

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 7: Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)

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"There's is a good deal to live for, but a man has to go through hell really to find it out." - EAR

Robinson is the first important poet of the twentieth century and famous for his use of the sonnet and the dramatic monologue. Many of his poems are on individuals and individual relationships; most of these individuals are failures. He is traditional in the use of meter; many of his longer works are in blank verse.

Primary Works

The Children of the Night, 1897; *The Man Against the Sky*, 1916; An Arthurian Trilogy (*Merlin*, 1917, *Lancelot*, 1920, and *Tristram*, 1927); *The Three Taverns*, 1920; *Avon's Harvest*, 1921; *Collected Poems*, 1921; *Dionysus in Doubt*, 1925; *Collected Poems*, 1937; *Selected Letters*, 1940; *Uncollected Poems and Prose*, 1975.

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Stanford, Donald E. *Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry: Studies in Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Yvor Winters*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1983.

| [Top](#) | Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Abigail Andrade

When Edwin Arlington Robinson began his life on December 22, 1869, outside Head Tide, Maine, few would have imagined he would become a widely praised writer. He was born to Mary Palmer Robinson and Edward Robinson, when Mary was thirty-six and her husband was fifteen years her senior (Anderson, 21). Oddly, Edwin was not named until six months after his birth, while his mother was recuperating from the rough birth in the resort town of South Harpswell, Maine (Anderson, 21). His father was a shrewd businessman. Though he ran a general store, was a banker, a postmaster and, for a time, served in the state legislature, he became wealthy in the business of buying and selling timber (Anderson, 22). In September of 1870, the Edward Robinson moved the family to Gardiner, Maine, so that Edwin and his two older brothers could receive a better education than the one offered in Head Tide (Anderson, 22). Anderson points out that Edwin was raised in a loving household, where his mother and father were close (22).

It was in Gardiner that he spent the first twenty-seven years of his life. He attended Gardiner High School and it was there that he studied sciences. There were other subjects that he preferred, but he chose these because he evidently assumed his father would not send him to college (Anderson, 30). While still in high school, he published a prose essay entitled "Bores", which was published in "The Amateur", the school's literary magazine. After his graduation from high school in 1888, he spend an additional year there studying classics by authors such as Horace and Milton (Franchere, 11).

Next door to the Robinson's house lived a man by the name of Dr. Schumann (Franchere, 11). Franchere points out in his biography of Robinson that young Edwin and Dr. Schumann became close friends, though Schumann was much older. Through Schumann, he met various other writers in a little poetry club who critiqued his work and helped him broaden his literary horizons (11). At the age of seventeen, he became excited about blank verse. He made a blank verse translation of Cicero's First Oration against Catiline into English from Latin (Anderson, 31). His talent, though obviously present from the start, was obviously increasing. In 1890, The Reporter Monthly was the first to publish his poetry, publishing "Thalia" (Coxe, 36).

In 1891, Robinson entered Harvard as a special student, where he published poems in "The Harvard Advocate". He felt that Harvard would do him a "world of good" (Anderson, 44). His father still did not have a positive attitude about sending his youngest son to college. However, Robinson became ill, and had to go to Boston for evaluation and treatment of his condition. This event combined with his brother's urging their father to allow young Robinson to go finally resulted in his father's consent (Anderson, 44). He continued his education at Harvard until 1893 (Anderson, 44).

In 1892, Robinson's father died. He had been suffering from ill health for some time. Additionally, Dean, his oldest brother, became ill, and his career as a doctor was over. Robinson himself was left with a partial hearing loss as a result of his earlier illness (Anderson, xiv). Additionally, his family was suffering from financial difficulties due to poor investments in Western real estate made by his second brother Herman. Herman felt himself a failure, and turned to alcohol as a way to deal with the dire financial straits the family was in (Anderson, 50). The failure of his two older brothers was always present in the mind of Robinson. His fear of failure would later manifest itself in his work. He imagined that the townspeople regarded him as a failure. Upon his return from Harvard, he felt increasing pressure to take a job and go into business as his father and brother had done (Anderson, 50).

A true writer, he chose to stick with his passion. In a letter to a friend, he wrote that he would continue with his writing, despite what his neighbors might say, because it was writing that he truly enjoyed (Anderson, 50).

From 1893- 1896, Robinson had several poems published. These included a book of poetry he had dedicated to his mother The Torrent and The Night Before (Anderson, 53). Unfortunately however, his mother died in 1896, just a week before it was published (Anderson, 53).

In 1897, Robinson left Gardiner for New York (Anderson, xiv). His family life was increasingly troublesome at home in Gardiner, and Franchere suspects that these family troubles are what motivated him to seek out a life in New York City (40). While in New York, his poetry collection entitled The Children of the Night was published. In these

poems, he discusses various aspects of the relationship between man and the universe (Anderson, 84). Anderson observes that Robinson's "idealistic philosophy runs throughout these poems: his conception of an ordered and purposeful universe founded in wisdom and in love, the necessity of self-knowledge, and the futility of materialism" (84-85).

Despite his relative success, Robinson ran out of funds and was forced to return to his hometown of Gardiner in 1898 (Anderson, xiv). In 1899, he took a job as secretary in the office of the president of Harvard (Franchere, 42). He was grateful for this position, yet he found it ill-suited for his writing, as he found little spare time to devote to this endeavor (Franchere, 42). He resigned from this position June of that year and moved to New York four months later. Here he was a time-checker in the construction of the subway. During this period, he suffered from physical and emotional exhaustion.

In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt offered him a job in the New York Customs, which he accepted (Coxe, 58). Though he desperately needed the money, he was not appreciative of this position and wrote no poetry during this time (Coxe, 58).

Robinson was also interested in writing plays, which he did from approximately 1906-1913 (Anderson, xv). Beginning in 1911, he spent his summers in New Hampshire (Coxe, 94-95). Among these was Van Horn, which was published in 1914.

Two years later came what Anderson refers to as Robinson's "first real critical recognition of [his] stature as a poet" (xv). From 1916 to 1929 came a series of literary successes. He published many collections of poems and received numerous awards. Among them were three Pulitzer Prizes, the first for Collected Poems in 1921, a second for The Man Who Died Twice in 1924, and third for Tristram in 1927 (Coxe, 144, 149). In 1922, Robinson received an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Yale (Anderson, 96). In 1925, he was awarded the same honorary degree from Bowdoin (Anderson, xv). In 1929, following the publication of Cavender's House, he was the recipient of a gold medal by the National Institute of Arts and Letters (Anderson, xvi).

Throughout his life, Robinson penned many notable works. Though his prose plays were not widely recognized, his contributions as a poet most definitely are. He wrote poetry up until the time of his death. On April 6, 1935, he succumbed to cancer (Franchere, 56). Though his death occurred over 65 years ago, his poetry is still widely renowned by many.

Works Cited

Anderson, Wallace L. Edwin Arlington Robinson- A Critical Introduction. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967.

Coxe, Louis Osborne. Edwin Arlington Robinson- the Life of Poetry. New York: Pegasus, 1969.

Franchere, Hoyt C. Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968.

Study Questions

1. What is Robinson's attitude towards his characters? Discuss two or three of his poetic portraits in explaining your point. What is he implying through his attitude of the failure of his characters and of the world in which they live?
2. Discuss the theme of withdrawal and isolation as it applies to his characters. Discuss, for instance, whether the isolation is voluntary or not, what Robinson's attitude toward withdrawal is, or what this withdrawal is from. Is the withdrawal the result of failure, or is it evidence of flaws that caused the failure?
3. Describe the relationship between the unnamed man and woman in "Eros Turannos." What has happened to sexuality in their relationship? Does the title shed any light on this aspect of the poem?

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