

Chapter 1

Introduction

The reconstitution of society to suit industrial needs brought about drastic change in the mindset of the Americans in the nineteenth century. The creed of material advancement replaced puritan morality and spirituality. The age named the “Gilded Age” because of its obsession with industrial expansion and economic prosperity paved the way for a capitalist society (Burton 4). Agrarian ideals were swept aside and the American continent became a highly competitive business community, poised for a big leap forward to commercial and material prosperity. This new economic system coincided with disillusionment with traditional Christian theology and brought about rapid dissemination of the philosophy of materialism. Any philosophy, when it becomes the dominant social ideology of a particular period, is modified to suit the desires and aspirations of the majority in a society. The philosophic doctrine of materialism, as it gained widespread acceptance in American society, came to be identified with pursuit of wealth and material comforts. The mass production of industrial goods at the beginning of the twentieth century heralded a new social and cultural era. The United States became a nation of cities with considerable increase in urban population. “This urban growth had wide cultural ramifications. While Americans remained strongly attached to rural and small-town values, the nation in the 1920’s became increasingly urbanized, not only numerically but also...‘in the cast of its mind, in its ideals, and in its folkways’” (Boyer et al. 842).

The new cultural ideology was based on the belief that unlimited production would lead to economic prosperity, which in turn, would contribute to the progress of the human race by promoting absolute freedom and unrestricted happiness. But the euphoria over economic prosperity and unlimited progress did not last long. Western man realized the folly

of his belief that material prosperity would put an end to all human misery. Though materialism paved the way for increased economic prosperity, it was also instrumental in bringing about conformity, automatization and alienation. Instead of absolute freedom and unrestricted happiness modernization paved the way for decreased freedom and happiness. F. Tannenbaum concluded his *Philosophy of Labor* stating that “The major error of the last century has been the assumption that a total society can be organized upon an economic motive, upon profit. The trade union has proved that notion to be false. It has demonstrated once again that men do not live by bread alone” (Fromm 195). Mass production generated an abundance of consumer goods. But it also promoted repetitive labor with a minimum of initiative or variation. This resulted in boredom and lack of involvement. Emile Durkheim observed that boredom and anxiety were not found to such a great extent in pre-modern societies and were indicative of the alienation of man in the modern age. In his third major sociological work entitled *Suicide* he established the direct relationship between suicide and social causes (Morrison 204). From Durkheim’s social theory of suicide evolved the reasoning that high incidence of suicide in modern western societies was linked to the existing social ideology.

This dissertation undertakes a textual analysis of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poetry and the poetic strategy employed by him to subvert the destructive social ideology prevalent in American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Industrialization, commercialization and materialism had forged a new social ideology in American society. The salient features of this ideology were an obsession with wealth and material comforts, the submission of individual identity to herd identity, and skepticism towards spiritual and moral values. Deviance from this dominant ideology resulted in social alienation, while submission to the ideology paved the way for self- alienation. Social alienation was the

individual subject's estrangement from its community or society. Self-alienation was characterized by the division of the self into two conflicting parts: "a split between man's real 'nature', or 'essence', and his 'factual' properties or 'existence'" (Edwards1: 79). This alienation from man's real nature resulted in frustration and mental aberration. The self-alienated individual was far from being sane though he performed the routine functions of life. The split in his personality destroyed his capacity for reasoning and rendered him unproductive. The tragedy of the twentieth century western civilization was that society itself was insane as the majority were self-estranged individuals. Erich Fromm in his work, *The Sane Society*, contradicted the common belief that a society was always sane and concluded that in certain situations it was possible for a whole society to be sick. He went on to prove that twentieth century American society was a sick society comprising of a majority of self-alienated individuals and pointed to a close link between the economic prosperity of societies and their mental pathology:

We find that the countries in Europe which are among the most democratic, peaceful and prosperous ones, and the United States, the most prosperous country in the world, show the most severe symptoms of mental disturbance. The aim of the whole socio-economic development of the western world is that of the materially comfortable life, relatively equal distribution of wealth, stable democracy and peace, and the very countries which have come closest to this aim show the most severe signs of mental unbalance. (19)

The mental abnormality of this modern man was unlike the insanity found in psychiatric patients. He could perform the routine tasks of life perfectly. The pathology of this man lay in his inability to experience himself and the world around him in an authentic manner. This fragmentation of experience rendered him inhuman and prompted him to lead

a mechanical life. Since self-alienation was not immediately apparent it was extremely difficult to identify the abnormality afflicting modern man. Robinson was one of the very few who recognized the symptoms of mental pathology tormenting his contemporaries and traced the root cause of their insanity to the dominant materialistic ideology. Hence, he tried to redefine the social ideology of twentieth century America by exposing the evils of materialism through his poetry. Though he exposed the self-alienation of the majority with the objective of revealing the pitfalls of the philosophy of materialism, he was more concerned about the social alienation of the minority in his poetry. Most of his poems are on the social alienation of the nonconformist who refused to conform to the materialistic ideology. He portrays their marginalization and isolation in his poetry. The poet also exposes the stigmatization of this minority as the abnormal and their categorization as the failed. He propounded a philosophy that is a combination of realism and idealism, which he calls “Optimistic Desperation”, as an antidote to materialism (Smith 301).

A critique of Robinson’s crusade against materialism is possible only by placing him in his poetic and social context and revealing the influences which shaped him as one of the greatest of American poets. Robinson was born in 1869, when there prevailed a general dissatisfaction with contemporary American poetry. Bryant, Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell and Whitman were all gone and their place had not been taken by any. Scott Donaldson comments on the poetic climate of Robinson’s age in his biography of the poet. “Poetry had become a parlor game for the wealthy, a suppressed instinct whose chief function was ornament, an avocation unattached to and uninterested in American life” (169). Several critics felt the need for a genuine poet who would fill the lacuna existing in the American poetic scene. The words of a Massachusetts critic of the time reveal the urgent need for a poet, who represented the spirit of the American people:

The country needs a poet. England has her Kipling who fights to keep the pirates from stealing his peaches and Alfred Austin who waives his copyright rights for the benefit of whoever care to use his soft poems. We really have no one who can give tongue in rhyme appropriately when events call for expression, or thought bursts the bounds of prose. (Anderson 5)

Robinson too felt the need for a poet rooted in the American tradition, perhaps unaware at the time that he would play an important role in ushering in a new era in American poetry. In his sonnet "OH, for a poet – for a beacon bright" he called the age, "this barren age of ours" and expressed the need for a good American poet (S 21). But unfortunately in the initial stages of Robinson's poetic career the public as well as critics were not willing to accept the new type of poetry that he wrote. His poems about insignificant butchers, misers and drunkards shocked poetry lovers. Hence his poems written in a terse language with extraordinary psychological insight received lukewarm response from the poetic fraternity who had been used to nature poems and didactic poems. Ellsworth Barnard endorsed the poet's efforts to restore realism to American poetry and stated that he attempted

...to bring poetry back into touch with life; to take it out of the drawing room, out of the realm of hearts and flowers, and onto drab small town streets and dusty country roads; to tell the stories of humdrum and even sordid lives and show that these were after all the lives of human beings; and to tell these stories in 'the real language of men'. (Donaldson 171)

As the twentieth century dawned, a spirit of restlessness and boredom at the existing poetry combined with a sense of expectancy for the arrival of the new age and a new poetry. The new age demanded a different type of poetry and it was soon apparent that twentieth century poetry would be different from the old. From the very beginning of his poetic

career, Robinson started writing a different kind of poetry, though he stuck to the traditional form. Hence his poems were very slow in gaining public approval. Even critics found it difficult to accept the type of subject matter that he dealt with in his poems. But by 1912 the poetic renaissance had swept the American continent and there was plenty of poetry being written in an innovative manner. Robinson's poems began to attract critical and public attention. In 1913 Alfred Noyes named Robinson as "America's foremost poet" (Anderson 18). In 1917 when Amy Lowell undertook the task of analyzing the "new poetry", she considered Robinson as a pioneer of the "new poetry" and devoted the first chapter of her book, *Tendencies in Modern Poetry*, to Robinson (Anderson 19). The smooth blending of traditional and novel techniques in his poetry made Robert Frost remark that "Robinson stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new" (33). Charles Cestre also endorsed this view and enumerated the traditional as well as modern qualities which make his poems modern classics:

Robinson as a poet deserves to be styled a modern classic, because he combines in harmonious union the old-time qualities of intellectual acumen, broad humanity, universal appeal, decorum, sense of proportion and art of composition, with powers more recently developed as means of literary expression: imaginative coloring, sensuous richness, suggestive foreshortenings and word melody. (5)

Robinson was especially modern in his subject matter which reflected the dichotomy in early twentieth century American life arising from the spiritual degeneration of this economically prosperous period in American history. Wallace L. Anderson compared Robinson with other modern writers and accorded him a pioneering position in bringing about the transition from the old to the new poetry. "Long before Eliot's 'The Waste Land'

and Auden's 'The Age of Anxiety,' Robinson mirrored the spiritual sterility of an age that was to hurl itself into two world wars and go crashing along on a 'blind atomic pilgrimage'" (63).

The circumstances that shaped Robinson's life are an important source of information regarding his poetry as well as his philosophic outlook. He was born in Head Tide, Maine, as the youngest of the three sons of Edward Robinson, a shrewd and practical businessman. Soon after the birth of Robinson, the family moved to Gardiner and it was here that the poet grew up. Gardiner, like other major towns of America of the time, was marching forward at a tremendous pace towards economic prosperity. It was a time when all institutions which make up a society--family, religion, education, industry, and media – conspired to propagate the supremacy of material prosperity. No wonder young men and women of the age internalized this ideology and complied with the demands made by it. Those who did not conform to this ideology were isolated as the abnormal. The two elder sons of the Robinson family showed signs of conforming to the new ideology and were lionized by the materialistic society. Dean, the eldest son studied medicine and became a physician. Herman, the second one, being endowed with the business acumen of his father, took over the family business to the delight of his father. But Robinson, the youngest son, did not fit into this family picture and was destined to be different. While other young men were busy making money and fame, Robinson remained aloof, unable to adjust to the materialist society around him. It was not as if he hated money but he was averse to cut-throat competition in the name of wealth and fame. This barbaric quest for wealth of the so called civilized was repulsive to Robinson's sensitive mind. He wrote to his friend Harry de Forest Smith, "Dollars are convenient things to have but this diabolical dirty race that men are running after them disgusts me" (Burton 4). At a time when people were willing to give up

their innate abilities-- the essence of their individual selves-- for the sake of wealth and fame, Robinson insisted on pursuing the vocation of poetry. At an early age he came under the spell of words and was drawn towards poetry. He began writing when he was eleven, and by the time he was sixteen, he knew fairly well that he was destined to be a poet. But poetry was not a creditable profession at the time and he had fallen from grace because of his decision to pursue poetry. Though his father forced him to take a course in science at high school, as he considered it more practical, Robinson continued to nurture his interest in poetry. He read a lot, enjoyed studying Latin and translated Latin verses into English. While his classmates found Latin tedious he was enthralled by Latin verses. Robinson equipped himself with knowledge of Latin poetry as a prerequisite for his aspiration to become a poet.

Even in a commercial society like Gardiner there were a few people who encouraged Robinson's interest in poetry. He became a member of the Poetry Society of Gardiner through Alanson Tucker Schuman who introduced him to the group. Realizing that young Robinson was a better poet than he would ever be, Dr. Schuman sought to encourage and nurture his poetic talent. Schuman's encouragement and criticism went a long way in shaping Robinson as a poet. Two other Gardiners who influenced Robinson's poetry were Caroline Swan who admired French poetry and Henry Sewall Webster who was a judge by profession and a poet by instinct. They too were members of the Poetry Club. Thus the foundation for Robinson's poetic career was laid in Gardiner in spite of the mercantile culture prevailing in the town.

Though his father never intended Robinson to attend Harvard, he was destined to enjoy the literary atmosphere of Harvard. After he finished school it was discovered that Robinson needed prolonged treatment for his ear and that was available only in Boston. So he was enrolled as a special student at Harvard so that he could receive constant medical

attention. At Harvard he came under the influence of distinguished professors. Though he denied being influenced by any of the faculty, the basis for his idealism could be traced to Professor Royce's interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy (Kaplan 28). Robinson's world view, realistic and hopeful at the same time, was derived undoubtedly from Royce. In his work *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* Royce asserted that "The world is, on the whole very nearly as tragic as Schopenhauer represents it to be. Only spirituality consists in being heroic enough to accept the tragedy of existence and to glory in the strength wherewith it is given to the true lords of life to conquer this tragedy, and to make their world after all divine" (Kaplan 28). Robinson's protagonists have this enduring capacity that Royce speaks of, and an optimism rooted in the reality of worldly suffering is pronounced in his poetry.

On the matter of transcendent influence, Robinson's critics are divided. William J. Free speaks of the influence of Emerson on Robinson and states that Robinson was especially attracted by Emerson's Law of compensation. "Just as Emerson believed that wisdom comes from pain, Robinson found hell worth enduring for the compensating knowledge of life's value" (71). But Free admits that, unlike Emerson, Robinson did not find in compensation a remedy for all of man's illness. "... Robinson's mind inherited from its New England soil a Hawthornesque power of blackness as well as Emersonian light. Experience taught him that few men were saints enough to possess the perfect love and wisdom of which Emerson wrote" (82). Free concludes that Robinson modified Emerson's Law of compensation to suit his purposes. But Yvor Winters was skeptical about the transcendentalist influence on Robinson and dismissed it as "fragmentary, occasional and contrary to the main directions of his thought and achievement" (4). Though Robinson's philosophy of life has certain parallels to transcendentalism, his idealism rooted in reality cannot be equated to the unrealistic optimism of Emerson.

Knowing Robinson's family circumstances this is not surprising. Tragedy loomed large over Robinson's family in his youth. He left Harvard without a degree, as the family business declined. His father died and his brother, Dean, was fully under the spell of drugs. The declining family business adversely affected Herman, who took to drinking to forget his misfortunes. Robinson's sensitive nature suffered terribly during those ill fated months. To add to the suffering, just before he published his first collection of poems, *The Torrent and the Night Before*, his mother died of black diphtheria. As the physician, the undertaker and the minister refused to touch her body, the three sons had to bury their mother themselves. These tragic circumstances left an indelible mark on Robinson and enriched his poetry. He learnt at an early age of failure, loneliness, misery, death and poverty. The pessimism in his poetry, for which he was severely criticized, was the product of his early suffering. But these early setbacks were also instrumental in developing a sympathetic approach towards "failures" which attracted readers to his poetry. He knew from personal experience that these "failures" had failed only from the materialist's point of view. He tried to redefine success and expressed disapproval of materialism through the medium of his poetry. Robinson's letter to Edith Brower at the time of the publication of his first volume of poetry articulates his condemnation of materialistic culture. "You may consider the whole thing as a kind of self-defense against the abject materialism of a "down east" community whereof the whole purpose of life is to "get a job" and to vote a straight Republican ticket" (Cary, Letters 16).

In 1897 Robinson left Gardiner for New York since he felt stifled by his family and friends. He published his second volume of poems, *The Children of the Night*, in the same year. At New York he was surrounded by a group of "incomplete genius," who had great talent but had failed in their chosen vocations. It was here that he made the acquaintance of

Alfred Louis, the original for Captain Craig and the Wandering Jew. He was fascinated by this extraordinary man, who had got to the edge of true fame and had then failed miserably. He had lofty connections and dazzled his hearers with his eloquence and learning. The profound effect that this incredible man had on him resulted in his first lengthy poem “Captain Craig”. In 1902 he published the poem along with “Isaac and Archibald” and “Aunt Imogen” in a volume entitled *Captain Craig*. He was happy with his work and expected that the volume would establish him as a poet. But unfortunately the volume did not make any impact and he fell into depression and started drinking excessively. Pessimistic by nature, Robinson did not expect critics to praise his innovative poetry but he had hoped they would at least acknowledge his existence as a poet. *Captain Craig* made very few ripples at the time on the American poetic scene.

Most poets would have quit writing or else would have altered their style and technique to suit the taste of the critics and the public at this juncture. But Robinson did not do either. In spite of the disappointment, with his typical New England tenacity, he remained firm in his conviction that he was born to be a pioneer of the “new” poetry. He continued to write in the same vein not willing to compromise on good writing. Perhaps it is this stubbornness to write only good poetry that prevented him from getting recognition at an early age. Winters points out that Robinson’s style “...is accurate with the conscientiousness of genius, and such accuracy is invariably a major obstacle to success. Nothing baffles the average critic so completely as honesty – he is prepared for everything but that; and I have the impression that this has been true in every period” (5-6).

The period following the publication of *Captain Craig* was indeed difficult for Robinson. Lack of recognition as a poet, loneliness and poverty combined to reduce him to a wreck. Help came to Robinson from an unexpected quarter in this critical period.

President Theodore Roosevelt came to know of Robinson's work through his son Kermit, who was a pupil at Groton. Roosevelt liked the verse and wrote an article in praise of Robinson's poems for the *Outlook* and persuaded Scribner to reissue *The Children of the Night*. Realizing the poet's financial position, the President also got him a job as special agent of the Treasury at \$2000 per year. But whether the charity was distasteful to Robinson or the disappointment of *Captain Craig* had left him despondent, he wrote very little during his employment under Roosevelt. In 1909 Roosevelt had to step down from the presidency and Robinson resigned his job. Though he had not published since the disappointment of *Captain Craig* he had never stopped writing. He was always aware that writing was the only business that he wanted to do and could do well. Hence he continued to write in spite of the lack of critical approval or public acclaim. In 1910 he published a collection of his poems entitled *The Town Down the River*. The title poem reflects the enthusiasm and relief that Robinson felt at leaving Gardiner with its sorrowful memories behind and taking up residence at New York. Just as the Tilbury Town of his poems was Gardiner, "the town down the river" was New York, a city which gave refuge to many aspiring writers and artists.

In 1911 Robinson was introduced to Mac Dowell colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire, an incident which was fortunate for Robinson and American poetry as it provided him with the space and leisure to write good poetry. He was so pleased with his life at the colony that for the rest of his life he returned every summer to the colony. At about this time he gave up alcohol and took to writing verse prolifically. In 1916 he published *The Man against the Sky* which was precipitated by the war and his reputation which had been on the rise since *The Town Down the River* received a great impetus with this publication.

“The Man against the Sky”, the title poem, is Robinson’s most vociferous attack on materialism. In the poem he asserts his faith in the ultimate meaning of life. He resolves the conflict between spirituality and materialism by arguing that the sufferings of the world can be explained only through faith in an ultimate purpose to human life. In a letter to Hermann Hagedorn the poet stated the theme of this philosophic poem. “The world has been made what it is by upheavals, whether we like them or not. I’ve always told you it’s a hell of a place. That’s why I insist that it must mean something. My July work was a poem on this theme and I call it ‘The Man against the Sky’” (Kaplan 63). Robinson objected to art for art’s sake and never wanted to build imaginary castles in his poems. He believed that poetry was a vocation, a calling, which demanded poets to be of service to humanity. He rejected didactic poetry. But he deplored poetry without values even more. He wanted to root his poems in the reality of everyday life and ponder on the important questions of life so as to discover a meaning and purpose for human life. His response to the important questions of life would help his readers groping in the dark to find the light beyond the darkness of this world. Thus Robinson evolved as an intellectual poet with his own philosophy of light with which he combated the mystery shrouding the world. The early setbacks in his life like the failure of his brothers, the tragic death of his mother, poverty and his own failure to be recognized as a poet only strengthened him and helped him to attain mastery over himself and his art. As Anderson points out aptly, “His basic convictions, philosophic and poetic, were forged in fire” (49). These convictions gained force and strength as he grew older.

In 1917 Robinson published the first of his Arthurian trilogy, *Merlin*, which established his reputation as the greatest living poet of America. If in the early part of his poetic career he was totally neglected, in the latter part he attained great popularity. On his fiftieth birthday, the *New York Times Review of Books* devoted its first page to him. Leading

critics paid glowing tributes to his poetic genius and he received what was due to him since his arrival on the American poetic scene. Revitalized by the public patronage, he started writing profusely and published a collection of poems almost every year. In 1920 appeared his second Arthurian poem *Lancelot* followed by *The Three Taverns* and *Avon's Harvest*. 1921 saw the publication of the first collected edition of Robinson's poems by Macmillan which received the Pulitzer Prize.

In the last phase of his poetic career he devoted much of his energy to writing long poems which were not as successful as his short poems or earlier long poems, though patches of brilliance are visible even in them. Once the tide of popularity and success were set rolling there was no end to it. His poetic genius produced a number of classic works of poetry in the latter years and he reaped success and popularity in profusion. *Roman Bartholow* was published in 1923 and in 1924 was published *The Man Who Died Twice* which fetched for him his second Pulitzer Prize. *Dionysus in Doubt* appeared in 1925 and in 1927 came out the third Arthurian trilogy, *Tristram*, which became a national best seller. The public who had neglected him when he needed encouragement and support to pursue his poetic vision now wholeheartedly supported his genius. He was awarded his third Pulitzer Prize. The American public thus made amends for their early neglect of this truly American poet. Robinson the artist had reached his zenith and the drift downwards had begun. *Cavender's House*, *The Glory of the Nightingales*, *Matthias at the Door*, *Nicodemus*, *Talifer*, *Amaranth* and *King Jasper* which belong to the last phase of his poetic career do not bear testimony to the immortal magic of his poetry though they do encompass poetic techniques like psychological penetration, character revelation and philosophic outlook which raised his early poems to artistic perfection. Most of these poems were long and tedious and could not hold the attention of the readers. The final curtain fell on the life of this truly American

poet on 6th April, 1935.

Since this thesis is a study on the paradigm shift in the social ideology of twentieth century America as reflected in the poetry of Robinson, the social and philosophic background of his poetry is as important as the poetic context. Robinson was born in the Gilded Age when the social scenario of America had transformed abruptly to accommodate the rapid changes in the industrial sphere. As David H Burton points out in his work *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Stages in a New England Poet's Search*:

The years marking the life of the poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 1869 – 1935, span the American experience from the Gilded Age to the New Deal. These were years replete with material growth on an almost unprecedented scale, yet punctuated by notable failures in both the material and the moral orders. (1)

This unprecedented material growth along with skepticism towards the philosophical idealism of traditional Christian theology brought about a rapid proliferation of the philosophy of materialism into twentieth century American society. Though materialism is an age old philosophy it appealed to the popular imagination only at the dawn of the twentieth century. Numerous factors like industrialization, commercialization and disillusionment with Christian theology paved the way to make materialism the most accepted philosophy of modern America. Hence a critique of the philosophy of materialism is imperative to comprehend the reasons for the rapid dissemination of this philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The philosophic basis of materialism is the fact that matter is the only reality and that everything in the world, including thought, will and feeling, can be explained in terms of matter alone. It repudiates centuries of thought and wisdom by opposing the claim that the

body and mind are distinct. It is also antithetical to philosophical idealism which denies the existence of matter. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy explicates materialism as

... the name given to a family of doctrines concerning the nature of the world which give to matter a primary position and accord to mind (or spirit) a secondary, dependent reality or even none at all. Extreme materialism asserts that the real world consists of material things, varying in their states and relations, and nothing else (Edwards 5: 179).

When materialism became the accepted philosophy of twentieth century America, a paradigm shift took place in its social ideology. The pursuit of wealth replaced the penchant for morals and values, skepticism substituted traditional faith in God, religion and idealism and herd identity ousted individual identity. In the early years of the twentieth century there was great jubilation at the economic success brought about by the new social ideology. The gospel of wealth fostered by the new ideology ushered in unprecedented economic prosperity which in turn brought in numerous material comforts. Industrialization paved the way for mass production and made possible easy access to material comforts for all sections of the people. The American populace, enamored by this new prosperity, became ardent supporters of the new ideology, unaware of the dangerous pitfalls in it as well as the philosophy which had given birth to it.

Gradually the evils inherent in the philosophy and in the new social ideology derived from it became apparent. Industrialization and mass production were responsible for routinization of urban life. The obsession with wealth paved the way for cut-throat competition, selfishness, greed, and devaluation of moral and spiritual values. But the most destructive effect of the new social ideology was the alienation of modern man.

Like materialism, alienation is also a term of varied philosophical insights and

connotations. Hence it is necessary to define the term as it is used in this thesis. F.H. Heinemann's definition of alienation describes aptly modern man's condition:

The facts to which the term alienation refers are, objectively, different kinds of disassociation, break or rupture between beings and their objects, whether the latter be other persons, or the natural world, or their own creations of art, science and society; and, subjectively, the corresponding states of disequilibrium, disturbance, strangeness and anxiety. (Murchland 29)

Though alienation is not a modern phenomenon and stems from the very nature of man's life in an alien world, the alienation typical of modern man which has been portrayed by writers like Ibsen, Osborne and Kafka is to a great extent the product of modern social ideology. According to Bernard Murchland, self-alienation can be traced to the eighteenth century, when Rousseau became aware of the role played by society in shackling human freedom and thus thwarting man's fulfillment:

By alienation Rousseau meant in general the unauthentic condition of man which results from the corrupt and contradictory character of society. Being-appearance, transparency-opacity, autonomy-heteronomy, nature-society, sensibility-reason, the private and public selves --these were some of the main dichotomies he saw that pointed to the pervasiveness of alienation.... Society is an artificial world which militates against human development because it demands certain forms of behavior and imposes uniformity as its chief characteristic. As such, society requires the sacrifice of original individuality and idealism; it forbids genuine self-expression and effective action; it fosters hypocrisy and falsehood and lends to 'total deprivation'. (123)

After Rousseau it was Karl Marx who emphasized the close relationship between

alienation and society. Marx inherited his theory of alienation from Hegel, but he objected to Hegel's belief that alienation is a permanent feature of mankind. He came to consider it as a product of society, and of capitalistic society in particular. He believed that the problem of alienation is essentially the plight of man under given political and economic conditions. Hence he considered political ideology to be responsible for the alienation of man and blamed capitalism for it. Though Marx wanted to free society from alienation he was so obsessed with economic considerations and the emancipation of the laboring class that he could not devote enough time to evolve a comprehensive theory of alienation (Murchland 15).

Fromm too delved deep into the problem of alienation and concluded that the alienation typical of modern man was self-alienation or self-estrangement. He gave a detailed description of self-estrangement:

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, are experienced as things are experienced, with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside, productively. (111)

Identification of this self-estrangement is possible through the delineation of certain characteristics like conformity, habitualization, routinization, automatization, reification, atomization and abstractification. Conformity is the tendency of modern man to sacrifice his

individual identity for the sake of belonging to a group or a herd. This urge for herd-identity is so compulsive that “People are willing to risk their lives, to give up their love, to surrender their freedom for the sake of being one of the herd, of conforming, and thus of acquiring a sense of identity, even though it is an illusion” (Fromm 64). Herd identity dominates and controls individual identity in this mode of conformity. Hence modern man conforms to the dictates of the herd or society at all times even when it is destructive to his own personality. This mode of conformity is internalized by modern man at a very young age so that it becomes habitual. This major behavioral change has been instrumental in aggravating self-alienation as his individual identity is suppressed by the herd-identity. Through the perpetuation of the habit of conformity society acquires great power over individuals. Hence society resorts to an important strategy called normalization to foster conformity.

Michele Foucault, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, throws light on this important modern strategy for the imposition of societal ideology which he calls the process of “normalization” (Smart 85). Normalization is the process by which the majority in society conform to the dictates of the society and solely by virtue of this conformity are categorized as the normal members of the society. By the same process, the nonconforming minority are categorized and stigmatized as the abnormal. Normalization is achieved through two important techniques, the first of which is the internalization of the principle of conformity and the second is the normalization of this conforming majority. Society employs subtle methods by which conformity is cultivated in all the members of a society so that it becomes a part of the cultural ideology. This is achieved through religion, art, literature, education and games, all of which encourage and promote conformity. Internalization is very essential in molding future generations to conform thus perpetuating standardization

and uniformity. According to Foucault the normalization process is far from harmless and is a powerful strategy deliberately employed by society to coerce individuals to conform through the marginalization of the nonconforming minority. He reveals the politics operating behind this normalization technique when he states that the normal is defined through the abnormal and when normality and its corresponding norm is defined, the “normal” person has power over the “abnormal” (Smart 85-86). In spite of visible signs of self-alienation which is a form of mental insanity, the conforming majority is accepted as the normal by the herd. Thus there is a reversal by which the insane majority becomes the “normal” and the sane minority is stigmatized as the “abnormal”. This powerful “normal” majority occupies the centre of modern society and the “abnormal” minority is pushed to the margins. Since the majority is insane and suffers from self-alienation, consensual validation which was accepted as a sign of reason and normalcy in the past is no more indicative of rationality or mental health. “The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same form of mental pathology does not make these people sane” (Fromm 23).

Habitualization, which is another characteristic of self-alienation, is the process of continuous repetition by which an activity becomes an automatic response to a stimulus. This automatic response is gradually internalized to become a habit. Habitualization plays an important role in the internalization of not only conformity but all the other characteristics like routinization, automatization etc. which are responsible for the alienation of modern man. Routinization, as the very word denotes, is the forceful imposition of routine life which has become an important strategy in imposing modern social ideology. Extreme routinization deprives man of the ability for a balanced perspective and he lives out

of touch with the fundamental realities of life. Another characteristic of modern man's alienation is automatization. Man in the modern world has become mechanized and his decisions are not the products of cognition and rationalization but mechanical and automatic. Reification has also contributed greatly to the alienation of modern man. It deprives man of his humane nature and converts him into an inanimate thing. Marx holds capitalism and the marketing-orientation of capitalist philosophy responsible for depriving man of his essential organic nature and reducing him to the status of a thing. Atomization is another quality that distinguishes alienated man from the normal. Fromm throws light on this malady and states that "Modern society consists of "atoms" (if we use the Greek equivalent of "individual") little particles estranged from each other but held together by selfish interests and by the necessity to make use of each other" (127). Abstractification which is typical of the modern world is another characteristic which contributes to the alienation of man. Modern business which deals with millions of customers, thousands of stockholders, workers and employees and makes personal contact among the members of a business establishment impossible is one example of the modern process of abstractification. But abstractification is not limited to business alone. It has affected every aspect of modern man's life so much so that people are experienced as things to be exchanged for value rather than human beings.

Since modern man's alienation stemmed from the existing social ideology the remedy for alienation lay in the restructuring of society so as to liberate it from the excesses of materialism. Materialism had to be replaced by a philosophy which would reduce the alienation in modern societies. Robinson found an alternative to materialism in idealism. Idealism is the philosophy which propounds that being is determined by thought and is primarily opposed to materialism and realism. The poet's idealism was unique in that it was

opposed to materialism but not altogether antithetical to realism. His idealism which he calls “Optimistic Desperation” is a combination of the optimism derived from an idealistic belief in an ordered universe with the desperation arising from the factual realism of world phenomena (Smith 30). The grimness and sordidness of the material world was cause for despair. But this hopelessness was countered by a belief in the ultimate meaning and purposefulness of life. The poet says that “If a reader doesn’t get from my books an impression that life is very worthwhile, even though it may not seem always to be profitable or desirable, I can only say that he doesn’t see what I’m driving at” (Barnard 204). Thus Robinson’s poetry can be said to comprise of skepticism towards materialism, a reflection of alienation in modern society and a belief in an idealism rooted in realism.

Robinson’s poetry as well as his philosophy has been subjected to scrutiny and analysis by many critics notable among them being Hermann Hagedorn, David H Burton, Ellsworth Barnard, Estelle Kaplan, Wallace L. Anderson, Charles Cestre and Yvor Winters. Hagedorn’s biography of Robinson throws light on the life of the poet and the circumstances that shaped Robinson’s poetry and philosophy. Burton exposes the faulty social ideology of the age which was characterized by the American preoccupation with business and commerce. This obsession with wealth gave the age its name, the Gilded age, in which success was judged according to material standards. The heroes of the age were young men who had succeeded in the commercial, industrial, and financial spheres. Burton emphasizes the internalization of the materialistic culture by the American youth and the consequent paradigm shift in the social ideology of the nation in his work. He states that:

A new generation was being nourished on the belief that the remaining frontiers to occupy were the marketplace, the factory, the counting house. Immigrants mixed with native sons and daughters both groups sharing the

creed of material advancement. The newcomers readily learnt what the old stock had had bred into it, namely, the promise of America was significantly materialistic. (5)

Another critic who analyzed the impact of the philosophy of materialism on American society and Robinson's objection to the philosophy was Barnard. He proved conclusively that Robinson was an antimaterialist. Most critics agree that Robinson was an idealist. Kaplan, Anderson and Cestre have made a detailed study of Robinson's philosophy and all three have proposed that he was an idealist and that his idealism was counter to the materialism of his age. According to Kaplan, "Robinson's disillusionment, fatalism and skepticism are mingled from the start, with his humor, or sense of comedy, and with his idealistic loyalty to truth. Robinson constantly presents this idealistic faith in "light" as a contrast to the realism and mechanistic materialism of the age" (36). But Kaplan asserts that Robinson's idealism was not born of any blind optimism. He throws light on the influence of Schopenhauer as interpreted by Royce in shaping Robinson's philosophy of idealism. She proves undoubtedly that Robinson was greatly influenced by Royce's interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy. A quotation from Royce's work *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* will prove this point. "I think that the best man is the one who can see the truth of pessimism, can absorb and transcend that truth and can be nevertheless an optimist, not by virtue of his failure to recognize the evil of life, but by virtue of his readiness to take part in the struggle against evil" (Kaplan 28). This statement reflects almost exactly Robinson's philosophy of life as expressed in his poetry. Anderson in his work, *Robinson: A Critical Introduction* refutes Robinson's pessimism and asserts that his philosophy "was positive, even optimistic.... Robinson could not conceive of a maleficent deity, nor of a chaotic universe reeling through eons of endless time; to him the universe had both order and

purpose, and man's transient life on earth was part of a larger plan" (55). Cestre also agrees with Anderson's assertion of the poet's idealism and observes that "Robinson's poetry, at its highest, overleaps the barriers of realism and expands in the sphere of liberated thought, where reason and faith, transcending the accidents of mortal life, descry the beauty and hopefulness of ultimate values" (22-23). Winters classifies Robinson as a "counter romantic" in his work *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (27). He analyses Robinson's poem "Hillcrest" to prove his argument:

... the poem represents a pretty explicit negation of the essential ideas of the romantic movement, especially as the movement has been represented by the Emersonian tradition: it tells us that life is a very trying experience, to be endured only with pain and to be understood only with difficulty; that easy solutions are misleading; that all solutions must be scrutinized; and that understanding is necessary. (30-31)

There has been a renewed interest in the poetry and philosophy of Robinson in recent years. In 1994 *The Essential Robinson* edited by Donald Hall was published. "In his foreword, Hall argued that Robinson's reputation had been unjustly sacrificed on the altar of modernism.... 'We must restore Robinson to the American pantheon'" (Donaldson 478). 1997 saw the publication of the *Selected Poems* edited by Robert Faggen. This was followed by the 1999 Modern Library edition of *The Poetry of E. A. Robinson* edited by Robert Mezey. The interest in Robinson's poetry and his life long devotion to the cause of antimaterialism gained momentum with the comprehensive biography of the poet written by Scott Donaldson published in 2007.

Thus Robinson's antimaterialism, realism and idealism have been much discussed by critics and scholars. But so far, only one critic has discovered a relation between the concept

of alienation and Robinson's poetry. In his article "The Alienated Self" W.R. Robinson treats the theme of alienation as projected by Robinson in his poetry. "...the twentieth century is the age of alienation and alienated man can be found with ease and in abundance in Robinson's poetry" (128). He also throws light on the conflict between the individual and society as portrayed by Robinson:

... in every poem, regardless of what happens, the initial truth, the given condition of human existence, is the alienation of self from society, a schism between art and social values, the spirit and social forms, the soul and doctrine, the Light and the world. And finally that schism is an irremediable dichotomy in man's being between his personal and his social self. (137)

In his essay W.R. Robinson attempts a generalized study of the problem of alienation in Robinson's poetry. In this thesis an attempt to make a detailed yet specific study of social alienation in relation to the principle of nonconformity has been undertaken. The study asserts that alienation is the direct result of the normalization process propagated by the philosophy of materialism. The process of normalization categories people into the "normal" and the "abnormal", not based on the criterion of normalcy but on conformity. The internalization of the conformity creed deprives modern man of his individual identity and fosters herd identity. The imposition of herd identity leads to the complete deprivation of individual identity and results in self-estrangement as portrayed by Robinson. But the poet is not so much interested in the self-alienation of the majority in society. He focuses his attention on the social alienation of the minority since the socially alienated minority is marginalized and voiceless. Robinson becomes the voice of this marginalized group and attempts to subvert the "success myth" propagated by the dominant social ideology. Materialistic America regarded wealth as the basic requirement for success. The poet

shatters this myth by exposing the self-alienation of the so called “successful”, and the self-fulfillment of the marginalized nonconforming minority in American society. The thesis thus attempts to analyze the purpose of Robinson’s poetry, which was the subversion of the dominant social ideology of twentieth century American society.

A hundred years have passed since the publication of Robinson’s first collection of poems, *The Torrent and the Night Before*. It is easier and more accurate now to assign him his rightful place in the poetic tradition. But a major hurdle in doing so lies in the particular period into which he was born--the transition from the old world to the new. But he combines in his poetry innovation and tradition, in a skillful manner to produce some of the greatest poetry written in the English language. Though many critics exclude him from the group of modern poetic innovators because of his persistent use of traditional forms, nobody can deny him his pioneering position regarding the themes. He brought realism into American poetry by making clerks, butchers and misers the heroes of his poems. His originality lay in his spirit and philosophy while his technique remained old fashioned and traditional. His greatest achievement lies in the psychological insight with which he painted a gallery of portraits unequalled in American poetry. He detested experimentation for the sake of being different. Poetry, he affirmed, had to be particular and universal at the same time. And his poetry has the mark of real poetic genius by being particular and universal at the same time. Whether we place him in the nineteenth or the twentieth century, he has a coveted position among the best poets of both these centuries. Anderson makes a comparative assessment of Robinson and states that “he compares more than favorably and in some ways surpassingly well” with the four major American poets of the nineteenth century, Poe, Emerson, Whitman and Emily Dickson. Evaluating twentieth century poetry, he concludes that:

There were of course some fine poets who produced some excellent poems, but of all of those variously regarded as “new poets” – Frost, Sandburg, Masters, Amy Lowell, Fletcher, Lindsay, Williams, Pound, Eliot and a host of lesser figures--only two appear to be of equal stature with Robinson, namely, Frost and Eliot. (153)

The focal point of this dissertation is Robinson’s effort to destabilize the dominant social ideology of the Gilded Age in America. This dominant social ideology was characterized by an obsession with wealth, status and material possessions and neglect of spiritual and moral values. It also propagated the “success myth” according to which success was defined by wealth and status in society. This destructive social ideology, the poet believed, was responsible for the self- alienation of the conforming majority and the social alienation of the nonconforming minority. Robinson considered it his moral responsibility to expose the hazards of materialism and create an awareness of the destructiveness inherent in the social ideology shaped by materialism. With a crusader’s zeal he revealed the discrepancies in the philosophy of materialism. His poems also portray the self-alienation and social alienation prevalent in twentieth century American society as a result of the cultural creed propagated by materialism. Hence a textual analysis of Robinson’s poems have been undertaken to throw light on Robinson’s abhorrence towards the philosophy of materialism on theoretical and cultural grounds. The thesis also analyses the social alienation of the nonconforming minority and their marginalization in twentieth century American society.

This thesis is structured into six chapters including the introduction and the conclusion. The Introduction contextualizes the poet in the Gilded Age in America and attempts a detailed analysis of the social ideology of the age. The chapter also analyses the

concept of alienation from a modern perspective and differentiates between the self-alienation of the conformist and the social alienation of the nonconformist. A brief sketch of Robinson's personal life, adequate to throw light on the influences which shaped his poetry and his philosophy, has also been included in the chapter.

Chapter 2 entitled "Robinson the Antimaterialist" discusses the characteristic features of a materialistic society and Robinson's aversion to the philosophy of materialism which forms the philosophic backbone of his poetry. A textual analysis of ten poems has been undertaken to prove the fallacies inherent in materialistic philosophy and the poet's endeavor to disrupt the dominant social ideology. To expose the fallacies and contradictions inherent in the philosophy of materialism, the poem "The Man against the Sky" has been analyzed. The influence of Hindu philosophy on shaping the poet's philosophy is also explored. The symbolism involved in the creation of the fictional town called Tilbury is next discussed to throw light on the dominant social ideology of American towns and cities at the beginning of the twentieth century. The other aspects of materialism discussed in the chapter are the dichotomy of the artist in a materialistic society, Tilbury hypocrisy, the impact of industrialization on small entrepreneurs, the spiritual and moral degeneration of materialistic society, the probable repercussions of the new social ideology on future generations, the cause of individual freedom and the evils propagated by capitalism.

Chapter 3 is entitled "Alienation of the Nonconformist" and attempts to analyze the characteristics of modern authority and the normalization process which divides society into the normal and the abnormal on the basis of conformity and the modern phenomenon of alienation. Though self-alienation and social alienation have been discussed in the chapter, the focus is on social alienation. Ten poems-- "Richard Cory", "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford", "Rembrandt to Rembrandt", "The Three Taverns", "Flammonde",

“Eben Flood”, “Miniver Cheevy”, “Aunt Imogen”, Matthias at the Door”, and “Dionysus in Doubt” -- have been explicated in the chapter.

Chapter 4 entitled “Optimistic Desperation” proposes Robinson’s alternative to materialism, a unique idealism rooted in realism. Ten poems have been taken up for evaluation in this chapter. The chapter attempts to project Robinson’s idealism which is closely aligned to humanism without losing sight of the basic concept of idealism which is the faith in a benevolent Power which controls the universe.

Chapter 5 entitled “The Essential Robinson: Fusion of Theme and Technique” attempts a detailed assessment of Robinson’s poetic craft with a view to highlighting the deliberate evolution of a poetic style adapted to the exposure of alienation. The characteristics of this unique poetic style like epigrammatic and evocative quality, the use of irony, comparison and contrast and psychological insight are analyzed with reference to his poems.

The Conclusion sums up the various strands of thought explored in the earlier chapters. An attempt has been made to place Robinson and his philosophy in relation to the postmodern scenario. The chapter also outlines the contribution of this thesis to the study of literature and also dwells on the scope for further study.