

Chapter 4

Optimistic Desperation

In the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to analyze the evils in the dominant social ideology of America which led to self- alienation of the majority and social alienation of the minority. The conclusion drawn from it is that the philosophy of materialism was responsible for the corrupt social ideology and the alienation resulting from it. But it is not enough to understand and analyze a problem. To overcome the evil, it is imperative to seek and systematize a remedy. Robinson found an alternative to the philosophy of materialism in idealism, a unique idealism which he believed would reduce the alienation in modern society.

Though an idealist Robinson did not equate idealism with an ideal world. He had too much of the scientific temper in him to ignore facts or material reality. This scientific temper gave him a glimpse of reality which was tainted by suffering and misery. The world was dark, mysterious and inscrutable. It is this perception of the dark side of life that compelled him to sing of darkness and misery. But he was aware of the sunshine too, and it is this consciousness that complicated his poems with a paradoxical coexistence of good and evil. This conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, joy and sorrow is reflected in his poems and renders them mysterious. He sought an explanation for the paradoxical nature of life and formulated a philosophy that explicated the contradiction. He discovered that most of the time sorrow outweighed happiness in human life. But this did not prevent him from having an optimistic view of life since he believed in a benevolent Architect who created the universe. His idealism was thus a combination of realism and transcendentalism, pessimism and optimism. Robinson's philosophy of idealism or "Optimistic Desperation" resolved the conflict between optimism in the ultimate fruitfulness of life and desperation arising from

the sufferings of the world (Smith 301). He asserted that the world is far from being a heaven, but that life is still worth living. It is this belief that prompted him to write to Hagedorn, "The world has been made what it is by upheavals, whether we like them or not. I've always told you it's a hell of a place. That's why I insist that it must mean something" (Kaplan 63). The very fact that the world is hell is reason enough to suppose that human life has some ultimate purpose that is incomprehensible to human mind. Each creation is the wish fulfillment of the creator and as such no creator would want his creation to suffer. The Divine Architect would not have created the Universe with a transient objective.

The first step in establishing Robinson as an idealist would be to remove the stigma of pessimism surrounding him. There has been a lot of debate among critics and scholars on whether Robinson was a pessimist or not. This debate has raged since the publication of his first collection of poems *The Torrent and the Night Before*. B.R. Redman, reviewing this first volume remarked that "His humor is of a grim sort and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison house". Robinson retorted with a statement which has since been quoted by Robinson lovers as his philosophy of life. "The world is not a prison house but a spiritual kindergarten where bewildered infants spell God with the wrong blocks" (Kaplan 20). Human beings lack knowledge of the Architect who has shaped them and His plans regarding His creation. But human ignorance does not negate the Architect or His benign nature. This idea forms the basis of Robinson's philosophy-- the belief that there is a benevolent power that controls the universe though he could not name it or describe it.

Robinson's pessimism was the product of the twentieth century obsession for realism. His adherence to reality revealed to him a very grim and miserable world which he portrayed faithfully in his poems. Hence, the initial response to Robinson's poems is usually that of gloom and pessimism. This is not surprising considering the fact that he presented a

realistic picture of the miseries and sorrows of life. The evil atmosphere has put off many a reader from reading them. But to say that Robinson was a pessimist is far from the truth. He was often shocked by this label of pessimism attached to his poems since he thought of himself as an incurable optimist. He tried to clarify his outlook and said, "I've been called a fatalist, a pessimist and an optimist so many times that I am beginning to believe that I must be all three....If a reader doesn't get from my books an impression 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" (Kaplan 63). It is apparent from this statement that he was an optimist who believed in the worthiness of human life. But his optimism was not the blind optimism based on illusion and deceit. He expressed his contempt for such blind optimism. "Most people are afraid of life that when they see it coming their first impulse is to get behind a tree and shut their eyes. And for some odd reason they call this impulse optimism" (Barnard 205).

Robinson's optimism, on the other hand, was firmly rooted in material reality. He would not deny material reality. What he denied as unnecessary was materialism and not material reality. Material reality did not prevent him from having a deep conviction in the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. He gave expression to this conviction quite frequently in his writings: "I am inclined to be a trifle solemn in my verses, but I intend that there shall always be at least a suggestion of something wiser than hatred and something better than despair" (Barnard 207). He describes his unique optimism in a letter to Edith Brower, "When a kind mother wallops her only child does she not do so for the supposed wisdom of the thing. And when the Eternal Wisdom of the Universe makes life hell for us poor devils cannot the spiritual age perceive a living principle of compensation..." (Cary, letters 55). There is always a redeeming light that softens the darkness of his grim world. There is

always a flicker of hope in his poems that imparts strength and courage to human beings. His poems usually end on this note of hope in the worthiness of human life. In Octave XXII (CP 107) he affirms this faith in a benign God:

He sees beyond the groaning borough lines
Of Hell, God's highways gleaming, and he knows
That Love's complete communion is the end
Of anguish to the liberated man.

Most critics agree that he was an idealist. Smith in *Where the Light Falls* remarks that Robinson believed idealism to be the only satisfactory interpretation of life and that his idealism had certain fundamental beliefs like "...first, that there was some central Meaning which was working itself out in the Scheme, second, that human or natural reason cannot fathom it, and, third, that man is helpless before its omnipotence" (312-13). Another critic who believed in Robinson's idealism was Kaplan who asserts that, "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). Anderson also throws light on Robinson's idealism when he remarks that "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). Further analyzing Robinson's idealism, Anderson states that "Since philosophical idealism manifested itself in a variety of forms during the nineteenth century, it is more meaningful to define Robinson's idealism as modified transcendentalism, a composite of Carlyle, Emerson and Sweden Borg filtered through the mind and temperament of the poet" (56). Cestre also endorses the poet's idealism and is of

the opinion 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 moral life, descry the beauty and hopefulness of ultimate values" (22-23).

Robinson's idealism has certain distinctive qualities that make it typically Robinsonian. It is an amalgamation of contradictory states like pessimism and optimism, hope and desperation, good and evil, realism and spiritualism and light and darkness. The reconciliation of these antithetical qualities is justified as it mirrors the harmony arising out of the fusion of discordant principles which is found in nature. The trials and tribulations of life do not make him a cynic because he realizes that God has some purpose in making man suffer in the world. Cynicism arises from ignorance, and wisdom enables man to recognize the humor that God sees and enjoys in human follies. This would result in "resignation" and not "lamentation" (Kaplan 44). His poems reflect his unique idealism through the delineation of themes like hope and optimism rooted in realism, peace and contentment through repentance, opposition to materialism, belief in predestination, necessity of stoic endurance and self-knowledge, belief in the role of the Spirit in human life and recognition of Christ as Savior.

Many of Robinson's poems portray his optimism arising from a belief in the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. Three poems "L'envoi"(CP 108), "Credo" (CP 94), and "Isaac and Archibald"(SP 23) are analyzed to illustrate that Robinson was basically an optimist and not a pessimist. The three poems treat the poet's varying shades of optimism. "L'envoi" is a simple sonnet descrying the harmony of the universe. In "Credo" too the poet expresses his belief in a purposeful universe though there is greater complication and concentration effected through the use of the light imagery. In "Isaac and Archibald" the poet portrays two ideal people with "sun-receptive" minds who in their simplicity and innocence are imbued

with spiritual values.

“L’envoi” is a beautiful sonnet in which Robinson affirms his faith in a God who is kind and benevolent. The usual gloom and grimness found in Robinson’s poems are absent and the whole sonnet resounds with the harmonious music of the universe. The rationale behind this faith in the beauty and purpose of nature is not the romantic creed but a far more factual and realistic idealism. The apparent contradiction between realism and idealism is resolved in the poet’s philosophy of “optimistic desperation” which fuses together discordant strands like transcendentalism and realism. Though Robinson’s philosophy is of the scientific age because of its realism, it looks beyond scientific realism towards immortality.

Now in a thought, now in a shadowed word,

Now in a voice that thrills eternity,

Ever there comes an onward phrase to me

Of some transcendent music I have heard; (1– 4)

The greatest problem of the modern age is the conflict between science and faith, the question of the supremacy of scientific reality over spirituality. Since the age was fertile for the growth of the scientific temperament it led to the gradual ascendancy of science and a consequent devaluation of spirituality. Scientific reality came to be regarded as the ultimate reality. The majority, who in the past were ardent supporters of religious faith since it accorded immortality to man, became vociferous advocates of scientific truth. The minority who questioned the infallibility of science were isolated and stigmatized as the abnormal. Robinson belonged to the alienated minority who were unable to accept scientific reality as the ultimate and only reality. The mysterious nature of the universe was evidence enough for a transcendent presence which though not explicitly understood was beyond doubt a reality.

The poet is so thrilled by the harmonious music of the universe that he finds in it evidence for the belief that this music is not of the world. He is certain that no musical instrument can play this music. The only instrument which can produce this celestial music is man and the only musician who can compose this divine music is God. If the world is a mere material reality, chaos and confusion would be the outcome. The beauty and harmony of the universe point to the validity of the theory of creation and the divine and benevolent nature of this Creator. Time and space are significant concepts only in a material world and are antithetical to eternity. The poem ends on a note of hope by affirming the eternal nature of divine music and the immortality of man.

No kind of instrument? Ah, yes, there is;

And after time and place are overthrown,

God's touch will keep its one chord quivering. (12 – 14)

Unlike “L’envoi” the sonnet “Credo” is about the grimness and sordidness of the world and the human predicament arising from this life in a miserable world. The pessimism attributed to Robinson is apparent in the octave where the poet describes the pathetic condition of man who is groping in the darkness and fails to find his way because of the lack of a guiding star to show the way. The use of the adjective “shrouded” in the second line to qualify the “heavens” is evocative of death and loss of faith. The octave has an audio-visual effect as a result of the three striking images used. The first is the already stated one of the shrouded heavens and the star. The second imagery is from music. The poet laments the lack of a “living voice” nearby to guide human beings in their journey of life. He adds to the mystery by describing the remoteness of this “living voice” which is heard as a part of a “lost” “imperial music” (4-6). The third image presents a grim and unnatural scene where angels weave flowerless garlands out of dead leaves. All three images reinforce

the darkness and mystery of the world. Though the sestet also begins with a lamentation of the “black and awful chaos of the night” there is a shift of tone towards the end of the sestet and the poem ends in the hope of redemption (11). Spirituality imparts the vision to see the light beyond the darkness and chaos of human misery. The poet inspires men to endure the sufferings of life with courage and to look with hope on the glory that is to come in the future. The Light though not visible at all times, is ever present.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night,
For through it all - above, beyond it all
I know the far sent messages of the years
I feel the coming glory of the Light. (9-14)

The symbolic use of light and darkness is a special poetic device that Robinson uses to resolve the conflict between hope and despair. He makes use of varying degrees of white and black, from bright white sunlight to different shades of gray. Light represents the Spirit and has the redeeming power to alleviate the darkness and evils of the world. But this light is visible only to those who have their eyes and minds open to truth. This light was denied to the "sun-shut mind" of the materialist (Captain Craig 1710). But those minds which are receptive to the sun are aware of the Light that redeems human life.

In his poem "Isaac and Archibald" Robinson portrays two “sun- receptive” minds in the two men, Isaac and Archibald. The poem is set in a pastoral atmosphere and the two characters Isaac and Archibald are infused with a pastoral simplicity and innocence. This poem is very different from Robinson’s other poems as he has excluded darkness and

grimness entirely from the poem. Hope and faith are ever present and alleviates the sufferings of the world. There is a romantic beauty and peace in the poem which is in contrast to the turmoil and frustration of modern urban civilization. The simplicity of diction and narration is in accordance to the theme and setting. The poem narrates the story of two old men Isaac and Archibald who in their pastoral simplicity are contrasted with Tilbury townsmen who represent material culture. The poem opens with a journey undertaken by Isaac along with the narrator to Archibald's cottage. The purpose of the journey is to ascertain Archibald's good health since Isaac has a premonition that Archibald is growing old and showing signs of infirmity.

Isaac and Archibald were two old men.

I knew them, and I may have laughed at them

A little, but I must have honored them

For they were old, and they were good to me. (1-4)

To bring out the innocence and simplicity of the rural setting Robinson uses a twelve year old boy as the narrator of the story. The world is viewed objectively through the nonconformist eyes of a twelve year old, to bring out the spiritual hollowness of the material world as opposed to the spiritual fulfillment of a life lived in accordance to the laws of nature. The poem is full of contrasts-youth against experience, rusticity versus urbanity, the Spirit against the world and modernity versus tradition. The narrator recalls with nostalgia the long walk he took with Isaac when he was a boy. The poet juxtaposes the boy with old Isaac with the objective of contrasting youth with experience. The day was hot and the narrator was tired and complained of the scorching heat after a mile. But Isaac enjoyed the walk and said that "the day was like a dream, / And praised the Lord, and talked about the breeze" (36-37). Isaac's overwhelming gratitude and contentment over the little

things of life is contrasted with youthful and urban frustration. Spirituality imparts men with a positive attitude that recognizes the good in human life, while materialism fosters a negative attitude that sees only the evil in the world. The materialist derives happiness from material success alone. But since material success is transient it cannot bestow peace and tranquility.

The poem also exposes the "sun-shut mind" of the materialist. They are not bestowed with spirituality and hence they find no sense to life. Spiritual vision is denied to the materialist since his inner eye lacks sight. He has only a worldly vision which gives him sensory perception and helps him to enjoy the beauty of the material world. But he is denied a balanced vision which combines sensory perception with spiritual insight.

You have the eyes –

Oh, Yes - but you have not the other things:

The sight within that never will deceive, (58-60)

The passage of time brings old age accompanied by physical and mental changes. The poet hints at the frailties of old age which make the last stage of human life miserable. The worst affliction of old age is loneliness. But loneliness would be worse for the self-alienated materialist than the isolated rustic as he does not have faith in the Light which guides men through the darkness of old age. True friendship is a blessing of the sun-receptive minds, and Isaac and Archibald are blessed with true friendship which provides consolation to them in old age and provides them courage in the face of death.

It comes without your knowing when it comes;

You know that he is changing, and you know

That he is going - just as I know now

That Archibald is going, and that I

Am staying. (97-101)

Old age and death are less severe for the ‘sun-receptive minds’ and they are optimistic about their life even in old age. There is still sunshine in their lives. Isaac and Archibald are representatives of two ideal human beings who are kind and unselfish. They are children of the sun and the Light guides them in their journey through life.

The sunshine lights

A good road yet before us if we look,

And we are doing that when least we know it;

For both of us were children of the sun, (262-265)

The poet affirms the presence of the Light that illumines the darkness of the world. Archibald tells the boy the role that the Light plays in providing certitude to an uncertain life. Though old age brings frailty and suffering, men with spiritual vision are always conscious of the Spirit. It is this faith in the Spirit, the faith in the Light that gives them the courage to face the shadow of death. |

But I am old and I must think of them;

I'm in the shadow, but I don't forget

The light, my boy - the Light behind the stars. (300-302)

The poem shatters the myth of pessimism surrounding Robinson's poetry with its forward looking stance. There is no despair but a firm faith in the glory yet to come. The presence of the “white sun” dispels the darkness of the world and fills it with a fragrance and vital warmth which are signs of a glorious future. But glory and happiness lie beyond the forest which is a metaphor the poet uses for the evil lurking in the world:

I felt

Within the mightiness of the white sun
That smote the land around us and wrought out
A fragrance from the trees, a vital warmth
And fullness for the time that was to come,
And a glory for the world beyond the forest. (340-45)

The poem puts forward an alternative world of idealism as opposed to the world of materialism represented by Tilbury town. The qualities that characterize this community are sun-receptiveness, care and concern for others and being true to one's inner self. Isaac and Archibald possess these qualities which allow them to inhabit the world of idealism. Though Robinson uses pastoral setting for his ideal world, he does not prescribe a return to rusticity as the answer to modern man's dilemma. If there is a solution to man's problems it lies in a rejection of materialism rather than a return to tradition. The poem depicts Isaac and the narrator as walking away from Tilbury town symbolizing their rejection of materialism. They walk towards Archibald's cottage, an ideal world in which hardships of the material world are fused with spiritual strength and fortitude.

The only other poem written by Robinson with a happy ending is "Talifer"(CP 1231). But unlike "Isaac and Archibald" which symbolizes rusticity, innocence and simplicity, Talifer is a love poem embodying one of his favorite themes —sin and punishment and the joy that comes from rectifying one's mistakes at the right time. The poem begins in gloom and despair with Talifer's decision to reject Althea's love and marry Karen who he thinks would give him peace and happiness. Dr. Quick, a common friend of Talifer and Althea, does not merely treat physical illnesses but is also a doctor for mental maladies. He comforts Althea with his prophetic remarks about the disintegration of a marriage of convenience. He wisely advises her to remain patient and believe in the healing touch of

Time. The poem teaches the importance of patience when sufferings and miseries overwhelm human beings:

Believe in time - which holds for many, I fear,
Only itself and emptiness. For you,
You know not what it holds. But you must wait,
And save yourself to wait. Patience will help
To save, but will not come if not invited; (370-74)

Althea's burning love for Talifer is contrasted with the cold beauty of Karen. Karen is portrayed as a "trout" lacking in human qualities. She is incapable of love and has a cold inhuman composure at all times. The poet uses words like "cool", "unimpassioned" and "refrigerated" to bring out her lack of passion and sensitivity:

In a land burning certainly to ashes,
You are as cool and lovely as a trout
Of just what unimpassioned particles
Are you composed, I wonder. In this weather,
How do you show yourself so heinously
Refrigerated, and so heavenly clean? (418-23)

The poem reveals Robinson's contempt for marriages of convenience rather than true love. He has portrayed such loveless marital situations which destroy the happiness of both husband and wife in several poems like "Eros Turannos"(CP 32)and "The Whip"(CP 338). The conflict arising out of a loveless marriage is a favorite theme of Robinson and this theme is the focal point of "Talifer" too. However the protagonist realizes his mistake and resolves to make amends. Hence the poem ends in love and happiness. There is an inference that Talifer was able to make amends, and joy was restored because it was fated to

be so. But Talifer suffers for his misdeed before peace is restored. The conclusion drawn is that suffering is a requisite for wisdom.

It is because Talifer suffered in his marriage to Karen that he understood the real worth of Althea. The poet describes in poignant words the sufferings of Talifer when he realizes his blunder in rejecting Althea's true love and marrying the "cold" Karen. Karen lived in a world of books and was incapable of love. Karen had never loved Talifer and the only reason she married him was because she "wanted what Althea wanted" (1653). So it was not love but rather envy that drove her to marry him. Hence Talifer is deprived of marital bliss and home is no more a place of joy for him. "It did not look like home / And felt less like it as he entered it" (1358-59).

The Church in collaboration with the State plays an important role in perpetuating the material creed. Though in theory the Church proclaims the need for spirituality, in practice it encourages materialism. This contradiction was unacceptable to the poet. He rejected the conventions and dogmas of the church since he could not identify his God with the God of institutionalized religion. As Burton opines, "In his poetry God is not so much a person as a force, a Divine Force for Good, which motivates men and turns them in the direction of God" (279). The church forces upon individuals customs that shatter their peace and happiness. As the institution of marriage is regarded as sacred and binding by the church it does not free individuals trapped in an unhappy marriage.

And he had bound himself by church and state,
In a blind lapse of pagan turbulence,
To a soul-frozen disillusionment
That was not woman and was not for man. (1365-68)

Talifer is luckier than most men bonded in an unhappy marriage as fate intervenes on

his behalf and frees him from his destructive marriage. His frigid wife is so frightened by his overtures of love that she takes refuge in Dr. Quick's house. Realizing her incapacity to love a man, Dr.Quick dissuades Karen from going back to Talifer. Unlike the church which perpetuates discordant marriages for the sake of convention, Dr. Quick persuades Karen to go away from Talifer's life and free him from the bonds of an unhappy marriage. Talifer realizes he is very fortunate to have a second chance to make the right choice and marry Althea who loves him fervently. He does not waste this second chance and rectifies the mistake that he made in marrying Karen. Most people are not given a second chance and suffer to the end of their days. Talifer is fortunate to be given a second chance. The moment Karen leaves his life, he asks Althea's forgiveness and takes her as his wife. This time the choice is wise and Talifer reaps peace and joy from his union with Althea. It is a mutually satisfying relationship which brings happiness to both of them. The birth of a son enhances their joy.

Talifer, smiling,

With eyes that were no longer terrifying

Saw now around him only quiet and rest,

And realization; and with grateful ears

That were attuned again to pleasant music,

Heard nothing but the mellow bells of peace. (2312-17)

Thus the harmony which had been disrupted for a while is reestablished. Man can attain peace not by conforming to convention and tradition but by living in harmony with the natural laws of the universe. "And there is a law stronger / Than all the suns that has you in its keeping" (1704-05).

Idealism is the notion that material reality is transient and only spiritual fulfillment

can ensure immortality to man. Since Robinson had shaped his ideology on this belief he objected to the materialistic way of life. In his poem "Ponce De Leon"(CP 1187), he probes into the life of the Spanish explorer Ponce De Leon and proves that the wealth that Ponce De Leon has made by exploiting the natives of Puerto Rica is futile in saving his life or in giving him a peaceful and contented death. The poem exposes the limitations of scientific knowledge in saving his life and advocates a rejection of materialism. Ponce De Leon has amassed a lot of wealth from his voyages to the American continent, but he remains dissatisfied with what he has achieved. One of the greatest disadvantages of a desire for worldly wealth and glory is that man is never satisfied. It only begets in him avarice for more wealth and fame. This was the case with Ponce De Leon too. In spite of the wealth that he had plundered from the natives his greed is not satiated and once more he undertakes a journey to America for acquiring more wealth. This voyage had one more objective-- that of discovering the "fountain of youth" rumored to be present in the continent. On coming across an island filled with foliage and blossoms he names it Florida and goes in search of the "fountain of youth". But unfortunately an arrow from one of the natives pierces his thigh. There is irony in the fact that the very same island where he had gone in search of the fountain of youth furnishes him his fatal wound. His men take him to Havana where lives a sage and physician who might be able to cure his wound. Robinson presents the character of the physician as a contrast to Ponce De Leon. The physician has devoted his whole life to the study of the human body and mind, while Ponce De Leon has wasted away his life in mortal acts of exploitation, conquest and acquisition.

There is a man of learning in Havana

A sage and a physician, an old man,

Whose ways are famous. Men have said of him

That he reads all that we have written on us
Of what we are within, and has a genius
In all obscured things that are physical,
To make them right and well. (25-31)

The old sage emphasizes the importance of spiritual quest over worldly quest and how spiritual search results in peace and happiness, whereas exploitation of the earth and nature may end in punishment and depletion of the resources of the world. Like Wordsworth, Robinson too regards nature as a friend, philosopher and guide. Those who tread the path of nature are more content and peaceful than those who pursue material pleasures.

Be a child again

In spirit, and our Savior will reward you,
But if you be a child again in deeds,
He may be overtaxed, and leave to nature
Those who offend it. He left nature with us
That we should recognize it and observe it,
And through it find a wiser way to grace
Than we are finding yet. (56-63)

De Leon realizes from the words of the old sage that there is no cure for his malady. This leads him to think of his past life and the transience of all worldly wealth and pleasure. He feels sorry for the unjust acts of exploitation that he has committed towards the innocent natives of America. The old physician asks De Leon to recall his valorous deeds as a conqueror to boost him up. But De Leon is aware that death is fast approaching and feels no glory in his past deeds but only shame and regret. The poet brings out the futility of a

materialist's life by describing the despair, disillusionment, and lack of contentment that De Leon feels at the hour of his imminent death.

There are no valorous pictures of myself
That will inspire me, as you will have it,
And there are few of my performances
That are good memories, or good food for souls. (91-94)

The poem exposes the limitations of scientific knowledge as well as the foolishness of the materialist in putting his faith in science which is not always the ultimate word in knowledge or wisdom. Scientific knowledge is powerless to cure De Leon's wound thus throwing light on the inability of science to give final solutions. De Leon realizes the inability of science to help him. He is certain of his death and it is then that he comes face to face with man's mortality. Neither science nor his glorious conquests can provide him immortality. He realizes that man has an innate craving for immortality which cannot be satisfied by material pleasures. Spirituality alone can give him visions of the transcendent.

There was more of it
In one small arrow than there was in me.
You know; and all your skill and all your science
Will give me only words to make me well. (131-134)

De Leon acknowledges the wisdom of divine intervention which had inflicted him with the fatal wound that prevented him from discovering the fountain of youth. Had he discovered the fountain of youth he would have perpetuated his wickedness towards the natives for eternity. So he acknowledges the wisdom of God and the role of fate in bringing about his death.

Now I can see,

And read the wisdom of a wiser God
Who hid from me that fountain I was after,
In a lost island that I never found,
That I might flourish always. Had I found it,
I might have walked with iron feet for ever

Over the maimed or slaughtered flesh and faces
Of those who trusted me. (157-64)

At the hour of death, De Leon has clarity of vision which he lacked throughout his glorious life. He understands that the Spirit is more important than all the glory and wealth of the world. He is conscious of the presence of the Spirit in the old sage and is drawn towards him. After confessing to the old sage the cruelty and inhumanity of his past life he is at peace with himself. He does not feel sorry for his impending death or his inability to discover the fountain.

I never found it;
And while you look at me, I am not sorry,
For there is peace and wisdom in your eyes,
And no fear for the end which is worth more
To me now than all fountain. (312-316)

The meeting with the sage has given him the courage to face certain death. The old physician is one of the “empowered men” who sees truth and tries to impart truth to others. He is able to bring men to the Spirit and give them light and hope. De Leon is drawn towards the Spirit through the old sage and he becomes much more peaceful than he had been for years. The “empowered men” are bestowed with visions and voices which guide

them through the path of wisdom. Those who follow them are also blessed with wisdom.

That hidden voices are in some of us,
And, when we least would hear them, whisper to us
That we had better go the other way.
And other voices are in some of us,
Telling us to go on as we are going-
So long as we go sensibly and fairly,
And with a vigilance. (319-325)

The old sage questions the materialistic assumption that the universe is an accident and not the fulfillment of a Divine plan. He warns humanity of false philosophies that may seem very attractive but are really worthless. He exposes the absurdity of materialistic philosophy which teaches that human life is merely mechanical.

There are voices also,
Saying that if this world is only this,
We are remarkable animate accidents,
And are all generated for a most
Remorseless and extravagant sacrifice
To an insatiate God of nothing at all-
Who is not mine, or yours. (325-31)

Fear is the result of ignorance and doubt perpetuated by materialism. By rejecting the Spirit materialism deprives man of his faith in immortality. And once immortality is denied death becomes final and fearsome. A man with the Spirit on the other hand has nothing to fear. He does not fear death as it is only a passage for heavenly bliss. So the old sage advises

De Leon to have faith and confess his sins to God, who will definitely forgive him.

Yet when you have revealed your memories
To your confessor and have made your peace
With God, you will be wiser, and be done
With fear, which I see written on you still. (375-78)

Peace and wisdom are the reward of faith and De Leon is blessed with both peace and wisdom at the end of his life. Robinson ends the poem on a note of hope for De Leon and for the whole of humanity. De Leon dies peacefully having confessed his sins to his Maker. He has faith in the wisdom of the old sage who directed him to the Spirit.

De Leon sighed, and felt the old man's hand
Cool on his forehead, as it was before,
And closed his eyes to be alone with pain.
Yet he was not alone for the same eyes
Were there. He smiled, knowing them to be there,
And opened his to say that he was ready. (401-06)

One unique characteristic of Robinson's idealism is his belief in predestination. He believed that man is destined for a certain kind of life even before his birth. Some are born to be poets, others to be businessmen. Some are called to be successful, others to be failures. This is the only explanation that he could find for the miseries and sufferings of the world. Man cannot alter his destiny. His greatness lies in his ability to accept fate, not to despair and to go forward in the hope of ultimate justice and happiness.

Hence Robinson never passes judgment on anyone, not even the wicked, as he believed that they were all victims of fate. Smith makes a note of this in his biography of Robinson and asserts that "The basic reason Robinson never passed judgment on anyone

even the comfort-anesthetized rich, even the 'victims of good luck' was his instinctive addiction to another central Puritan tenet; that of Predestination" (312). But Smith comments that Robinson's belief in Predestination was unique because it was modified by his notion of "Universal Salvation" (315). Since all men are fated to be saved he accepts all people whether they are sinners or saints with love and sympathy. He is never critical of sinners or failures as human beings do not have the power to alter their destiny. Human success lies in enduring sufferings with courage and fortitude. This is the only way man can accept the evil and mystery of the world and attain peace.

"The Prodigal Son" (CP 1209) is a poem which explicates the theory of predestination. The poet treats the parable of the prodigal son in a new light and looks at the conflict between the two sons from a new angle. The elder son's anger and jealousy towards the prodigal son has been a subject of discussion among theologians and has puzzled many lay people too. Robinson interprets the elder son's anger on the basis of ignorance. The elder son believes that men are always masters of their life and hence holds his younger brother accountable for his misdeeds. But human life does not always substantiate this theory. Fate plays a decisive role in shaping man's life. The Prodigal son is fated to play the role of the black sheep while it is the fortunate destiny of the elder one to be a contrast to his wayward brother. Neither the elder brother's virtue nor the younger one's degradation is the result of volition. Fate is responsible for the events and incidents that shape a man's life. The elder son was fortunate enough to learn from the example of his younger brother and is forever indebted to his brother and destiny for his virtuous life. He should rejoice at the grand welcome his father has given his brother because he too has profited from the act.

You are not merry, brother, why not laugh,

As I do, and acclaim the fatted calf?

For, unless ways are changing here at home,

You might not have it if I had not come. (1- 4)

The role of destiny in shaping human life is the focal point of the poem. It is not our merit that we are good neither is it our fault that we are sinners. We are predestined for our roles and can only act out the parts that destiny has given us. Robinson's theory of predestination echoes the Shakespearean image of the world as a stage and men and women as actors fated to play their predestined roles. Destiny had played the villain in the life of the prodigal son while the elder brother was fated to become wiser through the experience of his younger brother. Human will is merely a myth and makes very little difference in reality. The Prodigal son's degradation as well as the elder son's obedience is an act of destiny and hence neither can the prodigal son be judged for his transgression nor can the elder son claim credit for his virtuous life. The elder brother should rejoice in his younger brother's return to the ancestral house as it was fate's way of educating him.

And having hated me till you are tired

You will begin to see, as if inspired,

It was fates way of educating us. (17- 19)

The contradiction implicit in human life is that death ends worldly life but it is death which imparts immortality to man. From the materialistic point of view death is final as it results in the destruction of the body. By endorsing the finality of death, materialism exposes the transience of material reality and supports the theory of the futility of human life. To transcend death and attain immortality man should reject materialism and have faith in either the laws of nature or spirituality. The cyclic nature of birth and death gives significance to human life and imparts immortality to man. In the spiritual vision earthly existence has little significance as life is a brief interlude before eternity. Death is a passage

of transition through which human beings pass into eternity. Death transforms both the living and the dead. Death deprives the deceased of their material and temporal reality and inspires the living to aspire towards spirituality. The fear and despair instilled by death in the living change to faith and hope once they resort to spirituality.

We are so different when we are dead,
That you alive, may weep for who you said,
And I, the ghost of one you could not save,
May find you planting lentils on my grave. (25 – 28)

Since Robinson believes that men are predestined in their lives and his experience has taught him that life is painful for most people most of the time, he recognizes the need for stoic endurance. Spirituality consists in being heroic enough to endure the tragedies of life and not lose hope completely. Success defies definition as it is relative and is different for different people. Material success is often antagonistic to contentment and happiness. Hence the only yardstick by which the poet measured success was the courage with which human beings faced the trials and tribulations of life. Barnard confirms this. "Robinson's innate temperament, his New England background, his admiration of the great Victorians, in most of whom there is a strong Stoic trend, his own long wanderings in the Valley of the Shadow-- all these led him to the conclusion that for most men and women the only way to a good life is through fortitude" (238). Since Robinson was obsessed with the "failure of success and the success of failure" he has written a number of poems on the subject of stoic endurance which for him is a sure sign of success. One of the finest poems by Robinson on the theme of stoic endurance is "Eros Turannos". Though a short poem, it has compressed into its few lines the substance of a tragic novel. The brevity has only contributed to the depth to the poem by a concentration of meaning. Winters observes that "This is a universal tragedy in a Maine setting" (32). The uniqueness of the tragedy lies in the fortitude shown

by the protagonist in surrendering to her fate. The woman regrets having married a worthless man but considers it her duty to make the best of her situation. “She fears him; and will always ask / What fated her to choose him;” (1-2). Though she feels regret there is a graceful dignity in the way in which she becomes resigned to her fate. She chooses to isolate herself as this is the only way she can endure the foolish marriage that she has made. Her isolation helps her to escape from the prying eyes of her neighbors. She prefers isolation to social alienation. As she does not conform to the social convention of a deceptive life wearing the mask of happiness she is alienated by society. She counters social alienation by her self inflicted isolation.

And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide,
While all the tower and harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion. (29-32)

The only way we can accept the miseries of life gracefully is through endurance especially an endurance based on faith in a benevolent Power that controls us. Suffering leaves its mark on human beings and the signs of suffering are recognizable on those who have suffered. Yet the fortitude to face suffering brings with it peace which is lacking in those without endurance.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what God has given; (41-44)

The dream narrative ‘Amaranth’ treats the subject of self-knowledge. Self-delusion is destructive while true knowledge of the self leads to self realization as well as peace and contentment. The poem tells the story of Fargo, a painter, who realizes that he is no genius and decides to burn all his paintings except one which he puts on the wall. He gives up his

artistic career and starts making a living by installing water pumps. He comes to realize that he is fated to be a plumber and not a painter and this self realization brings peace and freedom. There is no regret in the decision, only a sense of freedom. A friendly voice whose identity he did not know at the time urged him to give up his artistic career. He obeyed the voice and the decision made him happy as it emanated from the realization that he was not fated to be an artist.

They were all gone now, and the last faint ghost
Of an unreal regret had followed them.
A voice like one of an undying friend
Whom he had always known and never seen
Had pierced and avoided him till he was warned
Of only one escape; and he was free. (8-13)

Ten years after he had made his decision to destroy his paintings he has a dream in which the events and the choices of his life come around a second time. A second time Fargo stands at the wharf contemplating suicide and a second time he confronts the figure Amaranth, "the flower that never fades" (214). He recognizes that it was Amaranth who had prompted him to forego his artistic aspirations. Amaranth being the flower that never fades is symbolic of immortality. Robinson attaches additional significance of an agent of reason and self-knowledge to the figure. It is his duty to reveal the truth about the self to human beings. People react to self-revelation in two contradictory ways. A minority accept the truth about the revelation and change their life accordingly. Fargo belongs to this group. The majority do not heed the voice and lead lives of self deception as they are unwilling to come out of their illusions. Amaranth being self-knowledge is forced to destroy their illusions. The shock of the self-revelation is fatal and forces many of them to commit suicide.

Amaranth takes Fargo to the Tavern of the Vanquished because he has come back a second time to the wrong world. The Tavern of the Vanquished is inhabited by people who have made their lives miserable because of wrong choices. Amaranth brings Fargo here so that he can see for himself the misery of these people and take a decision. Fargo is forced to follow Amaranth as this is the only path before him. Amaranth explicates that the laws of nature are universal and only by living according to these laws can man have peace and happiness. The harmony of the universe is the result of obedience to natural laws.

Only, I say that you will follow me
Because no other road is left for you
For the same law that holds the stars apart
Holds you and me together. (190-193)

Ignorance gives way to knowledge on Fargo's second visit and he has a clear insight into the lives of the people inhabiting the Tavern. On his first visit his zeal and ignorance had stood in the way of his vision and he was deprived of the truth. Robinson understands that vision is given only to a few and at certain moments in life, when they are ready to understand the truth of the vision.

You were here before,
But you had then your zeal and ignorance
Between you and your vision of it now. (248-50)

Robinson analyses the importance of knowledge and concludes that it is a prerequisite for inner peace. Materialism fosters deception, and this ultimately leads to frustration and alienation. The preponderance of alienation in the modern world is the result of this deception practiced in society. Self-knowledge as opposed to self-deception is an important theme in Robinson's poetry. The Tavern of the Vanquished is populated by

numerous people who have come to the wrong world because they are ignorant of their destiny. Their ignorance arises from their aversion to self-knowledge which would shatter their illusions about themselves. People react to self-knowledge differently. Some accept the bitter truth embedded in the self-revelation and end the self-deception. Some are unwilling to face the truth and continue with the deception. But at some point in their lives they have to accept the truth and are disillusioned or forced to commit suicide.

You see the place

Is filled now, and you mourn to see so many
In the wrong world -- some young and unsubdued,
Some older and untold, some very old,
And mercifully not to be disturbed
Or undeceived. (262-67)

At the Tavern, Fargo meets Evensong, a musician who is a representative of eternal failure. He is not destined to be a musician but continues to make music because of habit rather than talent. His failure is not in becoming a successful musician as Robinson did not believe in conventional success. His failure is in his inability to accept the truth that he is not equipped to be a great musician. Evensong is given a flute "suggestive of piping and the plaintive" as his instrument so that he symbolizes failure (Kaplan 73).

I am Evensong, a resident
For life in the wrong world, where I made music,
And make it still. It is not necessary,
But habit that has out lived revelation
May pipe on to the end. (287-91)

Evensong introduces Fargo to the other inhabitants of the tavern who are all cases of maladjustment. There is Edward Figg, an honest man who should not have been a lawyer, Doctor Styx who should have been a ventriloquist, Reverend Pascal Flax who lacks faith, and Pink the poet and Atlas the painter who are misfits in their chosen vocations. Robinson analyses the attitude of each character towards self-knowledge. Edward Figg, Doctor Styx, Reverend Flax and Evensong have accepted their fate and remain tranquil in the wrong world but the poet Pink on realizing his mistake prefers death to eternal life in the wrong world. Hence he hangs himself. This prompts Doctor Styx to make his observations on time. There is no future time for the men in the wrong world. They cannot rectify their mistakes nor have a new beginning. Regret is futile since there is no tomorrow for these men. "Time here is all today and yesterday, / For in the wrong world there is no tomorrow" (566-67).

The poem gives a graphic description of maladjustment in the modern world. The long list of misfits shocks and stuns the readers to an awareness of the dire consequences of the myth of success nurtured by western society. In a materialistic world certain occupations and privileged positions are symbols of success. People are forced to take up these occupations and posts in their race for success sometimes contrary to personal desires and inclinations. They are unable to attain self-realization and this results in discontentment and alienation.

There are physicians here who cannot hold them,

Or cure themselves of an incessant wound

That now no retrospect of their tuition

In a wrong school shall heal, there are divines

Who long ago lost their divinity,

And are still feeling for a solid station,
There are philosophers who delve and starve
To say again what others have said better; (683-90)

The list of the self alienated is long and includes moralists, economists, lawyers, inventors, gardeners and many others who are in the wrong profession and who can never find peace unless they accept their fate. Fargo was one of the few who listened to Amaranth's advice and gave up his artistic career at the self-realization that he would never be a great artist. He willingly surrenders himself to divine intervention and finds peace and contentment. The price of self-deception is self-alienation. Fargo does not suffer from alienation as he is true to his self. He puts God's plan for him above his own ambition to become a great painter. His success is his absolute trust in God.

This other fellow,
Who's not here to be happy, is one Fargo,
Who made himself believe he was a painter
Till Amaranth murmured one day in his ear
And he escaped. In his right world he learned
That God's good purpose was to make of him
A spring clean unimpeachable pump-builder— (1009-15)

Fargo becomes resigned to his destiny and is rewarded with peace and tranquility. But there are many who do not listen to the murmurings of Amaranth. They have traveled along the wrong path for too long and cannot change like Ipswich the inventor. As a young man, Ipswich had dreamt of inventions that would change the destiny of the world. But in spite of his deep desire he never invented anything as he was not fated for that role in life. He had devoted his life for the wrong pursuit and wasted away his own and his wife's life.

He went against his destiny by neglecting his loving wife and devoting his time for science.

But since fate is undefeatable he lost both science and love.

I loved her more than life but less than science.

She knew the last; the first I never told her. (1425-26)

The life of Ipswich teaches the importance of self-knowledge in leading a happy life.

It is because Ipswich never listened to Amaranth that he has been doomed.

For the long years

It followed me, I stifled it with lies,

Trying to tell myself there was no voice

But there it was. (1455-58)

The poem exposes the deception practiced by man to escape self-knowledge until it is too late. There is the voice that murmurs to each and everyone, but in the din and bustle of the material world man refuses to listen to these murmurs and remains maladjusted throughout his life. Those who escape from maladjustment are the few like Fargo who are ready to accept the sometimes painful knowledge about the self and act accordingly. A man needs a lot of courage to face the truth and only very few have it. Maladjustment is especially on the rise as the materialistic creed forces wrong choices on people.

Even when dealing with such a somber topic as fate, Robinson is not without his humor. He takes a humorous dig at modern art in the poem. Lawyer Figg looks at the latest painting by Atlas and is perplexed by the experimental art before him.

You say it is a horse,

And I have never called it a volcano,

You say the sky is blue, and so it is,

And a horse has a right to some of it,

But when you make him indigo all over,
And then forget that you leave out of him
Everything that I've always called a horse,
A lawyer wonders why it is a horse,
Whatever the sky may be. (1727-35)

Robinson expresses his objection towards innovation for the sake of modernity very explicitly. Most poets who lived at the time of the transition from tradition to modernity in the beginning of the twentieth century were anxious to exhibit their originality. But Robinson remained content with old forms though his psychological penetration into the lives of his characters accords novelty to his poems. Unlike many of the new generation poets he never sacrificed poetic beauty for the sake of innovation.

Like my contemporaries, Flax and Figg,
I lean to less rebellious innovations;
And like them, I've an antiquated eye
For change too savage, or for cataclysms
That would shake out of me an old suspicion
That art has roots. (1788-93)

Atlas looks into Amaranth's eyes and sees the truth that he shall never be a great painter. Though Amaranth pleads with him to escape, the knowledge is too painful for him and he kills himself. Atlas symbolizes modern man, who in his feverish pursuit of success, loses touch with his inner self and is subjected to self-alienation.

The finality of human destiny is emphasized in the poem. By introducing into the poem Ampersand, a cat that can talk and philosophize like man, the poet shatters the illusion

of human freedom. Ampersand makes fun of the human belief that he is master of his destiny. The cat convinces the readers of the role of fate in human life, by throwing light on the fact that even animal behavior is governed by fate. There is an echo of William Blake's philosophy which attributes the gentleness of the lamb and the ferocity of the tiger to the same God. It is unjust to ascribe cruelty to the cat as the cat's nature is also a work of God.

Nature in us

Is more intractable and peremptory;
Wherefore you call us feral and ferocious,
Which is unfair to us; for the same God
Who sees a sparrow on the ground shows us
The way to catch him, and we cannot choose. (2475-80)

Ampersand teaches modern man to accept his fate and make the best of what is given to him. He makes fun of the human characteristic of blaming Providence for all his misfortunes. Man must learn to be independent like cats and face life bravely. He cannot choose the circumstances of life. He can only accept the life situations given to him and make the best of it.

There's a lesson

In him, and for us all, of independence,
If there's not one of courtesy. He's not saying
That all cats who have no one to call Father
Should therefore curse their birth and drown themselves.

(2718-22)

Robinson clearly reveals his concept of God through Flax, the clergyman. Reverend Flax was a kindred soul of Robinson as both had lost their faith in conventional religion but

not in God. Both the clergyman and the poet believe that God was not fearsome, as traditional religion painted him to be. He is a benevolent God who guides people and gives them strength and courage. The secular nature of his faith is manifested by the fact that he does not attach any importance to the name of the Almighty.

There is no God,
For me to fear, or none that I may find,
Or feel, except a living one within me,
Who tells me clearly, when I question him,
That he is there. There is no name for him,
For names are only words. (2777-82)

Fargo is given the chance to leave the wrong world as he has accepted Amaranth's advice. Those who are unwilling to change even after Amaranth reveals the truth about them have to spend the rest of their days in the Wrong World. They lead a self-alienated life with no future promise of glory awaiting them. Fargo on the other hand has gained wisdom and strength from his visit to the Wrong World. He need not fear Amaranth anymore as he has accepted Amaranth's advice and has foregone his ambition to be an artist. By accepting fate he has fulfilled God's plan for his life. He finds peace and joy in leading his life according to divine intervention.

Fargo, the time has come
For you to tell me that my eyes have in them
Nothing for you to fear; for now you know
That once having heard my voice and heeded it,
Henceforth you are the stronger of the two. (2865-69)

“Amaranth” propounds the necessity of self-knowledge in human life. Knowledge of

the self equips men with a correct self-estimate and a proper understanding of the role that they have to play in life. It destroys misconceptions and illusions about the self. It is better that these illusions are shattered early enough, for then, the pain arising from the truth is much lesser. Self-knowledge leads to self-realization and self-fulfillment and prevents alienation. Thus self-knowledge gives one the strength to face any adversity in life.

“John Brown” (CP 486) is a poem on spiritual salvation through martyrdom. The protagonist of the poem, John Brown, is a character from American history. He was an ardent supporter of the abolition of slavery and devoted his whole life to the cause. On October 16, 1859 he led twenty one men on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with a plan to arm slaves with weapons. But he was wounded, caught and hanged on December 2, 1859. Though initially many people were shocked by Brown’s cruelty towards the whites in his efforts to get justice for the blacks, gradually many Northerners began to recognize the nobility of the cause for which he fought and his selfless devotion.

The poem is in the form of a letter written by John Brown to his wife on the eve of his execution. John Brown exemplifies idealism and nonconformism in the poem. He is alienated by the white community for not conforming to their acts of atrocity towards the blacks. The poet accentuates the loneliness of Brown who had to spend his last night alone in a prison. But he is more concerned about the loneliness of his wife than his own isolation. The Poem explores the different forms of isolation and alienation found in society. John Brown is an example of the nonconformist who is alienated by the society. His wife suffers from isolation on account of her husband’s nonconformity. The poet also throws light on the isolation of men even in a crowd.

And you, poor woman that I made my wife,

You have had more of loneliness, I fear,

Than I – though I have been the most alone,
Even when the most attended. (5–8)

Since he believed it was divine instigation that prompted him to undertake the mission of freeing the slaves, he was calm and peaceful even when facing death. Spiritualism is the only philosophy that provides men with courage in the face of death as it is based on something more than material reality. This is exemplified by three of Robinson's poems "John Brown" "Ponce de Leon" and "Toussaint L'Ouverture". Materialism fails miserably in strengthening men at the hour of death as the philosophy is opposed to the spiritual and the transcendent.

God set the mark of his inscrutable
Necessity on one that was to grope,
And serve, and suffer, and withal be glad
For what was his, (9–12)

Robinson ascertains the immortality of deeds of goodness and is certain that Brown's name will live forever in American history. The Northerners can only destroy his body; his deeds will always remain unconquered. Brown compares his immortality with the transient triumph of his enemies. The sun imagery in the following lines reinforces spirituality as an antagonistic force to materialism. In a spiritual vision Brown emerges triumphant and immortal while his executioners degenerate into mortal beings needed for his triumph.

There is no death
For me in what they do. Their death it is
They should heed most when the sun comes again
To make them solemn. (23–26)

Brown is aware of the fact that the whites consider him a traitor but comforts himself

with the thought that at least a few of them even if they do not openly support him sympathize with him in their hearts. He is esteemed even by his enemies for his immortal deeds of selflessness. He stands apart from the crowd for the sympathy that he has shown towards the blacks who have been persecuted for centuries. Brown derives his uncommon strength and humanity from spirituality.

For some of them will pity this old man,
Who took upon himself the work of God
Because he pitied millions. (29-31)

The whites cannot suppress the rebellion by killing Brown. For each death of a revolutionary there will be hundreds of followers to take up the cause and fight for it. Hence Brown is fearless to die as he is aware that the abolition of slavery will become a reality in the near future. “And there are many men to give their blood, / As I gave mine for them” (38-39). It is not fear that he feels on the eve of his death but peace and contentment because he was chosen by God to take up the fight against discrimination. Brown is a nonconformist who is indifferent to other people’s opinion. Robinson contrasts the “inner-directed” Brown with the majority in American society who are “other- directed” and act according to the dictates of society. Being “inner-directed” he does his duty without expecting approval or appreciation. It was God who inspired him to fight for the rights of the slaves and he is indifferent to the world outside.

Meanwhile, I’ve a strange content,
A patience, and a vast indifference
To what men say of me and what men fear
To say. There was a work to be begun,
And when the voice, that I have heard so long,

Announced as in a thousand silences

An end of preparation, I began

The coming work of death which is to be,

That life may be. (45-53)

The majority in a society do not have the vision or spiritual awareness to see the truth. That is why from time to time divine intervention becomes necessary and a prophet is sent to the world. His role in life is to expose the ignorance, apathy and wickedness of society. He is often stigmatized as abnormal as he does not conform. Brown derives satisfaction from the fact that all great men including Christ were persecuted by society.

For men are children, waiting to be told,

And most of them are children all their lives

The good God in his wisdom had them so,

That now and then a mad man or a seer

May shake them out of their complacency

And shame them into deeds. (60–65)

Robinson portrays John Brown as a typical antimaterialist who attaches no importance to worldly glory. The materialist goes after glory and is reciprocated with transient worldly fame, while the antimaterialist rejects fame and is rewarded with immortality. “I was not after glory / But there was glory with me, like a friend” (118 -19).

Brown dies with the satisfaction that he has done justice to the task for which he was chosen. Though incapable of completing his mission there was no frustration as he knew for certain that his followers inspired by his sacrifice would finish the mission that he had begun. Hence he feels that he has gained much more than he has lost. “Few are alive to day

with less to lose / Than I who tell you this, or more to gain;” (190-91). Robinson concludes the poem on the note of hope that prophets and seers make their presence felt after their death. During their life time they are regarded as traitors and madmen. “I shall have more to say when I am dead” (199). John Brown dies with the surety that posterity will judge his deeds in a better light than his contemporaries.

The poem “Nicodemus” (CP 1159) is an affirmation of the poet’s faith in Christ as the Savior of mankind. Though he was against institutionalized Christianity, Robinson saw in Christ’s teaching the redeeming light for humanity. He brings out the essential Christ in ‘Nicodemus’. The poem begins with a meeting between Nicodemus and Caiaphas. Caiaphas epitomizes law and tradition while Nicodemus stands for spiritual rebirth. For Caiaphas, Christ is merely a carpenter, who through his sophistry has attracted some followers. But for Nicodemus Christ is the Son of God who has the power to give spiritual rebirth.

He was a carpenter;
But there are men who were dead yesterday,
And are alive today, who do not care
Profoundly about that. What the man is,
Not what he was to unawakened eyes,
Engages these who have acknowledged him
And are alive today. (40–46)

Caiaphas represents the power and glory of the materialist, which according to Nicodemus is transient and cannot give man lasting peace and happiness. Nicodemus refutes materialism and preaches the spirituality propagated by Christ. Christian philosophy promises its followers the cross in this world and immortality in the next. Neither

Christianity nor spirituality promises a heaven in this world. It is materialism that judges a man's worth depending on his wealth and status. For the idealist these are transient values with little importance. The man who indulges in the selfish pursuit of material pleasures ends up by forsaking redemption. The antimaterialist endures social alienation in order to attain immortality.

High men, like you and me, whether by worth,
Or birth, or other worldly circumstances
Have risen to shining heights, and there may still
Rise higher, where they shall be no higher than earth.
Men who are braver may forgo their shining,
Leaving it all above them, and go down
To loneliness and peace, and there find life. (60 – 66)

Since social and religious customs demand absolute conformity and those who do not conform are alienated the majority in a society live a life of pretension. This kills their energy and initiative and they are like "painted shells" lacking in vitality. They wear masks to cover up their true selves. Only a nonconformist who can break out of the shackles of dead customs and traditions can achieve immortality through a spiritual rebirth. The spiritual rebirth advocated by Christ gives eternal life. Materialism, by denying spirituality, has denied immortality to human beings.

Caiaphas, you and I are not alive,
We are two painted shells of eminence
Carried by two dead men. Because we move
And breathe, and say a few complacent words
With tongues that are afraid to say our thoughts,

We think we are alive. But we are dead. (67–72)

In the spiritual vision the human body has no worth except as an instrument for the spirit to reside. Robinson endorses the superiority of the spirit over the body. It is the Spirit which imparts immortality to humans. Materialism, by negating spirituality deprives men of eternal life.

You may destroy his body,

Which is an instrument whereon the spirit

Plays for a time – and not for a long time,

He tells me. (113–16)

Man sticks to age-old rules because he is afraid of change. Christ is a revolutionary figure who has brought drastic changes in the existing social system. Traditionalists like Caiaphas oppose change as they would lose their privileged position in society if they accept change. They are not aware of the transience of worldly glory and oppose spirituality.

And your fond warning now that I may save him

Is like a child's unwillingness to read

A book of easy letters that are life,

Because they are new letters, and not death. (159–62)

The poem proclaims the death of old beliefs which have become outdated and the need for a new philosophy of life which can give meaning to life. Christ's teachings are revolutionary as he was a realist who did not promise heaven on earth. Christ asks his follower to take up the cross and follow him. Thus Christ accepts the sufferings of the world and teaches man that only spirituality, a belief in the transcendent, can save man. "There is no life in those old laws of ours, / Caiaphas, they are forms and rules and fears," (164-165). The poet affirms his belief in a life after death which will compensate

for the miseries of this world. Only a faith in after-life, can give meaning to man's existence in the world. A materialist fears death as it is final and irrevocable in the light of materialistic philosophy. But a spiritualist has no fear of death as it is only a passage for transition from worldly life to eternity. "They are the dead who are afraid of dying" (170).

Through Nicodemus Robinson affirms Christ as the Savior of mankind. But people who are blinded by tradition and convention do not see the light in Christ. They love the dark as the light would reveal their ignorance. Hence they murder great thinkers and philosophers. They make plans to kill Christ, thinking that it would be the end of his revolutionary teachings. But as history has proved Christ conquered death and attained immortality while those who plotted to kill him have an existence only as antagonists of Christ.

He is the light; and we, who love the dark
Because our fathers were at home in it,
Would hound him off alone into the hills
And laugh to see that we were rid of him. (189-92)

The poem exposes the dynamics of power in a society. The powerful are afraid of revolutions and change as they fear the loss of their power. The lower classes always welcome change as they have nothing to lose. It was the fishermen, the lepers and the blind who became the followers of Christ. The Pharisees and the High Priests only persecuted and killed him. They rejected Christ because they gave importance to materialistic values.

The lowly are the first inheritors
Of his report, the first acknowledgers
Of his reward – having no fame to lose,
No brief and tinsel prerequisite of pomp,

Or profitable Office, to renounce. (205–06)

The poem throws light on the normalization strategy adopted by the powerful majority to subjugate the minority. The minority who do not conform to standardization are categorized as the abnormal by the society. Caiaphas casts the stigma of the ‘abnormal’ on Nicodemus who does not conform to Jewish laws. But Nicodemus retorts that he is not abnormal but has the spiritual vision which distinguishes him from the conforming majority.

I am not mad,

Unless a man is mad who brings a light

For eyes that will not open. (285-87)

Like Nicodemus the poet too believed that Christ’s teaching combines spirituality with humanism and is a better philosophy than materialism. Christian faith is based on life after death as worldly life is temporary. Thus Christianity in truth is opposed to materialism which admits only material reality. But institutionalized Christianity is allied to materialism and Robinson clearly rejects it.

An evaluation of Robinson’s poetry reveals the fact that he pictured life as he saw and understood it, analytically and impartially. This truthful and objective assessment of life revealed a dark and mysterious universe in which human beings struggled to survive. Misery and pathos outweighed happiness and tranquility. Robinson groped in the darkness and mystery of the world searching for a meaning in human existence. Though nineteenth century materialism arose from scientific realism and Robinson was a realist, he rejected materialism on three grounds. Firstly he objected to the theoretical frame work of the philosophy which asserted the reality of matter alone and rejected spiritualism altogether. Material reality failed to explain many human and natural phenomena. Secondly he rejected materialism because it could not provide a meaning and purpose to human life. Finally he

rejected the philosophy because by the very fact that it emphasized material reality it paved the way for a twentieth century culture based on consumerism. Twentieth century man under the influence of materialism became so obsessed with wealth and status that it was instrumental in bringing about the two fold alienation of modern man – self-alienation and societal alienation. Robinson’s search for meaning found fruition in idealism, not the traditional idealism grounded in an unrealistic and baseless optimism but an amalgamation of idealism and realism which he called “optimistic desperation”. Robinson did not portray an ideal world but a dark, miserable and mysterious world that was cause enough for despair. But he did not stop with this pessimistic view of life. Along with his belief that human life was miserable, he had a firm faith in a supernatural Architect who governs the world. It is this belief that imparts a meaning and purpose to human life. Many of the mysterious aspects of the universe can be explained only by this belief in the transcendent. In an age of scientific realism and materialism, he was a nonconformist who subscribed to spiritualism. In his spiritualism too he was a nonconformist. He rejected conventional Christianity which had become institutionalized and conformed to social norms. Spirituality for him was a belief in a benevolent Power that has created man and the universe and governs it according to a plan which will be beneficial to mankind. The evils and miseries of the world are puzzling to a man who does not know the nature or plan of Providence.

To clinch the argument that Robinson was an idealist, but an idealist rooted in realism, a comment made by Cestre is quoted here. “As a cultured man and a well balanced thinker, he is neither a mystic nor a sceptic, neither a romantic dreamer nor a morose pessimist, but an observer of the facts of the spirit as well as of physical realities, who knows man’s limitations and weaknesses and yet believes in man’s destiny and in life’s ideal completion. He is an idealist, who remains attached to Christian feelings, without being

hampered by Christian dogma” (55).