

# Loneliness in E.A. Robinson's Poetry

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**Abstract:** Among Robinson's poetry, loneliness is an important theme. This paper would analyze the reasons why he created these lonely characters from his life experience, and provide detailed analysis about three kinds of loneliness reflected in his poetry, then explicit some implications implied in his writing.

**Keywords:** Loneliness; Materialistic Society; Poetry

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Edwin Arlington Robinson, known as E. A. Robinson, is one of the most eminent poets in American literature. As the leading poet between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was considered as the only distinguished poet of his generation. He won Pulitzer Prize for three times and was named on the longlist of the Nobel Prize in Literature for four times. Described as "more artful than Hardy and more coy than Frost and a brilliant sonneteer" (Schmidt 526), he was highly praised during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while his reputation declines nowadays.

Robinson's poetry was heavily influenced by his own life experience. The town he once lived in renamed "Tilbury Town", became the backdrop for many of Robinson's poems. Many characters in his poems, living in the transitional period in America and feeling confused and disillusioned about the social change of fast industrialization and urbanization, lived in the town and suffered the same crisis

## 1. The Background

Robinson was rather quiet in his life. He seldom talked since his childhood, some people even mocked him that "he hasn't any tongue" (Neff 4). He seldom showed up in public and never gave a speech, keeping himself away from the crowds. One important reason why he was silent was that he thought "people are rather interesting after all, if you don't have to talk with them" (Neff 37). What is more, he kept single all his life, having no intimate friends. Thus, he was able to depict the mental state of his characters vividly. They were also introvert, on the one hand they did not want to talk to others about their sufferings, and on the other hand, they had no one to share their inner feeling with. The reasons why they were lonely included the estrangement with friends, relatives and the society.

## 2. The Evidence

Loneliness could be caused by different reasons, for example, most people would feel lonely when they miss their lovers or friends. While another important cause of loneliness is the estrangement with the society. If someone persists on one thing that is not popular, or more seriously, not accepted by most of his contemporaries, he would feel lonely, the feeling of one person fights against the whole world would lead to depression. In Robinson's poems, there were three reasons why the characters felt lonely: the leaving of friends, the death of lovers and the estrangement with society.

Mr. Flood, the old man who drank alone in a night, held a one-person party in his hermitage. While climbing upon the hill, he pretended that there were his friends drinking with him, as they used to do before. Being away from the town and seeing the lights of the house down the hill, the previous memories flooded into his mind, bringing a stronger sense of loneliness. He used to drink with his friends, now he only had the accompany of the moon and the jar. The title is "Mr. Flood's Party", but after finished reading the poem, we found that there was only one person in this poem, Mr. Flood himself. The so-called party was the carnival of he himself, alone.

Reuben Bright, the butcher who seemed like a brute, unexpected by readers when seeing him "cried like a great baby" (Robinson 18). In people's eyes, a butcher was that kind of person who was strong both physically and mentally, but this butcher was as weak as others psychologically, it seemed that after his wife's death, he had nothing to care about in the world, even his slaughter-house. He packed up all of his wife's stuff and gave up his work, removing all the things which carried their memory. Losing his beloved wife, he was a single man, a lonely man.

Miniver Cheevy wanted to come back to the time when "swords were bright and steeds were prancing" (Robinson 24), the period when people were honest and simple. While time, like the water, flowed away and would never come back. The society went on and the trend of materialization and industrialization of the society would not stop. As a small figure, one can do nothing instead of acclimating to the trend. He was lonely because he could not suit to the society. Being estranged from the whole society, he disliked the material world, so he "scorned the gold he sought", but had to live in the society where money was essential, he felt "sore annoyed

without it". The contradiction between his dream and reality depressed him, "Miniver thought, and thought, and thought, and thought about it" (Robinson 32), but he knew he could not fight against the world, thus he had to hide his feelings inside and kept on drinking to escape from reality.

Another typical character is Richard Cory. He was the idol in people's eyes: gentle, rich yet human. In order to become as rich as him, "so on we worked, and waited for the light, and went without the meat and cursed the bread" (Robinson 56). While beyond their expectation, he committed suicide on one calm summer night. It was astonishing that a rich man, who was "richer than a king" (Robinson 56), would leave the world where he could live a quite comfortable life with his fortune. The fortune he owned was what people spend a lifetime pursuing for. Richard Cory, however, cared more about the spiritual world rather than the material possessions. Although he was rich in material stuff, his mind was empty. The pursuits were different between Richard Cory and other people in society, and no one could understand him. It was the estrangement and loneliness that led to his suicide. The lamentable story of Miniver Cheevy and the tragedy of Richard Cory were caused by their unique pursuit, which was distinctive from the circumstance.

### 3. Implications

Loneliness in Robinson's poetry showed his feelings about life at that time. Living in a materialistic society, he felt discontent, because people around him were pursuing substantial life and ignoring spiritual values. He himself devoted all his life into poetry. After he left the Customs House as a sinecure, he did not find work anymore. Leaving all the time writing poetry was a rare phenomenon at that time, but Robinson kept doing it, though being criticized as "churls and sluggard" (Robinson 97). The unique choice he made deepened his feeling of loneliness, which promoted his depiction of loneliness in his characters.

Nevertheless, it could be a misconception that Robinson wrote so many lonely characters because he had pessimistic ideas about life. On the contrary, the sufferings of people who were lonely because of the lack of friends and lovers, like Mr. Flood, implied that the poet believed in friendship and love. If Mr. Flood still had his friends around him, he would not feel lonely, not to say drinking with the moon; Reuben Bright needed not to give up his previous life if his wife still alive. The reason why he wrote so many miserable and lonely characters was that they actually exist in real life, and he happened to find them and recorded them. As he remarked, "the people who interest me are my close associates and the 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" (Robinson 56). Robinson hoped that readers would understand his "optimistic desperation" (Neff 64) of his poetry.

Just as Wallace said, "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." (Wallace 504). As Robinson said, "[My primary concern is] to make a few of us understand our fellow creatures a little better" (Hoffpauir 25). Lonely was one kind of feeling that most people would have when facing the shift from traditional to industrial society. Depicting these characters and exposing their inner world toward readers, it was "a symbol of a protest against the brutal, materialistic society." (Lowell 34).

### 4. Conclusion

One's mind could fly freely when the writer is alone, thus one's intelligence could be expressed adequately, the emotions and feelings of the writer could be presented by the words. That is to say, the writer's intelligence is inspired by loneliness. As a man who lived alone for all his life, carrying on the career that people did not understand, Robinson knew deeply about the feeling of loneliness, and he fully expressed his feelings in his poems. His life seemed alone and miserable, but his poetry had lead him to the fulfillment of his personal pursuit. The stories of those lonely individuals showed Robinson's attitude toward friends, family, and the society. Robinson's characters, who were as lonely as him, found different ways to release their depression, Mr. Flood kept drinking and comfort himself by pretending there were friends drinking with him; Miniver Cheevy resorted to drink, while Richard Cory chose to suicide. Apparently and fortunately, the poet chose to write poemsto release his loneliness, leaving us valuable cultural heritage.

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