

A STUDY OF CHARACTER IN THE SONNETS OF
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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Edwin Arlington Robinson

A great amount of criticism of E. A. Robinson has involved the study of the characters in his poetry with the examination of such well known favorites as Richard Cory, Bewick Finzer, Eben Flood, Aaron Stark, Reuben Bright, Miniver Cheevy, Luke Havergal, John Everledown, Captain Craig, and Merlin. But even though no study of character could exclude the mention of some characters in the sonnets, there has been very little if any critical discussion of Robinson's unique talent of portraying character in the sonnet. In fact, only a few critics have made even a superficial noting of this aspect of Robinson's poetic capabilities. Edwin Fussell attempted to place his contribution to the sonnet tradition in English in perspective and in the process he commented on Robinson's innovations in character portrayal:

...the sonnet, of all the intricate metrical arrangements of English poetry, has most clearly followed a steady pattern of desuetude and rejuvenescence. It has been revived successively by Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Robinson; each renewal, moreover, although it involved some new principle of extension, has established its validity by reference to the past history of the form. Shakespeare starts with the contrast of everyday experience with the Petrarchan conventions. The Miltonic sublimity depends for its effect upon our awareness of the effects so achieved by Shakespeare (and Donne); all three must be kept in mind in order to measure the lyric departures of Wordsworth. Robinson's use of the sonnet for his concise narrative and dramatic portraiture represents what is probably his most skillfull adaptation of an apparently decadent form to a dynamic and realistic contemporary purpose.¹

¹ Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), pp. 183-184.

Ellsworth Barnard also noted Robinson's use of the sonnet in portraying character and made a comment about his relation to the history of the sonnet:

...there is the poet's sense of form, together with his gift for achieving its "inevitable conjunction" with theme. No modern poet, for instance, has held more assured though unostentatious mastery of the sonnet, or made it serve so faultlessly so many ends: meditation ("Many Are Called"), parable ("Alma Mater"), portraiture ("Cliff Klingenhagen"), drama ("Ben Trovato"), satire ("Karma"). This very distinction, indeed, may be why Robinson's achievement in this form has been so often overlooked; the traditional mood of the sonnet is confessional, and no poet since Milton has so widened its range.²

One more statement was made by Louis Untermeyer in the form of a parody of Robinson's method of sonnet portraiture. This sonnet was printed in the Colby Library Quarterly, (December, 1969) with a following note by Mr. Untermeyer:

SIMON SIMPLE

What does it matter, who are we to say
How much is clear and how much there must be
Behind that innocent simplicity?
He left us smiling and a bit astray.
Yet there were times when Simon would convey
A curious sharpness etched with something free;
For he was touched with fire and prophecy,
And, without pride or pennies, went his way.

I'll say this much for Simon. If his ghost
Has half the hungry life that's lived by most,
He will not rest in the dry, desolate night.
He will come back and storm the western gate,
Scorning such lesser things as death and fate...
Well, there is that side, too. You may be right.

Some years ago I wrote a series of parodies around a central idea. I conceived of a project which enlisted the modern poets in an effort to rewrite MOTHER GOOSE. Each poet was supposed to take

²"'Of This and That Estate'; Robinson's Literary Reputation," in Edwin Arlington Robinson Centenary Essays, ed. by Ellsworth Barnard (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 13.

a particular jingle and remold it nearer to his heart's desire. This is the way I thought E. A. Robinson would revise what we know of Simple Simon in one of his sonnet portraitures.³

But other than this simple recognition and the mere mentioning of Robinson's talent in this area, there has been no attempted analysis of character in the sonnet. In most studies of Robinson's characters the sonnet characters have taken a back-seat to the Arthurian characters, to the characters of the long poems such as Captain Craig and Amaranth, and to the characters of the short lyrical poems such as "Richard Cory," "The Gift of God," "Eros Turannos" and many others. When a sonnet character is discussed, he is usually mentioned as a further illustration of a character type or in connection with some broad generalization about characterization. For example, Ellsworth Barnard, in his creditable, but general study of Robinson's characterization, makes mention of several sonnet portraits, but because of the broadness of his study, he can rarely find time or space to include all the sonnet characters or do more than simply mention a few. He only has time to briefly note some sonnet characters as examples of the five different character classes⁴ or to list a few sonnets as illustrations of some broad generalization such as Robinson's disavowal of didacticism.⁵ Rarely is a thorough examination made of the sonnet as a presentation of character.

Such an examination then will be the purpose of this paper. With the sonnet characters serving as the means of limitation, this paper will be concerned first with an organization, a classification of Robinson's character types. Although the range of Robinson's characters is wide and varied,

³ "Simon Simple," Colby Library Quarterly, 8 (December, 1969), 415.

⁴ Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), pp. 122-143.

⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

it is possible to categorize the sonnet characters thematically and historically. The second area of interest will be an analysis of Robinson's methods of presentation of character. This will involve a study of such methods as narration, dialogue, and dramatic monologue, as well as what might be called Robinson's "inferential" method or what Richard Crowder calls his in medias res method.⁶ The last concern will involve a discussion of the sonnet as an appropriate form for the portrayal of character. Why would Robinson choose this short and rather restrictive form for presentation of character? What advantages are gained by the use of the sonnet?

The poetry of E. A. Robinson is essentially concerned with men and women and the sonnets are not an exception. Of the eighty-nine published sonnets and the few unpublished ones, only a few fail to deal with human life. There are a handful of sonnets written about the art of poetry and a few written to explore a philosophical conception, but the majority concern the actions, thoughts, and habits of people. There can be no doubt that Robinson was fascinated by human beings and most often portrayed them in his poetry as varied and distinctive individuals. Thus, Robinson's theme in the sonnets, as well as in all his poetry, is mankind. In a letter to Amy Lowell (March 3, 1916), in which he related his feelings toward free verse, he made it clear that he believed that humanity was the basis of poetry, the essential subject matter: "...I find it necessary to remind you now that what seems to me to be the very best of you vers libre is almost exclusively 'human' in its subject matter, and therefore substantially old-fashioned." And further on in the same letter he suggested that if a poet had to sacrifice either form or content that "you would retain that part of your poetry

⁶ "Here are the Men..."; E. A. Robinson's Male Character Types," New England Quarterly, 18 (September, 1945), 346.

that has in it the good and bad solid old-fashioned human qualities that make us all one crazy family of children, throwing things at each other across the table, and making faces at each other in saecula saeculorum."⁷ In a letter to Harry Smith (October 1, 1893), Robinson further established his belief in humanity as the primary subject matter of poetry when he wrote that "There is poetry in all types of humanity--even in lawyers and horse-jockeys--if we are willing to search it out."⁸

James Dickey wrote:

Robinson has been perhaps the only American poet--certainly the only one of major status--interested exclusively in human beings as subject matter for poetry--in the psychological, motivational aspects of living, in the inner life as it is projected upon the outer.⁹

Although the use of the word "exclusively" is perhaps a bit extreme, the recognition of Robinson's interest in the "inner life" of his characters is accurate. Barnard also used the word "exclusive" but added a qualifier which aids the acceptance of his statement. He wrote that Robinson had an "almost exclusive concern with inward experience rather than physical conflict."¹⁰ Robinson is not interested in the way a character looks. Clothing, countenance, and other aspects of appearance are not important (Aaron Stark is a rare exception to this contention). Instead, he is concerned with the concentrated intellectual analysis of the processes of the heart and mind

⁷ Edwin Arlington Robinson, Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), pp. 93-94.

⁸ Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry De Forest Smith, 1890-1905, ed. by Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), p. 108.

⁹ "Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Many Truths," in Selected Poems, ed. by Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. xvi.

¹⁰ Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 150.

of his characters, and with the interaction of people with one another and with the world. He wrote to Harry Smith (March 4, 1894) that "There is more in every person's soul than we think. Even the happy mortals we term ordinary or commonplace act their own mental tragedies and live a far deeper and wider life than we are inclined to believe possible in the light of our prejudices."¹¹

With the understanding that Robinson's major interest is the psychological and motivational make-up of unique and distinctive individuals, it is time to organize his sonnet characters into convenient categories and classes for discussion and analysis. At first glance, this appears to be a contradictory intention. The very ideas connoted by the words "unique," "distinctive," and "individual" seem to negate the possibility of classification. But just as in life people tend to conform to one of several general patterns, so Robinson's characters, the majority of which are based upon his contemporaries, can be found to fall into one or another of five general classes. At the same time, it will be granted that each individual character will fit that general class slightly differently than another and that a given character might be found to overlap more than one class. The lines of distinction between the categories are not intended to be so rigid that exceptions are denied. Instead, they are intended to be a simple and convenient means of organizing the study of the sonnet characters.

With Robinson's sonnets, this works better than a chronology would. Even though there may be as much as 25 to 30 years difference in publication dates as there is between "Fleming Helpenstine" and "'If the Lord Would Make Windows in Heaven'," the date of publication is not important except as an indication of Robinson's use of variations on the same basic character type

¹¹Untriangulated Stars, p. 134.

throughout his years of sonnet-making.

Ellsworth Barnard has made the most detailed study of Robinson's characters and has set down what might be called a continuum with five classes based upon a concept of success-failure.¹² By making use of the same categories with slight modifications, this section of the paper will classify the majority of the sonnet characters.¹³

In Barnard's first class (in which he includes no sonnet characters), there can be placed the characters of several sonnets: "Shadrach O'Leary," "Caput Mortuum," "The Sunken Crown," "A Man in Our Town," and "Afterthoughts."¹⁴ Barnard defines this class as comprising those characters who are failures in a worldly sense but not in a spiritual sense. That is, although in their lives Fate or Time or Passion may have deprived them of such earthly pleasures as wealth, acceptance, respect, and contentment--all tangible values, there is the intangible feeling that in some spiritual sense they have been successful, their lives have counted. With the exception of "Shadrach O'Leary" and "Caput Mortuum," the sonnet characters of this class are individuals whose real worth was not rewarded on earth and it was not until after their death or disappearance that they were found to have succeeded. Thus, in the eyes of the world, they appeared unsuccessful, but they were spiritual victors, their lives have counted as realized after their loss.

¹²Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 150. Barnard's classes of characters are explained fully with examples from the poetry in Chapter V: Characters: A Spiritual Genealogy, pp. 121-148.

¹³By no means do I intend to include all 89 of Robinson's sonnets in this discussion. Character is not the central controlling element in 27 sonnets. In some 20 others, the role of character is of minimal significance, even though human elements are prevalent. I intend to work with those 40 sonnets in which character is the central issue.

¹⁴For reference, discussion, and quotation of the sonnets, I have made use of Edwin Arlington Robinson, Sonnets: 1889-1927. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.

In "The Sunken Crown," the portrait is that of a man whose dedication to his idealism has relegated him to worldly failure; he is scorned by the speaker of the sonnet. But there is an underlying irony in this sonnet which belittles the speaker's scorn of this idealist and suggests to the reader a spiritual success in idealism. The ironical tone implies that the idealist is better off plunging for "the sunken crown" than sitting back condescendingly criticizing those who have tried. In another character sketch, the poet is addressing his townspeople (Tilbury Town). He recalls to them "A Man in Our Town" whom it was good for them to know, a lonely, pitiable, poor and humble fellow whom they found fault with for his lack of ambition and prosperity, but whom they often silently and unconsciously missed after his death because of his unselfish aid in times of difficulty: "Though he be forgotten, it was good/for more than one of you that he was here."

In one other sonnet, "Afterthoughts," it is not until the speaker is lost forever that his real success is known. Two friends meet and part as they had many times in the past. The one returns to tell the other, the speaker of the poem, something that, although the reader is not told what it is, must have been important to both of them. Perhaps it was some philosophic reflection on life, some wisdom won from experience, some point of view that helped to illuminate the meaning of life. Regardless of what the message was, it was not important until later, after his friend's death, when the speaker says:

And I, no doubt, if he had not returned
Might yet be unaware that he had earned
More than earth gives to many who have won
More than it has to give when they are gone.

In "Shadrach O'Leary" and "Caput Mortuum," the earthly failure involves the plight of the giftless poet, the unsuccessful attempt to compose poetry.

But each is a spiritual success in his own way. "Caput Mortuum" portrays a would-be poet whose life is beneficial despite his "old defeat...In Art's long hazard." The speaker, the maker of this sonnet, in an imaginary visit, remembers his poet-friend as an important influence in his own life as a poet. It is not the poet's poetry that was influential but rather his attitude despite his poetic failure ("Unfailing and exuberant all the time"). He may have failed in his ambition as a poet, but his life has had a spiritual value. This same point can be made about Shadrach O'Leary. But his case is slightly different from all the other apparent earthly failures who are really successes. He too failed as a poet and thus failed in an earthly sense. But he also succeeded in an earthly sense by casting off his poetic ambitions and finding his proper and suitable station in life, a station which rewarded him with self-respect and contentment. Shadrach could admit himself a failure in poetry, and yet find happiness in another occupation. He has found a physical well-being in society and the result has led him away from moral ruin and loss of faith--he has attained a spiritual success as well.

This portrait is exemplary of the overlapping of classes, for Shadrach O'Leary could justifiably be placed in what Barnard lists as his last class: those individuals to whom destiny is kind--they who find worldly success as well as spiritual success. Worldly success does not necessarily mean material success although it well could; instead, it usually designates a contentment and happiness, a peace and inner security in life. This tangible success may be painfully bought as in the cases of Cliff Klingenhagen and the wife in "Vain Gratuities," but it is certainly worth its price. Spiritual success, a deeper intangible significance, then, comes as a result of adjustment and contentment in life. The spiritually successful man is not destroyed by moral corruption and loss of faith. He is, in fact, confident of his spirit-

ual well-being. Shadrach has been able to attain these qualities, after suffering through a period of failure and faithlessness. Characters of three other sonnets qualify for this class: "Firelight," "Vain Gratuities," and "Cliff Klingenhagen."

In both "Firelight" and "Vain Gratuities," Robinson presents near ideal marital relationships. This is not Robinson's normal presentation of marriage. In most instances, he pictured the causes and results of the breakdown and failure of conjugal relations. But in these two sonnets, he demonstrates the possibilities of married love if only the marital partners are able to be content with their situations. In "Firelight," the couple has realized "The blessing of what neither says aloud" and that they are "Wiser for silence." They are peaceful and contented as a result. The wife in "Vain Gratuities" could easily be placed in the first class of characters because "in the eyes of other women" she was a failure to be pitied for her choice of a husband: "Never was there a man much uglier/...or more grim." She appears to have failed, but, in truth, she is found to be happier and more content with her homely husband than her gossipers are with their husbands and, in addition, she is inwardly self-assured of her success.

It is the portrait of Cliff Klingenhagen in the sonnet of the same name that best illustrates this class of worldly success followed by the resultant spiritual success:

Cliff Klingenhagen had me in to dine
With him one day; and after soup and meat,
And all the other things there were to eat,
Cliff took two glasses and filled one with wine
And one with wormwood. Then, without a sign
For me to choose at all, he took the draught
Of bitterness himself, and lightly quaffed
It off, and said the other one was mine.

And when I asked him what the deuce he meant
By doing that, he only looked at me
And smiled, and said it was a way of his.
And though I know the fellow, I have spent
Long time a-wondering when I shall be
As happy as Cliff Klingenhagen is.

This may seem to be slightly didactic but it stands as a demonstration of worldly success leading to spiritual success as a result of adjustment to this world. The fact that Cliff can serve in his home a full meal to a friend is partial evidence, at least in a material sense, that he is a worldly success. The fact that he is happy in his generosity further demonstrates his success for he is portrayed by the speaker as content and adjusted to his way of life. In an habitual act of self-discipline, without hesitation, Cliff "took the draught/of bitterness himself," and gave the wine to the speaker. This action is symbolic for it suggests that true happiness is felt when bitterness is upon the tongue; a price must be paid for happiness. To Cliff, it is a minimal cost for the beneficial reward; to the poet-narrator, not knowledgeable of the reward, the price seems harsh and incomprehensible. But he does clearly recognize Cliff Klingenhagen's success.

Cliff Klingenhagen and the few characters mentioned above are a distinct minority in Robinson's scheme of characters--they are spiritually successful. Most of the characters resemble more the poet-narrator in that they are searching after happiness and contentment but never find them. They are failures and they are more numerous in his poetry simply because in life, the source of Robinson's portraits, he saw more failure than success.

Barnard has three basic patterns for classification of Robinson's characters who fail. The first includes those characters who appear to be successful in this world but who in reality are failures. (Again Barnard includes no sonnets in this class). "Richard Cory," although it is not a sonnet, serves as the best known and most obvious example of this character type. Robinson is working here, as in the first class, with a basic theme: the disparity between appearance and reality. Characters in three sonnets can be found to follow this pattern: "Fleming Helpenstine," "If the Lord Would Make Windows in Heaven," and "Karma."

Fleming Helpenstine appeared to be a most jovial, contented, relaxed man whose face "shone joyously" and who "laughed and chaffed like any friend." But as soon as the poet-narrator "looked hard at him," Fleming fled from him and was never seen again. This man who appeared so happy with life and close to friends was incapable of establishing a warm friendship. His joyousness was a facade.

The woman in "'If the Lord Would Make Windows in Heaven'" could very well be the wife of the idealist in "The Sunken Crown" who is scorned for his idealism. Robinson is again defending the idealist even though the idealist is a failure. He presents this disloyal wife as a hypocrite. Although she appeared "year by year...more angelical," "A saint abroad," who on the surface exhibited loyalty and encouragement toward her husband, she did in fact contribute to his ultimate failure for she "dishonored his illusions day by day."

In both of these examples of failure disguised as success in life, the supposed success is represented by apparent friendship, loyalty and contentment--over-all adjustment in life. In "Karma," success means material success. The portrait is that of a financially successful businessman during the Christmas season. In the process of becoming "successful," he has had to step on and destroy his competitors and he is particularly conscious at this religious time of the year, having been reminded by a sidewalk Santa Claus, of "the axe that fell" on a friend who "would neither buy nor sell."

This sonnet illustrates the suffering of an apparently successful man because of his qualms of conscience, "A few confusing flaws/in the divers of God's images." But the man has not really suffered sufficiently for his responsibility for the death of a human being. His conscience is too easily comforted. Robinson strikes hard at this materialist through irony in the sestet:

Acknowledging an improvident surprise,
 He magnified a fancy that he wished
 The friend whom he had wrecked were here again.
 Not sure of that, he found a compromise;
 And from the fulness of his heart he fished
 A dime for Jesus who had died for men.

It is from the title that one realizes the businessman's failure despite his material success. "Karma" is a term which loosely means fate or destiny, but more specifically in Hinduism or Buddhism it means that the totality of a person's actions in one state of existence determines his destiny in the next. Perhaps the suffering of this businessman appears to be insignificant, for his conscience can be soothed by a "charitable" contribution of one thin dime. But Robinson's title clearly indicates belief that the man will ultimately receive his due, that is, relegation to spiritual failure.

A second class of the failures set down by Barnard includes those to whom neither worldly nor spiritual success is permitted; they have neither the outward appearance nor the inward reward of success. They are the failures for whom there is little hope. "Aaron Stark," "Charles Carville's Eyes," "The Rat," "Doctor of Billiards," and "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" are the sonnets whose characters follow this pattern. From each of these sonnets comes a sharp sense of emptiness, of a wasted existence, of complete failure.

In the sonnet "Aaron Stark," which is as deftly handled and sharply delineated as its title suggests, Robinson presents the protagonist as a miser "with a miser's nose/And eyes like little dollars in the dark." The poet's severe description of this man is exemplified by the simile which concludes the octave in which Aaron is compared to a "cur" through whose "scattered fangs a few snarled words...came like sullen blows." There is very little hope of redemption for Aaron as evidenced by the presentation of his attitude toward the townspeople (Tilbury Town) in the sestet:

Glad for the murmur of his hard renown,
 Year after year he shambled through the town,
 A loveless exile moving with a staff;
 And oftentimes there crept into his ears
 A sound of alien pity, touched with tears,--
 And then (and only then) did Aaron laugh.

He even laughed at those who could find some pity in their hearts for him.
 He is damned in both a worldly and a spiritual sense.

The townspeople found pity for two other sonnet characters designated by Barnard as representatives of this class: Charles Carvill and the man ignominiously named "The Rat." In both of these sonnets it is not until after death that the townspeople even recognized them as human beings. But unlike the protagonists of the sonnets of the first class whose true worth was not recognized until after death, these men are never exonerated of their failures and therefore are forever the "disinherited sons of God."¹⁵

"Doctor of Billiards" is the most blatant example of a wasted existence:

Of all among the fallen from on high
 We count you last...

 You click away the kingdom that is yours,
 And you click off your crown for cap and bells;

The "click" is the sound made "by three spheres of insidious ivory" which become the symbol of the doctor's existence. He is a man without direction or purpose whose life is a failure beyond redemption.

The last sonnet portrait which conforms to the pattern of the complete failure is "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" (a two-sonnet sequence). Lorraine recognized her failure and committed suicide--not an unusual character action of this class in which emptiness and despair are paramount. She was driven by passion and discontent to a life of prostitution from which there

¹⁵ Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 132.

was no escape for her except death. The title of this poem seems confusing on first glance--the use of the word "growth" suggests that Robinson approved of suicide as an escape from a life of failure. This is not so. To understand the use of this word, the reader must be aware of the point of view of the narrator of these sonnets. He is an ex-friend, possibly an ex-fiance, who after many years managed to forget Lorraine and was not "surprised or grieved" to hear of her suicide. To him, her death is "growth" away from her evil, degraded life of promiscuity. The reader, having before him both Lorraine's and the narrator's attitudes, should recognize that Lorraine's "growth" is further growth in failure. At the end of the second sonnet, Lorraine writes in her suicide note that she

...cannot curse
The love that flings, for better or for worse,
This worn-out, cast-out flesh of mine to sleep.

Her love of passion and her slavery to a promiscuous life (as developed in the first sonnet) are the "love" that she cannot curse. There is not hint of penitence or guilt; she is now simply unable physically ("worn-out, cast-out flesh of mine") to continue. She can be classified as none other than a complete failure, whose life was wasted and empty.

The last category of failures according to Barnard's scheme contains the largest number of characters and perhaps the most pitiable ones. It includes those who are relegated to a life of solitude, loneliness and sadness as a result of the breakdown of marital relationships ("An Evangelist's Wife," "Job, The Rejected," "Not Always," "The Story of the Ashes and the Flame," "The Woman and the Wife"), the loss of a loved one ("Reuben Bright," "Amaryllis"), the inability to relate ("The Long Race," "Reunion," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden"), or simply the loss of security ("Lost Anchors").

Of those sonnets which depict the breakdown of the relationship between husbands and wives, "Job, The Rejected" and "The Story of the Ashes and the Flame" illustrate the loneliness of the rejected husband. The weak husband in "Job, The Rejected" could neither control his wife's wild aspirations nor adjust himself to her disappearance. "The Story of the Ashes and the Flame" presents a tender portrait of a devoted husband suffering because his wife has left him and hopelessly dreaming that she will return to him "with penitent scared eyes."

In the other three portraits of domestic discord there are presented three pictures of the solitude and sadness of the marital partners despite the fact that neither has deserted the other. In fact, in "Not Always" (a two sonnet sequence) the portrait is that of a weak marriage in which each partner is

Wishing the other might at once be sure
And strong enough to shake the prison down.

But in the meantime life together is barely endurable for both.

"An Evangelist's Wife" and "The Woman and the Wife" present faulty marital situations with the wives as the principal sufferers. The plight of the wife of the foolish evangelist drives her to disgust with her husband not only because of his adultery but also because of his accusations that she is jealous of God. She is left lonely and sad unjustly forced to endure his sins against her. "The Woman and the Wife" (another two sonnet sequence) depicts the loneliness and suffering of a woman who fully realizes that "God never made me for the wife of you." She understands that they are living a lie and in this dramatic monologue she is trying to convince her husband that "Passion has turned the lock," but that "Pride keeps the key." It is pride that imprisons these two lonely people in a marriage that should never have been.

A sadness and solitude is also demonstrated in those sonnets which depict the reactions of those whose loved ones have died. In one of Robinson's earliest sonnets, "Amaryllis," the subject is the painful pitiable suffering of an old man because of the death of his wife. The scene is set in the calm of the forest where the old man has laid his wife in her grave. The heartbreak and grief of the man is accentuated by a contrast in the sestet in which "the calling of loud progress" blares on:

But though the trumpets of the world were glad,
It made me lonely and it made me sad
To think that Amaryllis had grown old.

Reuben Bright has also lost a loved one. Reuben is a butcher who, because of his occupation, is not unfamiliar with death, but his wife's death nearly destroys him. Reuben's sorrow is so painful that he "shook with grief and fright/And cried like a great baby half the night." The pathos of death had gripped him so keenly that he has given up his butcher business--he "tore down the slaughter-house." Reuben has been left lonely and saddened.

Another rather serious and pitiable failure which leaves people isolated and weak is the inability to relate to one another, the difficulty of establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships. As Barnard suggests, "The Long Race" and "Reunion" seem to be companion poems which fit this category even though several years separate their publication dates. Both deal with the loss of human bonds due to long separation.¹⁶ "The Long Race" depicts the reuniting of two friends after fifty years. The meeting was painful for both--"they dredged an hour for words, and then were done." They had lost any feelings shared a half century before and each is left like the little horse on the weather-vane--old and alone. "Reunion" also portrays

¹⁶ Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 135.

a pair of former friends whose chance reunion after many years is "not so friendly;" in fact, "when there was at last a way to leave,/Farewell was a foreseen extravagance." These men could not catch the spirit of their youthful enthusiasms for each other. In the sestet, the speaker who gives the account of this meeting expresses indirectly his feeling of loneliness and disappointment on the next evening as he sits by his fire:

Tonight the west has yet a failing red,
While silence whispers of all things not here;
And round there where the fire was that is dead,
Dusk-hidden tenants that are chairs appear.
The same old stars will soon be overhead,
But not so fridndly and not quite so near.

Both of these poems are laden with an atmosphere and tone of darkness, futility, and failure.

Pamela, in "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," is more of a lonesome failure even than the two pairs of estranged friends above. She apparently, although no explanation is explicitly stated, cannot establish any relationship, not even one that can be lost because of time and separation. The most likely explanation is that she fears the possible pain that results from human attachment and therefore avoids it, especially contact with men.¹⁷ She lives alone in her garden, talks to her roses, and deceives Tilbury Town. She makes the townspeople believe that she is more interested in the North Star than in men and she only smiles when sympathetic neighbors suggest a remedy for her loneliness. Pamela's closest contact is with her garden of flowers which does not cause her pain. Barnard suggests that she "has found a kind of contentment in second best."¹⁸

¹⁷Scott Donaldson, "The Alien Pity: A Study of Character in E.A.Robinson's Poetry," American Literature, 38 (May, 1966), 227-228.

¹⁸Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 135.

The last sonnet in this class, "Lost Anchors," is exemplary of the isolation and torment that results from one's alienation from one's proper role. "Like a dry fish flung inland far from shore," the old sailor waits out his "dry leisure" by telling stories and legends about the sea from which he has been separated. What "misadventure" it is that caused him to be flung inland and alienated from the sea is never revealed, but he is shown to be "lost" as the anchors were lost. He, like the anchors, has been deprived of his security and his sense of belonging. His life story is meaningful only as a "manifest/Analogy," as an example of insecurity.¹⁹

In some of the sonnets, such as "Aaron Stark," "The Growth of 'Lorraine'," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," and "Lost Anchors," more than one interpretation is possible. Don't Aaron's laugh and Lorraine's impenitence suggest a kind of success? Doesn't Pamela's satisfaction with second best deny failure? Is the old sailor in "Lost Anchors" really unhappy? There can be no doubt that an argument can be made that these characters are in some sense successes. The sonnets and their characters are far too complex for one to state unequivocally that there is only one interpretation. But from an humanitarian point of view, Aaron, Lorraine, Pamela and the old sailor are failures. Aaron and Pamela may be "self-content" in a personal sense, but they are definitely losers in a spiritual sense because of their inhumanity. Lorraine and the sailor are both able to spit in the eye of the world for their misfortunes, but certainly neither has succeeded.

The above sonnets and several others ("How Annandale Went Out," "Another Dark Lady," "Alma Mater," "En Passant," "Battle After War"), which were not included in the five classes because their characters did not follow the

¹⁹Ronald Wesson Moran, "With Firm Address: A Critical Study of 26 Shorter Poems of E. A. Robinson," Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1966, pp. 160-161.

patterns described, make up the majority of Robinson's sonnet characters and are based upon figures in his contemporary world. Robinson wrote that

The people that interest me are my close associates and creatures of my own fancy. I have a dozen or so of the latter who have kept me company for a long time. Now I want to see them on paper.²⁰

Although it is not easy to substantiate any direct connections between Robinson's fictional characters and individuals in his contemporary scene, there can be little doubt that the inspiration for the majority of his portraits of contemporary characters came from his keen observation, almost psychological penetration, of people in his immediate society. Rollo Brown wrote:

What he wanted to know was the inclusive story behind the appearances--the story behind this man's or that woman's conduct. When the story was not obvious, he would shake his head and say, "there must be something there."²¹

Up to this point, the discussion has concerned itself only with the sonnet characters which Robinson saw or envisioned as part of his contemporary society. Obviously these portraits are the most memorable and numerous, but there are also the portraits of characters of the past--the historical portraits.

Robinson wrote seven sonnets in which historical figures are presented. It is interesting to note that all of these men were literary figures and that all of the sonnets were written before 1902 except "Silver Street." In 1902, Robinson was still in the early stages of his poetic career and

²⁰ Untriangulated Stars, p. 119.

²¹ Next Door to a Poet (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937), p. 52.

undoubtedly he had found in his reading many literary figures whose work he admired and perhaps emulated. In these portraits, Robinson did not center his attention upon the inner aspects, the psychological make-up of his subjects as he had with most of the portraits of contemporary figures. Instead, his main purpose was to offer a word of praise for the literary contributions of these artists.

During a brief trip to England, Robinson visited a spot where Shakespeare had stayed with Mountjoy. "Silver Street," a sonnet in commemoration of Shakespeare, was Robinson's final salute, Hagedorn tells us, to a man who Robinson felt was a "spiritual ancestor of his."²² In like manner, "The Sage" is a sonnet which demonstrates Robinson's deep admiration and esteem for Ralph Waldo Emerson because of his idealism, and his philosophical and intellectual capabilities.

In "Thomas Hood" and "George Crabbe," Robinson found praise for two English poets. His appreciation of Thomas Hood seems to stem from Hood's comic analysis of his very distressing, dismal existence. The feeling of melancholy grows to deep sadness with further contemplation on Hood's life and works. George Crabbe is thought by many critics to be a major influence on Robinson because Crabbe was a realist and a sympathetic depicter of the lives of the poor and ordinary of his day. Although Robinson admired him for these qualities, it is not easy to estimate the degree of influence. It is sufficient to say that Robinson found Crabbe to an admirable, but neglected poet.

Robinson's interest in Zola and Erasmus is more a defense of these two men's work than an admiration of it for its literary quality. In "Zola," he comments on the hostile attitude of his day toward Zola's art and defends its

²² Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 336.

realistic elements. In "Erasmus," his interest in this 15th-century theologian and scholar seems to stem from Erasmus' demonstration of the truth regardless of its consequences. He found Erasmus to be a bold man who "protested" against what he felt was wrong:

Good fathers looked askance at him and rolled
 Their inward eyes in anguish and affright;
 There were some of them did shake at what was told,
 And they shook best who knew that he was right.

In the historical sonnet portrait, "Verlaine," Robinson is not in the least concerned with Verlaine, the man, or with his poetry. We learn from Fussell that the French Symbolist movement of which Verlaine was a part, was of no influence on him. Robinson's major point is his denial of the importance of the biographical approach to criticism.

Come! let the grass grow there; and leave his verse
 To tell the story of the life he led.
 Let the man go: let the dead flesh be dead,
 And let the worms be its biographers.

Robinson is concerned with the relation of art to social morality; he is insisting on the separation of aesthetic and biographical judgments.²³

E. A. Robinson has been severely criticized by his reviewers for being too vague in his presentation of character and meaning in much of his poetry. This is not an unjust criticism. Robinson himself was aware of the complaint and recognized its validity.²⁴ He understood that it was his method of presentation that was the basis of the problem, but it was this same method of presentation that proved to be his poetic strength. The terms "indirection"

²³ Fussell, p. 198.

²⁴ Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, pp. 27-28.

and "inferential" have been used in attempts to analyse this method.²⁵ In reference to Robinson's presentation of character, Richard Crowder perhaps summarized it best when he wrote:

His method is to seize upon a situation usually at its telling moment and minutely examine the enmeshed characters. Such a system of exposition parallels the classical in medias res, except that the reader is not so often plunged into a whirlpool of action as into a careful analysis.²⁶

A few years earlier, Henry Wells had stated a similar observation: "He enjoys plunging into the midst of a character or an action, striking the dominant spiritual note but mystifying the reader as to the merely material events."²⁷ A sonnet which serves as a good illustration of this method at its best is "The Long Race":

Up the old hill to the old house again
Where fifty years ago the friend was young
Who should be waiting somewhere there among
Old things that least remembered most remain,
He toiled on with a pleasure that was pain
To think how soon asunder would be flung
The curtain half a century had hung
Between the two ambitions they had slain.

They dredged an hour for words, and then were done.
"Good-bye!...You have the same old weather-vane--
Your little horse that's always on the run."
And all the way down back to the next train,
Down the old hill to the old road again,
It seemed as if the little horse had won.

²⁵ Charles Cestre, An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 222 and Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1946), pp. 44, 45 are two of the earliest critics to refer to Robinson's technique and style with these terms.

²⁶ Crowder, 147.

²⁷ New Poets From Old (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 94.

Making use of the "inferential" or in medias res method of presentation, Robinson has set before the reader two men in reaction to an emotional situation, in this case, their reunion after fifty years. The meaning of the sonnet is implied through the personalities of the characters shown in emotional crisis: the inability of man to relate to his fellow man. Robinson makes this theme more poignant by not naming either of these men and by not giving either one any particularly individual characteristics. This lends a sense of universality to the theme.

But in the process of working out his theme through presentation of character, Robinson has left the reader with several unanswered questions: Why had these men not seen each other for fifty years? What ambitions had they slain? Why had they decided to meet again after so long? There are no certain answers and Robinson intended it that way. He has thrust the reader into a human situation at its climactic point and then he leaves it to the reader's curiosity to speculate about the actual events that led up to this crisis point in their lives. But the truth is that this background information is of little importance. Robinson is primarily concerned with recording the effects of the situation upon a man's personality.²⁸

Again, in a two sonnet sequence entitled "The Growth of 'Lorraine'," Robinson makes use of the in medias res technique:

I

While I stood listening, discreetly dumb,
Lorraine was having the last word with me:
"I know," she said, "I know it, but you see
Some creatures are born fortunate, and some
Are born to be found out and overcome,--
Born to be slaves, to let the rest go free;
And if I'm one of them (and I must be)
You may as well forget me and go home.

²⁸Moran, pp. 162-163, 165.

"You tell me not to say these things, I know,
 But I should never try to be content:
 I've gone too far; the life would be too slow.
 Some could have done it--some girls have the stuff;
 But I can't do it: I don't know enough.
 I'm going to the devil." --And she went.

II

I did not half believe her when she said
 That I should never hear from her again;
 Nor when I found a letter from Lorraine,
 Was I surprised or grieved at what I read:
 "Dear Friend, when you find this, I shall be dead.
 You are too far away to make me stop.
 They say that one drop--think of it, one drop!--
 Will be enough,--but I'll take five instead.

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

As is customary in this method of presentation, the reader finds himself at the beginning of the first sonnet listening to the tail-end of a remembered conversation between the narrator and Lorraine in which "Lorraine was having the last word" before their final separation. Some twenty lines later, in the second sonnet, the reader now finds himself listening to the narrator reading Lorraine's suicide note in which she describes herself as "Impenitent, sick, and shattered." What proceeded Lorraine's "last word?" What was the relationship between the narrator and Lorraine? What duration of time was there between the first and second sonnets? These are a few of the pieces the reader must supply in order to complete this human puzzle.

But, again, Robinson is not interested in the completion of a picture puzzle. Instead, his interest lies in the poignant presentation of those two critical points in Lorraine's life: her decision to become promiscuous and her suicide. Through Lorraine's own words, he is offering a concentrated

intellective analysis of the reason for her decisions. In both cases, we find that Lorraine felt driven, compelled as a slave. In the first sonnet, she states that she is inherently a slave to passion and that ordinary "life would be too slow." She must go "to the devil," that is, be a prostitute. The second sonnet depicts Lorraine much later in life, driven to suicide by the realization of her inability to continue her life as before. Thus, Robinson is interested in portraying Lorraine's own explanation of her decisions in life; he is not interested in creating all the sordid details that make up that life.

The essential drama of life lies in the inward effect of experience upon the character. To capture fully those effects of experience, Robinson made use of more than just this in medias res method of presentation in the sonnets. In the case of "The Growth of 'Lorraine'," we have already noted the importance of the point of view from which the dramatic representation of character is related. The understanding that these sonnets are partially Lorraine's dramatic monologue and partially a narrative exposition by her ex-friend is essential for Robinson's method of presentation of the inner aspects of character. The understanding of the use of the word "growth" in the title, for example, is dependent upon this knowledge. Thus, the method of presentation is not limited to the in medias res method, but it also involves point of view.

Sonnets such as "Aaron Stark," "Reuben Bright," "Firelight," and "Job, The Rejected" all demand little attention concerning their points of view for their characters are portrayed in straight narrative. The poet usually admits himself the story-teller and undisguisedly narrates the poem. In other narrative poems, the poet enters into the situation usually as an involved participant or as an observer. "Another Dark Lady," "Fleming Helpenstine," and "Cliff Klingenhagen" are examples.

One other form of narrative presentation, which seems in the sonnet to be unique with Robinson, is the narrative with scattered pieces of dialogue. This occurs in such sonnet-portraits as "Amaryllis," "Vain Gratuities," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," and "The Long Race." The two-line bit of dialogue in the sestet of "The Long Race" is perhaps illustrative of the usefulness of this method of presentation for the development of character:

They dredged an hour for words, and then were done.
 "Good-bye!...You have the same old weather-vane--
 Your little horse that's always on the run."
 And all the way down back to the next train,
 Down the old hill to the old road again,
 It seemed as if the little horse had won.

A change of tone occurs when the men have finished their conversation and the visitor has started down the hill. There is a sense of relief that the ordeal is over. "Good-bye!" came as a form of deliverance and the movement of the last four lines is noticeably hurried.²⁹ The comment concerning the weather-vane further demonstrates that a cold, distant relationship still exists and emphasizes the inability to communicate.

Dramatic representation of character not only includes a portrayal of the inward aspects of character in reaction to some stimulus, but it also implies that the poet withdraw from the scene. This can best be accomplished in the dramatic monologue and Robinson mastered the form and adapted it to the sonnet. The dramatic monologue is a great aid in characterization because it encourages compression and emphasizes the essential. It allows the poet to delve into the deepest and most hidden aspects of the soul by means of speech and to reveal the interplay within the mind as a result of a situation. But perhaps best, the monologue allows the poet to shrink into the

²⁹Ibid., p. 165.

background, to be detached, and it permits the reader to focus his attention upon the speaker's psyche. "The Growth of 'Lorraine'," could almost be termed a dramatic monologue even though it is not entirely the words of one person. "How Annandale Went Out," "The Woman and the Wife," and "An Evangelist's Wife" are pure examples of Robinson's ability with this poetic technique in the sonnet. "How Annandale Went Out" will serve as an illustration of the usefulness of the dramatic monologue in examination and portrayal of character. One must keep in mind that Robinson has also elected to present this sonnet character by means of the in medias res technique, which naturally heightens the effects of the sonnet.

"They called it Annandale--and I was there
To flourish, to find words, and to attend:
Liar, physician, hypocrite, and friend,
I watched him; and the sight was not so fair
As one or two that I have seen elsewhere:
An apparatus not for me to mend--
A wreck, with hell between him and the end,
Remained of Annandale; and I was there.

"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;
So put the two together, if you can,
Remembering the worst you know of me.
Now view yourself as I was, on the spot--
With a slight kind of engine. Do you see?
Like this...You wouldn't hang me? I thought not."

This sonnet is a doctor's argument in defense of his practice of euthanasia on his slow-suffering personal friend. The last line of the sonnet indicates that this monologue was not a soliloquy, but was addressed by the doctor to a particular audience--perhaps to a judge and jury or just to a friend. There are two details which present particular problems in interpretation. The first puzzling detail occurs in the first line of the poem and involves what appears to be a lack of noun and pronoun agreement: the use of the word "it" in reference to Annandale. There is no agreement error as viewed from the doctor's point of view. Annandale has lost all human

characteristics except the capacity for suffering. In the doctor's opinion, this man (thing), especially because he was a personal friend, deserved to be relieved of the "hell between him and the end." The other confusing detail involves the phrase "a light kind of engine." It is quite obvious that this phrase describes the instrument used in the mercy killing; but specifically what is the "engine?" A most reasonable instrument, readily available to a doctor, would be a hypodermic needle. But this is only speculation and not essential to the understanding of the sonnet.³⁰

The thing that makes this poem work so successfully is the tone of irony, understatement, and downright flippancy expressed by the doctor in his dramatic monologue. The nature of the situation, the question of euthanasia are most serious, and yet he underplays everything. The very title of the sonnet lacks the sense of seriousness that the situation deserves. But why has the doctor defended himself in this manner? The answer is not easy. One must first realize that his attitude toward himself is not an elevated one. He calls himself a "Liar, hypocrite" and later asks the audience to remember "The worst you know of me" in making the judgment. His intention is not to humble himself before his audience, but rather to present himself realistically. This deliberate self-deprecation along with his use of irony and understatement are manifestations of his own realistic appraisal of Annandale's situation as being absurd in its pathos and the situation of the placement of guilt as being equally absurd. The doctor felt that what he did was not only justified but also was the only right, natural, and compassionate thing to do.³¹

³⁰ Wallace L. Anderson, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 105-106.

³¹ Moran, pp. 67-68.

Again, the fact that Robinson excluded all unnecessary bits of background information and included only what he needed is a credit to his poetic abilities. This is the result not only of the dramatic monologue technique but also of the in medias res method presentation. For example, the exact circumstances of Annandale's illness are never revealed. Did he have cancer, a heart attack, war wounds, mental illness? The reader is not told partly because he has joined the discussion in the middle. But the major reason is that that knowledge would tend to shift the emphasis away from the doctor, about whom the sonnet revolves, and direct the reader's attention on Annandale. This is the doctor's poem; information of that nature can only detract from the poem and possibly lead to melodrama.³² As it is, "How Annandale Went Out" is a masterful piece of poetry due primarily to Robinson's expert handling of the methods of presentation.

A question that must be dealt with in a study of Robinson's sonnet characters is why Robinson employed the sonnet for character portrayal? This certainly was an innovation on his part. Where characters appear in the sonnets of the past, they seem to be incidental to other themes: Shakespeare's sonnet no. 131 on his Dark Lady, Milton's "Cromwell," Wordsworth's "On Milton," and Shelley's "Ozymandias."

Perhaps the explanation is simply that at the time that he was writing there seemed to be some advantage in taking a well-established and highly respectable form. He would probably start tentatively with a few lines that in turn suggested others. The very rhyme scheme may have forced his invention. He had a character, an emotion, a thought in mind (perhaps to illustrate some principle) which he worked into the demanding form of the sonnet.

³²Ibid., p. 68.

It is really not easy to ascertain Robinson's motives for his unique use of the sonnet without indulging in outright speculation and guesswork. But perhaps an examination of the advantages gained by this poetic technique will serve as an explanation.

An obvious advantage that is readily understood from the former discussion of the method of presentation, is the sonnet's adaptability to the in medias res technique. The form lends itself well to the compressed, tightly-packed structure necessary in this method of character portrayal. There is not time nor opportunity to digress. The space that the poet allows himself is quite restrictive and he becomes primarily concerned with inclusion of the essential and exclusion of the irrelevant.³³ Louis Coxe makes the point that in many of the character portraits in his short poems and sonnets, Robinson must make character, theme, and symbol "do in brief and without obtrusiveness what long passages of dialogue, exposition and description would effect in a novel."³⁴ And when Robinson does this successfully as he did in "How Annandale Went Out" and "The Long Race" for example, it is the tightness, the compression, the brevity that nearly always heightens the dramatic effect. Amy Lowell pinpointed Robinson's major advantage in the use of the sonnet when she wrote:

Mr. Robinson has carefully studied that primary condition of all poetry: brevity; and his best effects are those gained with the utmost economy of means.³⁵

³³Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 97.

³⁴Edwin Arlington Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 36.

³⁵Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (1921; rpt. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1970), p. 32.

Robinson's choice of the Petrarchan sonnet form (all his sonnets except "An Evangelist's Wife" are Petrarchan) was also an advantage to his method of character portrayal. He avoided the concluding couplet of the Shakespearian sonnet form, for he did not want to produce the rapid and climactic effect that this form makes possible. Instead, he wanted to work with the "turn" after the octave of the Petrarchan form. In only two of his sonnets did Robinson fail to come to a full stop after the eighth line. The "turn" offered him the opportunity to pause and consider what had been stated and then to proceed in an attempt to apply or comment on that statement, and being the sonnet to a logical close in the sestet.³⁶

Robinson made use of the "turn" of the Petrarchan form as a means of presenting a contrast or conflicting points of view. In "Fleming Helpenstine," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," and "Vain Gratuities," the break between the octave and sestet develop contrasts which demonstrate the disparity between appearance and reality. The contrasts in "Amaryllis" and "Shadrach O'Leary" work toward quite different themes. The most common use of the "turn" occurs in such sonnets as "Alma Mater," "Reuben Bright," "How Annandale Went Out," "The Long Race," and "Karma." In all of these sonnets there is a distinct division between the example, the narrative, the exposition in the octave and the implied general statement in the sestet. "Cliff Klingenhagen" is a pointed example. The octave concerns itself with the exposition of a situation in Cliff's home at mealtime. It is presented with Cliff's action in the forefront. In the sestet, the poet-narrator's observation is made and completed by an implied suggestion that Cliff is right. Thus the structure of the poem (division between octave and sestet) coincides with the two points of view, and with the exposition and implied statement

³⁶Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study, p. 65.

of theme.

The sonnet, then, particularly the Petrarchan sonnet, provided Robinson with a traditionally admired form with which he felt comfortable. Its basic structure not only encouraged economy, brevity, and compression in character portrayal, which suited his purposes, but its octave-sestet division also enhanced his method of presentation.

Robinson expressed a rather humble opinion of his attempts at sonnet-making in a letter in 1923:

I am trying to write sonnets, but when I consider that there are only about forty or fifty really good ones in the world, I wonder if I hadn't better be delivering milk.³⁷

But Robinson continued to compose sonnets and did not resort to "delivering milk." Perhaps it will be found, after time has influenced the judgment, that one or two of Robinson's sonnets are to be included in those "forty or fifty really good ones in the world."

³⁷Selected Letters, p. 135.

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A STUDY OF CHARACTER IN THE SONNETS OF
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

by

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ABSTRACT

Edwin Arlington Robinson did something new in his use of the sonnet. He used the sonnet as a means of character presentation, as a poetic form for portrayal of character. This was an innovation on his part. Where characters appear in the sonnets of the past, they seem to be incidental to other themes: Shakespeare's no. 131 on his Dark Lady, Milton's "Cromwell," and Wordsworth's "On Milton."

With this in mind, it seems rather surprising that very little critical attention has been paid to this unique development in the sonnet tradition. In most studies of Robinson's characters the sonnet characters have taken a back-seat to the Arthurian characters, to the characters in the long poems such as Captain Craig and Amaranth, and to the characters of the short lyrical poems such as "Richard Cory," "Miniver Cheevy," "Eben Flood," "Luke Havergal," "Eros Turannos," and many others. Rarely is an examination made of the Robinsonian sonnet as a means of character presentation.

Such an examination is the purpose of this study. It is found that Robinson's sonnet characters fall into one of five patterns according to the degree of their success or failure measured by a continuum of success-failure. Although the range of characters is wide and varied, it is possible to class the sonnet character types both thematically and historically. The continuum extends from the adjusted, happy success in "Cliff Klingenhagen" to the complete failure in "Doctor of Billiards." In addition to the presentation of portraits of contemporary figures, Robinson also composed several sonnet portraits of historical personages, primarily literary figures such as George Crabbe, Thomas Hood, and Zola. This classification system serves as a convenient means of character discussion.

Robinson's real artistry and talent in the sonnet is revealed by an analysis of his methods of presentation of character in the sonnet. He made use of the same methods that any literary artist who wishes to present

character might choose. These methods involve the use of point of view and include such means as straight narrative ("Cliff Klingenhagen"), narrative intermixed with dialogue by the character ("The Long Race"), and dramatic monologue ("How Annandale Went Out"). If this doesn't seem particularly innovative, recognize that there are only 14 lines with which to work; the task then looks immensely more staggering and the accomplishment extremely laudable.

But an even more creative method of presentation is what has been called Robinson's in medias res technique. By this method, he seizes upon the character in a situation at its most telling moment, at the crucial moment of exposition, makes a careful, minute analysis of the character's reaction, and allows the reader to surmise what has preceded. This method demands a compact, concise form for presentation. The sonnets "The Long Race" and "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" serve as illustrations of this method quite successfully.

The question of why Robinson would choose the sonnet, a quite restrictive and very demanding poetic form, for the presentation of the psychology of character is a puzzling one. What advantages did he gain with his use of the sonnet? As mentioned, the concise, compact sonnet form seemed best suited to his in medias res technique. Perhaps it was simply that at the time he was writing, there seemed to be some advantage in taking a well-established and highly respectable form. Perhaps, too, the Petrarchan sonnet form, of which he made almost exclusive use, because of its octave and sestet divisions, served precisely his purposes for character portrayal. But regardless of his motives, it was a happy invention.