The Character Sketches of Edwin Arlington Robinson

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Kristina K. Horn

Thesis Director

[Signature]

(advisor's signature)

Ball State University

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Unlike other authors whose works are frequently anthologized, Edwin Arlington Robinson has not been the subject of much popular writing for over half a century. Perhaps through his poem "Richard Cory," however, high school and college students still may catch a glimpse of this sensitive and insightful creator of the materialistic Tilbury Town and its residents. But "Richard Cory" is only one of sixty-three Tilbury Town selections, or what critics call short psychological character sketches, psychological because his primary subject matter is people, "drunkards, dreamers, and misfits with names like Richard Cory, Bewick Finzer, and Eben Flood. They embodied the spiritual drought and moral failure that Robinson made the thematic center of much of his work" ("Edwin Arlington Robinson" 974). But why did Robinson write so many of these character sketches? A clear-cut answer has not yet been found. But perhaps one can be proposed after a study of three areas of his thought: realism, pessimism, and anti-materialism. Therefore, following a study of the life and background of E. A. Robinson and his works as well as his general public acceptance, a more in-depth study can be conducted in the above three areas and how they relate to Robinson in order to propose an answer to the question. Finally, using the information just discussed, explications and discussions of the four poems, "Richard Cory" from The Children of the Night (1897), "Miniver Cheevy" from The Town Down the River (1910),
"Bewick Finzer" from *The Man Against the Sky* (1916), and "Mr. Flood's Party" from *Avon's Harvest* (1921), will tie together this mass of criticism. Then the question of Robinson's character sketches can once again be put to rest.
Except for direct quotations, citations have been omitted from the biography section in order to provide easier reading. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge my major biographical sources:

**Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction** by Wallace L. Anderson,
**Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays** edited by Ellsworth Barnard,
**An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson** by Charles Cestre,
**Edwin Arlington Robinson** by Hoyt C. Franchere,
**Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography** by Hermann Hagedorn,
**Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson** by Chard Powers Smith,
and **Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Reappraisal** by Louis Untermeyer.
Edwin Arlington Robinson was born December 22, 1869 at Head Tide, Maine. However this third son of Edward and Mary Elizabeth Palmer Robinson did not bring the typical joy to his parents that a newborn brings. The Robinsons were already content with their two sons, Dean, who was twelve, and Herman, who was four. The news of a third son was perhaps unwelcome and even disturbing, especially since Mary Robinson desperately longed for a girl. Even when he was six months old the poor boy had not been given a name. Since Mary Robinson had none to suggest, one of her friends proposed they draw lots to choose a name. Edwin was chosen as the first name. And since the lady who suggested the lottery was from Arlington, Massachusetts, Arlington would be his middle name. Thus Edwin Arlington Robinson was agreed upon, thanks to a little midsummer fun, and one of the twentieth century's best poets could finally be called by name.

In September of 1870 Edward Robinson moved his family to Gardiner, Maine. This would be young Edwin's home for the next twenty-seven years. As Edwin grew he acted as any four-year-old boy would, making mudpies and building dams in the brook. But at five-years-old, perhaps since his mother was a former school teacher, he discovered reading and wondered if he would ever enjoy anything else. At ten he started collecting words, and at eleven he began writing verse. That year he was also taken out of primary school and put into grammar-school because his father thought it would be good for him. But it was here that Edwin received a blow to his ear that would plague him for
quite some time—all because his teacher was tired of his dreaminess.

Age thirteen found the tall awkward Win entering high school. Yet the boy was not an outcast. He had friends who found in him a pleasant companion. But books were what he enjoyed most. Dickens was one of his favorites. And in his spare time he would write verse. He was growing up and beginning to realize, according to Hagedorn, that poetry was an "individual self-expression" (31). The poems that he wanted to write were unusual. Win did not like the lofty language most poets seemed to use. He would ask, "Why not write as the clerks talked in the stores on Water Street?" (Hagedorn 31).

At age 17 Robinson became so excited about the structure of English blank verse that he made a blank verse translation of Cicero's first oration against Catiline. His teacher was amazed at his enthusiasm, but his fellow students just wondered what would make him do such a thing. Robinson just smiled at the knowledge he had gained about blank verse.

Also while in high school Robinson became closely associated with Dr. Alanson Schumann, who was also a lover of poetry. Recognizing Robinson's talent, Dr. Schumann introduced him to Caroline Swan and her little poetry club. Occasionally the club would discuss some of Robinson's work, which stimulated him to work even harder. Thus, with much patience and Schumann's help, Robinson "acquired command of his medium" and "matured as a human being" (Hagedorn 37).
Robinson graduated from Gardiner High School in June, 1888. But realizing he was not ready for college or a job, he returned to high school to study Milton and Horace another year. However, Robinson also realized that he had no intention of going to college or to work. He would write.

At this point in Robinson's life, he had no real direction. He lived in Gardiner doing odd jobs and writing verse. He dreamed about going to Harvard. And he was lonely. The friends from high school were no longer around or were striking up new friendships. So Robinson had much time to read and write. Consequently, Robinson's first poem "Thalia" was published in The Gardiner Reporter Monthly on March 29, 1890. Perhaps Robinson's career was picking up. He gained new vigor and began to think again of college. The end of September, 1891 arrived, and Robinson was off for Harvard.

While at Harvard Robinson continued writing and was able to have some of his poems published in The Harvard Advocate. However Robinson was back in Gardiner before his first year was over. His father was dying. His father kept hanging on and until the end was even rather coherent, but July brought about his death. Not ready to stay in Gardiner, Robinson went back to Harvard to finish his study. Unfortunately in his two years there he made no lasting literary impression. But he was truly grateful for the friends and the fellowship he had known.

The year 1893 brought about a turmoil all its own. Robinson's family was in serious financial trouble because of bad investments in Western real estate. Robinson's mother
and his brother Herman wanted him to go into business in order to make some money. Robinson himself even considered this notion, thinking it would make him a respected member of society. But even as his family and friends struggled around him, Robinson could not give up his art. "'I am as poor as need be,'" Robinson would say, "'But that is all right. The loss of money is a small thing, after all, compared with other things'" (Hagedorn 84).

In November of 1896 another loss confronted Robinson. His mother died of "'black diphtheria.'" Because of this diagnosis no one would come near the house. Therefore Robinson and his two older brothers had to carry out the funeral details by themselves. The undertaker would not bring the coffin in the house, so the sons had to bring it inside and lay their mother in it. The minister conducted the service from the porch, speaking through an open window. And the sons even had to drive their mother to the cemetery and put her in the grave. "The Lord of chaos, trying to dramatize the irrationality of destiny, could scarcely have devised a more perfect plot" (Hagedorn 107).

During Robinson's residence in Gardiner he had been working on a book as a surprise for his mother. But she would never see it. It contained about forty poems, some of which he had tried, with little luck, to get published in magazines and newspapers. He sent the book, called The Torrent and The Night Before, to a publisher. It came back and Robinson was surprised and a little hurt. He sent it out a second time and it again came back, but this time Robinson was just surprised. Back and forth between Gardiner and publisher went The Torrent and The Night.
Before. And the response was always the same—a rejection notice. This made Robinson work even harder. He arranged to have 300 copies of the book published, which cost Robinson $52.00. But at least it was published, his first book. But criticism came back saying his poetry "was so 'gloomy' and 'pessimistic.'" The criticism filled him with a kind of helpless despair. He, gloomy? He, pessimistic? Could people not read?" (Hagedorn 109).

In late 1897 not only did Robinson get his first taste of New York, but also his second book of poetry was published, The Children of the Night. Apparently not all criticism of his first book had been negative, because Richard J. Badger, a Boston publisher, had gotten in touch with Robinson to arrange terms for his next book. And thanks to Robinson's devoted admirer Willie Butler, the publisher's bill was paid. The reviews of The Children of the Night were quite positive and Robinson was pleased. One critic for the Globe even went so far as to compare the title poem with "In Memoriam." But the major literary periodicals paid no attention to Robinson's latest work.

January, 1899 found Robinson back at Harvard working in the administrative office. The job kept him quite busy. Thus he had no opportunity to write. While at Harvard he was offered the position of literary editor of the Kansas City Star, but he turned it down. He did not like the position he held presently and knew he would not like doing criticism for the Star. Again the realization that perhaps no job was for him presented itself. Except this time he was ready to accept the fact.
In June Robinson quit his job, and in September he was back in Gardiner. His brother Dean had died. He was only in Gardiner for two days, but those two days were filled with memories of his brother. Robinson kept asking, "Why?". Finally Robinson was on the southbound train and a man named Bailey approached him. "'I like your poetry,' he said abruptly. 'I think it's fine. Some people think you dash it off. But I know you sweat blood over it'" (Hagedorn 155). Suddenly Robinson's despair disappeared. Finally someone understood.

In New York, where Robinson had lived since he returned from Gardiner, he was working on still another work, the long poem "Captain Craig." After many rejections from publishers, Houghton Mifflin Company, in October, 1902, finally agreed to publish "Captain Craig," since so many of Robinson's friends were willing to back him. According to Hagedorn, "the majority of the reviews of this third book were cautious, tepid, and patronizing" (190). But they did give rise to a second edition after just six months. Unfortunately magazines were still rejecting Robinson's manuscripts. The success of "Captain Craig" had faded. And Robinson was again wondering how he would survive.

After "Captain Craig" Robinson went downhill. He stopped writing verse, cut off all correspondence, and was poverty-striken. But in the autumn of 1903 a little hope was found. Robinson was employed as a timekeeper on the New York subway project. He found this too simple and hated it, mostly because it left him no time to write. But he kept at it until the following August when he was laid off. The next January he was
again employed, this time in a drygoods store of his friend Willie Butler in Boston. But the two had an understanding. The work would only take one-third of Robinson's time so he would have time to write.

In June, 1905, Robinson's works had even reached the White House, and as a result Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to a position in the office of the Collector of Customs in New York. Roosevelt's son had been so excited by The Children of the Night that he attained a copy to send to his father. Roosevelt wrote to Robinson praising his poetry and extending invitations and employment opportunities. Robinson finally accepted the Customs position because it would allow him the time to write. But the President did not just find Robinson a job and then forget him. He persuaded Scribner's to take over the publishing of The Children of the Night and wrote an article for the August 12, 1905 issue of the Outlook about The Children of the Night. Even though the President was criticized for writing the article, Robinson was given humble approval. Once again Robinson's career was looking up.

During the next few years Robinson turned to commercial play writing for the New York stage. And he even tried his hand at writing novels, but later destroyed them. During this time his poetry suffered. In five years he only published twelve poems. But Robinson and his close literary friends were in hopes of a theatrical movement. Therefore Robinson worked harder than ever on drama, hoping someday to see it on a stage. But just as with his earlier books of poetry, the publishers
rejected his plays too. "Here he was, almost forty, he exclaimed, and absolutely unknown" (Hagedorn 249). All he wanted was for someone to acknowledge his works, to confirm his way of life.

Lowering Robinson's spirits even further, his brother Herman died of tuberculosis in January of 1909. Even though he was not close to his brother, the loss was still great. And in March Taft stepped into the Presidency and proceeded to clean house, putting Robinson's job in danger. As a result Robinson resigned his Customs position.

Ready to get away, Robinson went to visit Herman's widow and family in Maine, which would be his last visit to his native state. He looked up old friends and enjoyed familiar walks through the autumn countryside. But then he was back to work revising poems for his new collection The Town Down the River. Robinson had high expectations for this book and even dedicated it to President Roosevelt, who kindly accepted the dedication. Almost a year after it was finished, The Town Down the River was published by Scribner's. And the reviews were the most promising yet, commenting on Robinson's sensitivity, individuality, and perception. Robinson had had good reason for his high expectations of this book.

But a bit of recognition did not change Robinson. He still felt insignificant, depending too much on alcohol, and his friends became concerned. Hermann Hagedorn, who later became Robinson's first biographer, suggested that Robinson go to Peterborough, New Hampshire, where a growing circle of writers known as the MacDowell Colony regularly met. After some hesitation a reluctant Robinson arrived in June, 1911. Determined not to like the Colony,
Robinson would wander through the forest and enjoy the quiet. But he realized the Colony was "a bad place for not working" and set to work on a play that would later be called "The Porcupine" (Hagedorn 267). Feeling refreshed and free to write anything he wanted, Robinson concluded his first summer at the Colony, the retreat where he would spend each succeeding summer until his death.

The years 1914-1917 saw Robinson writing and even publishing something every year. Peterborough set Robinson on fire. He was excited again about writing, especially plays, because of his fascination with the stage. In 1914 "Van Zorn" was published, and in the following year "The Porcupine." The publishing was a result of Peterborough, which was fast becoming the center of Robinson's life. There he would do all his writing, which was again turning back to poetry. His next collection, published in February, 1916, was called The Man Against the Sky. It was his first collection of poetry in six years. According to Hagedorn, "The reviews suggested rather than proclaimed his emergence from the obscurity which had held him so long . . . the book set none of the critics on fire" (304). But Amy Lowell, a critic for the New Republic, found his work great, experienced, and dynamic. Unfortunately the public did not agree with Lowell. Finally, Robinson concluded his four-year publishing run with "Merlin" in 1917. The critics did not know what to make of this work, since it seemed so very different from his usual style. And once again Robinson was confused by the critics' "inability to understand what seemed to him so clear" (Hagedorn 321).
"Poets Celebrate E. A. Robinson's Birthday" was the headline Robinson found as he picked up the December 21, 1919 edition of the New York Times Review of Books. Robinson's friends and contemporaries had chosen his fiftieth birthday to pay him tribute. Several literary figures of the day such as Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, and Sara Teasdale praised Robinson as never before, using such adjectives as "strong," "master craftsman," "thinker," "subtle," and "original." Robinson was taken by surprise; actually he was quite overwhelmed. He had felt that he was not to be popular, at least not yet, because he needed time to grow slowly.

After this gain in popularity Robinson published "Lancelot" and The Three Taverns in 1920 and Avon's Harvest in 1921. But his readers had not increased in proportion to his popularity, which is why at first Robinson did not take seriously the suggestion to publish a collected edition of his poetry. There would simply be no demand for it. But he agreed at least to entertain the suggestion. With relatively little effort, at least in comparison to his previous attempts at publishing, the Collected Poems was published in October, 1921. Thus the critics had a challenge: facing Robinson's life-work, not merely a single book. And they praised it beautifully, even calling him one of the six greatest poets writing at the time. But this favorable response from the critics was not the only recognition Robinson's Collected Poems received. In 1922 Robinson received a Pulitzer Prize for his Collected Poems, finally receiving long over-due recognition. He also received an award from the Author's Club of New York for his distinguished contribution to American literature and an honorary degree from Yale. As Hagedorn states: "The long struggle
was ended. Robinson's lifelong hunger to 'justify his existence' had been satisfied at last . . ." (326).

After publishing yet another work, "Roman Bartholow" in 1923, Robinson used his funds from the Pulitzer Prize to travel to England. After six weeks he decided that England could be a paradise to him, but he would never do any writing. No one had ever heard of him, which he found slightly amusing. Thus in August he appeared in Peterborough at the MacDowell Colony, realizing what he really cared for.

Being back in Peterborough in August 1923 meant that Robinson was once again writing. In June 1924 he received his second Pulitzer Prize for *The Man Who Died Twice*. And in April, 1925 he published *Dionysus in Doubt*. But Robinson's true success came in 1927 with "Tristram," an idea that he had carried with him for at least ten years. Despite the poem's length, it was read by the public. The Literary Guild featured "Tristram" as its book-of-the-month. Robinson was honored for the poem at a dinner attended by distinguished literary figures. "Tristram" was a best seller and reprinted four times within the first three weeks of publication. Robinson was amazed, and his literary position was finally secure. "Tristram" received for Robinson his third Pulitzer Prize, which also meant economic security. Even though he knew how to live on very little, he could now be independent and never have to borrow from friends. But all of this success was secondary for Robinson. Three weeks after "Tristram's" acceptance Robinson was back at Peterborough concentrating on what was primary—his writing.
At Peterborough Robinson was almost looked upon as a hero. But he did not wallow in this hero-worship as some might. He had had a life filled with despair, defeat, and neglect, and had emerged triumphant. Thus he was sympathetic to the colonists, ready to lend a listening ear if need be. But Robinson still valued his privacy and kept on writing, pushing himself in his old age. In each of the seven years preceding his death Robinson produced still another volume. "Amaranth," the last work Robinson saw published, received mixed reviews. The Boston Transcript reviewed it enthusiastically. But the New Republic was cold and contemptuous, and the Christian Century was even savage in its evaluation.

In failing health, these reviews caused Robinson even more pain. Thus he finally agreed to consult a doctor. Surgery was performed, which revealed a cancer, but Robinson was not told of this. He simply remained in bed, working on his final poem, "King Jasper." Nearing the end, Robinson made arrangements for its publication. Finally, in the company of his friends, Robinson died. It was half past two on the morning of April 6, 1935.

The nation mourned the loss of a poet who had never before received the public's true affection. Finally Robinson's life of writing was genuinely recognized. Unfortunately Robinson would never hear the cheers. And in November, 1935 "King Jasper" was published posthumously, containing an introduction by Robert Frost: "... our age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The old way to be new no longer sufficed" (Frost v). Robinson had surely shown us the best way.
II

With Robinson's literary background complete, the question of his character sketches comes into play. Most of Robinson's books are filled with shorter poems or character sketches of men who were defeated, lost, or simply failures. Some, like Miniver Cheevy, dream their life away. Others, like Richard Cory, seem to have everything, but show how difficult life really is by ending their own. These portraits are usually presented in the style of the dramatic monologue or narrative, enhancing the reality of the character. But why write these character sketches at all? One reason may be the literary period itself--Realism. Thus, characteristics of Robinson and his character sketches need to be considered after establishing an understanding of the realistic period as well as realism in order to begin to draw some conclusions about Robinson's writing before considering the areas of pessimism and finally anti-materialism.

At the time of Robinson's writing, the United States was going through a major change. The nation was becoming very heavily industrialized; thus, fewer people were laboring on farms. The majority of the population moved to towns and cities to be near industry. As the industry spread, machines replaced hand-labor. As a result, employer-employee relationships became very impersonal. But still people flocked to the cities hoping for high paying factory work. Also at this time the government was expanding as a result of the Civil War, bringing with it the income tax and paper money.
It was the beginning of what Mark Twain called 'The Guilded Age,' an age of extremes: of decline and progress, of poverty and dazzling wealth, of gloom and bouyant hope--an age of gaudy excesses that one historian described as 'The Great Barbeque.' ("The Age of Realism" 2)

With the telegraph, telephone, and railroad, commercialism grew. The rich prospered while the poor suffered. Education also increased, however, with the result that from 1865 to 1905 the total number of periodicals published in the United States increased from about seven hundred to more than six thousand, all trying to satisfy the appetites of a vast new reading audience that was hungry for articles, essays, fiction, and poems. ("The Age of Realism" 5)

Thus several new writers appeared with a middle class background, writing about what they knew--middle class American life. Thus came about Realism.

As William Dean Howells defines realism, it is "'the truthful treatment of material'" (Holman 366). More specifically, writers in America between 1865 and 1914, the realistic period in literature, tend to focus on middle class life, common everyday people dealing with specific actions and consequences free of prejudice and subjectivity. Realist authors are not like the naturalists searching for controlling factors or the romantics searching for the ideal. In fact, Realism is a reaction against Romanticism (Hart 334). Furthermore, the realist tends to be
very interested in his audience, feeling obliged to convey the absolute truth. Thus, the individual is valued very highly and characterization is of primary importance to the realist. Although the novel has generally been considered the best means of expressing realism, it is not limited to that form. Therefore, realism may best be approached as an attitude of the author, allowing the inclusion of Robinson and his poetry.

Although Robinson cannot be totally catagorized into any one literary movement, at least two major factors can be listed that could qualify Robinson as a realist. The first is his tendency to write about ordinary men in a simple manner. When he was just starting to write verse seriously, Robinson had problems with the language of the day being too lofty and unnatural. Why use thee and thou? Robinson chose instead "to preserve the rhythms of ordinary speech" (Evans 676). As Amy Lowell points out, this simplicity forces a "glittering effect" that is never commonplace (31). Besides writing in normal speech patterns, Robinson chose his subject matter directly from common American experience. Robinson himself confessed that he learned more "on Water Street, looking into the eyes of . . . the town miser," and was "gripped by a sharp, uncomprehending pity" (Hagedorn 53). Robinson also believed that the common men had a deeper existence than others want to admit (Neff 47). Thus Robinson did not go out looking for his subject matter or try to copy the lofty style of the day. He insisted on being himself, a poet, and on simplicity (Smith 281).

The second factor inclining Robinson toward realism is his own existence. More specifically, his own failures, which made
him very much like the characters of his poetry and added to his sensitivity. Robinson lived most of his life a poor man, looking forward to the day when he would own two pairs of shoes. In the eyes of the world he was a failure because he had no money in the bank. But what really was success or failure? This constant questioning allowed Robinson to look inside himself, inside his characters (Barnard, *A Critical Study* 159). Thus in his poetry he painted portraits so real that they allowed the perceptive reader to see through the outward action to the inward consequences that the character had to face. He also carefully developed these characters, conveying only what was absolutely necessary. Again he was able to do this because he was sensitive to failure, but also looked at it objectively (Kaplan 37). Robinson's objectivity, gained from experience, is important to note when discussing realism. Although he displayed pity for his Tilbury Town failures, he still feels obliged to convey the truth. The best art comes from experience. Thus all of these together, sensitivity, experience, and objectivity, make Robinson a very effective artist.

Examples of characteristics of realism can be found by just opening the *Collected Poems*. Poor Miniver Cheevy, a common dreamer and drunkard, "coughed, and called it fate,/And kept on drinking." Aaron Stark was a miser who had "eyes like little dollars in the dark." Richard Cory "was always human when he talked" but "Went home and put a bullet through his head." Flammonde is remembered with a "glint of iron in his eyes" and Bewick Finzer with "The broken voice, the withered neck,/The coat worn out with care." Robinson is concerned mainly with personality and the makings of
human character; "his method, as we have seen, is founded on that of prose realism" (Morris 20). He presents ordinary people and their experiences, which are "not simply all good or all bad" ("The Age of Realism" 5). The result is a gallery of portraits of the inhabitants of Tilbury Town, each individually painted and framed.

Juxtaposing realism and the realistic period with Robinson and his character sketches may begin to shed some light on why Robinson wrote so many character sketches. Perhaps he chose a realistic method to rebel against the growing dependence of his age on success. Perhaps he was writing from his own realistic experiences about street misers, the downtrodden, the commonplace. Or perhaps he was so in-tune with himself and his worldly failure that the only way to express the result was through these character sketches; he wanted people to see where they were headed. But whatever the reason, at this point we can only speculate.
III

Another possible reason that Robinson wrote so many character sketches is his apparent pessimism. Some critics have dismissed Robinson, saying he is a total pessimist. However Robinson has disputed this claim. Perhaps at first reading he may seem pessimistic. But upon re-reading, a sensitivity, and even an optimism shows through. Thus after looking at what the critics say about the pessimistic Robinson, as well as what Robinson himself says, conclusions can be drawn as to the relationship between Robinson's apparent pessimism and his character sketches.

Robinson was first accused of pessimism by Harry Thurston Peck's comment in The Bookman with reference to The Torrent and The Night Before. According to Peck, Robinson had found

'a true fire . . . the swing and the singing of wind and wave and the passion of human emotion . . . and the cry of a yearning spirit.' But the poet's 'limitations,' he went on, were 'vital.' 'His humor is of a grim sort, and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison-house. In the night-time there is weeping and sorrow, and joy does not come in the morning.' (Hagedorn 111-112)

This is probably the most widely quoted comment on Robinson. Critics also have exhausted their vocabularies, describing Robinson with such words as "negative," "dark," "gloomy," "decay," "defeat," "failure," and "waste." Unfortunately they have all missed the point (Barnard, A Critical Study 198).

Furthermore, critics call Robinson a pessimist because his characters are not similar to the typical romantic character-
type. Instead, his characters come from the lower reaches of humanity. They have overwhelming problems and are simply looked upon as failures, at least according to worldly standards. After a quick reading, the reader sees Eben Flood, left alone to drink, and Bewick Finzer, ruined by Wall Street. Bokardo has tried suicide, and Richard Cory has, ironically enough, succeeded. Some critics have even said that Robinson himself is his own best character (Kreymborg 299). Thus they attribute Robinson's own desperation and unhappiness to his characters, even labeling them as bitter or indulging in self-pity.

Robinson had several responses to these criticisms. All, in some way or another, deny his pessimism. In response to the initial comment by Peck, Robinson replied, "'The world is not a 'prison-house,' but a kind of spiritual kindergarten where bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks'" (Evans 680). Later when asked about this response, Robinson simply said that it was a smart thing to say when he was young (Evans 680). Also, from the time Peck made his comment, Robinson was always irritated by being called a pessimist. He commented that critics resented him for being cheerful; "'It is not unusual, even for me. For in all my dramatic poems there is an undercurrent of comedy and humor'" (Barnard, A Critical Study 198).

Besides being cheerful, Robinson felt that life was worthwhile. "'If a reader doesn't get from my books an impression that life is very much worthwhile, 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'" (Hagedorn 286). Apparently most critics did not.
As for Robinson's characters, it is true that there are not many happy endings. But "Old King Cole" shows that Robinson does respect honest optimism, and "Isaac and Archibald" and "Talifer" "cannot have been the work of a man who despaired of human happiness" (Barnard, A Critical Study 204). And it is true that Robinson's characters suffer, but they are not "corrupted or morally destroyed" (Barnard, A Critical Study 206). They may find life unliveable, but they never protest, pity themselves, or lose their dignity. Never whining, they may admit defeat, but never surrender. "Whatever accidents befall it in experience, humiliation is a casualty to which the human spirit is never subject" (Morris 71).

Perhaps the bottom line is this:

This is existence as he sees it, and he will not prettify it even though the dark fabric of his work occasion the word 'pessimist' in the mouths of unthinking readers. He knows what he is doing; he knows what he sees; he knows that in the final summing up 'pessimist' is the last word that will be flung at him. (Gorman 23)

Furthermore, these "unthinking readers" in their careless brush through Robinson's work can hardly accuse him of anything resembling pessimism. In fact, their fault lies not "in exaggerating the darkness . . . but in overlooking the light," the optimism (Barnard, A Critical Study 196). Yes Robinson's characters fail, but while searching for the highest light (Kreyemborg 299). They have some purpose, some direction; they
do not simply give up as failures. And Robinson himself had some purpose, some direction. He wrote because he had an idea, or because his poem "held up some fragment of humanity for a moment's contemplation," or because the poem "turned a light on some aspect of life" (Bates 22). "He seeks to set forth his observation and testimony with fundamental insight into all lives, not to be a moralist or a pessimist, or ironic, etc., as certain critics insist" (Morrill 353). Thus, Robinson was aware of life as it was. Yes, he could see, and, yes, there is a purpose to his writing, his seemingly pessimistic writing.
IV

One final point in answer to the question posed by Robinson's character sketches is his anti-materialism. The country at the time was fast discovering the power of money. However, Robinson was not enjoying the worldly pleasures that money could bring. He even went so far as to hold the belief that a worldly failure meant a spiritual success, giving an ironic flavor to his works. Thus, after focusing on the materialism of the times as well as Robinson's reactions, perhaps a relationship can be found between his anti-materialism and the characters he portrayed.

As mentioned above, during the time of Robinson's writing the country's pace quickened because of the telephone, telegraph, and railroad. The focus was on the big cities. Between 1870 and 1890 the U.S. population doubled and the national income quadrupled ("The Age of Realism" 3). The nation had some 4000 millionaires with names like Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan:

It was a time of glowing visions, of radiant prospects, when ministers preached (and congregations believed) a gospel of wealth, suggesting that riches were at last in league with virtue and the age of unlimited progress had finally dawned. ("The Age of Realism" 3)

With this wealth came the desire to show it off. Millionaires built elaborate mansions in Gothic or Romanesque, complete with domes, towers, and arches. Inside these mansions were imported pieces of European art, conspicuously displayed. As a sign of wealth, European styles of dress and manners were adopted. And millionaires even sent their children away to European schools, all this because of their desperate love of money.
Robinson never felt the need to be one of the upper class. Even as his family was suffering financially, Robinson refused to give up his writing in order to take a more respectable, profitable position. As he continued his writing, he wanted simply to be acknowledged for his work, not necessarily to be paid monetarily. When Robinson won his first Pulitzer Prize, his lifestyle did not change. He admitted that he was used to living as a poor artist and did not think he could change. And he did not. He kept right on writing because it was what he loved to do. He had no interest in the worldly success he would gain.

At the beginning of Robinson's career, the gap between the rich and poor was becoming wider every day. However, being at the poor end of the spectrum did not drive Robinson to despair. He even resented the idea that success be measured in dollars because he felt this standard had a restrictive and degrading effect on human life (Barnard, A Critical Study 191). In order to be a genuine artist, he must "be able to be poor" (Neff 63). Reward should not come from worldly pleasures but from his conscience and the praise of his few supporters. Thus he was constantly in search of self-understanding; "he was in no sense a materialist" (Kaplan 33).

Robinson's view on materialism can very definitely be witnessed in a letter he wrote to Will Durant in 1931:

It is true that we have acquired a great deal of material knowledge in recent years, but so far as knowledge of the truth itself is concerned, I can-
not see that we are any nearer to it now than our less imaginative ancestors were . . ., or that we know any more than they knew of what happened to the soul . . . . It is easy, and just now rather fashionable, to say that there is no soul, but we do not know whether there is a soul or not . . . The cocksureness of the modern 'mechanist' means nothing to me; and I doubt if it means any more to him when he pauses really to think. (Barnard, A Critical Study 192-193)

At first conceding that we have gained material knowledge, Robinson then questions its value. To him, materialism has no value because it does not move us any closer to the truth. And if people would sit down and think about this material knowledge instead of just accepting it, they too would recognize its lack of value.

But a much stronger motive to opposition was Robinson's conviction that human life, if taken on the terms of the materialist, is a mere insane welter in which happiness is overwhelmingly outweighed by pain. (Barnard, A Critical Study 193)

Many instances in Robinson's poetry explore what life would be like if our senses ruled. In a word, it is futile, as Robinson continues to assert in his letter to Will Durant:

If a man is a materialist, or a mechanist, or whatever he likes to call himself, I can see for him no escape from belief in a futility so prolonged and complicated and diabolical and preposterous as to be worse than
absurd; and as I do not know that such a tragic absurdity is not a fact, I can only know my native inability to believe that it is one... But if life is only what it appears to be, no amount of improvement or enlightenment will ever compensate or atone for what it has inflicted and endured in ages past, or for what it is inflicting and enduring today. Only the most self-centered and short-sighted of egoists, it seems to me, will attempt to deny the truth of a statement so obvious. (Barnard, A Critical Study 194)

The language here is quite extreme, indicating Robinson's intense feelings about the subject.

Robinson's belief that materialism is futile brings about another idea, something that critics call 'success through failure.' But the failure mentioned is not actual failure. It is the "recognition of the ironic discord between material experience and spiritual ideals" (Morris 69). Only such characters as Richard Cory or Tasker Norcross are really failures, because they have no light to follow. Thus, Robinson believed one should follow the light always, through challenges of doubt and despair. Follow it even though worldly standards may call you a failure. The suffering and failure will help you develop to your fullest, which will be recognized after death. Thus, your worldly failures will lead to spiritual successes because you have fulfilled your destiny. You were not caught up in the glamour of the material world; thus, you will profit spiritually. This fits, furthermore, with Robinson's belief in immortality.
Referring to his mother, he wrote, "'She has gone ahead and I am glad for her. You see I have come to look on death as a deliverance and an advancement'" (Barnard, *A Critical Study* 215).

Considering Robinson's particular anti-materialist viewpoint, his characters are not failures. They may even become spiritual successes. Some have denied the world and its temptations. But perhaps they will be rewarded by death. Thus, Robinson may have written his character sketches as a warning of what could happen when we follow our senses. He may be emphasizing the thought that spiritual success can only come by worldly failure; therefore, we should be patient and continue to follow the light.
V

With the information gathered on Robinson's realism, pessimism, and anti-materialism, further explanations and applications need to be made in order to propose concrete conclusions. Thus explanations and discussions of "Richard Cory," "Miniver Cheevy," "Bewick Finzer," and "Mr. Flood's Party" will be conducted in light of this preceding information. Then, hopefully, the connections will be made and the question answered.

"Richard Cory," included in The Children of the Night, one of Robinson's earliest collections (1897), has been classified with those poems apparently secure as American classics. "Richard Cory" has even been called, by George Latham, "'a portrait of his creator'" (Neff 28). This statement may be a bit extreme to describe Robinson, but it could apply to those who choose materialism as a way of life. When Robinson wrote "Richard Cory," it was intended as "an attack on materialism" (Neff 255). The first fourteen lines show Richard Cory "through the effect of his personality upon those who were familiar with him" (Morris 22). The last two lines are a surprise, the overturn of the popular belief of materialism (Barnard, A Critical Study 99).

The first two lines of the first stanza: "Whenever Richard Cory went down town,/ We people on the pavement looked at him," suggest that Richard Cory was different from the ordinary "people on the pavement." Perhaps he had obvious material wealth that attracted attention. The next two lines: "He was a gentleman from sole to crown,/ Clean-favored, and imperially slim," further explain what separates Richard Cory from the others. He was clean
and well-dressed. The words "crown" and "imperially" suggest royalty. Thus we discover from this first stanza that Richard Cory is a success according to the standards of the material world, but a failure in Robinson's eyes by achieving what the "people on the pavement" can only dream of.

The next stanza:

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good Morning," and he glittered when he walked
tells about what elevates Richard Cory still more. He is apparently very modest, never boasting about his material wealth. He never puts down the people who look up at him. He is not showy. But the people still admire him for the material wealth he has. According to worldly standards, he is a success.

Again, in the beginning of the third stanza: "And he was rich--yes, richer than a king--," Richard Cory's wealth is emphasized, as is his possible relationship to royalty. But the next line, "And admirably schooled in every grace," shows that the people noticed more than his wealth. Of course they would not like to have it thought that in their eyes wealth is every-thing. The last two lines of the stanza: "In fine, we thought that he was everything/ To make us wish that we were in his place," is a summation of how the ordinary people felt about Richard Cory, about the dream of an ideal existence. They thought his life was perfect and envied his material success.

The first two lines of the last stanza bring us back to the life of the ordinary people, "So on we worked and waited for the
light,/ And went without the meat and cursed the bread." They had a hard life, working for what they had. They waited for good things to come their way, but were never as lucky as Richard Cory. They did not even have meat to eat, only bread. They thought their lives were failures in comparison to Richard Cory's. He had everything, and they had nothing. They were obsessed with Richard Cory's wealth, even to the point of cursing what they had. Thus their lives were spiritually impoverished because of their envy of Richard Cory. But as the last two lines show, material wealth is not everything. "And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,/ Went home and put a bullet through his head." These last two lines are a surprise. We were led to believe, with the townspeople, that Richard Cory had everything; but apparently something was missing, since he has killed himself. Perhaps, as Robinson believed, Richard Cory was a spiritual failure since he achieved material success. Thus Robinson was attacking materialism in order to show its consequences.

"Richard Cory" shows ordinary, realistic characters envying a man who has achieved material success. But Richard Cory's downfall cannot be attributed to the pessimism of the author. Rather Robinson, as a very conscious observer, was trying to show the consequences of materialism. Obviously life has to be filled with more than material objects. In order to be successful, man has to have something to live for, beyond material objects. All Richard Cory has are material objects and the envy of others. Life for Richard Cory means nothing beyond his possessions.
The next poem, "Miniver Cheevy" was included in the 1910 collection, The Town Down the River. New York was the town down the river, and Robinson "suggested the fascination, the mystery, the ruthlessness" of this city he loved (Hagedorn 237). In "Miniver Cheevy" some critics say Robinson "'spoofed' himself" (Hagedorn 238). Although it is true that Robinson enjoyed alcohol as does Miniver, perhaps Robinson was not as out of touch as Miniver, because Miniver thinks "it is the age and not himself that is out of tune" (Barnard, A Critical Study 31). Thus Miniver's "life consists of futile yearnings and frustration to no end except that 'Miniver coughed, and called it fate, and kept on drinking'" (Hart 267).

Miniver Cheevy
Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
And he had reasons.

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

Miniver sighed for what was not,
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And Priam's neighbors.
Miniver mourned the ripe renown
That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
And Art, a vagrant.

Miniver loved the Medici,
Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
Could he have been one.

Miniver cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the mediaeval grace
Of iron clothing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
And thought about it.

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scrapped his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

In the first stanza the drunkard and dreamer Miniver Cheevy is introduced as someone filled with anger and disgust. He has only harsh words for the passing seasons and can only cry that "he was ever born." He is a common man wishing for what he thinks is the best. Like the townspeople of "Richard Cory," he curses himself. But, "he had reasons," or at least Miniver believes he has reasons to cry, as the next six stanzas show.
First Miniver wishes he had lived in "the days of old." He loves the bright flash of the sword and the royal prance of the stallion. He envisions himself as the warrior, with a sword, sitting on the "steed," which "set him dancing." He finds this time, as he envisions it, much more exciting than the present.

The next stanza finds Miniver still dreaming, simply sitting back and sighing as he feels sorry for himself. He does not do any work; he simply dreams of cities of old in ancient Egypt and Greece as well as the legendary city of King Arthur's palace and the mythological characters of Troy. He is obsessed with past times and does not acknowledge reality.

Stanzas four and five still find Miniver dreaming and mourning for times past. He "loved the Medici," the powerful Italian family with a ruthless reputation, but he had never seen anyone from that family. But, as an almost humorous side-light, Miniver could have been just as ruthless if he had been from that family. Here Robinson's humor is evident, because poor Miniver is too busy feeling sorry for himself and what he does not have to realize his own inadequacies.

Stanza six finds Miniver cursing "the commonplace," just as the townspeople of "Richard Cory" did. But that is what Miniver is, a common man. He looks upon "a khaki suit," perhaps a modern army uniform, "with loathing." This common suit does not have the style and grace of the mediaeval knight's iron. Again, he is dreaming of the days of King Arthur.
The next stanza is a bit ironic. First Miniver scorns the riches that he seeks. Perhaps Miniver is not all bad. But then Miniver admits he is "annoyed" without the riches. He seeks material goods and scorns the commonplace, but he cannot rise above his common drunken state. Then at last Miniver simply "thought, and thought, and thought,/ And thought about it." Again Robinson adds this line with subtle humor. Robert Frost points out, "'There is more to it than the number of thoughts. There is the way the last one turns up by surprise around the corner, the way the shape of the stanza is played with, the easy way the obstacle of verse is turned to advantage'" (Neff 158). Robinson clearly portrays Miniver's character in the previous six stanzas, but especially in this last line.

The final stanza finds Miniver conceding that he was "born too late." We can almost see this pathetic creature scratching his head with one hand and holding his alcohol with another. He simply gives up, calls it "fate," and continues drinking.

Thus Miniver Cheevy is a common man dreaming of times past. He also wants material wealth, as most people do, but for a short time "scorned" the riches he wanted. Robinson is not painting a pessimistic picture of a poor drunkard and dreamer. Rather, he wants to show the humor of the situation. He wants to show one of Tilbury Town's failures in order to allow the reader to realize life's worth. Instead of sitting back drinking and dreaming, we should do something with our lives. We should make something of ourselves. And Robinson himself said that life was worth living.
The third character, "Bewick Finzer," is found in *The Man Against the Sky* (1916). Similar to Miniver Cheevy in that he is "a portrait of one who seeks by dreaming of past glories," Bewick Finzer seems to be more aware of the world of reality (Barnard, *A Critical Study* 132). He is a materialist who has fallen from high economic status. Instead of wishing for the glorious days of old, he only wants what used to be his—self-respect.

**Bewick Finzer**

Time was when his half million drew
The breath of six per cent;
But soon the worm of what-was-not
Fed hard on his content;
And something crumbled in his brain
When his half million went.

Time passed, and filled along with his
The place of many more;
Time came, and hardly one of us
Had credence to restore,
From what appeared one day, the man
Whom we had known before.

The broken voice, the withered neck,
The coat worn out with care,
The cleanliness of indigence,
The brilliance of despair,
The fond imponderable dreams
Of affluence,—all were there.
Poor Finzer, with his dreams and schemes,
Fares hard now in the race,
With heart and eye that have a task
When he looks in the face
Of one who might so easily
Have been in Finzer's place.

He comes unfailing for the loan
We give and then forget;
He comes, and probably for years
Will he be coming yet,—
Familiar as an old mistake,
And futile as regret.

Stanza one brings us up to date on poor Bewick Finzer.
At one time Bewick had achieved material success. He had a
half million dollars earning a healthy interest. He was a
contented and respected member of the community. But he lost
his money, perhaps in a depression. And as he lost his money
"something crumbled in his brain." Perhaps his mind went along
with his money.

The next stanza suggests simply the passage of time. As
time passed, Bewick Finzer also went through a change, as the
third stanza describes. Bewick had apparently broken down after
his loss. His voice was broken, neck withered, and coat worn.
He had nothing; he was desperate. And still remaining were his
dreams of material success. Maybe he still had hope. Perhaps
there was a chance for material success even though he had lost
everything.
The fourth stanza allows a bit of sympathy for "Poor Finzer" who still has dreams. Life is hard now for him. But what is even harder is looking into the faces of those "who might so easily have been in Finzer's place." He has trouble acknowledging the fact that he is on the same level as these others. He no longer has his money or self-respect.

The last stanza makes clear the futility of Bewick's situation. "He comes unfailing for the loan . . . and probably for years." He will always cling to his dream, but it is "futile as regret." Bewick lost his money once, and he will never get it back. To Bewick, his loss of money means loss of self-worth. Apparently he feels that he must keep on trying; but it is futile.

Thus in "Bewick Finzer" Robinson was emphasizing his belief in the futility of materialism. At one time Bewick had everything. He was definitely a materialist from an aristocratic family. However, as Robinson shows in this example, money is not everything. It can quickly be lost. Thus we should put our trust in something higher in order to achieve spiritual success.

The final poem to be considered is "Mr. Flood's Party" from the 1921 collection, Avon's Harvest. "Mr. Flood's Party," according to Neff, is "the short poem which perhaps best represents the quality of Robinson's personality and art" (198). The poem came to Robinson from a story belonging to Harry Smith's father of a Maine eccentric who would propose as well as drink toasts to himself. In this poem Mr. Flood pauses on his way back from Tilbury Town, where he has filled his liquor jug, in order to exchange toasts with his dead friends below in the town.
Mr. Flood's Party

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night
Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home, paused warily.
The road was his with not a native near;
And Eben, having leisure, said aloud,
For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird." He raised up to the light
The jug that he had gone so far to fill,
And answered huskily: "Well, Mr. Flood,
Since you propose it, I believe I will."

Alone, as if enduring to the end
A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn,
He stood there in the middle of the road
Like Roland's ghost winding a silent horn.
Below him, in the town among the trees,
Where friends of other days had honored him,
A phantom salutation of the dead
Rang thinly till old Eben's eyes were dim.
Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again:

"Well Mr. Flood, we have not met like this
In a long time; and many a change has come
To both of us, I fear, since last it was
We had a drop together. Welcome home!"
Convivially returning with himself,
Again he raised the jug up to the light;
And with an acquiescent quaver said:
"Well Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.

"Only a very little, Mr. Flood--
For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do."
So, for the time, apparently it did,
And Eben evidently thought so too;
For soon amid the silver loneliness
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,
Secure, with only two moons listening,
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang--
"For auld lang syne." The weary throat gave out,  
The last word wavered, and the song was done.  
He raised again the jug regretfully  
And shook his head, and was again alone.  
There was not much that was ahead of him,  
And there was nothing in the town below—  
Where strangers would have shut the many doors  
That many friends had opened long ago.

Stanza one of "Mr. Flood's Party" introduces Eben Flood,  
whose name suggests a common ebb and flow, and the situation in  
which he finds himself: "alone." Eben is climbing toward what  
is now his home when he pauses on a hill looking on the town  
below. He is completely alone, "not a native near." So while  
he pauses he begins a conversation with himself.

In the conversation of stanza two, Robinson shows an  
almost pathetic Mr. Flood in the midst of humor. He is noticing  
the "harvest moon" and the bird "on the wing," again emphasizing  
his loneliness. He is drinking toasts with himself from the  
"jug that he had gone so far to fill." Robinson's language  
creates a very clear picture of this humorous scene where an  
old, lonely man stands talking and raising toasts to himself.

The third stanza is perhaps the most effective in the poem.  
The language clearly "supports the meaning, . . . clarifies or  
intensifies the character, the mood, or the philosophic conception  
that the poet is striving to incarnate in words" (Barnard, A Critical  
Study 56). An almost eerie mood is created through the sound of  
the words "alone," "hopes," and "outworn." Not only is Eben
alone, but also his hopes have been "scarred" and "outworn." He is overwhelmed, as the allusion to "Roland's ghost" points out. He still remembers his achievements, his honors of days past. But all those who had honored him are now dead. The words "ghost," "phantom," and "dead" further emphasize Mr. Flood's past successes. He is the only one who remembers his life with any fondness at all. He is alone with his jug and his memories.

The next stanza reveals the tenderness with which Mr. Flood sets "the jug down slowly at his feet." He treats it as a mother does her sleeping child, a most prized possession. It is what allows Mr. Flood to keep his memories alive. It is also what he has "gone so far to fill." In the last four lines of this stanza Robinson contrasts the sureness with which the jug stands on "firm earth" to "the uncertain lives of men." Thus in plain language Robinson points out that money can be lost, as in "Bewick Finzer," notoriety can be lost, as in "Mr. Flood's Party," dreams can be lost, as in "Miniver Cheevy," and even a life can be lost, as in "Richard Cory." Nothing is certain, unless we put our faith in something higher.

The fifth stanza finds Mr. Flood once again in conversation with himself. It has been a long time since he has found himself on the hill looking down on Tilbury Town. He realizes that "'many a change has come'" over him as the years have passed. He gives himself a big "'Welcome home,'" in the air of social celebration, and proposes to drink another toast. Passively, with a quaver in his voice, he conceeds, "'I might.'"
The conversation and toasting continue in the next stanza. However the social celebration is becoming a lonely remembrance of old times past. Eben agrees with himself to drink one more smaller toast "for auld lang syne," then no more. He has had enough. The last four lines of this stanza emphasize once again the loneliness of Mr. Flood's existence. "Silver loneliness" describes the night when Mr. Flood lifts his voice to sing. No one was around, "only two moons listening." Thus "the whole harmonious landscape rang" with Mr. Flood's lonely song.

In the last stanza Mr. Flood's throat gives out as he finishes his song "for auld lang syne." "Regretfully" he raises the jug for one last toast, shakes his head, and is again alone. He returns to the present and realizes that there is not much ahead of him. He looks down on "the town below" where his friends, who are now dead, would have honored him, and realizes there is nothing for him except "strangers (who) would have shut the many doors/ That many friends had opened long ago."

Therefore, in "Mr. Flood's Party" the present Mr. Flood is a poor, common, lonely old man whose material successes have been forgotten along with the people who shared them. Mr. Flood carries the only memory of this success but has no one to share it with. Thus it becomes futile. Again Robinson is attacking materialism. Since material wealth and success are not certain, our faith must be placed in something higher in order to achieve spiritual success. Perhaps Mr. Flood will attain spiritual success since he has only fond memories of the past and does not dwell on his apparent worldly failure.
VI

The American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson can now be understood more clearly, in view of the explanations of realism, pessimism, and anti-materialism and their applications to the poems "Richard Cory," "Miniver Cheevy," "Bewick Finzer," and "Mr. Flood's Party." Thus an answer can now be proposed to the following question: Why did E. A. Robinson write so many of these character sketches?

First, Robinson displays characteristics of realism, although that does not make him a realist. As several writers of the time, Robinson wrote in reaction to romanticism. He enjoyed watching people, old men on porches or misers in the street. Thus his characters became these common people of the street, not the high class ladies and gentlemen of romance. He wanted to be one of the first to portray life as he saw it, as it really was. He was an honest writer.

Second, Robinson's character portraits are not totally pessimistic and do not reflect his apparent worldly failures, even though they may seem that way at first. The reader needs to look beyond the text and ask questions. To Robinson, worldly failure meant spiritual success. Thus Robinson's characters were examples of possible spiritual successes. The reader should value a hard life because it will only make him stronger and lead to a better life somewhere else.

Third, Robinson was very much against the materialism of the times. He believed that people were becoming too caught up in money matters to think about what their future would bring.
Thus Robinson's poems were used again as examples. Materialism is not everything and does not bring satisfaction, as Richard Cory's case shows. The money cannot be counted on always to be there, as Bewick Finzer and Miniver Cheevy can attest. And the material successes will not always be remembered, as Eben Flood found out.

Therefore, Robinson wrote his character sketches as examples for a population he felt was in trouble. Perhaps no other writer has ever been so concerned about his public, but then again perhaps no other writer since Robinson has needed to be.
Selected List of Works Consulted


