potential for being stereotyped create emotions of which Imogen is aware. And when she has her revelation, that she must exchange her hoped-for motherly love for the real love that exists between the children and herself, a certain peace, an intuitive sense of well-being, descends upon her. "The triumph was not

hers: there was no love / Save borrowed love: there was no might have been" (188).

I believe that there are two additional details in this poem which underscore Aunt Imogen's difference from the spinster stereotype. The first is that Imogen works for a living in a position that must entail considerable responsibility. She has earned an entire month of vacation; therefore, she does not slave away at some poor-paying, dirty, illness-inducing factory job such as those which Carrie Meeber endures in Chicago at the beginning of Dreiser's novel. At a time when all workers were routinely exploited to the last measure of their strength, Imogen has an occupation which appears to reward her well. The second detail is young Jane's immediate identification with her aunt. Imogen's appearance in the second stanza touches off a wild celebration; this is not the entrance of a bitter and resentful witch. Jane runs "by the wings of sex" (185). She is the oldest child, and one might expect her to run more swiftly than the little boys with the wings of her age, but Robinson's diction here emphasizes the girl's emotional connection with the woman, again avoiding the separation to be expected had Imogen fit the stereotype.

Avenel Gray, of "Mortmain," a much later poem than "Aunt Imogen," lives out the consequences of a spinsterhood clung to beyond all apparent reason. It is clear in comparing the two poems that Robinson felt that a woman choosing an unmarried state was justified only if she found some kind of love to accept and return. Clinging to memories would be an unjustifiable waste of an otherwise useful life. The dead

hand of the title refers to the hold that Avenel Gray's brother retains over her.

Of course, with Seneca Sprague as suitor -- bald, long-winded, condescending -- it is little wonder that Avenel Gray remains constant to the memory of her ten-years-dead brother. Avenel Gray and Seneca Sprague are fifty and are friendly neighbors. Most of this nearly 400-line poem is taken up with Sprague using the oldest _carpe diem_ strategy in the book to convince Avenel finally to marry him, for example with: "You may observe that I've a guest with me / This time, Time being the guest -- scythe, glass, and all" (890). Despite their matching grayness, Sprague thinks of her as child-like, and he treats her as a child, calling her "My perishable angel" and "A most adorable and essential monster." Sprague represents society's expectations for Avenel, but he admits that he waited too long to approach her. In her resistance she exhibits strength of character; toward the end of the poem, she admits that she is not exactly unhappy with her situation and would prefer to remain "just friends" with Sprague.

But the end of the poem undercuts both Sprague, as representative of heterosexual love and the institution of marriage, and Avenel, as a woman choosing her own way without society's approval. Avenel chooses stasis: ". . . we have been / Too long familiar with our differences / To quarrel -- or to change" (899). Poor Sprague imagines himself drowning, but Prufrock-like, he remains ashore:

He went slowly home,
Imagining, as a fond improvisation,
That waves huger than Andes or Sierras

> Would soon be overwhelming, as before,
> A ship that would be sunk for the last time
> With all on board, and far from Tilbury Town. (899)

The last line reveals that these people are Tilbury Town residents, notorious in Robinson's poems for being fools who waste more of life than they live. And these two are condemned for wasting at least the last ten years.

Condemned in a similar way is the woman who is "The Poor Relation." Like Eben Flood, she has outlived her friends and her usefulness. She is the good daughter who stayed home to care for and to be a companion for her mother, but like Avenel Gray, through her devotion she relinquished the opportunity to live a more meaningful life. Most critics have used "To those who come for what she was" as a basis for an argument that she is the "poor" relation because she is no longer wealthy, but this assertion is contradicted by "They go, and leave her there alone / To count her chimneys and her spires" (46). She still can afford to live in the big family home.

Instead of from material poverty, the Poor Relation suffers from that most typical of Robinsonian afflictions, spiritual poverty. In giving her life to another, she has retained nothing for herself. Some critics, such as Wallace Anderson, read a good deal of sexual imagery and longing into this poem, but I believe that the consistent references to childhood undercut this argument. The wealth, the former beauty, and the envy these attributes caused are not the most significant parts of her past: "Her memories go foraging / For bits of childhood song they

treasure" (46). She does not understand how life could have passed by her so quickly, but it is not a bitter memory of adolescent regret or missed opportunity that haunts her, but rather, it is the earlier experience, the last time she could have been "herself," that she recalls: "And wistful yet for being cheated, / A child would seem to ask again / A question many times repeated" (45). The question is, How could this have happened? She does not know.

That she is "Unsought, unthought-of, and unheard" in the last stanza contradicts the fact that some visitors have appeared in the third stanza; nevertheless, she remains for the most part alone. We have another pitiable, but not self-pitying, maiden aunt, for "The few left who know where to find her" must be her relatives who come to lie to her about continued prospects for marriage and a "normal" life. The stereotype is truer of her family (waiting for her to die so that they can divide the estate?) than it is of this lonely old woman who is not bitter, only perplexed. She accepts her fated spinsterhood, not through either the positive choice Imogen makes or the negative choice Avenel Gray makes, but through inertia, singing in a cage as Time's "slow drops" descend.

Karen and Althea, in Talifer, a book-length poem published toward the end of Robinson's career in 1933, are somewhat more problematical than Aunt Imogen, Pamela, or the other unmarried characters. Karen is described as darkly beautiful and as an intellectual, and the main descriptor for her is "cold." Repeatedly, Karen is called "the Fish," because of her cold intellectuality. She wins Talifer's affections but remains emotionally independent of him, finally driving him to leave her

and go back to Althea, whom the narrative makes clear is the woman he should have married in the first place. Althea is light, more emotional than intellectual, in contrast with Karen. The narrative indicates that a combination of beauty and brains is detrimental to a woman.

Karen is a "New Woman," or, since Talifer was written in the early 1930's, a second-generation New Woman. Elaine Showalter summarizes this woman as one who "criticized society's insistence on marriage as woman's only option for a fulfilling life" and "engendered intense hostility and fear as she seemed to challenge male supremacy in art, the professions, and the home" (38). The feminist movement that finally won the right to vote for women in 1920 continued through the Jazz Age of the '20's. But along with new freedoms came the conservative reaction. As Sara Evans points out, a re-emergence of the domestic ideal characterized this decade, re-igniting sentiment against unmarried career women and older "unfeminine" feminists (194). Karen is an independent woman and the text implies that she is a feminist, but she is inexplicably caught up in competition against Althea for the attentions of Talifer; as Dr. Quick, a character who functions as a counselor or confidant for all the characters, reminds Karen, she should not be surprised at the failure of her relationship with Talifer because she only wanted him in order to take him away from Althea.

Althea is upset by Talifer's selection of Karen, but she is patient. Although two years are skipped and the reunion scene is not presented, we learn that Althea has quietly abided in her traditional large home on a tree-lined street until Talifer's infatuation with Karen and the notion of "Peace" he thinks he attained with her runs its course

and he returns, chastened. Althea is all-to-ready to forgive her prodigal fiance; however, despite her victory, she feels that she must tease Talifer with his past errors of judgment. She retains plenty of leftover jealousy and hostility.

The characterization of each woman in this poem is problematical for its unusual (for Robinson) dependence upon stereotype. It is to be wondered whether late in his career Robinson joined the anti-feminist reaction that Sara Evans describes. Some selected descriptions and comments from the text will demonstrate what seems to me to be a reliance on generalizations about women. Dr. Quick wants Karen to run away with him:

> Karen, Karen,
> I look at you sometimes with a sad fear
> That you are mostly made of beauty and brains --
> A coalescence rarer than green robins,
> Yet not quite all there is that's in a woman. (1246)

And later, Quick congratulates Talifer for winning Karen's affections:

> Now I can see why Karen is for you
> A treasure not of earth, a gem celestial.
> There was a comprehension more than woman's,
> A foresight more than man's, if I may say so,
> In her command . . . (1253)

And Althea, after Talifer has chosen Karen, wonders how "women in books / Had made of pride a guidance and a magic," and is left moping like a stereotypical high school girl waiting for the telephone to ring:

> And she was driven alone into the dark,
> Where there was no way back. She must go on
> Alone; and there was no place anywhere
> For her to go. It was all old enough,
> Or so tradition sang; and she supposed
> That there were women enough who might have told her
> That it was always new, and very strange. (1232-33)

Robinson scholars have almost ignored Talifer, deeming it late hack work or simply listing it with other poems that portray relationships. The most condemnatory was Yvor Winters, who wrote that the poem "hardly deserves a summary. It is extremely long, not very complex, and unbelievably dull" (119). Critics acknowledge that Talifer is Robinson's attempt at humor, but they do this only because after the book received negative reviews Robinson exclaimed among his friends that it was intended as a comic piece (see Hagedorn 365). The problem is that there is nothing funny in the poem. Neither witty repartee, nor puns, nor verbal or situational irony is evident within the poem. The only way in which this poem can be thought humorous is to compare it with Robinson's other long poems. Usually, characters' fortunes only decline, especially for wealthy materialists such as those in Talifer. But in this poem, characters seem to get what they want or think they deserve. Perhaps Robinson meant that we should view Karen as the lucky one who is first attracted to, but finally gets away from, the others, but I believe the poem lends no direct evidence for this interpretation.

I will end the chapter with a discussion of three poems written early in Robinson's career which provide a more traditional male view of

women, but in which the characterization of the women is more general than in the other poems. In "Luke Havergal," "John Evereldown," and "Sainte-Nitouche," women inspire men toward love, lust, piety, or some combination of these.

"John Evereldown" is the least ambiguous of these three poems, in its ballad-like repetition at the beginnings and endings of stanzas and in its alternation of moral questioner with answerer succumbing to temptation. The light/dark imagery that became a signature for Robinson's work is especially evident. The women are generalized, sirens who call through the darkness of immorality and the unknown, and Evereldown feels that he has no choice but to follow to his destruction, leaving the light of morality and knowledge behind. Following the call of these wild women, as the unnamed questioner observes, has caused Evereldown to age, a typically-asserted effect of too much sex, as if it is the women's fault that they attract him. But it is unlikely that Robinson would have had much sympathy for any man with so little self-control.

In his Collected Poems, Robinson placed "Luke Havergal," a poem in which a man is tempted to follow this time just one woman, immediately after "John Evereldown." Perhaps the juxtaposition was intended. Again, the woman functions as a kind of siren, and critics argue about whether the poem's voice is hers or a portion of Havergal's own mind and whether Havergal follows or intends to follow her through self-destruction. But Luke is consumed with love whereas John Evereldown is consumed with lust. The poem was a "great lyric" to Allen Tate and a "masterpiece" to Yvor Winters. I side with those who say the speaker is

Luke's mind, at least in part because there are no answers; it is a strategy that Robinson would come back to for Cavender's House. "The dark will end the dark, if anything" is the most quoted line in the poem, and it is assumed to refer to death. But I believe it refers more ambiguously to the unknown, which includes death but additional ideas as well. The central ambiguity is "if anything": the dark will end the dark if anything will end it, or the dark will end the dark if indeed the dark can end anything. If there is no certainty to this ending, I am inclined to agree with Richard P. Adams, who notes that Luke is enjoined to go to rather than through the western gate and is therefore asked to continue living instead of committing suicide (132-33), although I would add that the temptation is there. He also is told that he must not "riddle the dead words" the crimson leaves say, but must trust a later call. In this poem, the woman is a mysterious presence who sounds like a siren but says "wait."

The main character of "Sainte-Nitouche" is a clergyman named Vanderberg who tells his story to an unnamed first-person narrator. This is one of Robinson's more obscure poems, and few writers have troubled themselves with explaining it, probably because of the rather jingly xaxa quatrains. Sainte-Nitouche is not characterized at all; she is a woman with whom Vanderberg had a affair, which ended when she died. Unlike Luke Havergal, Vanderberg is not tempted toward suicide and an immediate rejoining; instead, her death motivates Vanderberg's renewed faith and commitment to his church, but seemingly without repentence. It is as if Vanderberg is grateful to sin for showing him the path to righteousness. Neff calls this an "apparent reversal of Dimmesdale's

experience in Hawthorne's novel" (122), and Barnard somewhat reluctantly agrees. Anyone familiar with Robinson's canon would expect some kind of Tilbury-Town undercutting of Vanderberg's renewal, but this does not happen. Vanderberg dies, and in the last nine quatrains the narrator eulogizes him, only acknowledging that we shall never know whether truth or love finally wins. The woman is simply allowed to represent both the wrong path and the right.

Robinson's characters who are single women demonstrate a variety of depictions, from those who are cunning enough to conceal their true feelings from the Tilbury Town crowd, like Pamela, to those who choose the safe "feminine" niche of conformity that society prepares for them, like Althea, and those who are generalized representations of men's desires, like Luke Havergal's woman. Of the women characters in this chapter's poems, only Althea becomes a mother, a role which Robinson seldom portrayed in his work.

CHAPTER VII

MOTHERS

> No man can ever appreciate the debt he owes to his mother, but sometimes a little thing may come up to set him thinking.
> -- letter to Harry de Forest Smith, Feb. 11, 1897 (US 278)

In The American 1890's, Larzer Ziff discusses the difficulties facing American fiction writers who dared to "chip away at the shrine of American Motherhood"; publishers were reluctant and critics scoffed (279). The idealization of women was not new, of course, but was part of a polarization of attitudes about women which developed as the suffrage movement grew. On one side were those who argued that women are human beings who are perfectly capable of political involvement and insight; on the other side were those who argued that women are "too good" for the squabbles and the wheeling and dealing of serious politics. As Mary Ellman has pointed out in Thinking About Women, the ideology of the feminine supported the notion that men are idealized upon becoming men, women upon "rising above themselves" in moral judgment. For men this self-elevation is a struggle, but for women it is to seem effortless (67-8). Childrearing and hometending take place outside the sphere of action that men created for themselves. This was an accepted division of labor which separated women from the "real world," and this division kept women, paradoxically, objectified through

the idealization of their main roles. In Images of Women in Literature, Mary Anne Ferguson writes that the literary mother is either an "angel" or "the all-powerful `Mom,' a character to be both loved and feared," or she may be both angel and Mom (93), but in nineteenth-century American poetry, she was almost always the "angel." Marie Therese Blanc, a Frenchwoman visiting America in the 1890's and studying women, wrote, "Perhaps it is really to women that it belongs to shape men; the maternal instinct with which almost all of them are born prepares them for that task" (140). This chapter will show that Robinson neither subscribed in full to the glorification of mothers nor ignored the role of mothers as important and worthy in its own right.

In creating female characters who are mothers and who exemplify human foibles and triumphs both, Robinson was, as usual, beating against the current of popular poetry. Only four poems in Robinson's canon depict mothers. These are "For a Dead Lady," "The Gift of God," "Aunt Imogen," and Talifer. Before analyzing these poems, however, it will be well to look at a small sampling of poetry from other nineteenth-century American writers who depicted mothers, for a point of comparison.

I will use E.C. Stedman's An American Anthology as a source for the poetry typical of the nineteenth century because Stedman included literally hundreds of poets, seemingly leaving no magazine page unturned in his quest for a complete record of the themes and techniques used over the previous century and more. Within his pages are many poems which are tributes, warnings, or addresses to women, and among these are many encomiums of mothers. In her assessment of 1890's poetry, "Women Poets in the Twilight Period," Dorothea Steiner writes, "Woman as the

preserver of values and refiner of life is thus given a definite role in society: to assure the permanence and stability of the essentially human part of man" (171). It is important to realize, however, that male poets also provided works with the expected veneration of mothers as exalted creatures incapable of error. It must have been a terrifying standard of behavior to uphold, doubtlessly inducing guilt in many women, who either did not express their concerns in poetry or could not find an outlet for their work among the pages of panegyrics.

A look at the poetry about motherhood published through the 1890's reveals a consistency of characterization that exposes the ideal as mere conventionalized expression. With little variation in the themes of the poems, the individual poet's voice is obliterated in the standardized technique of abab rhyme or, occasionally, couplets, along with short lilting lines. Typical of poetry about mothers is George Pope Morris's "My Mother's Bible," published about 1860. The first stanza of this son's tribute depicts the mother as seat of all religious instruction and inspiration as well as of family history:

> This book is all that's left me now!
>   Tears unbidden start --
> With faltering lip and throbbing brow
>   I press it to my heart.
> For many generations past,
>   Here is our family tree;
> My mother's hands this Bible clasped,
>   She, dying, gave to me. (83)

In addition to children writing poems directly to their mothers, poets such as John Banister Tabb idealized the mother/child

relationship, using the third person point of view to present a "miracle." Here is the second stanza of Tabb's "The Child (to his Mother)," which was published about 1897, the same year Robinson published his second little book:

> He brought a rose; and, lo,
> The crimson blossom saw
> Her beauty, and in awe
> Became as white as snow. (490)[1]

There was something of a cottage industry for poets portraying mothers addressing their departed children. As examples, see Edith Matilda Thomas's "The Mother Who Died Too" (575) and Virginia Woodward Cloud's "The Mother's Song" (657), both of which were published about 1895. Mark Twain had already mocked the genre of death tributes with "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd" in Huckleberry Finn, but determined hearts persevered. Julia Neely Finch went in the other direction with a mother addressing her fetus. Here is part of the third stanza of "The Unborn":

> In a soft and silken chamber set apart --
> Here, just beneath my happy heart, --
> Thou didst lie at dreamy ease
> While all my being paid
> Its tribute unto thee.
> What happy hours for thee and me! (759)

What happy hours many of these poets must have spent with pen in hand. As Mary Ellman writes, the mother's source of moral power was in

sacrificing herself to her children (132). It must have been difficult, being always a beacon of moral perfection with seemingly no opportunity to relax or to share one's burdens.

Mary Palmer Robinson, E.A. Robinson's mother, had a lasting influence on her son, as anyone might expect. She suffered and endured through wide swings in the family's financial situation which were due to her husband's speculations in timber. She witnessed the rise and most of the demise of her eldest son, Dean, a doctor who became a morphine addict, and of her second son, Herman, a businessman who became an alcoholic when his investments in St. Louis real estate collapsed. She died shortly before E.A. published his first volume, The Torrent and the Night Before, in 1896. Robinson was convinced that although she had "black diphtheria," she was killed in part by believing all three of her sons to be failures.

"For a Dead Lady" is universally acknowledged to be Robinson's tribute to his mother, but it is different in some respects from the typical mother-tributes which continued to be widely published even as he launched his career. In the first stanza, Robinson uses the standard evocation of female mystery -- the unseeing eyes keep "Their woman-hidden world" (355) unrevealed -- but he also acknowledges the mutability of the modern world, rather than the standard unchanging beauty and moral superiority, in "The shifting and the many-shaded" nature of the days. The second stanza also mixes the traditional and the new in its description. There is the ubiquitous "grace, divine" of many nineteenth-century motherhood poems; however, because it "Clings only as a faint forestalling," we see that it is as perishable as the

body that no longer breathes. "The laugh that love could not forgive" is a line that many have admired but none has explained. It adds ambiguity to the poem because it implies a husband who was in some way a victim of her wit, a wit that must have cut beneath whatever mask of male superiority he might have worn. Coxe merely writes that "perhaps the remembrance of her is not one of total idealization" (90). The third stanza begins like any other 1890's elegy, with its focus on the woman's faded beauty and the fact that death keeps her from watching over her children. But the often-quoted final four lines reverse the focus, placing it on poets:

> And we who delve in beauty's lore
> Know all that we have known before
> Of what inexorable cause
> Makes Time so vicious in his reaping. (CP 355)

While Robinson asserts the usual -- that Time has a greater impact on women because society values them more when they retain their beauty -- there is no revelation, no epiphany to be gained by this woman's death. Winters complains that the poem is "unlightened by any mitigating idea or feeling" (36), but I suggest that to mitigate the idea of death would undercut one of Robinson's major themes -- that even after observing a death and writing about it, we know no more about Time's ultimate consequences than we ever have.

Chapter One has already discussed to some extent Jane, the mother of the children who love Aunt Imogen. It demonstrated how Robinson's revisions created, from a generalized character who assumes she knows

the desires of all women, a more individualized character who understands her sister's longing for motherhood. Jane may be somewhat more permissive than we imagine Victorian mothers to be, in that in terms of her children's behavior, it appears that anything goes while Imogen is there; indeed, Imogen's month in the household sounds like one long party during which the elder Jane (it is important to remember that Jane's daughter also is named Jane) is willing to recede into the background in order to allow Imogen and the children the fullest enjoyment possible:

> Aunt Imogen was coming, and therefore
> The children -- Jane, Sylvester, and Young George --
> Were eyes and ears; for there was only one
> Aunt Imogen to them in the whole world,
> And she was in it only for four weeks
> In fifty-two. But those great bites of time
> Made all September a Queen's Festival;
> And they would strive, informally, to make
> The most of them. -- The mother understood,
> And wisely stepped away. Aunt Imogen
> Was there for only one month in the year,
> While she, the mother, -- she was always there;
> And that was what made all the difference.
> (_CP_ 184-85)

Jane's willingness to be temporarily supplanted in the children's affections sounds almost too good to be true, especially considering the length of Imogen's stay. But we must remember that long visits were not unusual less than a century ago, and compromises and tolerances that would be impossible today must have been common.

Imogen's growth, from an occasionally self-pitying mother-want-to-be to a woman who accepts the joy in the life she has, was discussed in

the previous chapter. However, it seems appropriate to add a quotation here which will demonstrate Robinson's willingness to de-idealize motherhood, at least for Imogen:

> There were no dreams,
> No phantoms in her future any more:
> One clinching revelation of what was
> One by-flash of irrevocable chance,
> Had acridly but honestly foretold
> The mystical fulfilment of a life
> That might have once . . . But that was all gone by:
> There was no need of reaching back for that.
> (CP 188)

Mary Ellman writes that society makes certain that women see motherhood as their ultimate role, with stigma such as "old maid" and "spinster" provided for those who reject the role or who never get the opportunity to fulfil it (136). Imogen is a strong person who is able to resist the dominating ideology of motherhood in turn-of-the-century America.

Motherhood is given a very different emphasis in "The Gift of God," a poem about a mother's unceasing devotion to her son. This poem has been well explicated a number of times; each commentator has pointed out the mother's seeming short-sightedness in placing her son on some kind of pedestal, ignorant of other sons and their accomplishments which are greater than her son's. Her love is unconditional and complete; "She crowns him with her gratefulness" because of the very fact of his existence (7). Critics remark on the dramatic irony of the poem, the fact that the townspeople and the readers can see the ordinariness of the man while the mother can not.

I would like to suggest another level of irony, found in the fourth stanza, an irony that takes into account the fact that the Tilbury Townfolk are often incorrect with their assumptions about people's behavior, as they appear to be in "The Tree in Pamela's Garden." Emphasize "Perchance" and its repetition in the following lines:

> Perchance a canvass of the town
> Would find him far from flags and shouts,
> And leave him with only the renown
> Of many smiles and many doubts;
> Perchance the crude and common tongue
> Would havoc strangely with his worth;
> But she, with innocence unwrung,
> Would read his name around the earth. (*CP* 7)

The word is there to throw doubt on the observers' perceptions, and it implies that the truth may lie between the scorn of the average resident of Tilbury Town and the unqualified praise of the mother. Nowhere does the poem present even the smallest detail indicating the son's area of endeavor. It would be consistent with Robinson's oeuvre to imagine that this man has qualities, especially spiritual qualities, of which no one else (not even his mother) is aware. These qualities stand in contrast to the materialism of society, yet with the character's self-awareness that would see the mother's praise also as not fully deserved.

Among the long poems, only *Talifer* presents a character who is a mother, Althea. Published in 1933, the poem is built around the contrast between the bookish and brainy Karen and the warm and emotional Althea. Harold E. Stearns wrote in the 1920's that American women had become dissatisfied with the Victorian role of "ornamentation," which

left cultural pursuits the sole outlet for their energy (141), but in this poem Robinson harks back to a previous era. The conflict is between a representative of the New Woman and women's suffrage and a holdover from the nineteenth century, and Talifer's struggle to "choose" between them. Actually, Talifer is less chooser than chosen. Karen determines what she wants and grasps it; Althea is patient, despite the hurt of Talifer's desertion almost on the eve of their wedding, faithfully waiting until he realizes his mistake and returns to her.

The last section of the poem leaps two years into their marriage, to a scene including father, mother, and son. When Althea jokes that Dr. Quick, friend and confidant of all the characters, and the man for whom Karen leaves Talifer, sowed the seeds of their marriage, Talifer admits that she has a sense of humor he had not thought she had had before. He calls her the "home-breaker" (1291). Despite the fact that she finally won Talifer and they have the son Talifer never had with Karen, Althea remains jealous; she is not content with her "victory" over Karen, but she ties a cravat with several ingenious knots to imagine her hanging (1293). She would "eat lizards to forget" the time when Talifer was married to Karen (1295). Nevertheless, she is a devoted mother, pouring her vitality into the child. Being a mother makes her thinks of her Pilgrim foremothers who had no rest from bearing children; she will concentrate her efforts on their one child, Samuel Talifer, Jr., son and heir (1296). Class may be a factor, in that Talifer, like most of the main characters in Robinson's longer poems, appears to be independently wealthy. Althea would have no other vocation than raising the young gentleman; she seems to be a return to

the domestic ideal expressed in nearly all of the poetry of the previous century.

This ideal is apparent in another way. The mother and father contrast in that Althea is doting and perceptive, fulfilled in bearing and caring for Talifer's child, while fatherhood is strange to Talifer, who is stereotypically almost unable to hold the baby because it is "fearsome and irregular, / And of no constant length or magnitude" (1298). The child is entirely Althea's domain. But Althea's motherhood is not the most important part of her character in this poem; its function is simply to demonstrate the peace and "normality" Talifer would have missed had he stayed with the cold, intellectual "Fish," Karen.

Talifer is seldom read, perhaps justifiably, and Althea is Robinson's least-known mother character. It is interesting that this poem from near the end of Robinson's career should be one that appears to revert to the conventions of the nineteenth century for its portrayal of the mother figure. Perhaps age wore down much of Robinson's almost habitual sympathy for those with the difficult roles to play. The much earlier poem, "The Gift of God," introduces some irony into the mother's characterization. "Aunt Imogen" and "For a Dead Lady" are included among Robinson's best poems, and they show an understanding extending beyond the constrictive roles handed down to him by his poetic predecessors. While none of these poems fully endorses the expectations of stereotype, neither do they provide a role other than motherhood for these female characters. The maternal role is the one these women fulfill, and they are not shown working outside the home or agitating

for women's rights. Of course, it is doubtful that Robinson's intent in these poems was gender-political; that would be too narrow a consideration for him. His modernist concern extended more broadly, to include simply learning how to survive in the world, emotionally and spiritually, no matter what role must be played.

NOTE

[1]Ironically, Robinson used the same image of the rose undergoing a color change in his early poem, "The Miracle," in which the flower is placed on the grave of a "pure" lover. He later deemed the poem unworthy of inclusion in his Collected Poems.

CHAPTER VIII

WOMEN IN AND OUT OF LOVE

All fights are needless, when they're not our own.
-- "Nimmo"

The relationships between men and women were a constant source of inspiration for E.A. Robinson. Husbands and wives, premarital affairs, and extramarital affairs abound in his poems. Of course, none of the situations depicted in these poems is rendered from personal experience, but from observation and imagination and, one may suspect, from gossip. Robinson was a keen observer of the scene around him, and he maintained networks of friends and acquaintances in Gardiner/"Tilbury Town" and in New York/"The Town Down the River" as well as at the MacDowell Colony. The various locales and people served as rich sources of material for a wide range of poems depicting couples in the modern world. This chapter will group together about thirty poems, short and long, from across Robinson's career, which exhibit this range of situations.

K.K. Ruthven finds motherhood to be one of two over-riding myths oppressive to women, the other being the myth of romantic love (79). Robinson surely believed that romantic love was a source of joy, but this attitude was expressed almost solely in letters of congratulations to friends who announced their intentions to marry; however, even then,

he tended to express some doubts. In Robinson's poems, as in most writers' work, romantic love was more likely to become a source of woe. In her introduction to A House of Good Proportion, Michele Murray responds to Freud's famous question about what women want by asserting that they want what men want: "the unattainable," something beyond knowing (13). For Robinson, all important knowledge was beyond knowing, and relationships between the sexes were no exception. He was raised to expect marital bliss, or at least harmony, but his observations showed him that the behaviors of generally self-interested individuals create tensions, misunderstandings, and disappointments. The mysteries behind the failure of expectations and reality to match became sources of poetic inspiration for him because they exemplify difficulties people have in making meaningful connections with each other. This theme appears in many of his poems, not only those about men and women.

In reading books such as Murray's, Mary Anne Ferguson's Images of Women in Literature, Elizabeth Janeway's Man's World, Woman's Place, Nancy Reeves's Womankind, and Luce Irigaray's This Sex that is Not One, I see four stereotypes which appear to be applicable in this chapter on romantic love. The "Submissive Wife" is the "male ideal," a woman who subordinates herself to her husband, losing her own identity within his. "The Bitch" is the opposite of the submissive wife; this is the wife who completely dominates her husband, who is "unnatural" because she provokes hostility through asserting her authority. "Woman on a Pedestal," as Ferguson notes, is a mysterious kind of woman, an object of glory for men, leading them either to triumph or to destruction (215-16). "The Sex Object" is she who is kept from being a complete person

because of men's habit of viewing women in a single, sexual, dimension, and this view of women is the chief cause of men's jealousy. Of course, characters can overlap these categories; one can be a submissive sex object on a pedestal. And as I have pointed out in other chapters, some American women poets of the nineteenth century chose the pedestal as women's proper place.

As will be seen in the following discussion, many of these stereotypes appear in Robinson's poems, but not always in a representative way. Indeed, many of Robinson's female characters feel the need to stop being submissive to society's, or their husband's, expectations for their behavior. A number of poems demonstrate that the pedestal is a rather problematic perch. For a writer for whom women's issues per se were not a major concern, Robinson reveals a sensitivity perhaps unexpected in a male writer of his period, so that these categories are not always sufficient for explaining Robinson's women characters. Again, his method of individualizing his characters tends to reduce the dependence upon stereotypes. To some extent, Robinson's use of stereotypes became less frequent as his career progressed, and this chapter will mix chronological and thematic groupings of poems to show the range of representations Robinson used.

In the early long poem, _Captain Craig_, Robinson uses his protagonist to relate the story of two friends, a man and a woman, who seem to represent opposite poles of some sensibility spectrum in which the man is typically cold, intellectual, and austere, and the woman is typically warm, emotional, and giving. Each in turn speaks privately to the Captain. The man calls the woman "cursed with happiness" (_CP_ 127)

because she always looks at people's situations positively, whether they are cancer patients or the poor, and she takes some small action of relief. But he sees such actions as meaningless, since they can not alleviate the underlying causes of the conditions. She tells the Captain that this man is incapable of feeling joy because he always accentuates the negative: "Give him a rose, / And he will tell you it is very sweet, / But only for a day" (129). Throughout the poem, Captain Craig is the voice of reason and moderation: "Is it better to be blinded by the lights, / Or by the shadows?" he asks the narrator (130). And he concludes that it is best to consider both sides and avoid being blinded at all. In other words, neither the "typical" male response nor the "typical" female response is sufficient for the best understanding and action.

Two other early poems, "For Calderon" and "The Night Before," neither of which Robinson saw fit to collect, employ a similar kind of blindness that has lead to tragedy. In both poems, the protagonist is a man who is about to die after committing a murder; in both, a woman is the victim of the man's jealousy. "For Calderon" is the over-exclamatory deathbed confession of a man who poisoned a woman named Mona because he discovered that she loved his brother. She never knew, and he went unpunished for the crime, except for constant, torturous pangs of guilt. "The Night Before" is basically the same tale of passion, murder, and conscience, but this time the man confessing awaits execution for killing the other man instead of the woman he loved, who betrayed him. In both poems, the women are marginal characters who serve simply as objects of men's desire.

The Glory of the Nightingales also has a character, Agatha, who never appears. She functions as the romantic object of men's desire, destroyed by men's greed and jealousy, the woman over whom two powerful businessmen, Nightingale and Malory, fought years earlier. Before World War I, Nightingale visited Europe and engaged in a bit of financial treachery with which he enriched himself and "won" Agatha, but which ruined Malory's business. The problem is that Agatha actually loved Malory, and his calamity caused her health to decline. She died long before the poem's main action, Malory's return to exact revenge upon Nightingale. In this poem, it is the men who are stereotypical in their possessiveness, their view of Agatha as property to go to the highest bidder, a view which destroyed the men's friendship prior to the beginning of the poem.

As will be seen, many of Robinson's poems depict a man being unfaithful to a woman, but several involve a woman who scorns her husband, leaving him. "The Whip" comes as close as any of Robinson's poems to depicting Ferguson's category of "The Dominating Wife: The Bitch," if we consider only the male point of view. The speaker is a friend who addresses the dead husband, trying to understand why the man killed himself. The husband had discovered his wife with another man; all three on horseback, he chased the lovers and then rode, alone, off a precipice into a river to drown. This friend says that infidelity is not worth death, calling the husband "blind." But then he notices a bruise on the husband's face:

> 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? (CP 339)

And he realizes that the wife's hatred, not her infidelity, motivated the husband to ride into the river. In this poem, Robinson depicts a woman as the destroyer.

Barnard groups "The Whip" with two other poems, "The Unforgiven" and "Llewellyn and the Tree," which he considers examples of "women's cruelty -- which in these poems one feels to be more envenomed than any harshness to be found in men" (46). But in "The Unforgiven," how is the woman cruel? Clearly, she wants out of this marriage; is she wrong to desire a life of her own, one that does not reflect only her husband's expectations? We must wonder what action he has done that she will not forgive, and our assumptions are dashed when we are told: "But look for no red light behind him -- / No fumes of many-colored sins, / Fanned high by screaming violins." He has not been adulterous. The clues appear at the beginning of the poem:

When he, who is the unforgiven,
Beheld her first, he found her fair:
No promise ever dreamt in heaven
Could then have lured him anywhere
That would have been away from there;
And all his wits had lightly striven,
Foiled with her voice, and eyes, and hair.

There's nothing in the saints and sages
To meet the shafts her glances had,

Or such as hers have had for ages
To blind a man till he be glad,
And humble him till he be mad. (CP 37)

He has placed her on a pedestal for so long, thinking of her as more a goddess than a woman, that she has finally had enough -- his vision of her is greater than the person can achieve. Her cruelty is not the problem, but her realism is. He realizes that as a consequence of her new assertiveness he can not recapture the past: "But no magicians are attending / To make him see as he saw then." The husband who is unable to accept his wife's personhood finds himself left behind.

In "Llewellyn and the Tree," on the other hand, perhaps the woman is cruel; at least the man changes. Priscilla is characterized as the stereotypical shrew, always berating Llewellyn, refusing to allow him his ambitions: "And whatever timid hopes / He built -- she found them, and they fell" (51). Finally, he leaves Priscilla and Tilbury Town for another woman and New York. Twenty years later, the Tilbury Town narrator bumps into Llewellyn on Broadway, and the old man says running was the smartest thing he ever did. While Louis Coxe believes "The Unforgiven" is Robinson's statement in favor of divorce (133), I would give the honor to this poem. Again, the clue is in the first two stanzas:

Could he have made Priscilla share
  The paradise that he had planned,
Llewellyn would have loved his wife
  As well as any in the land.

Could he have made Priscilla cease

To goad him for what God left out,
Llewellyn would have been as mild
As any we have read about. (*CP* 50-51)

The incapacity to compromise destroys this couple. Emphasize "made" in the first lines of these stanzas, and it is clear that one reason behind Llewellyn's departure is his inability to control or influence his wife's behavior and attitude in the way he might have expected. At the end, the narrator expects to find a moral, but none occurs to him; this may be because he sees only the shrewish wife at fault.

Like "The Unforgiven," "The Story of the Ashes and the Flame" evokes the feeling of the woman on the pedestal, because it begins "No matter why, nor whence, nor when she came, / There was her place" (84). This sonnet is actually the story of the man, who idolizes the woman so completely that "living or dead, / Faithful or not, he loved her all the same." If nothing she does provokes any emotion in him but love, he is placing her above humanity. Her "place" is with him, and when she leaves, he has only books to turn to, with their romantic fantasies; he fantasizes her return, but each time he must awaken to the knowledge of her absence. In this poem, Robinson considers the consequences of the unrealistic expectations men sometimes hold onto for their relationships with women. A later poem, "Another Dark Lady," takes the same situation (a woman leaving a man) and presents an opposing attitude. He never wants to see her -- the devil -- again; far from fantasizing her return, he imagines a beech wood which once held fond memories, but now he imagines her feet "cloven as no beech's are" (42). In neither poem does

Robinson appear to privilege these male characters' attitudes. He points out the pitfalls of pouring too much of oneself into another and expecting perfection from the woman as "Other."

In "Job the Rejected," one woman leaves two men in the space of a sonnet's fourteen lines. Except for "it was her will to disappear" (577), the woman is not characterized; she marries a man, but both Job and the "we" narrator are certain the marriage will not last. There is no apparent connection with the biblical character, aside from this second man's patience in waiting for the marriage to fail. Job would have liked to be her emotional replacement for the husband "in the dust," but his affection, too, is left unrequited. This is one of many Robinson poems which imply that marriage is a rather limiting institution and that although separations are not often easy to understand, they may be the best course of action.

Another situation in which a woman leaves a man is presented in the dramatic dialogue, "London Bridge," which shows a relationship in the process of falling down. Seldom, if ever, does Robinson create a "material girl," and in this poem he gives us a woman confessing to an affair in order to demonstrate the priority of love over things. The only defence the husband presents is the fact that she would not have such a comfortable life if he did not work so hard, and he complains: "There are men who say there's reason hidden somewhere in a woman, / But I doubt if God himself remembers where the key was hung" (497). However, the accusation of a stereotypical flightiness will not convince her to return to him; she prefers honesty and says that through him she has learned enough about herself to realize that she is dissatisfied

with his possessions. Her only concession is to act the happy wife the same evening while they host a dance with 200 guests. Charles Cestre was one reader who believed that Robinson meant for her head to rein in her heart (13), but I feel certain that after the ball she will pack her bags, departing in the same way Ibsen's Nora leaves Torvald.

Another dramatic dialogue using the long, seven-stress lines is "John Gorham," a poem about the sexual double standard. Gorham and Jane Wayland have been a couple, but apparently not for the past year. He implies that he has learned that she has taken a lover; she responds that she knows about his "flocks." Passing off the other women as insignificant, he accuses her of teasing him and characterizes her variously as a butterfly and as a cat. This labeling causes her to argue that he is unable or unwilling to see her as a woman in her own right: "Somewhere in me there's a woman, if you know the way to find her" (14). Alfred Kreymborg wrote, "For once, the Robinsonian male holds his own with his antagonist and even has the last word" (307). Gorham does indeed speak last, about how he no longer finds moonlight romantic, but if this is victory, it is a pyrrhic one. Robinson gives the woman the strength to resist the expected surrender and to resume her own life.

A third dramatic dialogue, "Genevieve and Alexandra," is perhaps the least interesting of the three, as Robinson relies on stereotypical "feminine weaknesses" in depicting the relationship between the two sisters. Genevieve is "the pretty one," Alexandra "the smart one." Genevieve is married, but her husband is unfaithful and she realizes that beauty is not enough to maintain a man's interest. However, unlike

a Jane Wayland or the wife in "London Bridge," she is self-pitying. Alexandra is unmarried, and she sees Genevieve's problem as a simple unwillingness to use her beauty in new ways which might keep her husband interested. Perhaps Alexandra is not so smart; she does not see what Genevieve sees. Genevieve admits to jealousy of Alexandra because her husband looks at Alexandra with a kind of intellectual hunger while he looks at Genevieve with a kindness she finds irritating and condescending. The poem deteriorates into a squabble between the sisters, Alexandra denying that she could cause a rift between Genevieve and her husband.

Few are the Robinson poems that depict contentedness in relationships or marriage, but the sonnet, "Vain Gratuities," is one. Like "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," the poem it follows in Avon's Harvest and in the Collected Poems, "Vain Gratuities" explores gossip and the discrepancy between what the people of Tilbury Town think and what the subject character knows. Both poems employ an omniscient narrator who stands apart from the Tilbury Town crowd and focuses on the woman. Like Pamela, the unnamed woman of "Vain Gratuities" is strong, choosing her own course, content despite the suppositions of the gossipers. This is another of Robinson's poems against materialism; this time, love conquers the handicap of ugliness. Where Pamela would show a sly smile, this woman "would have laughed had she been there" to hear the gossipers discussing her husband's unattractive features as an impediment to love, especially in the contrast to her beauty. She is another of Robinson's women characters who stand against the stereotype of feminine weakness.

Sometimes women are the steadying influence in a man's life. It is a commonplace that women are the source of tradition in the home, and Robinson saw tradition as a positive element in a world of sometimes unmanageable change. The best example of a Robinson poem in which a woman affects a man's life is "Reuben Bright." The butcher has two polar aspects to his life: the slaughterhouse, where death brings his living; and his home, where his wife makes things. We are not told what she makes -- no doubt she sews the quilts or weaves the baskets of an average housewife. Yet, this craftwork, with its simple creativity, seems to have balanced Reuben's life, with home providing a refuge from the daily slaughter. And when this touchstone of normality takes ill and dies, Reuben's life swings out of control; he is left to destroy the slaughterhouse and to find some new way to order his life.

"Firelight" is a sonnet that some readers have placed with "Vain Gratuities" in the category of marital harmony, but only half the poem belongs there. The octave describes a couple grateful "to firelight and four walls / For love's obliteration of the crowd" (510). However, peacefulness is only a surface feature. This sonnet has a more interesting sound than some of Robinson's other sonnets because no line in it is made of ten monosyllables. There is a less sing-song flow that helps to reveal an undercurrent of uncertainty in the poem. In the sestet, we learn that silence is the source of concord in this marriage, that each partner is thinking of another person with whom he or she might find greater happiness. In contrast to the strength of character displayed by the wife in "Vain Gratuities," both characters in this poem

are weak, unable to voice their discontent and so to break the mask of affection for the opportunity of something better.

"Not Always II" is another poem about marital silence. It follows "Not Always I," which intimates some obscure discord. But in the second sonnet, the tensions are not secret: "Antipathy was now their daily bread, / And pride the bitter drink they daily fought / To throw away." The characters in this poem are weaker than those in "Firelight," unable to maintain even the mask of civility and unwilling to change their situation:

> Wishing the other might at once be sure
> And strong enough to shake the prison down,
> Neither believed, although they strove together,
> How long the solid fabric would endure
> That was a wall for them, and was to frown
> And shine for them through many sorts of weather.
> (CP 888)

They are willing to endure a joyless life of silence and anxiety and to suffer the familiar turmoil rather than the unknown. Traditionally, this attitude has been attributed to women, but I believe Robinson ascribes the weakness of indecision to both men and women. For him, the human condition means always falling short of potential or accepting less than we might otherwise achieve.

"Tact" provides another variation on the theme of relationship difficulties expressed in "Firelight" and "Not Always II." This time, the man and the woman (it is not made clear whether they are married) do manage to talk to one another, and neither is deceived about the

emotions of the other. She appears to initiate the discussion. His temporary desire to have them stay together is replaced by an amiable parting of the ways:

> Aware that all imagining
> Of more than what she meant
> Would urge an end of everything,
> He stayed; and when he went,
> They parted with a merry word
> That was to him as light
> As any that was ever heard
> Upon a starry night. (CP 474)

But the last stanza implies that she was the better actor of the two: "He saw no ruins anywhere, / Nor fancied there were scars / On anyone who lingered there, / Alone below the stars." The man takes some comfort in believing that his lover is not upset, but if she is merely acting her lack of dismay at their separation, which is implied with "fancied," Robinson is replacing the stereotype of inaction with that of dissimulation.

The only dissimulation in "Neighbors" is the appearance of friendliness on the part of the "wolf-haunted wife's" Tilbury Town acquaintances (459). The narrator of this seldom-discussed poem is Robinson's third-person-plural Tilbury Town speaker who usually misinterprets or exacerbates the personal or social situation of the poem. The neighbors admire her ability to operate her household despite her poverty, but it is a kind of pity-driven admiration that retains their separation from the woman, with the hint between the lines that their pity is for a stereotypically submissive wife laboring for a

husband who can not or will not do better. By the last stanza, the narrator/neighbors are so distant that they barely flinch at the news of the woman's death. It is as if with a shrug of the shoulders that they tell each other: "Love, with its gift of pain, had given / More than one heart could hold" (460). But with an ironic reading of the narrator, as with "The Tree in Pamela's Garden" or "Vain Gratuities," we see that the woman's pain was not a gift of love, but the fruit of the neighbors' blindness to a fellow human's need.

A more commonly depicted situation in Robinson's poetry is that of the husband abusing his wife's love for him, poems in which the male character looks outside of marriage for his personal or sexual satisfaction and the woman is left to survive emotionally on her own resources. Robinson's female characters respond in a variety of ways, from patience to vengeance. For example, the wife in "If the Lord Would Make Windows in Heaven" realizes that her husband, whom we now would call a "Type-A" personality, is taking her for granted in following his ambitions. She responds by being "more angelical," resisting the temptation to point out that he is over-extending himself, yet fearing disaster: "She sewed, and waited for the roof to fall" (901). The stereotypical "submissive wife," this woman nevertheless, as frequently occurs in Robinson's poems, sees more and realizes more than she reveals. She is aware of what both of them are doing, but as "A saint abroad," she provides the public support her husband requires, even while afraid that his aspirations will carry him emotionally further away from her. She also sees that "his high lights / [are] not shining;" success is never guaranteed for the materialist. As in

"London Bridge," the woman is granted the role of one who grows weary of a marriage based on what money can buy.

Despite Robinson's reputation as an anti-materialist, more poems explore the emotional tensions brought about by infidelity or alleged infidelity than by the struggles of the commercial world. For example, doubt accompanies the couple portrayed in "The Companion," which employs a metrical and stanzaic structure unusual in the Robinson canon. There are two seven-line stanzas of catalectic/trochaic tetrameter lines, rhyming abbacbc. The poem approximates a sonnet, but the shortened lines and the unexpected stanza break imply that something is missing from their relationship -- trust. The focus of the poem is on whether the husband can talk his way out of the situation he has apparently created for himself; he can not.

"Eros Turannos" is one of Robinson's most-anthologized and most-explicated poems. Charles Cestre included "Eros Turannos" with several poems which he believed indicated the characters' emotions being reined in by their reason (14). Yvor Winters included it with a number of poems with "endurance" as the central theme (32-33). Louis Coxe emphasized "the pressure of the public world upon the private," and the presence of the "we" narrator as symbolic of that pressure (159). M.L. Rosenthal teamed "Eros Turannos" and "John Evereldown" as poems with "the theme of the power of sex to rule a life," (104), and more recently, C. Hines Edwards has even attempted a Freudian reading.

Coxe's reading complements mine better than the other interpretations. I believe that the focus of this poem is on the woman as trapped in tradition. She is a middle- or upper-class wife without

the skills or the training to make her own way in the world, and she prefers the adulterous husband she knows to the unknown life unattached. This is the private world placed under pressure by the public. But she is not entirely submissive; the fact that "she secures him" at the end of the third stanza means that she can make his life miserable, perhaps by embarrassing him in public, and so he stays as part of her illusion of a home. If, as is usual, the narrator is incorrect, we must believe that this relationship is more complex than it appears; the truth is often beyond the ken of gossipers. In this poem, the harm is in forcing her to feel that she must hide.

While the wife in "Eros Turannos" accepts her situation, in most of Robinson's poems in which a husband is unfaithful, the wife finds a way to fight back, and in doing so, contests the stereotype of submission. Unusual because it is an Elizabethan sonnet instead of Robinson's normal Petrarchan form, "An Evangelist's Wife" depicts a woman who throws her husband's hypocrisy back into his face. Like our contemporary evangelical charlatan, Jimmy Swaggart, he has been slipping around, but instead of being caught by the media, he is caught by his spouse, who denies jealousy yet reminds him of Michal, whom David left to take Abigail and Ahinoam as wives (I Sam. 25). She acknowledges that he has not been cruel to her, but she wishes he had been, that she might despise him more. In the last line, she asks, "Jealous of God?" which implies that the evangelist has used the God-led-me-to-this defense, but she makes it clear that she does not believe it.

"The Woman and the Wife" presents two women who refuse to believe a man. It is a double sonnet, and in the first, the Other Woman is

telling the man that their relationship is over. Apparently, he has made promises he has no intention of carrying out, and she casts him off: "You look for just one lie to make black white, / But I can tell you only what is true -- / God never made me for the wife of you" (194). The deceived wife speaks the second sonnet, and although she resists her husband's implied request for a return to normal relations, she is not vindictive -- she simply wants him to leave: "What is it worth to-night that you can see / More marriage in the dream of one dead kiss / Than in a thousand years of life like this?" Neither woman is content with only part of this man's commitment, an emotion best expressed by the wife in the last line of her sonnet: "Do you ask me to take moonlight for the sun?" She will not accept a pale reflection of love instead of the sun. "The Woman and the Wife" is a little morality play in which the man is caught between two women. Neither is submissive, nor does either approach the stereotypical "Bitch" of literary tradition, but together they teach the husband a lesson.

Somewhat "bitchier," although justified, is the wife who berates her unfaithful husband in the ironically-titled dramatic monologue, "The Clinging Vine." She says she will maintain self-control, but she does not, as her repeated interjections such as "Be calm?" imply. Shocked at his infidelity, she nevertheless realizes her sudden freedom: "For I've no more a master" shows that she had accepted the social expectations of submissiveness in a wife (8). But now that he has broken the contract, she loses her mooring. Her consolation is in knowing that his younger, prettier mistress will soon age and her husband's restless eyes will light elsewhere. He apparently tries denial and blaming her

imagination, and then he tries reminding her of the pedestal on which he has placed her, but she rejects these arguments:

> "You'd say, and you'd say dying,
> That I dream what I know;
> And sighing, and denying,
> You'd hold my hand and go.
>
> ". . . so you've told me,
> So many mortal times,
> That heaven ought not to hold me
> Accountable for crimes." (CP 9)

As commonly happens in Robinson's poetry, the woman is granted insight. She understands that this affair of his is one of many to come; if this paramour were the only one, "I'd creep, and go on seeming / To be what I despise." She would despise the act assumed by a woman like the wife in "Eros Turannos," putting up the brave charade of normalcy. Here is another of Robinson's strong women, able to reject the male-dominated status quo when it is used against her. "Are women mad?" she asks. And her answer seems to be that women go mad only when the behaviors of men drive them to it.

The wife in "Ben Trovato" may not be mad, but she is devious and cunning in uncovering the truth about her dying husband's affections. This sonnet is a story told by a deacon to an unnamed listener, "And I'm unwilling even to condemn / The benefaction of a stratagem / Like hers -- and I'm a Presbyterian" (575). Mrs. Trovato's "stratagem" is the same as Jacob's in deceiving Isaac in order to receive the blessing and inheritance due Esau. Wearing a fur coat like that of the mistress, and

leaving her rings at home, she visits her blind and nearly-dead husband, who "smiled -- as he had never smiled at her" (576). The deacon is willing to believe that she is willing to forgive, but "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" if I may make a rather more mundane application of Eliot's line. She apparently allows him to die thinking that his secret remains unrevealed, but she takes with her the pain of having her suspicions confirmed.

There is a subset of poems with which Robinson explores male/female relationships with the complication of making one character an artist or the subject of a painter: "Her Eyes," "Partnership," "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," and "Nimmo" make up this group. "Her Eyes" is the earliest of these poems, appearing in The Children of the Night. It is a variation of the Pygmalion story; the image of the purely objectified woman is worshipped by the artist until she seems all there is of reality for him. "Her Eyes" is as close as Robinson comes to the tales of male creation such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, popular at the turn of the century. This painter struggles for many years, lonely in his garret/studio, until he paints his masterpiece, the image of a woman who is "Angel and maiden." The eyes present a further struggle until finally "With a gleam of heaven to make them pure, / And a glimmer of hell to make them human" they are finished (79). With the last stanza, however, Robinson demonstrates that the artistic representation of apparent perfection is insufficiently, or only temporarily, satisfying: "And he wonders yet what her love could be / To punish him after that strife so grim; / But the longer he lives with her eyes to see, / The plainer it all comes back to him" (80). What comes back to him is the

knowledge that because the image on the canvas is unchanging and unresponsive, it lacks much that a human lover could offer.

Another poem in which the tension is created through a pair of painted eyes is "Nimmo." The speaker of this dramatic monologue is a portrait painter who "put the devil" in Nimmo's eyes. This representation frightened Nimmo's wife to the point where the marriage has become a hollow shell. "God help us all when women think they see; / God save us when they do," the painter says, perhaps trying to soothe his conscience (522). "Nimmo" is one of several poems in which Robinson asserts that women are more perceptive than men, and are more affected by what they see (Merlin, "London Bridge," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," to name three). There is one line in this poem which reflects a truth about marriages, especially when we consider the frequency with which Robinson uses a narrator who is an outsider looking in: "All fights are needless, when they're not our own." The narrator tells of trying to convince Francesca, Nimmo's wife, that she need not fear him, but apparently he is unable.

"Partnership" contrasts more directly with "Her Eyes" by portraying a woman offering her very life for her artist husband. Originally published in Captain Craig as "The Wife of Palissy," this short dramatic monologue is formed from a woman's dying words to her husband; she says she was happy to share his suffering with him.[1] Emery Neff points out that Robinson learned about Palissy, a sixteenth-century French potter, through the artist's autobiography, which tells of "his sixteen-year search for the secret of white enamel, to which he sacrificed everything, even feeding his kiln with his household furniture as a last

resort" (120). There is no ironic twist of meaning at the end of the poem, as there is in "Her Eyes." Rather, in "Partnership," Robinson glorifies the wife's submission to the man's grand endeavor: "Let us have it well confessed: / You to triumph, I to rest. / That will be the best" (223). Another biographical poem which pays tribute to a wife's support of an artist is "Rembrandt to Rembrandt." In this dramatic monologue, Robinson portrays the artist talking to himself. A headnote to the poem is "Amsterdam, 1645," a date three years after the death of Saskia, Rembrandt's wife. According to Charles L. Mee, Jr., Rembrandt had used income Saskia had inherited to free himself from portrait painting; although lucrative, it was unsatisfying, and the artist turned to history paintings (133). In Robinson's poem, Rembrandt recalls Saskia's emotional and financial support and he encourages himself to develop his new techniques of lights and shadows because it is the right thing to do, whether he gains fame or scorn by it. The memory of Saskia motivates him.

In addition to "Partnership" and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," Robinson was influenced by biography when he wrote "Rahel to Varnhagen," based on the life and personality of Rahel Robert Varnhagen, who in the early nineteenth century in Germany hosted a salon where many of the figures of European Romanticism gathered for tea and conversation. She was "a Jewess and schlemihl," as she characterized herself (Arendt 15-16), who conversed easily but remained uncomfortable with her Judaism and found happiness almost impossible to attain. Robinson's dramatic monologue takes place in 1814 after the salon days are past; she is about to marry Varnhagen and feels she must expose her personal history to him by

allowing him to read letters from earlier lovers and close friends, Finkenstein, Urquijo, and Marwitz. Apparently, she was not physically attractive, and above all, as Robinson portrays her, she wants to convince Varnhagen not to put her on a pedestal:

> No, there was never anything like that [beauty];
> Nature has never fastened such a mask
> Of radiant and impenetrable merit
> On any woman as you say there is
> On this one. Not a mask? I thank you, sir,
> But you see more with your determination,
> I fear, than with your prudence or your conscience;
> And you have never met me with my eyes
> In all the mirrors I've made faces at. (*CP* 517)

She accuses herself of an "unwomanly straightforwardness" in presenting her very soul in this way, but her recitation appears to have the desired effect, as she asks, "Why are you so unwilling to be spared?" (518-19). It is perhaps a token of his love that he listens through the story; at the end, she decides he has learned enough. Robinson recreates in this poem a number of the complexities of a rather complex woman, one who tried always to remain financially and emotionally independent yet lived at a time when women were dependent for support upon the men in their families.

In addition to the subset of poems in which artists are important figures, there is the Arthurian subset, Robinson's trilogy of *Merlin* (1917), *Lancelot* (1920), and *Tristram* (1927). Vivian, Guinevere, Isolt of Ireland, and Isolt of the White Hands are reputed to be Robinson's great lovers. The scholars' main debate has been whether or not these

poems are still worth reading (or, in some minds, whether or not these poems ever were worth reading -- Allen Tate urged Robinson to return to the shorter forms). While Edmund Wilson considered all three works flat and unpoetic, and Yvor Winters included only _Lancelot_ among Robinson's best, others, such as Emery Neff, Chard Powers Smith, and Nathan C. Starr valued the trio of poems. The female characters gain considerable praise; E. Edith Pipkin called them "highly individualized and yet universal" (7) and Starr labeled them "intelligent women of the twentieth century" (253). Louise Dauner noted that strong characters are necessary because the poems "utilize the emotional relationships of men and women as basic motives for tragedy" (143). I believe it is a mistake to treat these characters as a single group. Vivian and Isolt of Ireland are called assertive, but I am not so sure they are; Guinevere is intelligent and fatalistic; and Isolt of Brittany (a.k.a. of the White Hands) is passive and submissive.

Dauner's generalization may be too broad to include the love of Vivian and Merlin. The actual basis of tragedy in _Merlin_ is Change, which the wizard comes to realize has a will greater than his own. But Vivian is an important character; her attractions form a foil for the duties of state that draw the old, now-beardless man back to Camelot to warn Arthur of his certain doom at the hands of Modred. There is much talk of Broceliande, Vivian's home, as Merlin's "living grave" and of Vivian's crown being more powerful than Arthur's, but Merlin does fulfill his obligations to Britain and to Arthur. Vivian is beautiful and powerful, and critics have called her assertive, but patience may be

her greatest virtue, as well as her undoing. The call of Camelot is more powerful than she is:

> She had not even asked him not to go;
> She might as well, she thought, have bid the wind
> Throw no more clouds across a lonely sky
> Between her and the moon, -- so great he seemed
> In his oppressed solemnity, and she,
> In her excess of wrong imagining,
> So trivial in an hour . . . (*CP* 259)

After Merlin's recitation of Arthur's sinfulness in begetting Modred and in marrying Guinevere despite her love for Lancelot, Vivian yawns: "Why all this new insistence upon sin?" (289). She knows that her relationship with Merlin is not sanctioned by the church; it is her last argument against his going. But she knows he will return to her: "He said he would come back, and so he will" (259). Because she has some of Merlin's ability to perceive the future, she can be patient. Her goal is to learn from him, and she has already waited twenty-five years for his arrival at Broceliande -- a little longer will not hurt.

Ironically, the Change that affects Camelot also affects Merlin, and he decides not to return to Vivian. Robinson does not grant us a scene of Vivian left waiting beside the fountain of Broceliande, but Merlin says, "We pay for going back; and all we get / Is one more needless ounce of weary wisdom / To bring away with us" (311). He has learned that he is helpless to change the Change he sees, and apparently he wants to spare Vivian his pain. What he forgets is that she desires

his knowledge simply for the sake of having it, not to make or unmake kings. Her interest is intellectual, while his is emotional.

Guinevere's unmaking of the king underlies _Lancelot_, the poem Yvor Winters ranked highest because it remains truest to Malory. The king and queen's loveless marriage and Lancelot's warring desires to have both Guinevere and the Light -- discovered during the Grail Quest and which "urges him away to the last edge / Of everything" (_CP_ 371) -- combine to render Guinevere helpless, a pawn caught between the men's pride and the fall of Camelot. Early on, she understands Lancelot's quandary:

> I see it now as always women must
> Who cannot hold what holds them any more.
> If Modred's hate were now the only hazard --
> The only shadow between you and me --
> How long should I be saying all this to you,
> Or you be listening? (379)

She knows that she will have secondary importance to the Light, but he listens mainly to Gawaine's challenge. After the rescue and the escape to Joyous Gard, Guinevere attempts to force the same understanding upon Lancelot:

> Nor do I wholly find an answer now
> In any shine of any far-off Light
> You may have seen. Knowing the world, you know
> How surely and how indifferently that Light
> Shall burn through many a war that is to be,
> To which this war were no more than a smear
> On circumstance. The world has not begun. (406)

She wants a world in which men will stop dying for her, but she is powerless to effect a change in the men's behavior. Robinson (as Malory does, and most of those between the two) creates a woman who has everything a woman is supposed to want -- beauty, position, love -- but the only solution to her situation appears to be giving up love and position and hiding the beauty under a nun's habit. "I shall not come / Between you and the Gleam that you must follow," she tells him to send him off (444). If Guinevere is a woman "of the twentieth century" as Starr and others have argued, her sacrifice of self only shows that by 1920 conditions had changed little for women since the age of Arthur's legend.

Isolt of Ireland does succeed in defeating King Mark, making herself somewhat less a pawn in the game of political marriages. She saves herself for her "true love," Tristram, all the while feeling that she is doomed. Michele Murray, in A House of Good Proportion, writes about literature's infatuation with the relationship between love and death:

> The myth of the unattainable, inexhaustible love has grown and swelled in Western culture until it fills every available space in the relations between men and women, whether explicitly brought forward or not, whether affirmed or denied: the myth of Tristan and Iseult, taken apart and pieced together in thousands of ways (see Anna Karenina, Doctor Zhivago, The Man Without Qualities, Wuthering Heights . . .), all essentially insisting that in death and death alone is the final possession, the true satisfaction of a passion which insists upon leaping beyond the allowable bounds . . . (25)

Isolt accepts history; she is fatalistic about her meeting with Tristram, their instant love for one another, and the probability that their greatest embrace will be in death. Nevertheless, she waits like a schoolgirl for him to act first: "I believed that you would speak, / For I could hear your silence like a song / Out of the sea" (CP 623). If a hallmark of modernization is a movement toward self-realization and gratification, Isolt takes a rather traditional strategy -- that of offering herself to Tristram: "Tristram, believe, whatever the rest may be, / This is all yours" (624). Indeed, when the lovers are reunited in Cornwall during Mark's imprisonment, Isolt tends more toward self-abnegation: "If you see wisdom / Shining out of my eyes at you sometime, / Say it is yours, not mine" (681). And still later, when they are together following Mark's acquiescence, Isolt is consumed with self-pity because she is certain she will not live much longer. All in all, Isolt is treated, and treats herself, as sex object, as woman-on-the-pedestal, as the "weaker sex."

While Isolt of Ireland is a woman, and the object of Tristram's passion, Isolt of Brittany, although she ages from eighteen to twenty during the course of the poem, remains a child. Both her father, King Howel, and her husband, Tristram, call her "my child," and they treat her like a child. The poem is framed with her passivity; except for a center section during which Tristram saves her from the monster, Griffon, marries her, and then is summoned back to Camelot, Isolt of Brittany mopes at her tower window overlooking the sea, waiting and waiting for Tristram to keep his promise to return. Even at the end, when she knows her husband has betrayed her and is dead, she stares out

to sea, completely under the spell of her memory of him, holding an agate he had left with her. Robinson has not "modernized" this Isolt; she is the quintessential jilted, grieving girl.

None of the women in these Arthurian poems seems to me to have been brought into the twentieth century in any positive way. Robinson said _Merlin_ was a response to conditions and attitudes during the Great War, but aside from rejecting the use of the love potion in _Tristram_, he keeps the women of his Arthurian trilogy in medieval character. Perhaps Morgan comments best on the condition of women when Tristram asserts that he is her "obedient slave":

> "We are the slaves,
> Not you. Not even when most we are in power
> Are women else than slaves to men they honor.
> Men worthy of their reverence know this well,
> And honor them sometimes to humor them.
> We are their slaves and their impediments,
> And there is much in us to be forgiven. (611)

This was neither the first nor the last time Robinson speculated that women do not receive either consideration or opportunity equal to men. But to him, the victimization of women was not a political imperative for change; it was an unfortunate fact in a world which in many ways was not what it could be, or could become.

Robinson was not afraid to create complex women characters or to borrow them from history. While he fell into using stereotypes at times, more often early in his career than later, if we keep in mind his modernist problems, for example that of loneliness as the major human

condition, we see Robinson portraying both men and women as struggling to make and maintain connections with others. The restrictions society placed on women appear to have concerned Robinson when they made understanding or acting on these connections difficult or disadvantageous. He was perceptive enough to see that not all people respond to similar situations in the same way. Some of his women characters are afraid, and others are unafraid, to break away from situations which demean them or keep them in restricted roles. Many of Robinson's poems deal in some way with themes involving men and women, and in reading a corpus of collected poems that stretches almost 1500 pages, anyone would wish for variety in presentation and resolution. In Robinson, we have this variety. The following chapter will continue the marriage theme by exploring the poems in which widows and widowhood play a part.

NOTE

[1]In a letter dated June 29, 1930, published in *Modern Poets of England and America*, edited by Gerald DeWitt Sanders and John Herbert Nelson, Robinson wrote, "`Partnership' was published originally under the title `The Wife of Palissy' . . . In a misguided moment I changed it -- with some notion, I suppose, of giving the poem a more general application. `It' is (or was) obviously one of Palissy's porcelains. Now it can be almost anything" (*Uncollected* 145).

CHAPTER IX

WIDOWS

Because male/female relationships, especially marriages, were important in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poetic considerations of the world, the impact of the death of one of the marriage partners on the one remaining was also important. Widowhood is a personally disorganizing event, disrupting everything about the woman's life whether it comes suddenly or after an illness which allows for some mental and emotional preparation. In her introduction to _On Their Own: Widows and Widowhood in the American Southwest 1848-1939_, Arlene Scadron summarizes the broader view of widowhood prevalent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2-3). Basically, the same two stereotypes persisted which had already persisted for centuries in both the Old World and the New.[1] First is the "sorrowing" widow, who is older, pitiable, depressed, and devastated by her loss. She becomes dependent upon her children or upon the charity of the community. Second is the "merry" widow, usually younger, attractive, wealthy, and pursued by men trying to marry money. Scadron notes that between 1880 and 1920 the average wife and mother was widowed shortly after the children were grown up and her widowhood lasted just 3-4 years (4). She either remarried fairly quickly or she declined and died.

On the other hand, Helena Znaniecka Lopata, in Women as Widows, points out that legal reforms of the early twentieth century created some variation in the stereotypes (28-29). New laws allowed a woman to retain more control of property after her husband's death, especially whatever property she may have brought to the marriage. Despite the still-separate male/female domains of work/home, women's expectations, in terms of status and material goods, rose prior to World War I. Lopata attributes these changes at least in part to cross-oceanic migration and to migration within the U.S., which created looser family ties, requiring more independent decision-making on the part of the widow. I have come across one short story from this period which may serve as an example. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Widow's Might," the grown children come from the East coast to Colorado after the news of their father's death, reluctantly planning to move their mother into one of their homes. She surprises them, however, by rejecting their dutiful appeals. The title pun on the "widow's mite" as a pittance on which to survive becomes clear as we hear that during her husband's long illness she has learned nursing and opened her house to the care of convalescents, earning a considerable nest egg for herself. In addition, before her husband died, she convinced him to deed all of the property to her, instead of sharing it with the children, and now she plans to travel and enjoy herself until either she or the money expires. The surprised and flustered children quietly return east.

In the popular poetry, however, no such radical behavior is evident. I could not find a male poet who wrote a poem in which he created the character of a widow to express her sorrow. The men wrote

tributes to deceased men or they grieved the loss of a woman. Robinson appears to be unique in writing poetry somewhat in the manner of a fiction writer, creating both male and female characters with which to explore the vicissitudes of life.

Most nineteenth-century women's poems of loss are generalized expressions of grief following some dear person's death. Typical of this poetry is Mary Mathews Adams's "Dead Love," a series of abab-rhymed quatrains that draws a parallel between the tombstone and her heart, which she feels is stone-like. The poem ends "O God, I pray, if love must die, / And make no more of life a part, / Let witness be where all can see, / And not within a living heart" (Stedman 464-65). A strongly-felt sentiment and a plea for understanding by the typical "sorrowing widow," but marred, certainly in Robinson's view, by the convoluted "poetic" syntax and the overt appeal to a higher being. The only poem I found that was technically interesting was an earlier piece by Emily Chubbuck Judson, "Watching." Judson avoids breaking syntactical expectations by varying both meter and rhyme scheme. Lines range between two and six stresses, incorporating couplets, alternating rhymes, and triplets. This poem ends "The candles flare / With fresher gusts of air; / The beetle's drone / Turns to a dirge-like, solitary moan; / Night deepens, and I sit in cheerless doubt, alone" (Stedman 184).

Robinson, neither as thematically traditional as Adams nor as technically daring as Judson, nevertheless put aside the romantic "I" narrator in favor of a greater variety of characterization. This chapter will show that by creating individual characters Robinson

usually avoided the stereotypical representation of either the "sorrowing" or the "merry" widow.

"The Book of Annandale" is a two-part blank verse narrative of some 500 lines in which Robinson explores the pressures of society's expectations surrounding widows: must she remain loyal to the memory of her husband? In the first part of the poem, George Annandale reflects immediately after the burial of his wife, Miriam. They had lived long and loved well together, but he expended his grief during her last illness, and now he is afraid he feels nothing. He had kept a journal, "The spiritual plaything of his life," but mysteriously, "not made for her" (CP 196). Robinson presents the widower as simply tired from the tensions of dealing with the funeral.

The second part of the poem is only tenuously connected to the first and is more relevant to our discussion. A woman named Damaris has been the widow of Argan for five years, and she is a character who has been living the limited life allowed to middle-aged widows. Damaris is oppressed by her memory; her dying husband extracted a promise from her to remain a widow after his death. She said no one could reach her love as he did, and Robinson uses the image of a thread that ties her to the churchyard where Argan lies, seemingly waiting for her to join him. Of course, this loyalty to the dead was expected, but now Argan is a ghost to her, and she would like to be free of her promise. Annandale has given her his book, and now she reads some of it and questions her identity:

> And who was *she*? The woman she had known --

> The woman she had petted and called "I" --
> The woman she had pitied, and at last
> Commiserated for the most abject
> And persecuted of all womankind, --
> Could it be she that had sought out the way
> To measure and thereby to quench in her
> The woman's fear -- the fear of her not fearing?
> (CP 206)

In this questioning, Damaris approaches "The Light," which for Robinson is not so much an epistemelogical understanding as it is an intuitive knowing that what one believes is right. What Damaris no longer fears is independence and the possibility of another love, and she realizes that she need not be a martyr to her promise. "And she had found what more than half had been / The grave-deluded, flesh- bewildered fear / Which men and women struggle to call faith" (210). The promise she had made, in Robinson's scheme of things, certainly would mean nothing to Damaris's first husband as soon as he was dead and out of this world. She is free of society's constraints, able to move on with her life, which she understands "Like silence after some far victory" (211). Although she never was the stereotypical "sorrowing widow," because she remains financially independent during her widowhood, Damaris finally uses Annandale's book to readjust her emotional and spiritual independence. The end of the poem implies that Damaris will re-experience love with George Annandale.

This George Annandale became a character Robinson returned to at least twice. "The Book of Annandale" was published in Captain Craig in 1902; this was followed eight years later in The Town Down the River by the often-anthologized "How Annandale Went Out," in which an unnamed

doctor tells the story of how he euthanizes the dying Annandale. The action of "Annandale Again" takes place shortly before "How Annandale Went Out," but this poem was not published until 1932, in Nicodemus. "Annandale Again" also is written through the point of view of the doctor, and he relates his last conversation with Annandale, who tells of his reawakened love for Damaris, how she helped him cope with the death of his first wife, and how his "Book" helped her cope with her first husband's death. Annandale gives Damaris credit for an ability which Robinson often ascribed to women, to see the good far below the surface of a man:

> ". . . you will see
> Why Damaris, who knows everything,
> Knows how to find so much in me.
>
> "She finds what I have never found
> Before; . . . (CP 1203)

Annandale continues to relate his appreciation for her "permutations" and her "complexities." But immediately after their talk, Annandale is made "a wreck" in the automobile accident which causes the doctor to use his "slight kind of engine" to perform euthanasia, sending Annandale "out" and making Damaris a widow for a second time.

I seem to be alone in noticing that this doctor reappears in "The March of the Cameron Men," a third-person narrative of about 480 lines published with "Annandale Again" in Nicodemus. This time, instead of witnessing the pursuit of the widow, the doctor is the pursuer. The unnamed woman has been widowed only a few hours (indeed, the body is not

even out of the house yet) from a husband she is not sorry to see die, a husband who was worn out and whom she merely endured: "He was a devil, / And should have gone before" (1227). The doctor might have extended the man's life, but he saw no medical purpose in it, in addition to having designs on the man's wife. However, he did not assist the inevitable, as he admits to having justly done with others:

> . . . I have not suborned
> The best of me in hastening nature's worst
> Indignities of anguish and despair
> To nature's end. I have done this before;
> And if again -- I shall have killed no man. (1223)

Instead, he says he merely let nature proceed.

The widow in this poem is unlike Damaris in that she is not tied to a promise made in the man's final hours. She fits neither the "sorrowing" nor the "merry" widow stereotype, as she is relieved of some unspecified oppression through her husband's death and yet she is not eager to remarry. Indeed, the poem is a record of the doctor's struggle to understand that she is rejecting his proposal:

> Yes, I am free -- if women are ever free;
> And I am thinking -- if a woman thinks.
> You men, who from your scalps down to your toes
> Are built of thought, are still debating it. (1224)

The doctor thinks, of course, that this is her perfect opportunity to join him. But once bitten is twice shy, as the old saying goes, and she chooses her own course:

> I have paid once for ruin,
> And once will do. I thought, before I thought,
> Before I knew, that I could see fair weather
> For you and me, and only friendliness
> In every natural sign that led me on --
> Till I found nature waiting like a fox
> For an unguarded pheasant. (1225)

She sees strategy where he sees love; therefore, she remains wary, quiet, and distant. They had rowed to the center of a lake for this discussion, and now she is strong enough to tell him to take her back to shore, where they will go their separate ways. Once again, by using a narrative poem and creating an individual situation with individual characters, Robinson avoided the stereotypes prevalent during his career.

"Late Summer" appears to portray the opposite of the Annandale/Damaris situation. Instead of regaining happiness in the second marriage, the widow dwells on her memory of her first husband, which troubles her second husband. He professes his difficulty in accepting her emotional distance, but ". . . he saw that while she was hearing him / Her eyes had more and more of the past in them" (526). He can overcome neither her consistent musing about the past nor his jealousy for the earlier man, and when he delivers an ultimatum for her to choose one or the other, she chooses the past. This poem is like

"Mortmain," in which Avenel Gray refuses to marry Seneca Sprague because she cannot relinquish her memory of, and her emotional dependence on, her deceased brother. In both "Mortmain" and "Late Summer," the narrative implies that to choose the past is the most limiting of choices. Instead of being like Damaris and moving forward with her life, this widow, although she has tried to recover happiness in a second marriage, remains locked in a static reverie.

"Lisette and Eileen," like "Late Summer," is a poem about jealousy, but instead of a dialogue, it is a dramatic monologue relating one woman's resentment of another's attributes that attract a man. It is Robinson at his most repetitious ("You last, I mean. That's what I mean. / I mean you last as long as lies" 50) and his most obscure ("There was a word you might have said; / So never mind what I have been, / Or anything, . . ." 49). The poem is obscure enough to have prevented scholars from trying to explain what is going on in it. But Lisette, the speaker, is a widow who resents the fact that her husband died while under the influence of "the other woman," Eileen, and her black hair and blue eyes. Nevertheless, there appears to be some confusion in Lisette's mind, as she addresses Eileen at one point as dead, at another as dying, and at still another as old. Therefore, in the first quotation above, it is difficult to ascertain whether Eileen is lasting because she is alive or because she is a torturous memory. The poem is too short for any real character development, and it is simply one of Robinson's briefer but less satisfactory psychological studies.

It may be ironic to place in this chapter "As a World Would Have It," Robinson's retelling of the story of Alcestis and Admetus. This early poem is a narrative and dialogue in which Alcestis is attempting to convince Admetus to accept her offer to die so that he might live. I include the poem here because in order to persuade Admetus of her desire she must imagine herself a widow, remaining miserably in the world without him. In allowing her to speak of this pain, Robinson employs the "sorrowing widow" stereotype of a woman who is abject at the thought of being without her man, in this case, literally, as well as figuratively, without her king: "Do I cling to shadows when I call you Life? / Do you love me still, or are the shadows all?" And later, after she has made her plea: "So, like a slave, she waited at his knees, / And waited. She was not unhappy now" (219). The poem ignores the cowardice of Admetus both in his frantic attempt to find any friend or relative to die for him and in his acceptance of his wife's sacrifice. It recreates just a small part of the myth which Robinson must have found interesting for its psychological turnabout.

Alcestis appears to me to be Robinson's widow-character who most fits one of the stereotypes because her plight is not complicated by other factors, such as jealousy or the desire to remarry. In general, the longer the poem, the greater the opportunity Robinson had for character development, such as with Damaris Annandale, and developed characters tend to inhibit stereotypical representation. Studies show that widows often face a kind of rejection because they are suddenly single in a society based on couples, but Robinson minimizes this rejection in poems that portray widows. He realized that they, like

everyone else, need a certain amount of compassion in order to survive in a confusing and materialistic world. Chapter Ten will investigate additional roles which usually elicit rejection, but which gain sympathy and understanding from Robinson, those of prostitutes and of suicides.

NOTE

[1]See Christine H. Tompsett's article, "A Note on the Economic Status of Widows in Colonial New York," New York History 55 (1974): 319-32, and Mary Anne Ferguson's book, Images of Women in Literature.

CHAPTER X

PROSTITUTES AND SUICIDES

> Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you
> -- Walt Whitman, "To a Common Prostitute"

Whitman's "scandalous" poem was just part of the infamously-sexual *Leaves of Grass* which managed to upset so many readers. As in Victorian England, in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America nice people did not speak of such matters, except in condemnation. Robinson, like Whitman, did not condemn people whose circumstances brought them miseries over which they could have little or no control; on the other hand, Robinson did avoid direct mention of occupations and actions which some readers would find objectionable. This chapter addresses poems which depict those people who are rejected by Robinson's proper, appearance-concerned Tilbury Town residents.

The rejected, prostitutes and suicides, are people for whom Robinson had a great deal of sympathy. They appear in the poems most often as women characters, because the patriarchal society in which Robinson lived was organized around restrictions for women, making life even more difficult for women than for men. "Veteran Sirens," "The Growth of `Lorraine'," "Leonora," and part of "Flammonde" reveal Robinson's regret that worldly judgment appears to fall more severely on

ladies of the night than on those who patronize them. The vicissitudes of love and marriage also interested Robinson with their pressures that sometimes result in suicide, as in Roman Bartholow, Matthias at the Door, and perhaps "Cortege" and "The Miracle." "The Mill" presents a slightly different case, as the suicides of husband and wife follow society's rejection of a traditional way of life rather than the internal emotional pressures of their marriage.

Many studies of Victorian women and sexuality have exposed the double standard as virtually institutionalized. In Man's World, Woman's Place, Elizabeth Janeway summarizes the nineteenth-century attitude toward love and marriage prevalent in both England and America by noting that women were sentimentally divided into the "good" and the "bad," and that love was divided into the "pure" and the "lustful" (210-11). These divisions certainly were advantageous to men. Because in marriage, at least in the upper-middle and upper classes that Robinson usually described, the image of prosperity and stability was of utmost importance, prostitution served as an outlet. According to John Eric Dingwall in The American Woman, despite attempts by women of the upper classes to make prostitution illegal, rather than regulated for health, the double standard flourished (97-98). The husband could have his "good, pure wife" in marriage and his sex outside. Such an arrangement gave the "good girl" something to bargain with -- her virginity -- but of course, once played, her hand was finished. In addition, the condescension toward women took its form in the lack of job opportunities resulting from so-called "inherent" or "natural" intellectual or physical weaknesses in women and the fact that the few

employment opportunities all entailed dreary, unhealthy, back-breaking, low-paying work suitable, it was said, only for women in the lowest socio-economic class.

Daniel J. Boorstin, in The Americans: The Democratic Experience, notes that in the post-Reconstruction period he calls the "Go-Getter" age, prostitution expanded with all other commercial and illegal opportunities leading up to Prohibition (80). Although Robinson visited some of Boston's houses of ill-repute as a young man at Harvard (yet it remains doubtful whether he actually partook of the services available), it would be entirely within Robinson's character as a condemner of materialism to expose the spiritual poverty of prostitution while retaining a high degree of sympathy for the women whose circumstances brought them to plying this demeaning trade. I do not know if Robinson ever read Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman, but the eighteenth-century feminist's opinion on prostitution paralleled Robinson's:

> Still, highly as I respect marriage, as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind. (165)

Whether the sexual double standard took its form as the "reputation" of purity or faithfulness every woman carefully had to maintain, especially among Tilbury Town snoopers and gossipers, or as a lack of other

opportunities, Robinson clearly sympathized with women who were at the mercy of other people's interpretations.

In "Flammonde," the first specific example of the unusual nature of "the man Flammonde" is his acceptance of a woman burdened with a bad reputation:

> There was a woman in our town
> On whom the fashion was to frown;
> But while our talk renewed the tinge
> Of a long-faded scarlet fringe,
> The man Flammonde saw none of that,
> And what he saw we wondered at --
> That none of us, in her distress,
> Could hide or find our littleness. (*CP* 4)

This Christ-like figure can see beneath the surface of the town's judgments; whereas Flammonde discounts the woman's now-distant past, the Tilbury Town gossipers remain interested only in her previous indiscretions. And as the last two lines of the stanza indicate, Flammonde's attitude toward the woman is responsible for the plural narrator seeing his own shortcomings.

"Flammonde" is read, with the additional examples of the financial help for the brilliant young man and the soothing of a feud, as a demonstration of society's willingness to allow the wrong to continue despite the fact that a little action would make many lives better -- only the intervention of a stranger encourages change. Of course, Flammonde's unusual behavior renders his changes impermanent. "What small satanic sort of kink / Was in his brain?" the narrator asks. Robinson had little faith in humankind's ability to change, as the end

of the poem shows; the narrator wonders at the ability of a man with Flammonde's talents to survive, and the townspeople do not use Flammonde as an example but "look beyond / Horizons" for his return. Surely they revert to thinking of the woman as "scarlet-fringed."

Mary Wollstonescraft made a statement about the plight of the prostitute which applies to "Flammonde," "Veteran Sirens," and "The Growth of `Lorraine'": "A woman who has lost her honor imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away" (165). Of course, the women in "Veteran Sirens" are far beyond returning to whatever "former station" they may once have had; they are concerned with maintaining what little "maimed allure" they have left with which to attract their customers. The poem has been called "an expression of pity" (Winters 33) and on the other hand, "whimsical" (Barnard 295), but I believe there are elements of both pity and whimsy in it. The oxymoron "time's malicious mercy" recalls time's "vicious reaping" in "For a Dead Lady." Time is malicious because it is inexorable and because it ages a person, causing beauty to fade; time is merciful because with its passage any situation oppressing us eventually will end. The comparison with the French libertine, Ninon, who was more adept at maintaining both her beauty and her spirits, is meant to show the aging prostitutes' poverty of both their circumstances and their self-perception, but other phrases point to Robinson's lighter touch. That the women must "fence with reason" indicates that they know better than to expect success at their labors; luckily, they work by the dim light of the streetlamps. The fourth stanza notes that there is another beauty in age -- that of grace

-- which is unavailable to these women who must maintain the semblance of a youthful beauty through cosmetic art. In this way, they continue "The patient ardor of the unpursued." The final stanza is both sympathetic and ironic. With "Poor flesh," "Poor vanity," and "Poor folly," Robinson teases the ladies for their efforts, but with "and so near the grave," he returns to the theme of many of his poems.

Also approaching the grave by her own choice, because she feels her circumstances cannot improve, is "Lorraine." Another of Robinson's double sonnets, "The Growth of `Lorraine'" depicts an emotionally-numb narrator who recalls the woman he once knew. Ronald Moran condemns this speaker for demonstrating insufficient sympathy (315), but I feel that he shows helpless acceptance. In the first sonnet, Lorraine speaks to this man who has apparently been in love with her, telling him to forget about her, because she cannot cope with an ordinary existence: " . . . 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." And so she decides to make her living on the streets -- "going to the devil." What is it that, according to "Lorraine," some women are able to do but she is not? Apparently, it is to become a wife. Olive Schreiner, a South African contemporary of Robinson who wrote voluminously about women's conditions and rights, was especially concerned with the economic status of women. In _Woman and Labor_, Schreiner describes what she calls "female parasitism." She included prostitutes in this group, but she also included the kept mistress or the kept wife, whom Schreiner said had no useful function in society; their role was limited to sex and/or reproduction (qtd. in Reeves 173-74). "Lorraine" is caught between

becoming a wife and becaoming a prostitute, and she chooses the latter role.

In the second sonnet of the poem, the male narrator receives a letter from "Lorraine," written as she is about to poison herself. We are not given an indication of how much time has passed between the actions of the two sonnets, but it has been long enough for "Lorraine's" health to be ruined. In 1897, Robinson wrote a letter to Harry Smith in which he admired the courage it would take to commit suicide, courage he did not feel he had (US 79). Some of this admiration may have informed "Lorraine's" letter; she faces death unafraid, simply recalling this man's acceptance:

> "You do not frown because I call you friend,
> For I would have you glad that I still keep
> Your memory, and even at the end --
> Impenitent, sick, shattered -- cannot curse
> The love that flings, for better or for worse,
> This worn-out, cast-out flesh of mine to sleep."
> (CP 192)

And in death the allusion to the marriage ceremony finally is as close as "Lorraine" can come to the "normal" life she resisted in the first sonnet.

Suicide has been the final act for many literary protagonists: Emma Bovary, Maggie, Edna Pontellier, to name just a few. Among many other feminist writers, Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique and Beth Ann Bassein in Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature attribute women's suicides (real as well as literary) to such

causes as a patriarchally-derived language that views women as sex objects valued only for their reproductive capacity, and a cultural ideology that expects and promotes feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness, and hopelessness in women who are completely dominated by men who are taught that women are inferior to them in all ways. Christian theology, with its traditional values of virginity and chastity, also places pressure on women to suppress their sexuality as well as their mental and physical abilities. Society expects that all women are happily to accept their roles as wife and mother, and society rejects those women who resist the "normal" expectations, especially shunning the memory of those who resist through suicide.

For Robinson, the interest usually is divided between speculations about behaviors or attitudes of the victim prior to the suicide and those of the Tilbury Town crowd following the self-destructive act. As an example, see the much-anthologized "Richard Cory," in which the townspeople recall the rich man's splendor and apparently-regal bearing, unaware that their own unwillingness to approach him as a human being may have contributed to the separation and loneliness preceding the bullet. However, Robinson seems to have thought of suicide as an act so private that no speculation can address its true causes. In a letter to Arthur Davison Ficke dated June 23, 1921, Robinson wrote, "A suicide signifies discouragement or despair -- either of which is, or should be, too far beyond the scope of our poor piddling censure to require of our ignorance anything less kind than silence" (<u>SL</u> 127). Despite his personal preference not to wonder about the choices other people made, in his poems some motivating cause is usually discernible. Often,

women's suicides are the result of some disappointment in love; sometimes they are the consequence of resistance to what the world expects.

Leonora seems to be another of Robinson's female characters, like "Lorraine," who resists the life she is expected to lead and consequently is rejected by the townspeople. Louise Dauner saw the poem as a simple assertion that life is better than death (unpub. diss., qtd. in Barnard 291), and Emery Neff believed that death protects Leonora from "a life of shame" (155). Neff's interpretation assumes that in the fourth line the "ways that would have been" are negative, and that perhaps, to follow the theme of this chapter, these "ways" are those of the prostitute. I would like to suggest an alternative reading: Leonora has chosen death over the "normal," everyday life she was raised to lead in Tilbury Town -- to get married, settle down, and nurture some children. The evidence for suicide is indirect, but a rereading of the eighth line suggests that, as usual, the townspeople do not know everything about Leonora. "There'll be lilies that are liars, and the rose will have its own" recalls the roses which Pamela tends in her garden. If lilies, as symbols of purity, are false, the roses indicate that, like Pamela, Leonora has known love and sex (and perhaps unlike Pamela, found them wanting), while the townspeople assume she has been sexually innocent. This reading clarifies the rejection evident in the final lines of the poem. "But the builders, looking forward into time, could only see / Darker nights for Leonora than to-night shall ever be." Leon Satterfield writes that the "darker nights" are those that would lie ahead should Leonora live; she has the potential to be a fallen

woman (8). But the townspeople are not speculating. If Leonora has been spared a shameful life, her nights should now be lighter, rather than darker, but if she has committed suicide in order to flout the presumed roles of wife and mother, the onlookers would assume she could have no salvation, but only a hell of darkness after her death.

While "Leonora" uses some irony, "The Miracle," an early poem Robinson chose not to include in his Collected Poems, uses the age-old stereotype of the pining woman's unrequited love and the age-old image of the roses' changing color to represent her constancy:

> "Dear brother, dearest friend, when I am dead,
> And you shall see no more this face of mine,
> Let nothing but red roses be the sign
> Of the white life I lost for him," she said;
> "No, do not curse him, -- pity him instead;
> Forgive him! -- forgive me! . . God's anodyne
> For human hate is pity; and the wine
> That makes men wise, forgiveness. I have read
> Love's message in love's murder, and I die."
> And so they laid her just where she would lie, --
> Under red roses. Red they bloomed and fell;
> But when flushed autumn and the snows went by,
> And spring came, -- lo, from every bud's green shell
> Burst a white blossom. -- Can love reason why?
> (Selected Early Poems 18)

This Miltonic sonnet is an unusual strategy for Robinson, with the "octave" spilling over through the ninth line. This section, which is enclosed by quotation marks, uses the verb "said"; however, with the salutation "Dear brother," the request for forgiveness for herself, and the certainty of the woman's death, I believe we are reading a suicide note. Robinson relied on the easy stereotype of women's propensity

toward suicide. And there is nothing new in the roses' tranformation; he grew more curious blossoms in "The Tree in Pamela's Garden" and "Leonora."

Another early poem about death is "Cortege," in which a narrator observes the funeral train of two lovers who died together. The steady tetrameter lines march through the quatrains without a rhythmic substitution, like the clicking of the railroad tracks, and the repetition of some lines reinforces the confusion, the "crazy tune" with which the narrator suffers. Hoyt Franchere conjectures that the death may be "only a figurative one" (65), but I believe the fourth stanza is the key to an apparent Romeo-and-Juliet suicide: "Four o'clock this afternoon / Love will hide them deep, they say; / Love that made the grave so soon, / Fifteen hundred miles away." As in "The Miracle," the verb, "say," repeated by the narrator, implies that he is reading or paraphrasing a letter the lovers left behind. And the five lines that begin with "Best" -- that the lovers go soon and go today to their graves -- also suggest that the narrator is giving us the dead couple's words.

While the focus of "Cortege" is on the narrator's disturbed state of mind, another Robinson poem with a double suicide, "The Mill," focuses on the couple's motivation and the seeming insignificance of their disappearance. This often-anthologized poem depicts the effect of change upon people engaged in a traditional way of life. When the husband says, "There are no millers anymore," he means that technology has displaced his one-man mill-stream operation. That the wife immediately follows her husband in death is usually noted, but not

explained. A writer like Charlotte Perkins Gilman might have her take over the mill and support herself with it -- to make of the wife an exceptional case, a positive example for women. But Robinson presents a more typical, albeit less "feminist" resolution.

Recognizing that the woman would have very little education and few skills outside of home-making, and that she is no longer young (the miller's statement implies that they are at least middle-aged; children, if there were any, are grown and gone), Robinson allows her to make the quick decision that leads to the mill-pond. "The Mill" was published in The Three Taverns in 1920, but this pond-drowning was a scene Robinson had been saving for twenty years. On July 31, 1900, he wrote to Daniel Gregory Mason about composing "Aunt Imogen":

> I did it in the rough two years ago, when I had my eyrie over Brown's dry goods store and smoked "Before the War" cigars. I had a good mill-pond to look out on and somehow conceived the notion of writing down this particular spinster. Maybe I thought she ought to have drowned herself; at any rate, the mill-pond had something to do with it. I have no mill-pond here, but I have five or six bottles of beer in the ice chest and a sweet sense of security. (67)

The miller's wife thus suffers the death which Aunt Imogen avoided by refocusing her inner turmoil, turning her attention from herself to her sister's children.

Gabrielle, wife of the main character in Roman Bartholow (1923), and Natalie, wife of the main character in Matthias at the Door (1931), do not avoid death, but choose it. These psychological marriage-dramas (along with Cavender's House and Talifer) represent Robinson's ideas

about the pitfalls of accumulating too much wealth at the expense of the soul: Bartholow suffers a crisis of self-worth and Matthias finds that spiritual knowledge is unavailable to him until he learns to live in a less materialistic way. Naturally enough, male critics have focused mainly on the male title characters. For example, W.R. Robinson includes these poems in a group which demonstrates that spiritual significance is unique to the individual (36), and to Floyd Stovall they demonstrate that the way to truth is through self-examination (14). Unfortunately, the women in the poems seem to subsidize with their lives the men's searches for truth and significance. While the men attempt an individual spiritual awakening, the women come to feel rejected, or at least to feel they are now less significant in the men's lives.

Louise Dauner, in the 1940's, appears to be the last scholar to consider these characters seriously in a manner equal to that of their male counterparts. Generalizing about the women in all of Robinson's longer poems, Dauner says in "The Pernicious Rib: E.A. Robinson's Concept of Feminine Character":

> They are capable of infinite individual personal shadings, but the pattern is consistent, and the larger emotional implications are logical and clear: Love, as one aspect of the Life Tragedy, is itself tragic; although in his insistence upon love, Robinson suggests it as also of paramount value -- even a value which must be realized only through an obscuring veil of sorrow.
> (158)

Many critics, including Dauner (147), assert that Robinson's poems show that the love of a woman forms a trap for a man. Gabrielle and Natalie certainly suffer when the men seek a freedom that does not include them.

Dauner lets Natalie's situation represent both, despite the fact that there are some significant differences. Natalie wonders whether bravery or cowardice contributes to suicide. Her "inherent passivity" is demonstrated in remaining married to Matthias for three years after she admits she loves Timberlake, a friend whom Matthias had earlier saved from a fire. Finally, feeling her life is a waste, she goes to a rock formation which forms a sort of mysterious "door" of the title, where another friend has committed suicide, and she takes her own life. Dauner sees her as complex, but unable to understand the force which sex exerts upon us (153).

Gabrielle Bartholow is perhaps not as complex a character as Natalie, and the poem, which is longer than all but Tristram, contrasts with the later Matthias in its characterization. The differences begin with the men. The materialistic Matthias is passive and uncurious, trying to avoid conflict, whether between others or within himself: "I'd rather turn my eyes the other way" (1093); consequently, Natalie, who is curious and whose character is as close as Robinson comes to creating a philosphizing female, is drawn to the rocks. She accepts the advances of Timberlake, rekindling her love for him, because her marriage has been "a cage" (CP 1105). But in contrast to Matthias, Bartholow is almost completely inward-looking; indeed, the central problem of the poem is his lack of self-esteem, and with the help of Penn-Raven, who functions as a sort of psychiatrist, Bartholow begins to

create himself anew. However, he manages this transformation at the cost of alienating Gabrielle, who seems to want just a normal marriage, by making her feel she is no longer necessary in his life. Unlike Natalie with Timberlake, Gabrielle rejects Penn-Raven because she believes he ruined her marriage, and later she rejects Bartholow because she feels that he prefers Penn-Raven's intellectuality to her emotional support.

Bartholow's absorption in his own spiritual well-being and Gabrielle's desire for continuity in marriage are allowed to function as conflicting ideals. Both are necessary, but they are difficult to reconcile with one another. For Bartholow, Gabrielle was once perfection in womanhood -- "beauty, mind and fire," but she does not suffice while he sees his soul as "foreign"; on the other hand, while Bartholow searches for his soul he becomes "a furniture / That was alive and tiresome" for Gabrielle (CP 734). She is stereotypically concrete in her outlook: "I know some things, / But I'm an ignoramus of the soul, / As you two men have noticed. I've a soul, / I hope, yet I'm not sure"; at the same time, her husband is lost in the abstract: "I'm at the oldest of all occupations, / Looking for something that I cannot find" (746-47). As a woman then, Gabrielle cannot compete with Bartholow's quest:

> . . . Some of us [women] are changing.
> But those who change the most will not change much,
> And will not have to. . . .
> I am the bridge, then, over which you pass,
> Here in the dark, to find a lighted way
> To a new region where I cannot follow,
> And where there is not either sand or moonshine,

> And a new sun shines always. Well, that's something.
> It may be all it was that I was worth. (802)

Unable to function as an equal in Bartholow's soul-search, feeling rejected by him, Gabrielle drowns herself in the river bordering their estate.

Gabrielle's desperate act frees both of them, but Bartholow is left unsatisfied; typically, he had assumed that he had control over his wife. After a long discussion, Penn-Raven finally points out what Bartholow should have known: "she is not either yours or mine" (825). At the end, Bartholow sells the house to move away and start over. He is somewhat at peace with himself, but only because he sees Gabrielle's death as a sacrifice meant for his benefit:

> . . . The sum
> Of all that each had ever owed the other
> Was covered, sealed, and cancelled in a grave,
> Where lay a woman doomed never to live --
> That he who had adored her and outgrown her
> Might yet achieve. (855)

What that achievement might be is left to the reader's imagination. Robinson assumes that men are capable of more "growth" than women, and Gabrielle is one of his female characters who is victimized by a man's personal ambitions. Her situation is a modernizing of the trouble between Lancelot and Guinevere; his following of "the Light" separates her from the full breadth of his emotions.

Like Freud, Robinson acknowledged that men have a difficult time understanding women. This difficulty is evident in the themes of many

of the poems in Chapter Eight, on love and marriage, and it continues in this chapter on the grimmer situations in which women sometimes find themselves. In _Matthias at the Door_, Timberlake tries to console Matthias after Natalie has committed suicide:

> A happy woman may be understood,
> Or near enough, but there is no man living
> With eyes or intuitions to interpret
> A woman hiding pain. Don't try, Matthias. (1139)

Both Natalie and Gabrielle conform, while they are alive, to expectations that create roles akin to Olive Schreiner's idea of the "kept wife." Neither character appears to have any role other than simply "being there" for their husbands, despite Matthias's disinterest and Bartholow's turning inward. I do not propose that Robinson intended to privilege these women's struggles against rejection as the main point of the poems, but in more than one letter to friends, Robinson implied that women do not always have their best interests served in marriage. And Umfraville, a fisherman/scholar and Robinson-like commentator in _Roman Bartholow_, says, "God help the women, / When they have only their own hearts to eat" (839). This sounds figuratively cannibalistic, but in the context of the poem, the sage is reminding Bartholow that custom pairs us, male and female, and that by turning to Penn-Raven for illumination, Bartholow had cut Gabrielle away from her emotional moorings, which contributed to her resignation and self-destruction. In his long poems, Robinson often portrayed men's insecurities as a root cause of women's problems. In addition to the problems of Bartholow and

Matthias, Talifer chooses his first wife unwisely, scarring Althea, his second wife and the woman he should have married first; and, as will be seen in the next chapter, Cavender's jealousy, though apparently unfounded, has dire consequences for his wife, Laramie. In his shorter poems, Robinson often portrayed the consequences of both difference and indifference. The people of Tilbury Town, who represent Robinson's opinion of the majority, resent and reject those who are different, especially in lifestyle -- for example, Flammonde, Leonora, or Pamela. And the majority also can be indifferent to others, as is implied, for example, in "The Mill," "Flammonde," and "Veteran Sirens." The consequences include separation and alienation, two conditions which Robinson felt diminished all of us.

CHAPTER XI

SPECIAL CASES

This chapter presents the unusual E.A. Robinson. Although the roles which women normally are given in literary works -- single woman, mother, wife, lover, widow, prostitute, suicide -- have served as an organizing scheme for the previous five chapters, some of Robinson's poems portray female characters who do not fit neatly into these roles. While his preferred method of composition was to invent characters which could stand as individuals, such as Eben Flood and Aunt Imogen, the poems collected here show that across his career, from the very early "For Arvia," to the mid-career "The Voice of Age," to the very last, _King Jasper_, Robinson was willing to risk different approaches to his themes. This chapter will constitute a miscellany, addressing, in the interest of completeness in a dissertation on a poet's presentation of women, several poems which are one- or two-of-a-kind in the theme or technique Robinson used in rendering these women. In several poems women are allegorical or symbolic figures, such as in "Cassandra," "The Dark House," _Amaranth_, and others. Two poems, "Sisera" and "Lazarus," portray women from the Bible. _Cavender's House_ was mentioned in Chapter VIII because Laramie, Cavender's wife, appears in the poem only as a figment of Cavender's imagination and conscience. And one poem

describes a child. The trouble is that some of these seldom-used strategies led Robinson occasionally to easy and unsatisfactory characterizations, such as those in the longer allegories -- Watchman, Honoria, Zoe -- women who are not given the opportunity to struggle and to change, but are allowed to play out only the most expected roles.

"For Arvia: On Her Fifth Birthday" is a sonnet which Chard Powers Smith says was written originally for Robinson's niece, Ruth, about 1896, but was re-dedicated to Percy MacKaye's daughter and published in Scribner's in 1908 (149-50, 221). The poem is like many which would appear in magazines at the time. It has no special insight into children or little girls, focusing on Arvia's "all-inquiring Eyes" and the capacity of children to wonder and to be mysterious and to see through adults' masks of condescension. The sestet versifies the stereotype of the child as wise beyond her years, with only the truly important questions on her mind: "And you have the whole world to think about, / With very little time for little things." She is to ignore Robinson and attend to her "gold of unrevealed imaginings."

Although Robinson had some interest in the innocence of childhood, he had a greater concern for the essential human innocence before the Creator. Robinson rejected all forms of organized religion; there is no mention of church attendance or interest in institutional matters in his letters or in the biographies. Yet, the Bible, along with his volume of Shakespeare's works, always lay on his writing table or near his bedside. He knew the Bible well, and its stories had continual fascination for him. He referred or alluded to the Bible often enough that Nicholas Ayo was able to write a dissertation on Robinson's use of

the characters and images it contains. For an introduction, see Ayo's article, "Robinson's Use of the Bible," in the Colby Library Quarterly; his main point is that the poems demonstrate an interest in religion that most readers do not associate with Robinson. "Lazarus" and "Sisera" are the two poems which present female characters, and both were published in volumes titled with other biblical characters in mind. "Lazarus" appeared in The Three Taverns in 1920; the title poem is a narrative depicting some of Paul's travels. "Sisera" followed the title poem, Nicodemus, in 1932.

"Lazarus" seems to be more concerned with Mary and Martha than with their brother. The first half of the poem presents the sisters in their guilt as they realize that they had Jesus draw Lazarus away from something much better than earthly existence:

> He who had been
> Their brother, and was dead, now seemed alive
> Only in death again -- or worse than death;
> For tombs at least, always until today,
> Though sad were certain. (CP 530)

Mary, who says she was not so eager as Martha, attempts to put into words the changes they see in Lazarus and the consequences for themselves:

> Here is more than Time;
> And we that are so lonely and so far
> From home, since he is with us here again,
> Are farther now from him and from ourselves
> Than we are from the stars. (531)

The sisters simply want forgiveness for their possessiveness, and in the second half of the poem, Lazarus, after a great deal of silence, finally grants this forgiveness. Ayo writes that in "Lazarus," Robinson tried "to isolate the mystery of death by a series of negatives, often only implied, which, while never revealing the unknown, encircle it with conclusions about what death must not be" (262). While rebuffing his sisters' requests to tell them what it was like to be dead, Lazarus does provide a hint (in a typically Robinsonian light/dark manner) that the world to come after this one is better: "For my part, / I am again with you, here among the shadows / That will not always be so dark as this" (538). Robinson focuses on the women because they represent two very human characteristics in this story; one is the desire to regain someone who is lost, and the other is curiosity about life (or whatever it is) after death.

"Sisera" is based on the story of Jael's murder of the fleeing Canaanite general, Sisera, in the fourth chapter of Judges. The poem is mistitled, as Jael is the protagonist. The straightforward presentation of the Bible is transformed into a psychological mini-drama of the woman's desire to accomplish the prophecy of Deborah, who foretold that "the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judges 4:9). Nicholas Ayo calls "Sisera" "sophisticated comedy" (263), but if driving a nail into a man's head is comic, it is too sophisticated for my understanding. Jael's calming of the exhausted Sisera has an undercurrent of certainty as she plans the murder; early in the poem we are told "She frightened men / With her security" (_CP_ 1170), and when

the general is asleep at her feet, she is not plagued with the doubt and hesitancy that trouble most biblical characters on first being called to significant action, such as Moses, Noah, and Paul.

Robinson's fictionalization of Jael's act draws attention to gender. The Bible does not provide Barak's reaction on finding Sisera's body in Jael's tent, but in the poem, Barak is shocked:

> A world that holds so much for men to know
> Must have been long in the making. The Lord pondered
> More than six days, I think, to make a woman.
> The book of woman that has troubled man
> So long in learning is all folly now.
> I shall go home tonight and make another.
> The wisest man alive, wherever he is,
> Is not so wise that he has never wondered
> What women do when they are left together,
> Or left alone. (1178)

Ayo believes that Jael rates Robinson's displeasure (252), but by emphasizing Jael's petition to tell Deborah that her prophecy has been fulfilled, Robinson asserts a difference between the men's code of honor which says that Sisera must be killed on the battlefield and the woman's code which says that when the opportunity to perform God's will presents itself, one must not shirk. While Barak wonders about women, reiterating the male's ancient stereotype of female-as-mystery, Jael celebrates the freedom of the Israelites.

Two poems, "The Return of Morgan and Fingal" and _Cavender's House_, are unique in the Robinson canon. The former is a ballad with no apparent point. Three men are partying together after being apart for twelve years, when a pale woman bursts into their seaside cottage and

begs them to retrieve the body of her drowned sister. They comply with this request and return to their party. There is no comment, no twist of plot or ironic hint of motive or mystery. None of the characters, male or female, is developed enough to attract a reader's interest. The poem is simply a story, a strange little story which demonstrates how even a very good poet sometimes forgets that his poem must be more than a rhythmic string of sounds. Robinson deleted a few poems in making choices from his individual volumes for his Collected Poems, and perhaps "The Return of Morgan and Fingal" should have been another.

Cavender's House, on the other hand, is a more complex investigation of psychological states. Laramie Cavender's husband murdered her in a fit of jealousy before the action of the poem begins, but this information is revealed only gradually, until nearly the end when we learn, through the device of having her voice sound increasingly different, that the woman Cavender has been talking to has been his own imagined re-creation. Cavender, who has returned to his house after twelve years of wandering, wants to know whether or not she had been having an affair when he killed her -- he had only suspected as much, but that was enough to motivate murder -- as if confirmation would provide justification. Of course, since "Laramie" is not actually Laramie, she can tell him nothing. Therefore, the poem is not the story of a woman revealing the truth to a man, but of a man revealing the truth about himself through the character of a woman.

Cavender is one of Robinson's misguided capitalists, a man who always has controlled the men who work for him as well as his wife. He is guilty of dehumanizing Laramie, idolizing her beauty and expecting

her to be nothing but another ornament in his large house. For example, Cavender holds Laramie at fault for his stereotypical view of women as mysterious:

> There are some women
> Whose privilege is to treasure and conserve
> Their mystery, and to make as much of it
> As heaven may give them leave and means. But you,
> Having so perilous an abundance of it,
> Made for yourself a peril of its abuse --
> Unconscious of how near you lived to madness
> In one who could not know. (CP 984)

And we must remember that even when Laramie speaks, she is Cavender speaking to himself. In this way, he generates some understanding of the limitations he placed upon her through his condescension. When Laramie accuses, Cavender is facing himself:

> And I would watch clouds going over the moon,
> Like doubts over a face -- if I had known
> Enough to think. I was not trying to think.
> You said I was too beautiful to think.
> You said that if I did, your quality
> Might have a shrinkage. You were a playful man,
> Cavender; and you played with me sometimes
> As a child might, seeing it in the house,
> With a superior kitten. (996)

Earlier, Cavender calls himself "the fool of his possession" (969). Perhaps Emery Neff expressed it best when he wrote of Cavender that ". . . it has gradually dawned upon him that his wife had an individuality he should have respected and that the universe has laws stronger than he,

stronger than all the laws of man" (230). In this poem, Robinson connects two themes, one against gender assumptions and one against materialism, to demonstrate that money and power seldom bring contentedness.

Another departure from Robinson's usual presentation occurs in several poems in which the figure of a woman is used either symbolically or allegorically. Male writers have used females as symbols of either good or evil for as long as literature has survived. Robinson's symbolic females usually represent something positive, often a belief or a way of life no longer in vogue. "Amaryllis" provides an example. In the octave of this sonnet, an old man approaches the narrator and begs to show him the grave of an "ancient woman." In classical Greek, Amaryllis is the name for a shepherdess or a country girl, but now she has wasted away almost beyond recognition, as have many traditions of America's agricultural heritage. The sestet tells more than is necessary; "loud progress" and "the bold / Incessant scream of commerce" -- Robinson's despised materialism -- have joined forces to age the symbol of pastoral simplicity.

"Cassandra" also is a poem against materialism. The daughter of Priam, king of Troy, and Hecuba, Cassandra was fated never to be believed. Robinson uses her name as the symbolic title of this poem in which a member of the Tilbury Town crowd infatuated with the "Dollar, Dove and Eagle" listens to someone's warnings about the folly of Reason's submission to materialism. The listener then moves on with the crowd, all ignoring the Cassandra-speaker's pleas: "Are you to pay for what you have / With all you are?" The poem exhibits one of Robinson's

chief frustrations, that people know what is in their spiritual best interest but they act in contrary ways.

Both "The Voice of Age" and "The Dark House" are in the same anti-materialist vein as "Cassandra." These poems use the figure of a woman to point out the shortcomings of human life; the difference is that in "The Voice of Age" the woman is positive, but in "The Dark House" she is negative. The first poem is made of four stanzas of four tetrameter couplets each, and Age is a wise woman who would not be harsh if only she could avoid it, an idea Robinson would return to with the opposite emphasis in "For a Dead Lady." Age is compared with Rhadamanthus, one of the judges of the Greek underworld, while we are compared with Belshazzar, the last Babylonian king, who according to the book of Daniel could not read the warning written on the wall -- another version of the warning delivered in "Cassandra." The third stanza suggests the Christian debate over whether grace can be earned through good works, but it is clear that Robinson sides with Age, who nods, "Almost as if she were deceived" by our "doing for the race." The final stanza calls us to use our eyes to see that the world's ways are not the best.

In "The Dark House," however, the woman is "a Demon." Although there is no evidence in the poem, Hagedorn and others have speculated that she is Alcohol, a demon with which Robinson had some acquaintance, and the dark house is the imprisonment of alcoholism. The text, however, points toward the Demon as being some combination of Age, Time, and Death. The title implies the grave, and the "charms / Of her eyes and of her arms" connote the attractions for the speaker as well as for the friend he describes as virtually powerless against this Demon, as

all are powerless against Time. The fifth stanza, with its spider-web imagery, suggests there is no escape, as there is none from death, and the sixth stanza is more specific, with its image of the fates at work -- "shears / On a thread made out of years." The remaining four stanzas build the case for another kind of living, "a music yet unheard," until the final stanza closes with a specific reference to New Testament belief: "And my friend, again outside, / Will be living, having died." While the figure of the woman in "The Voice of Age" represents Robinson's moral imperative of anti-materialism, the woman in "The Dark House" is to be avoided. These poems are back-to-back in the _Collected Poems_, but the contrast between the female figures seems to be coincidental, rather than intended. Both poems address the belief that our physical life on earth is not all there is.

At the end of his career, Robinson wrote two book-length poems in which the characters do not correspond to the "real world" roles evident in most of his poems; these are _Amaranth_ (1934) and _King Jasper_ (1935). As with all of Robinson's long poems, a few critics find interest in them while others ignore them. Robert Frost wrote the introduction to _King Jasper_ as a tribute to the recently-deceased author without mentioning the poem or giving any indication that he had bothered to read anything Robinson wrote after 1925. On the other hand, Ellsworth Barnard wrote, "Even in _Amaranth_ and _King Jasper_, where the omnipresent allegory tends to make the characters bloodless and inhuman -- to parasitize them, so to speak -- anyone who is persistent enough to try a second reading may be surprised at how some of the people come to life"

(116). Elaine Amelia Watchman of the former and Zoe and Honoria of the latter are the females among the allegorical characters.

Amaranth is the story of Fargo, a painter, who has what appears to be a dream vision in which he encounters a group of other failed artists and professionals, such as Pink the poet, Styx the physician, Flax the minister, Figg the lawyer, and Evensong the musician. The sole female in the company is Watchman, a productive-but-untalented fiction writer. She is a minor character representing the large number of popular and sentimental novelists still being published, who, according to Robinson, apparently churn out books without putting much thought into them. Watchman points to a shelf lined with her tomes and calls it her life: "Let others live / And let me write" (*CP* 1342). But she discovers on opening one of her books that it is dust inside, and the same fate awaits her. Earlier, Evensong implies that life is better without the arts and their attendant pain:

> Watchman, I wish to God
> That you had never learned to read and write,
> And I had never heard of counterpoint.
> We might by now be sailing where the whales
> Of grief would never catch us. (1340)

All of the characters are in this dream "world" because they are beset by self-doubt, and in Amaranth ("the flower that never fades"), a figure I would call Truth-the-Grim-Reaper, the characters can face their doubts by looking into his eyes. The revelation either inspires death (Pink hangs himself) or causes death (Watchman turns to dust along with her

books). When Fargo awakes at the end, he has been the beneficiary of some sort of psychic release, and he can go on with his life as a pump-maker, the trade he chose after giving up painting. The message is similar to that of _The Man Who Died Twice_, in which Fernando Nash has a vision of the symphony he might have written, but he chooses to be a drummer in a Salvation Army band: if art threatens your soul, find something more enjoyable to do. It makes one wonder if Robinson saw the long poems of his late career as the same sort of backing-away from the taut, incisive poems of his earlier work; however, whether this retreat was conscious or unconscious, he did say a number of times that the short poems just would not come to him any longer.

King Jasper was Robinson's last poem, revised in part as he lay on his deathbed in the spring of 1935. This allegory is simpler than that of _Amaranth_, being the story of the fall of capitalism. The characters are flat types, with the men depicted as incapable of adaptation and the women as agents of destruction split between tradition and change. Jasper is an industrialist, counting his wealth by the number of chimneys he owns. His son, Jasper Jr., the prince, is groomed as heir and successor, but he has married Zoe, who seems to represent what Robinson believed would be the sensible view, that there are more important concerns than chimneys and money. King Jasper is intrigued with Zoe, and he considers the possibility of becoming less ruthless in his business dealings. He has a long dream in which he realizes his culpability in the decline and death of his former partner, Hebron (echoing _The Glory of the Nightingales_), through his greed and his drive for power. As the symbol of new knowledge, Zoe introduces more

tensions; King Jasper fears her because she is the source of the end of his kingdom, but he also loves her. Honoria, the queen, argues that one of them must go. She represents the woman clinging to comfort and tradition, unwilling to relinquish any of the Jasper industrial prosperity so that the workers may have life's necessities. Oddly, when Honoria dies, King Jasper loses all interest in the spiritual improvements possible through Zoe, and his own health declines. As the king dies, the chimneys begin to crumble, and the prince kills himself rather than explore new worlds with Zoe. Young Hebron appears, seeking revenge, but Zoe kills him. At the end, she walks away while the house and chimneys burn and fall behind her. Robinson implies that there is no salvation of any kind for the capitalist class, that total destruction is the only resolution, and a hellish one at that. Even Zoe loses everything.

These late allegorical poems, as well as the earlier works described in this chapter, are not among Robinson's best poems. With the possible exception of the biblically-derived poems and Cavender's House, they tend to present themes and characters which are either too personal to Robinson for adequate communication with others, such as "The Return of Morgan and Fingal," or they over-generalize the impact of a societal or artistic situation, such as "Cassandra" or Amaranth. The poems do demonstrate a desire to experiment, to try new forms and new ideas, as one would hope that any poet with a 40-year career would do. Fortunately for Robinson, however, our view of his work today (a matter of some concern to him, as will be seen in the Conclusion) does not rest upon these poems.

CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

Once, while talking with Hermann Hagedorn, who was to become his first biographer, E.A. Robinson characterized his poetic message as:

> a faint hope of making a few of us understand our fellow creatures a little better, and to realize what a small difference there is, after all, between ourselves, as we are, and ourselves, not only as we might have been but would have been if our physical and temperamental make-up and our environment had been a little different . . . If a reader doesn't get from my books that life is very much worth while, even though it may not seem always to be profitable or desirable, I can only say that he doesn't see what I am driving at. (286)

The conditions and situations confronting all people, not just women, were the main motivation for Robinson's poetry, and this project is meant to demonstrate the extent of Robinson's concern beyond that which is frequently ascribed to him. However, generalizations about his depictions of women must account for the fact that we can know little about his intent aside from clues such as this one and those in his letters and in the memories of others. Furthermore, the body of Robinson's critical writings is quite small and of little help. However, it is not difficult to determine where Robinson's poetry, and his characterization of women, depart from the usual late-nineteenth and

early-twentieth century poetry. Whether written by men or by women, the average poem about any woman was sentimental and relied on readily-accepted (and expected) "truths" about the "nature of woman." Robinson created individual characters, in many cases similar to characters in works of fiction, who were given their own set of circumstances in which to succeed or fail. In this way, he often (but not always) avoided relying upon stereotypes.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, women came to consider themselves morally superior to men. At least, the upper class women, who had the time to think about such things, considered themselves so. In Women of America, part of the series Woman: In all Ages and in all Countries, published in 1908, John Rouse Larus presents the assumptions about women prevalent around the turn of the century. Women were still seen as the seat of all that was pure and lofty in moral aspiration; their best outlet was an organization such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union. A measure of both the pride in, and the continuing condescension toward, women and their abilities is visible in Larus's approval of increased opportunities for women's higher education and his contempt for the inclusion of competitive sports in those colleges (387-88). Janet Todd notes that avoiding stereotypical oppositions such as reason/emotion and culture/nature is important (14), but Robinson wrote at a time when these oppositions were accepted and we must acknowledge this fact. And yet, Robinson's poems demonstrate his disbelief that women represent a species of humanity significantly superior to men.

Robinson was more likely to reveal some of the consequences or limitations of the prevalent modes of thinking about women. For example, the wife in "Eros Turannos" is trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage, with neither the will nor the skill to leave, hiding in a large house from the Tilbury Town gossip-mongers. If biology equals destiny, which women have considered their problem for some time because of the expectations of a patriarchal culture which expresses great interest in the production of heirs, at least some of Robinson's female characters, such as Imogen or Leonora, take steps to avoid this fate, by accepting another role or by escaping life altogether. What do Robinson's women want? In some respect they want what men want -- a measure of control over their condition and situation.

Robinson wrote often about "failures" of various kinds, as numerous scholars have pointed out. To fail, one first must strive. And since women were only rarely strivers during Robinson's career -- certainly not to the extent of men -- they seldom appear in Robinson's poetry as the kind of moral failure that, say, Bewick Finzer represents. Larus points out that it was all well and good that women were intent upon improving themselves and entering the workforce, but it was to be remembered that their function was to help men with their important work, not to be their equal, or, worse yet, their competitor (368-69). Robinson does seem to have adhered to this assumption of the secondary position of women. But he focused more of his efforts on the problems caused by such assumptions -- witness the suicides of Gabrielle Bartholow and Natalie -- than on their intended results. The stereotype of the woman-as-mystery, one of the more common stereotypes in

literature, is one that Robinson used, but usually he undercut it, showing that whenever a man proposes such a characterization, he is incorrect. Laramie Cavender, Jael, Pamela, and Natalie are examples. Men find them mysterious, but only because these men do not see beyond their own needs or expectations. The mystery is not in the "nature of woman," but in what goes on between men and women. Robinson saw love and marriage as mysteries; while sometimes the poem itself provides the reader's chief mystery, the capacity people demonstrate for self-interest, betrayal, and unthinking hurtfulness within the context of their relationships with others seems to have astounded and troubled Robinson.

Of course, there are limitations inherent in the kind of feminist approach I have taken in investigating Robinson's poetry. It leaves out of the discussion some wonderful poems, such as The Man Who Died Twice, "Isaac and Archibald" and "Monadnock Through the Trees," which present other aspects of Robinson's major themes of moral failure or success, the impersonal ravages of time, and what the young learn from and remember of the old. This approach must also acknowledge that feminist social and political concerns were not Robinson's concerns. Such issues as the right to vote, equal pay for equal work, and safe working conditions concerned him only in so far as they represented humanity's general inhumanity toward its members. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of this male writer's production, sixty-five of some 200 poems, involve many different female characters in a variety of situations which depict a range of themes. Such a legacy is worth an investigation of its own.

In a letter to Hermann Hagedorn, Robinson once wrote, "This stuff of mine is never going to be heard from in my lifetime. But, fifty or sixty years after I am dead, someone may find something it" (Uncollected 157). In "John Brown," Robinson included a line he may have meant for himself: "I shall have more to say when I am dead." Much earlier, he had written "Walt Whitman," a poem of praise a decade after the death of the gray-bearded poet of America and the Cosmos, which includes the line, "We do not hear him very much today." Ironically, less than a decade after Robinson's death, the line from the Whitman tribute, if applied to himself, became a more accurate statement than the letter or the line from "John Brown," and Robinson was the poet less heard; this situation has persisted, despite the appearance of Morton Dauwen Zabel's fine edition of Robinson's Selected Poems in 1965. It is not the intent of this dissertation to spin the tables of renown yet again, depreciating the value of Whitman; however, with the centennial of Robinson's first book publication coming up in 1996, this may be a good time to plan a new edition of the Selected Poems, which might rekindle interest in the work of the lonely poet in search of the Light.

Zabel's selection includes, I think, all of Robinson's short poems that anyone would agree are worth continued easy access. However, Robinson wrote thirteen book-length poems. Although most scholars write that these poems are hardly worth bothering with, it is clear that these writers have read the poems only once, perhaps. While I agree that Robinson's greatest poems are his briefer character sketches, I believe that some of the longer poems bear re-reading, and the best of these could be included in a new, expanded edition of Selected Poems. My

nominations are _Merlin_, as the best of the Arthurian poems; _The Man Who Died Twice_, as the best of the poems which portray some aspect of failure; and _Roman Bartholow_, as the best of the poems which deal with understanding the self within the bounds of marriage. Of course, adding three book-length works to the _Selected Poems_ would more than double the volume, increasing the cost significantly, perhaps beyond the publisher's expectations for recovery.

Whether or not Robinson's _Selected Poems_ ever is expanded, some of his poems will continue to be read, enjoyed, and studied for a long time. In the very strange book-length poem, _Amaranth_, the characters watch Pink the poet hanging but nevertheless carrying on a conversation with them before he dies:

> "Poets are of a toughness,
> And they are slow to kill," the doctor said
> To Fargo: "Shall we drink to his departure?" (1327)

Robinson's work will endure beyond his departure despite the current convulsions of the literary canon (though perhaps not to the extent his own optimism in the letter to Hagedorn might imply), and one reason is that many of the female characters he created continue to intrigue his readers. These women, such as Imogen and Pamela and Leonora and Avenel Gray and others, many of whom resist the expectations of the dominant American culture of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, or who exemplify the limitations inherent in the usual ways of thinking about women, are drawn with enough individualized intelligence, wit,

insight, or vulnerability to seem real. This apparent reality of character, a hallmark of excellent writing, was one of Robinson's goals, one which he frequently achieved.

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APPENDIX

This is a list of Edwin Arlington Robinson's poems which deal with, characterize, mention, or allude to women, either collectively or as an individual character, no matter how minor. Page numbers refer to the Collected Poems, 1937, unless otherwise noted.

From The Children of the Night (1897):

John Evereldown, 73

Luke Havergal, 74

Her Eyes, 78

The Story of the Ashes and the Flame, 84

Amaryllis, 84

Reuben Bright, 92

See also three poems that were uncollected:

The Miracle, 18

For Calderon, 23

The Night Before, 37

Page numbers are for Selected Early Poems and Letters, ed. Charles T. Davis (New York: Holt Rinehart Winston, 1960).

From Captain Craig (1902):

Captain Craig, 113

The Return of Morgan and Fingal, 181

Aunt Imogen, 184

The Growth of Lorraine, 191

The Woman and the Wife, 194

The Book of Annandale, 195

Saint-Nitouche, 211

As a World would Have It, 218

Cortege, 221

Partnership (a.k.a. The Wife of Palissy), 222

From The Town Down the River (1910):

The Whip, 338

Leonora, 341

For Arvia, 344

The Companion, 353

For a Dead Lady, 355

From The Man Against the Sky (1916)

Flammonde, 3

The Gift of God, 6

The Clinging Vine, 8

Cassandra, 11

John Gorham, 13

Eros Turannos, 32

The Unforgiven, 37

Veteran Sirens, 40

Another Dark Lady, 41

The Voice of Age, 42

The Dark House, 43

The Poor Relation, 45

Lisette and Eileen, 49

Llewellyn and the Tree, 50

From The Three Taverns (1920):

Neighbors, 459

The Mill, 460

Tact, 473

London Bridge, 493

Firelight, 510

Rahel to Varnhagen, 513

Nimmo, 520

Late Summer, 525

An Evangelist's Wife, 528

Lazarus, 530

From Avon's Harvest (1921):

Avon's Harvest, 534

Ben Trovato, 575

The Tree in Pamela's Garden, 576

Vain Gratuities, 575

Job the Rejected, 577

Rembrandt to Rembrandt, 582

From _Dionysus in Doubt_ (1925):

Genevieve and Alexandra, 873

Not Always II, 887

Mortmain, 889

From _Nicodemus_ (1932):

Sisera, 1169

Annandale Again, 1200

The March of the Cameron Men, 1212

Also the following book-length poems, all of which are included in the _Collected Poems_:

Merlin (1917)

Lancelot (1920)

Roman Bartholow (1923)

Tristram (1927)

Cavender's House (1929)

The Glory of the Nightingales (1930)

Matthias at the Door (1931)

Talifer (1933)

Amaranth (1934)

King Jasper (1935)