

E. A. Robinson's ' The Man Against the Sky'

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Abstract

E. A. Robinson is modern American poet who lived between the years 1869 and 1935. Robinson who tried to present studies of psychological conditions of modern man in the material _ oriented world in fact criticized implicitly the material success of the world. The best example that comprises his view of modern man's problem is his famous poem " the Man Against the Sky ". The present paper is an analysis of poem . It aims to show the method through which the poet tries to express his views of modern man's condition .

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935) started publishing his poetry in 1896 when his first book of verse entitled *The Torrent and the Night Before was privately printed*. He published three volumes of his poetry which include *The Children of Night* (1897), *Captain Craig* (1902) and *The Town Down the River* (1904) before publishing *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916. It means that Robinson wrote this book , which included the poem carrying the same title, in almost the middles of his poetic career and after he had established himself as a recognized poet with ever increasing readers of his poetry.

In his early poetry Robinson presented various characters chosen from his imaginary Tillbury Town, and most of the people, whether critics or scholars or ordinary readers, find Robinson's poetic strength and ability reflected in those poems where he gave very fine studies of psychological conditions of men in modern, material-oriented world. Robinson tried to reflect man's loneliness, aloofness, psychological and spiritual loneliness of the characters he portrayed so minutely showing their inner realities as contrasted with their appearances. In his concern with the psychological aspects of the characters he was ahead of his time writing before the psychological studies and theories of such persons as Freud appeared. This gave and gives, Robinson a unique position among his contemporaries. Scot Donaldson's illuminating view emphasizes

Robinson's modernity Donaldson states that " in his preoccupation with the hidden motivations of character, in his vision of man's alienation on earth, and in his emphasis on the gulf between truth and illusion, Robinson is thoroughly modern". ⁽¹⁾ In fact in most of those poems Robinson portrayed the characters who suffer from frustration and failure whether psychologically or socially or else. It is this sense of frustration and failure that makes his characters alienated. Louis Underwear states:

Indeed, much of Robinson's work seems a protest, a criticism by implication, of that type of standardized success which so much of the world worships. Frustration and defeat are like an organ-point heard below the varying music of his verse; failure is almost glorified in his pages. ⁽²⁾

To state this is to touch upon an important point in Robinson's poetry, for his concern with man's condition actually stems from his reaction to a world that has been growing mad and irrational with the scientific achievements and technological development, which have forced on humans certain rules that have created psychological tension. So, financial success could be achieved by some persons in this crowded, hasty world of struggle but the price would be man's psychological and mental rest.

In drawing these characters Robinson does not state his point of view directly for he could keep an aesthetic distance and present them objectively letting their conditions speak for themselves and allowing his readers to deduce for themselves. However in 'The Man Against the Sky' Robinson tries another method of treatment for his subject matter. Here his main method is the presentation of modern man's problem in a philosophical way. Here it is man's faith and the various stages of man's journey in search of light is what is presented.

Robinson who felt the world to be " a hell of a place " ⁽³⁾ as he told his friend Hagedorn, could see the problem in man's loss and lack of faith that changed the world to that hell of which he spoke. For him man is alone against a glorious sky in a world that was on fire:

Between me and the sunset, like a dome
Against the glory of a world on fire,
Now burned a sudden hill,
Bleak, round and high, by flame. Lit height made higher,
With nothing on it for the flame to kill
Save one who moved and was alone up there
To loom before the chaos and the glare
As if he were the last god going home

Unto his last desire.¹

Then after establishing man in his position of climbing "the hill of life to death"⁽⁴⁾, Robinson begins his philosophical wonderings concerning man's attempts to find his identity in the wide universe. Roy. Harvey Pearce states that for Robinson "philosophical poetry was to be his means of establishing the sense of communitas of ego- transcending human relations which dramatic poetry requires."⁽⁵⁾ In his search for the real dilemma of man Robinson mentions the various possibilities that can explain the attempts made by man to gain self-knowledge. Man is seen quite small, lonely in the universe which consists of bitterness and blight, but what his attitudes are needs speculation. That is why the poet keeps mentioning the possibilities of attitudes. He keeps repeating the phrase ' He may ' to show these various attitudes and possibilities which reflect man's philosophy. Here it is seen that "man's attitude toward death is determined by his philosophy of life, and the way he lives is colored by his attitude toward death. "⁽⁶⁾ So, Robinson surveys these possible attitudes in five long stanzas in the poem and then summarizes them:

Whatever the dark road he may have taken,
This man who stood on high
And faced alone the sky,
Whatever drove or lured or guided him
A vision answering a faith unshaken,
An easy trust assumed of easy trials,
A sick negation born of weak denial,
A crazed abhorrence of an old condition,
A blind attendance on a brief ambition (LT,p.269)

The man is identified and associated with all the humans who, in the modern world of scientific development, are undergoing the same process of fluctuating between belief and skepticism.

Whatever stayed him or derided him,
His way was even as ours,
And we, with all our wounds and all our powers,
Must each await alone at his own height
Another darkness or another light. (LT,p.269)

¹ *A Little Treasury of American Poetry, edited by Oscar Williams (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p 264. Quotations of the poem hereafter are from this edition as LT with page number.*

After that the poet begins to attack " the underlying negative assumptions of the materialist and advances his own positive ones: ⁽⁷⁾

If , robbed of two fond old enormities,
Our being had no onward auguries,
What then were this great love of ours to say
For launching other lives to voyage again
A little farther into time and pain
A little faster in a futile chase
For a kingdom and a power and a race
That would have still in sight
A manifest end of ashes and eternal night? (LT,pp.269-270)

His direct message is quite clear: if one does not believe in heaven or hell it is useless to say that life has no meaning and that death is but oblivion. In other words, Robinson begins his refutation of skepticism, and disbelief and affirms his belief in the existence of order and purpose in the universe, and "affirms that life is so evidently meaningless and horrible that it must prefigure a world beyond." ⁽⁸⁾ The philosophical question is asked in a rhetorical way that affirms Robinson's positive view_ his belief in the existence of an aim in life:

If after all that we have lived and thought
All comes to naught
If there be nothing after now
And we be nothing anyhow
And we know that – why live? (LT, p .272)

It is this question that Robinson kept asking himself, and which he wants his readers to ask themselves which will virtually lead to the absolute answer that there must be an aim behind living . William j . Free , in his tracing of Emerson's ideas and philosophy in Robinson's poetry, stresses Robinson's use of these ideas stating: " in Emerson's idealistic philosophy , and particularly in his system of automatic polar justice, Robinson sought an anchor for his faith. ⁽⁹⁾

It becomes clear that in " *The Man Against the Sky* " Robinson deals with modern man's search for a meaning in life which depends on his self knowledge and knowledge of identity which enable him to realize the utmost aim of life and existence. Robinson starts with wondering about man and the path he is taking or going to take stating all the probabilities that he can imagine, and ends this philosophical wondering with the affirmation of the meaningfulness of existence. Here in concluding, it is worth quoting Louis Umtermeyer's words. He states:

Although Robinson was accused of holding consistently a negative attitude toward life, his poetry reveals a restless, uncertain but persistent search for moral values. This quest_ and questioning _of ultimates runs through his work as it ran through an age no longer satisfied with arid skepticism.⁽¹⁰⁾

For a poet like Robinson, who suffered from various troublesome conditions in life, it was a great thing to grasp life strongly and express hope in tomorrow.

Notes

- 1- Scott Donaldson, 'The Alien Pity: A Study of character in E.A. Robinson's Poetry' , in *American Literature*, vol, 38 , No2 (May, 1966). P. 229
- 2- Louis Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and world, *Inc*, 1950), P.118.
- 3- Cited in Wallace L. Anderson , *Edwin Arlington Robinson = critical introduction*, (Cambridge: Harvard univ : press,1968) , p.146
- 4- Ibid , p.147
- 5- Roy Harvey pearce , the continuity of American poetry. (Princeton, new jersey: Princeton univ. press, 1961) , p . 265
- 6- Anderson, P.147.
- 7- Ibid, P.148.
- 8- Donaldson, P.229.
- 9- William J. Free, "E.A. Robinson's Use of Emerson", in *American literature*, vol. 38, No1, (March, 1966), P.74.
- 10-Untermeyer, P.119.

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خلاصة باللغة العربية

يعد ادوين ارلنغتون روينسون الذي عاش بين السنوات ١٨٦٩-١٩٣٥ احد الشعراء الامريكان الذين ظهروا في العصر الحديث . لقد حاول هذا الشاعر ومن خلال قصائده ان يقدم دراسات سايكولوجية دقيقة جدا عن وضع الانسان الحديث في عالم مادي التوجه . وقد كان بهذا ينتقد بصورة ضمنية النجاح المادي للعالم والذي اصبح الناس يعبدونه . ان افضل مثال يتضمن رؤية هذا الشاعر لمشكلة الانسان المعاصر هو قصديته " الرجل الذي يواجه السماء " . ان البحث الحالي هو تحليل لهذه القصيدة والذي يحاول الباحث من خلاله اظهار الطريقة التي يحاول فيها الشاعر ان يعبر عن آرائه بخصوص احوال الانسان المعاصر.

