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Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram: E. A. Robinson's Arthurian Poems of Man's Dilemma

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MERLIN, LANCELOT, AND TRISTRAM:
E. A. ROBINSON'S ARTHURIAN
POEMS OF MAN'S
DILEMMA

by

Patricia O'Donnell Ewers

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CHAPTER I
THE MODERN POET AND THE MEDIEVAL LEGENDS

For forty years it was phrase on phrase on phrase with Robinson, and every one of the delineation of something that is something. Any poet, to resemble him in the least, would have to resemble him in that grazing closeness to the spiritual realities.1

In 1896 on the occasion of the appearance of his first volume of poetry, The Torrent and the Night Before, Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote to his friend Arthur Gledhill concerning the nature of the published volume.

You won't find much in the way of natural description. When it comes to "nightingales and roses" I am not "in it" nor have I the smallest desire to be. I sing, in my own particular manner, of heaven and hell and now and then of natural things (supposing they exist) of a more prosy connotation than those generally admitted into the domain of meter. In short I write whatever I think is appropriate to the subject and let tradition go to the deuce. This may not be a safe plan, but there is no end of personal satisfaction in it.2

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Although the letter was written in 1896, the self-analysis of style and matter remains relevant to all of Robinson's material. Though he was a poet nurtured by the thought and art of the nineteenth century, his art and audience were of the twentieth. He was not afraid to be an innovator in the imagery, diction, and subject matter of his poetry. With the accepted norms for these poetic elements Robinson made a deliberate and conscientious break. His direction was toward the simple and away from the ornate, toward the common and away from the poetic in diction, and toward the human dilemmas which confronted him and away from the sentimental in subject matter. He wanted

To put these little sonnet-men to flight
Who fashion, in a shrewd mechanic way,
Songs without souls, that flicker for a day,
To vanish in irrevocable night.  

With emphasis upon his role in turning from the Victorian influences and striking out in the direction of realism in his poetry, the artistic reputation of Edwin Arlington Robinson and the critical interest in his work at present is based to a large extent upon his transitional significance. Robinson's artistic path led to late recognition and popularity and then consideration as an historical figure. Commenting upon the characteristics of Robinson's style, J. C. Squire recognized the problems which the poet presented to his audience in 1928.

His musing habit, his interest in the subtler workings of the mind and heart, his restraining preference for understatement even of his most powerful emotions, the almost subcutaneous quality of his irony and humor, that uniform quietness which at first glance gives

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a flat appearance to his work, would always have made him a poet slow to gain a fit audience.4

But Robinson's dilemma was compounded by the nature of his specific audience and his specific literary time. The lack of reader interest in Robinson's early works and the neglect of his writings after the poetic revolution of the twenties seem to indicate that he was too modern for one world and not modern enough for the other. In a recent appraisal Louis Coxe commented upon this paradox.

The fact is, of course, that Robinson, between two movements and two worlds, could not be accepted by either. When triumph and commercial success came they came late and for the most part in response to relatively inferior work.5

Robinson's position, a traditionally schooled poet who sought new methods of expression and more realistic subjects than his contemporaries and whose reputation at present rests upon this attempt, raises a question concerning his decision in 1915 to make use of the Arthurian legends. Why did this poet who deliberately set out to break with the past turn to the oldest store of English legends for the subject matter of three long narrative poems?

The appearance of Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram caused difficulties for those critics who had come to respect Robinson for his deliberate modernity. In these poems they saw evidence of a literary retreat. Amy Lowell,


in her analysis of Merlin, wrote that Robinson had abandoned his unique style and material. The result is "only a rather feeble and emasculated picture, tricked out with charming lyrical figures, it is true, but lifeless and unconvincing" and lacking the "glory of his shorter pieces." Louis Untermeyer later recorded his reaction to Tristram: "Tristram is a surprising product for one as peculiarly inhibited as Robinson. It is a curious spectacle, the ascetic Puritan venturing into a glamorous territory and losing himself in confused romanticism." And Edmund Wilson commented on the three Arthurian poems:

But, with all respect for a fine poet and for one of the few really honorably won American reputations of our time, I would still give the whole of Mr. Robinson's Arthurian cycle, with its conventional romantic stage properties of unrecreated castles, seas and wars and its false starts at passionate expression always foundering in "before we knew what we were yet to see" and "until we saw as far as we should know," for a single one of his New England elegies.

Hagedorn summarized the critical reaction to Robinson's apparent departure from his past commitments.

To have this new-found hero of theirs, who seemed so secure in his modernism, his liberation from the "literary," spend his energies on what seemed to them a rehashing of the overworked and exhusted Arthurian legend, seemed a descent which was almost a betrayal.

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Underlying these criticisms are two objections: the first to the material itself as inappropriate for Robinson and the second to his handling of it. Why Robinson decided to treat the legends can never be fully answered with absolute certainty, but four reasons have been proposed. The most frequently offered is that Robinson was searching for an appropriate myth to clothe his vision of the death of a world—the necessary consequence of World War I. Robinson himself wrote of this intention. In a letter to Hagedorn, Robinson stated that his intention was to show "coming generations that nothing can stand on a rotten foundation." He used Lancelot "as a rather distant symbol of Germany, though the reader will do well not to make too much of this or carry it too far." 

Hagedorn stated that his friend was searching for a parable for his vision of inevitable disaster. "Robinson has found the parable he had sought in Malory's Morte Darthur." Another close friend of Robinson, Chard Powers Smith, confirms the evidence in Hagedorn.

The double epic Merlin and Lancelot was planned in the summer of 1915 as a comment on the World War and the necessary destruction of nineteenth century culture because, like Camelot, it was built on rotten foundations of self.

Emery Neff also believes that Robinson chose the legends for a vehicle of his world vision.

Casting about for a well-known legend to illustrate what he saw facing Western Civilization, he decided upon the Arthurian material as most

10Selected Letters, p. 112. 11Ibid.
12Hagedorn, p. 318.
familiar to Americans through Tennyson and Malory, and proceeded to mold it to his purposes after the free and easy fashion of the Greek dramatists with heroic myth. 14

That Robinson chose to picture social upheaval in his concern for the world condition in Merlin and Lancelot was one motive for these poems, but it does not account for the third poem, Tristram. In a recent publication, Smith revealed the frustrated love of Robinson for his sister-in-law, Emma Shepherd Robinson, and presented the reader with the "Legend of Emma." Here within the Robinson family itself was the triangular relationship which preoccupied Robinson and found expression in so much of his later material. Here within personal tragedy did Robinson discover literary material. The young poet, who introduced the object of his ideal love to his more dashing, if more materialistic brother Herman, felt himself the other party in a domestic tragedy. In the legends of Arthur and of Tristram, Robinson found a parallel to his own desperately unhappy situation.

As Lancelot, committed to Guinevere, brought her to King Arthur, as Tristram, committed to Isolt, brought her to King Mark, so Win introduced Emma to King Herman, who was sovereign of all the towers of Camelot beyond the sunset. But where neither Arthur nor Mark had the emotional credentials to possess their queens, Herman, being Emma's age instead of four years younger, brought exactly the tangible, worldly assurance that the woman required, and brought it with a dash and distinction her older suitor lacked. 15

Herman won Emma to a life of failure, financial and personal. The empire which he built through speculation in western lands was destroyed when his investments failed, and the loss led to his personal defeat by

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15 Smith, p. 97.
alcohol. All the while the poet stood looking on and believing that, like Guinevere and Isolt, Emma had given all to an undeserving sovereign and sacrificed a true and fulfilling love for a life of misery. Though Smith acknowledged the social sources of the legends, he asserted that they fade from importance when placed next to Robinson's personal motive. "The source of the epic was the destruction of the Robinson family, like that of Camelot, by Herman's two or more daemons of self-indulgence."16

Besides the social and biographical motives for Robinson's change in approach, critics have suggested that a lack of narrative power led Robinson to choose a fable that was already laid out for him. Winters stated that awareness of his lack of structural ability led Robinson to select the Merlin legend for his first attempt at a long formal narrative.17 David Brown was also of this opinion.

It is likely that one important reason for Robinson's use of the Arthurian material was the release it afforded him from the supplying of those external facts which were outside his interest. The plots were ready made, and the reader could supply whatever he did not care to give. Hence, Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram each presented him with a setting and plot for that triangular character relationship of husband-wife-friend which he was often to use in contemporary settings.18

That Robinson desired a fable to clothe his vision of modern society, that he had a domestic romantic tragedy which preoccupied his artistic

16Smith, p. 97.


concerns, and that he was weak in narrative design and might well profit from
a ready-made tale must be admitted. But still these facts do not account in
full for his selection of the legends of Arthur. It is in the tales them-
selves that the final answer to the question must be found.

Legend and folklore have always been a source of literary enrichment.
Although a medieval legend has its own audience and existence, its universal
elements and appeal often inspire other artists in other times to render it
in terms of their own uniqueness and individual conceptions. The results
are a growth in the legend and new works of art.

The tale of Arthur and the destruction of Camelot along with the
love stories of Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram and the two Isolts are such
literary sources. The heroic stature of the knights, the conception of an
ideal kingdom, the passions of the lovers, and the magic and mystery of
wizards, love potions, and healing powers weave a tapestry that has fasci-
nated the artistic imagination throughout the ages. The result has been a
continually growing and developing legendary source from the literature which
it has inspired. The Arthurian material with its loosely related love story
of Tristram and Isolt has become timeless in its successive adaptations
throughout every literary period. The legends have always transcended
fashion through their universal appeal.

Early in life Robinson became aware of the magic of Arthur. The
Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory, included in his father's library at
Gardiner, was an early source of pleasure for the growing poet. At eighteen
Robinson read Tennyson, "devouring the 'Morte d'Arthur'." In his

19 Hagedorn, p. 38.
extensive study of the literary background of Robinson, Edwin Fussell wrote

Moreover, it was almost certainly through Tennyson, rather than any of the other Victorians, that Robinson first became interested in the Arthurian legends that were to play so large a part in his later career. . . . The tragic catastrophe of the Arthurian story (with its possibilities as a myth of the decline of Western civilization) was what held Robinson's attention to "Guinevere."²⁰

As a special student at Harvard, Robinson told James Tryon, a classmate, of his interest in the Arthurian legends.²¹ Thus evidence points to an early and continuing fascination with the story of Camelot.

Robinson's interest in the Tristram and Isolde story arose out of his love of music. Wagner's Tristram und Isolde had always been his favorite opera. He wrote to Daniel Gregory Mason in 1900: "I have been twice this spring to hear Tristram und Isolde, which I maintain to be the only opera, as such, ever written."²² Once, while in desperate financial difficulty, Robinson was trying to save money for a new pair of pants but spent it to hear Tristram und Isolde at the Metropolitan. This devotion to the operatic treatment of the legend led to artistic motivation. Smith indicated that Robinson had planned a poetic version of the story for at least ten years.²³

Thus Robinson's Arthurian poems arose out of his own early interest


²³Smith, p. 258.
in the poetic potentials of the legends as well as the social, personal, and artistic motives that have been indicated. It is really not so strange that a poet who had chosen for his previous subject matter the common experience of American life should suddenly turn to the medieval past. Long aware of the beauty and truth of the tales, he wished to give expression to his own understanding of their grandeur and meaning. Perhaps the best statement of the legends effect upon Robinson has been given by Ellsworth Barnard.

Those who have wondered why Robinson, so resolute in facing the modern world with its skepticism, its restlessness, its complexity, should have turned back to the apparently primitive world of romance at which he gibes, though genially, in "Miniver Cheevy," may find an answer...; for underneath the surface simplicity, the glitter and the glamour of a childhood world, within the relations between men and women so haphazardly established by chance accretions to the central story, there are latent all the mental conflicts and spiritual crises by which man since the birth of civilization has been beset. No modern tensions can rack the soul more fearfully, no modern mazes of the mind can be more tortuous, than those surrounding the dwellers in Arthur's kingdom.24

The reasons why Robinson chose the Arthurian materials for poetic treatment have been presented. There can be no valid objections to the selection of subject. Robinson was free to treat any theme that revealed poetic potential. It is really to the second objection, the nature of the treatment rather than his selection of subject matter, that valid objections can be raised. Did Robinson select material that he was incapable of handling? Did he retreat from his stated artistic modernity in his recreation of the legends, or did he modernize the tales themselves? A brief examination of the acknowledged nature of Robinson's work up to the time of his use

of the legends will provide a foundation for the study of Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram.

Speaking of his play Van Zorn, Robinson said it was "supposed to open or partly open all sorts of trapdoors and windows that will give people glimpses into their own cellars and dooryards, and incidentally a fairly good view of the sun, moon, and stars." This vision into the inner world of the individual soul and the outer world which surrounds it is the crucial center of Robinson's poetry. The thematic preoccupation is the individual soul of man caught within the circumstances of his own character and within the larger world which is indifferent to his spiritual crises. In poem after poem, Robinson explores the human personality to attempt a discovery of its inherent nature. All men in some way are like the man Flammonde who makes the poet ask

But what of him--
So firm in every look and limb?
What small satanic sort of kink
Was in his brain? What broken link
Withheld him from the destinies
That came so near to being his?

The same questions are asked over and over again because, like Flammonde, "We've each a darkening hill to climb"; we've each a life to live with all our weaknesses and a death to face with all our dreams. Aaron Stark, Cliff Klingenhagen, Isaac, Archibald, Captain Craig, and Aunt Imogen are just a few of the named characters who with the nameless men and women of poem after poem

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27Ibid., p. 6.
poem are vividly presented to the reader.

The inner world of self, however, exists in a larger outer world. It might be the confines of Tilbury Town or the larger and more seductive Town down the River, but these specific locales are vague and indefinite places. Robinson is only interested in such immediate settings in so far as they reflect the soul. Setting in terms of nature or specific place is a vague and mysterious region which consists only of sparse furniture and a penetrating mood. Thus the sets upon which Robinson's characters act out their destinies are barren places where the poet plays with light and dark for effect. In "The House on the Hill" the poet speaks of the physical and spiritual destruction of a house. But the house of the title is physically unrealized with only a few details of its condition indicated. The attention is focused upon those who have left it, while the setting, the house, is merely implied as an atmospheric backdrop.

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken still?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.
There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill;
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.28

The use of vague and subjective regions for the immediate setting in
which the characters move about opens the way for Robinson's creation of a
larger stage for his action. The cosmic setting is the ever-present reality
within which the individuals exist. Robinson focuses upon the universe
whose agencies affect the lives of men. To refer again to the poet's comment
on his play Van Zorn, Robinson moved from the "trapdoors and windows," that
allow a vision of the inner life, to a "fairly good view of the sun, moon,
and stars." There is no pause to admire the house or the gardens. The view
shifts immediately from the self to the universe and its forces.

Although the majority of Robinson's poems demonstrate the effects of the
forces of the universe upon an individual, a number of his works are general
philosophical statements in which the poet gives his beliefs about the world
in which men act out their lives. An insight into that world will provide
a better understanding of the outer reality which is the larger setting of
Robinson's poetry. "The Man Against the Sky" makes the most explicit state-

What have we seen beyond our sunset fires
That lights again the way by which we came?
Why pay we such a price, and one we give
So clamorously, for each racked empty day
That leads one more lost human hope away,
As quiet fiends would lead past our grazed eyes
Our children to an unseen sacrifice?29

29 "The Man Against the Sky," ibid., p. 68.
Why does man endure life? Why does he continue to accept a life which "Falls here too sore and there too tedious"? Robinson asks these questions as he contemplates the figure of the man pictured against the sky, the everyman climbing his darkening hill through the flames of suffering to the eternal night of death. The poet's response to the questions he raises is still another question. What is it that we have glimpsed beyond the fires that leads us on? It is an intimation that

Eternity records
Too vast an answer for the time-born words
We spell, whereof so many are dead that once
In our capricious lexicons
Were so alive and final... 31

Robinson asserts that the life of man is one of intense humiliation

Wherefrom we gain
A little wisdom and much pain. 32

But this life of pain is not without its significance. Though man is unable to understand here and now, in time, the significance of his pain is apparent in another measure, Eternity. Though man is without the words that can spell out the meaning, he must believe in a spiritual reality that makes his material suffering significant and offer it

To an orient Word that will not be erased,
Or, save in incommunicable gleams
Too permanent for dreams,
Be found or know. 33

The necessity of faith in a seemingly hostile world is the theme of the poem.

Robinson wrote to Hagedorn in 1915:

\[\text{Ibid.}\] 30
\[\text{Ibid.}\] 31
\[\text{Ibid.}\] 32
\[\text{Ibid., p. 66}\] 33
The world has been made what it is by upheavals, whether we like them or not. I've always told you it's a hell of a place. That's why I insist that it must mean something. My July work was a poem on this theme and I call it "The Man Against the Sky." 34

The agencies of Time and Fate are the principal sources of the wisdom and pain which come to man and which call forth his most stoic endurance. Although these forces are not alien to man, their ceaseless indifferent operation becomes an inescapable reality that brings misery to mankind. It is Time, the relentless measure of change, that has wrought the helpless and pitiful situation of "The Poor Relation."

The City trembles, throbs, and pounds Outside, and through a thousand sounds The small intolerable drums Of Time are like slow drops descending.

Bereft enough to shame a sage And given little to long sighing, With no illusion to assuage The lonely changelessness of dying,— Unsought, unthought-of, and unheard, She sings and watches like a bird, Safe in a comfortable cage From which there will be no more flying. 35

Time, in the shape of Death, has left the many who mourn in the poem "For a Dead Lady" with an unsought reawakening of knowledge.

And we who delve in Beauty's lore Know all that we have known before Of what inexorable cause Makes Time so vicious in his reaping. 36

And Time is the enemy who has left Eben Flood to sit alone with his jug in the moonlight.

36"For a Dead Lady," ibid., p. 355.
"For auld lang syne." The weary throat gave out,  
The last word wavered; and the song being done,  
He raised again the jug regretfully  
And shook his head, and was again alone.  
There was not much that was ahead of him,  
And there was nothing in the town below—  
Where strangers would have shut the many doors  
That many friends had opened long ago.37

In the poetry of Robinson the workings of Fate have two manifestations: the conflict between what a man wishes to be and what he is and the discrepancy between a man's desires and their fulfillment. The old profligate John Evereldown answers the constant call of the women, and yet he cries out

God knows if I pray to be done with it all,  
But God is no friend to John Evereldown.  
So the clouds may come and the rain may fall,  
The shadows may creep and the dead men crawl,—  
But I follow the women wherever they call  
And that's why I'm going to Tilbury Town.38

What the old man wishes to be and what he is are two different things. The same dilemma confronts the metaphysician of "The Burning Book." He has dedicated "... as much of his life/ As a nun could have given,"39 only to realize that the book which he has written is a failure because he is far less the philosopher than he thought himself to be. He burns the book.

In the leaves that are crinkled and curled  
Are his ashes of glory,  
And what once was an end of the world  
Is an end of a story.40

37"Mr. Flood's Party," ibid., p. 575.
38"John Evereldown," ibid., p. 74.
40Ibid., p. 48.
These men were far less than they sought to be, or they desired to be more than they could be. But some characters' fates are not totally dictated by what is within them. Within the circumstances of their lives are found the workings of Fate which they are forced to accept. Fate has played cruelly with Aunt Imogen who wanted to be a mother and have children of her own, but who

...was not born to be so much as that,
For she was born to be Aunt Imogen.41

And the pathetic business man, Bewick Finzer, is still another man whose hopes have been destroyed by reality.

But soon the worm of what-was-not
Fed hard on his content;
And something crumbled in his brain
When his half million went.42

The universe of pain and ultimate meaning is the setting in which the psychological dramas of the inner world of the soul are played. Robinson desires to show the outer world of suffering in which the agencies of Time and Fate run counter to the dreams and hopes of man. Yet he asserts that there is a meaning to it all even if a man cannot comprehend it. Even if all the individual can see is "the black and awful chaos of the night,"43 the poet assures him that he "feels the coming glory of the Light."44 Robinson commented on his beliefs as they respect his art in a letter to Laura Richards.

41"Aunt Imogen," ibid., p. 188.
42"Bewick Finzer," ibid., p. 55.
43"Credo," ibid., p. 94. 44Ibid.
Moreover, I am what I am; and therefore I have my own paintpots to dabble with. Blacks and grays and browns and blues for the most part—but also a trick, I hope, of letting the white come through in places.45

The intensity of Robinson's poetry arises from the interplay of cosmic forces with the aspirations of his sharply delineated characters. The stories of Flammonde, Aaron Stark, Eben Flood, John Evereldown, Aunt Imogen, Bewick Finzer, and countless others are dramatizations of man's spiritual dilemma and represent Robinson's commitment to realism, his thematic modernity.

The form of the poetry is a necessary consequence of the inner-outer world concentration. Psychological depiction and analysis of character take precedence over action and details of setting. The characters illuminate the foreground of the poem, while the universe provides the backdrop. "Thus, in his narratives, his purposes demanded the suppression of picturesque action so that people may be set talking, for he was interested in the analysis and judgment of character."46 The emphasis upon what happens within a soul and to it leads Robinson to concentrate on the psychic rather than the physical characteristics. There is little description of the external aspect of a character. "Aaron Stark" is notable for its physical picture, and yet there is relatively little description within the poem. The details are more important to the understanding of the miser's spiritual niggardliness than they are to a knowledge of his outward appearance.

45Selected Letters, p. 49.
46Brown, p. 492.
Withal a meagre man was Aaron Stark,
Cursed and unkempt, shrewd, shrivelled, and morose
A miser was he, with a miser's nose,
And eyes like little dollars in the dark
His thin, pinched mouth was nothing but a mark;
And when he spoke there came 'like sullen blows
Through scattered fangs a few snarled words and close,
As if a cur were chary of its bark. 47

Instead of physical description Robinson tries to force the reader
to imagine characters from a conception of their essential natures. It is a
method of indirection and forces the reader to focus his attention upon every
detail of the poem, every line of dialogue, and every image. The house in
Stratford in "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," the self-revealing
dialogue of Jane Wayland in "John Gorham," and the jug in "Mr. Flood's
Party" are all indexes to the souls of men. Occasionally it is an action
that reveals the soul; Cliff Klingenhagen selects and drinks the wormwood.
The opinions of those who observe the principal character can be employed to
reveal the reality of character either directly, as in the case of Flammonde,
or ironically, as the misconceptions of the many who envy the glittering
Richard Cory. These essential devices and narrative elements are used by
Robinson to depict his chosen territory.

In the creation of psychological and philosophical poetry, Robinson
employs a few carefully chosen images which serve as unifying elements within
the poems, concrete realizations of the psychological states depicted, or
embodiments of thematic variables. These images arise out of a personal
idiom, and they seldom take on multiple meanings. Robinson deliberately

avoided the use of imagery to beautify or adorn; instead its function was one of economy "...to bring together all essential details within the smallest possible compass." The initial stanza of "The Man Against the Sky" employs vivid opening imagery.

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.  

While the colors are dramatic and the picture is presented forcefully to the eye, the image remains strikingly bare of specific details. The man on the hill at sunset establishes the mood of the poem, moves the poet to meditation, serves as a symbol for all men in their confrontation with life and death--in short, the image serves as the principal structural and thematic unifying device of the poem rather than a pleasing or moving picture.

The psychological attitude of the people of Tilbury Town toward Richard Cory is reflected in the regal images with which he is described. The subservience and envy of the town are suggested by the references to Cory's kingly bearing.

He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored and imperially slim.

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48 Barnard, p. 30.

49 "The Man Against the Sky," Collected Poems, p. 60
And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace. 50

The thematic function of Robinson's imagery can be clearly seen in
his sonnet to "George Crabbe." The variable of artistic accomplishment is
suggested by the fire image which ranges from the flicker to the flame.

Whether or not we read him we can feel
From time to time the vigor of his name
Against us like a finger for the shame
And emptiness of what our souls reveal
In books that are as altars where we kneel
To consecrate the flicker, not the flame. 51

The imagery of Robinson is the tool of his poetic vision. As Coffin states

One of the amazing things about the poet Robinson is his combination
of intense concentration upon dark, emotional stress and his clear-cut, homely imagery by which he follows its complex progress. Vague
and boundless agonies, and yet the words to them are usually simple
ones, and the images exact and common. 52

The images which Robinson chooses are in no way unique; the poems are filled
with light and dark, sea and music, house and castle, flame and ash images.
However, Davis, in his study of Robinson's imagery, asserts that the poet's
emphasis is modern and reveals

the tendency to organize references into systems, the ability to use
the image at depth—with a sense of discrimination and nuance, and
the incorporation of the image into a poetic idiom which is essen-
tially personal and emotional, not general and intellectual. 53

The functional use of imagery is paralleled by the poet's use of
language. It is a means to an end. Though Robinson loved the sounds and

50 "Richard Cory," ibid., p. 82. 51 "George Crabbe," ibid., p. 94.
52 Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and
Robinson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938), p. 87.
53 Charles T. Davis, "Image Patterns in the Poetry of E. A. Robinson,"
College English, XXII (March, 1961), 396.
effects of words, he used them as vehicles of thought and emotion rather than relishing them for their own sake. Robinson was repelled by bombastic language. He felt that his friend William Vaughan Moody had sacrificed his poetry to his rhetoric and wrote of his fellow poet: "There is a possibility of his growing up someday and writing like Shakespeare."54

Robinson's language is plain, and, for the most part, his syntax is straightforward. The poet speaks directly with simplicity to the reader.

She fears him, and will always ask
What fated her to choose him.55

Well, Bokardo, here we are,
Make yourself at home
Look around—you haven't far
To look—and why be dumb?56

Such passages are typical of Robinson's simple vocabulary and speech patterns. There are times when the syntax becomes more involved and indirect. This poetry is inferential in nature, although the language remains simple.

Improving a dry leisure to invest
Their misadventure with a manifest
Analogy that he may read who runs,
The sailor made it old as ocean grass—
Telling of much that once had come to pass
With him, whose mother should have had no sons.57

This less direct and suggestive method is one with Robinson's belief that all of the facts concerning another human being cannot be known. He

56 "Bokardo," ibid., p. 56.
57 "Lost Anchors," ibid., p. 577.
chooses a less direct statement for the embodiment of this belief, but his
diction and syntax seldom become "poetic." The language of everyday speech
and the ordinary sentence structure add further realistic touches to his
poetry.

The modern thoughts and techniques are fitted into traditional forms.

To the reader of Robinson's poetry the most apparent evidence of his tradи-
tional background is found in his use of metrics and stanza forms. His
rhythms are based on the patterns he gained familiarity with and respect for
as a boy in Gardiner, Maine. There, under the tutelage of an eccentric
amateur poet, Dr. Alanson Schumann, and the literary circle gathered about
a former teacher and devotee of French prosody, Caroline Swan, Robinson
learned mastery of the ballad, the sonnet, and the villanelle. Hagedorn
states that "Schumann stimulated the youth to compress thought and emotion
within the accepted confines, to sharpen his poetic teeth on the intricate
French forms, to play with feminine rhymes and gallop in tetrameters." 58

Robinson's youthful interest in blank verse led him to attempt a poetic
translation of the Aeneid for his high school Latin class.

Robinson never outgrew his youthful interest in and respect for the
traditional patterns. His final works employ the blank verse that fascinated
the schoolboy translator. He was suspicious of the growing trend toward
free verse which he felt seduced the poet away from human concerns and focused
all of the attention upon the mechanics of poetry. In 1921 Robinson wrote
to Witter Bynner:

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58 Hagedorn, p. 37.
I am pretty well satisfied that free verse, prohibition, and moving pictures are a triumvirate from hell, armed with the devil's instructions to abolish civilization—which, by the way, has not yet existed and cannot exist until the human brain undergoes many changes.\textsuperscript{59}

The poetic forms of the past were adapted and fitted to Robinson's chosen poetic subjects and realistic emphasis. The sonnet and the ballad became the vehicles of analytical character study in "Karma" and "Her Eyes." Blank verse is employed in the dramatic monologues "Isaac and Archibald" and "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford." Fussell stated that he was able to mold the forms he found into a fresh way of saying, that he was able to make the very pattern of the sonnet part of his ironic statement, that he constantly played off colloquial speech against the social connotations of the traditional stanza forms, all this was one of his ways of fusing the past and the present....\textsuperscript{60}

When in 1915 Robinson began his work upon the Arthurian materials, he had established his literary subject matter and style. His thematic preoccupations were the personal and cosmic struggles of men which were realized through concentration upon psychological character portrayal and a dramatic narrative design emphasizing character delineation and development. The techniques which he used were emphasis upon unifying and thematic imagery, simplicity of language, and traditional metrical patterns. These elements combined to give his style a stark and realistic modernity.

With this essential background in mind, a close textual examination of Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristan will be undertaken to reveal the nature of Robinson's treatment of the legends. Through these analyses a judgment can be made about the way in which the modern poet handled his medieval material.

\textsuperscript{59}Selected Letters, p. 128. \textsuperscript{60}Fussell, p. 179.
CHAPTER II

MERLIN WITHOUT MAGIC

From the time of Merlin's appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, c. 1136, his name has been synonymous with powers of prophecy and feats of magic. Through tellings and retellings of the story of Arthur and his knights, the figure of Merlin has provided the legends with an atmosphere of the marvelous and with the mystery of the unknown. His birth through the union of a human maiden and an incubus, his prediction of the battles of the red and white dragons, his role in the illicit union of Igerne and Uther which resulted in the birth of Arthur, his position in Arthur's kingdom as deus ex machina, and his magical disappearance with Vivian, a nymph, are the elements of Merlin's drama. Yet Edwin Arlington Robinson rejected any supernatural aspects of the tradition and focused upon Merlin as a man—a man of vision and a man of passion.

The Merlin of legendary fame had served his King long and faithfully by the use of his powers to know the future and to alter the present, when
he was filled with passion and longing for the beautiful nymph Vivian. Desiring to separate him from the world of Arthur or to free herself from his desires, Vivian tricked Merlin into revealing the secret of a spell. Then she cast the charm over the wizard, and, as suddenly as he had appeared, Merlin departed from the world.

In Robinson's treatment, which deliberately turned from the magical elements in Merlin's story, there could be no weaving of spells to deter or imprison a wizard. Only a reciprocal love could keep Merlin in Broceliande, Vivian's paradise. He is held by his attraction to a beautiful woman and her desire to keep him with her forever. To create a poem with this non-magical emphasis, Robinson chose to merge two major sources for his presentation of the legend of Merlin.

The story of Arthur's kingdom, its dreams and its defeats, is taken from the Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory. Robinson borrowed the two volume Temple edition of Malory from his friend Louis V. Ledoux in April of 1916 and returned it in July of 1924. Robinson owes the action which occurs in the Camelot setting largely to Malory's compilation of the Arthurian legends.¹

Robinson, however, rejected Malory's treatment of the love between Merlin and Vivian. Malory's story was based upon the Merlin of the Pseudo-Robert cycle, commonly known as the Huth-Merlin. In this version of the tale, Merlin's love was rejected by a nymph who rid herself of an annoyance when she cast a spell over the wizard. In Tennyson's treatment, which

Robinson also knew well, there was infatuation and weariness on the part of Merlin and hatred on the part of a scheming Vivian.

Instead of these sources, Robinson turned to the story of mutual and tender love found in the Vulgate French prose Merlin, the earliest treatment of the episode. Rather than the original work, Robinson used S. Humphreys Gurteen's summary of the story with all of the accumulated overtones of the intervening sources. Gurteen's The Arthurian Epic was mailed by Ledoux to Robinson in April or May of 1916. From this work the poet drew the story of the love of Merlin and Vivian, the constant threat to it by the call of the affairs of Arthur's state, and Vivian's deep opposition to that call.

Added to Robinson's selection of the element of a reciprocal love was his decision to change the story by allowing Merlin to depart from the confines of Broceliande. Since the poet wished to depict a character in conflict, Merlin had to choose between remaining with Vivian or returning to Arthur. Though the return of Merlin to Arthur's kingdom is outside of the legendary tradition, it is still in keeping with its spirit. This departure plus the return to the reciprocal love theme add to the more realistic approach which the poet desired to achieve.

Robinson's Merlin, a 2600 line poem which was published by Macmillan in 1917, emphasizes a man's personal struggle. The poet's handling of the legend itself, his choice of Malory and Gurteen as sources and his intro-

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2Ibid.

3Margaret J. C. Reid, The Arthurian Legend: Comparison of Treatment in Modern and Medieval Literature (London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1938), p. 84.
duction of Merlin's departure from Brocelflande, indicates his desire to create a realistic pull between two worlds. Robinson wished to create in Merlin, not a medieval magician, but the character of a man of vision who has a duty to live with the consequences of his own foresight, his knowledge of the inevitable destruction of Arthur's kingdom, but who opens himself to destruction when he abandons his unique position for the sake of love and freedom from his vision. Merlin as a visionary is seen in the disintegrating kingdom of Camelot with the defeated Arthur; Merlin as a lover is seen in the elaborate setting of Brocelflande with the intriguing Vivian. The finished poem is a narrative which dramatizes the ruin of these worlds.

The poem opens in Camelot—not a world of chivalric action, but a place of knightly musings. Gawaine, a knight known to all for his superficiality of character, has been affected by the unrest that is settling within Camelot. Dagonet, the Fool, chides his fellow knight for his thoughtfulness.

"Gawaine, Gawaine, what look ye for to see, So far beyond the faint edge of the world? D'ye look to see the lady Vivian, Pursued by divers ominous vile demons That have another king more fierce than ours? Or think ye that if ye look far enough And hard enough into the feathery west Ye'll have a glimmer of the Grail itself? And if ye look for neither Grail nor lady, What look ye for to see, Gawaine, Gawaine?"

4 Robinson follows Tennyson in the use of Camelot as synonymous with Arthur's kingdom rather than enumerating the various capitals used in earlier treatments.

This opening speech is an early forecast of the ultimate end of Camelot, for even at this point the forces of destruction are seen by the misshapen knight. Just as Vivian has lured Merlin from his place at Arthur's side, so Arthur's knights will seek more than Camelot has to offer through their quest for the light of the Graal and their love of the beauty of woman. Dagonet can see these clouds faintly edged above Camelot's horizons.

Attempts to look beyond the present moment into what lies ahead, Gawaine, with limited vision, acknowledges his own inability to read the future.

"Sir Dagonet, you best and warriest Of all dishonest men, I look through Time, For sight of what it is that is to be. I look to see it, though I see it not. I see a town down there that holds a king, And over it I see a few small clouds-- Like feathers in the west, as you observe; And I shall see no more this afternoon Than what there is around us every day, Unless you have a skill that I have not To ferret the invisible for rats." 

Dagonet, in his greater understanding, knows that

"If you see what's around us every day, You need no other showing to go mad."

Reluctant to put into words the suspicions that haunt them, the two men turn their talk to the rumors of Merlin's return from Broceliande. Providing the reader with essential background, Dagonet, who was sent by Arthur to seek Merlin's aid, relates to Gawaine the story of Merlin and Vivian.

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6Ibid., p. 237.

7Ibid.
"...he told the King one day
That he was to be buried, and alive,
In Brittany; and that the King should see
The face of him no more. Then Merlin sailed
Away to Vivian in Broceliande,
Where now she crowns him and herself with flowers
And feeds him fruits and wines and many foods
Of many savors, and sweet ortolans.
Wise books of every lore of every land
Are there to fill his days, if he require them,
And there are players of all instruments—
Flutes, hautboys, drums, and viols; and she sings
To Merlin, till he trembles in her arms
And there forgets that any town alive
Had ever such a name as Camelot.'\(^8\)

But Dagonet is wrong; Merlin has not forgotten Camelot. Merlin has returned.
A beardless "ghost in Arthur's palace,"\(^9\) he has been resurrected from his
grave in Broceliande. As they speak of these events, Dagonet senses in
Gawaine a lightness of soul that inhibits confidence. The Fool departs
leaving Gawaine to wonder about the future and Merlin's unexpected return.

The second section of the poem continues to establish the temper of
Camelot and makes more specific the cause of the sense of doom which seems
more ominous because of Merlin's return. As in section one, Robinson allows
the reader to overhear the conversations of characters who stand outside of
the central action. Their attempts to understand what is happening serves to
inform the reader of the central crises within the kingdom, and their differ-
ing opinions and sympathies help to set the tone of discord. This time it is
the impatient Sir Lamorak, "the man of oak and iron,"\(^10\) and the rational and
beloved Sir Bedivere who question what is and what is to come. Their con-

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\(^8\)Ibid., p. 239.
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 235.
\(^10\)Ibid., p. 241.
trasting characters and sympathies are indicated in their speeches.

Lamorak looks to the past for an answer to the whole dilemma.

"God's fish! The King had eyes; and Lancelot
Won't ride home to his mother, for she's dead.
The story is that Merlin warned the King
Of what's come now to pass; and I believe it.
And Arthur, he being Arthur and a king,
Has made a more pernicious mess than one,
We're told, for being so great and amorous;
It's that unwholesome and inclement cub
Young Modred I'd see first in hell before
I'd hang too high the Queen or Lancelot;
The King, if one may say it, set the pace,
And we've two strapping bastards here to prove it.
Young Borre, he's well enough; but as for Modred,
I squirm as often as I look at him.
And there again did Merlin warn the King,
The story goes abroad; and I believe it."

Bedivere has greater sympathy for the King. Acknowledging the past
deeds which Lamorak has related, Bedivere asserts that it is Lancelot who
has wronged Arthur. In the face of these wrongs the King's sufferings have
made him so pitiful that his past sins must be forgiven.

"Whatever the stormy faults he may have had,
To look on him today is to forget them;
And if it be too late for sorrow now
To save him—for it was a broken man
I saw this morning, and a broken king—
The God who sets a day for desolation
Will not forsake him in Avalon."

The knights are joined by Sir Kay, the seneschal, who speaks for
Guinevere and her unhappy and tenuous position within her husband's kingdom.
The section ends with Lamorak asking the questions which are troubling the
whole kingdom.

11Ibid., p. 243.
12Ibid.
"Is the King blind—with Modred watching him?
Does he forget the crown for Lancelot?
Does he forget that every woman mewing
Shall some day be a handful of small ashes?"

Through the first two sections, Robinson has given the reader a
diversity of views of the world of Camelot. Each knight speaks from his
limited point of view and from temperamental sympathies. But the central
issue emerges: Camelot is in upheaval. Arthur, preoccupied with his sense
of outrage because of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, neglects his
kingdom and leaves it open to the desires and designs of his illegitimate
son, Modred. Now Arthur has sent for Merlin. His trusted advisor has
returned to the world which he helped to create, but all wonder if he is
the same as he was before Broceliande.

Robinson has raised questions not only about the fate of Camelot,
but also about the character of Merlin which must be explored for the reader
in the climactic meeting between the sovereign and his trusted friend. The
meeting of Arthur and Merlin takes place in the third section of the poem.

The King who is presented to the reader is blinded by his own rage
and yet strangely aware of the destructive nature of his own preoccupation.
His last hope is that Merlin, "once the wisest of all men," will find a
solution or see an end to the misery which besets him. So he has summoned

with as little heart
As he had now for crowns, the fond lost Merlin,
Whose Nemesis had made of him a slave,
A man of daintiness, and a sybarite."

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13Ibid., p. 247.  
14Ibid., p. 249.  
15Ibid.
Yet as he hopes for a miracle and awaits the coming of Merlin, Arthur senses that change has marked his friend as it has the dwellers in Camelot. Arthur fears that the doom is inevitable. His worst suspicions are confirmed when he gazes upon the figure of Merlin,

Now robed in heavy wealth of purple silk,
With frogs and foreign tassels. On his face,
Too smooth now for a wizard or a sage,
Lay written, for the King's remembering eyes,
A pathos of a lost authority
Long faded, and unconscionably gone;
And on the King's heart lay a sudden cold:
''I might as well have left him in his grave,
As he would say it, saying what was true,—
As death is true. This Merlin is not mine,
But Vivian's. My crown is less than hers,
And I am less than woman to this man.''

Arthur is wrong when he judges Merlin by his changed appearance. He is not merely a faded relic of the past; he is 'Merlin still, or part of him.' That remaining part speaks to the King and warns him that unless he dedicates himself to his state he will lose it to Modred. This son of Arthur, born to him through an illicit union with his sister, Morgause, is the serpent in Camelot who lurks about awaiting the moment when he can strike and avenge himself upon his father and his kingdom. It is Modred who can bring ultimate defeat to Arthur's dreams and hopes.

''But Lancelot
Will have you first; and you need starve no more
For the Queen's love, the love that never was.
Your Queen is now your Kingdom, and hereafter
Let no man take it from you, or you die.''

16Ibid., pp. 249-50.  
17Ibid., p. 251.  
18Ibid., p. 253.
Merlin warns his friend that he has lost one Queen and that only vigilance will protect his remaining Queen, his state. Then, with the wisdom that has made him the most trusted counselor of Arthur, Merlin tells the King of the coming of a new knight, a son of Lancelot, who will find the Grail.

Arthur knows that all that Merlin has said to him is true. It makes no difference. Arthur being Arthur can know what he must do, and yet he will sit back and let destruction come. He is so overwhelmed by the consequences of his actions that he only awaits the inevitable. Robinson graphically suggests Arthur's character in the following passage.

"Why tell a king--
A poor, foiled, flouted, miserable king--
That if he lets rats eat his fingers off
He'll have no fingers to fight battles with?
I know as much as that, for I am still
A king--who thought himself a little less
Than God; a king who built him palaces
On sand and mud, and hears them crumbling now,
And sees them tottering, as he knew they must."

Arthur recognizes that his glorious plans have been destroyed by his pursuit of self-satisfaction. The end stands before him. He sees little hope for himself or for Merlin.

"God save us all, Merlin,
When you, the seer, the founder, and the prophet,
May throw the gold of your immortal treasure
Back to the God that gave it, and then laugh
Because a woman has you in her arms . . ."

Arthur and Merlin share the knowledge of their mutual defection. Unlike the knight to come, the only hope left to Arthur, these two men will not see the Grail. Arthur built on sand and mud; Merlin gave himself to

19Ibid., p. 251. 20Ibid.
Vivian. They have forfeited their right to seek the Grail. Merlin acknowledges his surrender.

"Once I dreamed of it,
But I was buried. I shall see no Grail,
Nor would I have it otherwise. I saw
Too much, and that was never good for man.
The man who goes alone too far goes mad--
In one way or another. God knew best
And he knows what is coming yet for me."21

The miracle that Arthur sought will not come. Merlin is no magician who can rid Camelot of its affliction. He is merely a man who can read the symptoms and counsel the sick ruler. The disease has spread too far.
The friends part. Merlin, anxious to return to Vivian, departs the scene of impending destruction. The knowledge which Merlin wished to impart to Arthur has been given. The King is aware, as Merlin is, that the sage is "less than Fate."22 Arthur remains with his memories of "the love that never was"23 and "of old illusions that were dead for ever."24

The world which Merlin has helped to build and has forsaken is presented by Robinson in the first three sections of the poem. The principal mood which the poet conveys is a foreboding sense of expectation which diminishes into passive resignation. The overheard conversations of the knights demonstrate that Camelot is awaiting a crisis and that the return of Merlin is a sign of its approach. Each of the speeches cited—the views of Gawaine, Dagonet, Lamorak, Bedivere, and Kay—represents a fragment of the total vision which is realized in the confrontation between Arthur and

21Ibid., p. 254.  
22Ibid., p. 253.  
23Ibid., p. 256.  
24Ibid., p. 257.
Merlin. The partial sight of the knights and Arthur prepares the reader for the fuller vision of the wizard. Robinson has presented Merlin, the man of vision, in Camelot.

A woman and the place in which she dwells constitute the refuge to which Merlin flees when he leaves Arthur alone. In this second world Merlin the prophet is replaced by Merlin the lover.

Vivian awaits the return of Merlin from Arthur. As the knights of Camelot attempted to read the fate of their world from Merlin's return, so Vivian speculates upon the fate of her kingdom of love. She wonders if

Modred, Lancelot,
The Queen, the King, the Kingdom, and the world,
Were less to Merlin, who made him King,
Than one small woman in Broceliande. 25

Merlin returns to Vivian and pledges that he will never leave her again.

At this point, the poem shifts in time to Merlin's first journey to Broceliande. Ten years before his sudden reappearance in Arthur's kingdom, Merlin told his King that he was departing for Brittany and "a living grave." 26 He wanted to find an end "of all my divination," 27 and he left Arthur and personal glory behind him.

Merlin entered a new world—a world marked by immediate appeals to his senses, as the following passage indicates.

Over the waves and into Brittany
Went Merlin, to Broceliande. Gay birds
Were singing high to greet him all along
A bread and sanded woodland avenue

25Ibid., p. 258. 26Ibid., p. 260. 27Ibid.
That led him on forever, so he thought,
Until at last there was an end of it:
And at the end there was a gate of iron,
Wrought heavily and invidiously barred.
He pulled a cord that rang somewhere a bell
Of many echoes, and sat down to rest,
Outside the keeper's house, upon a bench
Of carven stone that might for centuries
Have waited there in silence to receive him.
The birds were singing still; leaves flashed and swung
Before him in the sunlight; a soft breeze
Made intermittent whisperings around him
Of love and fate and danger, and faint waves
Of many sweetly-singing fragile odors
Broke lightly as they touched him; cherry-boughs
Above him snowed white petals down upon him,
And under their slow falling Merlin smiled
Contentedly, as one who contemplated
No longer fear, confusion, or regret
May smile at ruin or at revelation.28

In this world of physical beauty, Merlin seeks a new life and a
release from the impermanence which surrounds the kingdom of Arthur. When
Merlin enters Broceliande, the gate

Clang back behind him; and he swore no gate
Like that had ever clanged in Camelot,
Or any other place if not in hell.29

At the center of his newly entered paradise is Vivian whose beauty
and grace "made passing trash of empires."30 It is this woman who dominates
the world of cedars, fountains, and birds. It is she who has waited for
twenty years to be dominated by the wisest of men. Meeting Merlin at the
fountain, she sees the fulfillment of her soul's childhood desire.

"This is Merlin,"
She thought; "and I shall dream of him no more.
And he has come, he thinks, to frighten me

28Ibid., pp. 260-61.
29Ibid., p. 262.
30Ibid., p. 263.
With beards and robes and his immortal fame;
Or is it I who think so? I know not.
I'll be no more the Vivian for whose love
He tossed away his glory, or the Vivian
Who saw no man alive to make her love him
Till she saw Merlin once in Camelot,
And seeing him, saw no other. In an age
That has no plan for me that I can read
Without him, shall he tell me what I am,
And why I am, I wonder?"31

The lovers talk with an artificial and easy grace. Merlin questions
Vivian and asks her if her beauty is always robed in green. Rather than
answer his question, she asserts that she will be as she is and then chides
Merlin about his appearance.

"And say at once why you have come to me
Cloaked over like a monk, and with a beard
As long as Jeremiah's. I don't like it."32

Merlin senses that Vivian sees in his beard a "surviving ornament
of office,"33 a sign of that power which made him a maker of kings and their
kingdoms. That was what he was; that was the world of his past. Now he
belongs to the present and to Vivian alone. Merlin is aware of the change.

"Whatever I am,
I have not lived in Time until today."
A moment's worth of wisdom there escaped him,
But Vivian seized it, and it was not lost.34

Vivian and Merlin continue their sophisticated banter. Robinson
suggests the artificial nature of their relationship.

Embroidering doom with many levities,
Till now a fountain's crystal silver, fading,
Became a splash and a mere chilliness,

31Ibid.
32Ibid., p. 264.
33Ibid., p. 265.
34Ibid.
They mocked their fate with easy pleasantries
That were too false and small to be forgotten,
And with ingenious insincerities
That had no repetition or revival.35

Suddenly before them lies Vivian's manor aglow in the fire of a
setting sun. The flaming sky above the towers brings with its brilliant
light a vision of Camelot and Arthur's pain at his friend's departure.
Vivian, aware of the sudden surge of memory that turns Merlin's attention
away from her, jealously recognizes a rival for her lover's affection. With
determination she sets before Merlin her own desires and her fear that he may
leave her.

"Said I, 'When this great Merlin comes to me,
My task and avocation for some time
Will be to make him willing, if I can,
To teach and feed me with an ounce of wisdom.'
For I have eaten to an empty shell,
After a weary feast of observation
Among the glories of a tinsel world
That had for me no glory till you came,
A life that is no life."36

Section four ends as the lovers separate to prepare themselves for "a trifle
in the way of supper"37 and the consummation of their desires.

Robinson has established the mood of the lovers in this their first
meeting. Vivian and Merlin see in each other the hope of eternal escape.
Each comes to the other with skills to be used and desires to be fulfilled.
Their affair is to be an elaborately staged and artfully played game.

The Merlin who emerges has forsaken his ornaments of office to please
his lady. Vivian's servant, Blaise, informs Merlin of the lady's strong

35Ibid.
36Ibid., pp. 266-67.
37Ibid., p. 268
dislike for his apparel.

'The lady Vivian would be vexed, I fear,  
To meet you vested in these learned weeds  
Of gravity and death; for she abhors  
Mortality in all its hues and emblems—  
Black wear, long argument, and all the cold  
And solemn things that appertain to graves.'³⁸

Merlin's beard, which he vows never to look upon again, is cut away, and he is dressed in the royal purple garb which saddened Arthur when he saw it. Thus attired he joins Vivian, a picture of loveliness in a glowing red dress. Robinson's description of her is among the most vivid in the poem.

It seemed  
A flower of wonder with a crimson stem  
Came leaning slowly and regretfully  
To meet his will—a flower of change and peril  
That had a clinging blossom of warm olive  
Half stifled with a tyranny of black,  
And held the wayward fragrance of a rose  
Made woman by delicious alchemy.³⁹

Vivian presides over a feast of rare and delicious foods. Hesitating to eat for fear of losing sight of Vivian, Merlin is torn by the appeals to his senses of sight and taste. Yet even his compromise with food is noticed by the jealous lady who chides him for his indulgence.

"I put myself out cruelly to please you,  
And you, for that, forget almost at once  
The name and image of me altogether.  
You needn't, for when all is analyzed,  
It's only a bird-pie that you are eating."⁴⁰

With witty indulgence Merlin assures her that no dish could ever blot out the image of her beauty, and then he reminds her that only if he eats will he be able to live to love her.

³⁸Ibid.  
³⁹Ibid., p. 271.  
⁴⁰Ibid., p. 273.
The food having been served, a wine is brought to Merlin. Vivian offers it to him as final tribute and toast to their love.

"These cups
That you see coming are for the last there is
Of what my father gave to kings alone,
And far from always. You are more than kings
To me; therefore I give it all to you,
Imploring you to spare no more of it
Than a small cockle-shell would hold for me
To pledge your love and mine in. Take the rest,
That I may see tonight the end of it.
I'll have no living remnant of the dead
Annoying me until it fades and sours
Of too long cherishing; for Time enjoys
The look that's on our faces when we scowl
On unexpected ruins, and thrift itself
May be a sort of slow unwholesome fire
That eats away to dust the life that feeds it."  

This passage is particularly significant because in it Vivian sounds the first foreshadowing note of ruin. Merlin consumes all of the wine in this toast of love, only to discover that even this rare and sheltered vintage leaves specks within his golden cup. But Merlin will not let another unexpected note of sudden ruin change the mood of the night.

"Specks? What are specks? Are you afraid of them?"
He murmured slowly, with a drowsy tongue;
"There are specks everywhere. I fear them not."  

The feast is finished and the wine is consumed. The golden cup soiled by fragments which lie within its precious form is set aside. Merlin and Vivian remain to feast upon their love. As Merlin surrenders totally to the world of sense, their supreme moment comes while towers topple and kingdoms are destroyed.

41Ibid., p. 275.  42Ibid., p. 277.
There came
 Between him and the world a crumbling sky
 Of black and crimson, with a crimson cloud
 That held a far off town of many towers
 All swayed and shaken, till at last they fell
 And there was nothing but a crimson cloud
 That crumbled into nothing, like the sky
 That vanished with it, carrying away
 The world, the woman, and all memory of them.  

Vivian allows her lover freedom within his grave. Merlin roams at
will the gardens and forests of Broceliande, their retreat from a world
which has no place for their love. Vivian only demands that Merlin preserve
the sanctuary.

"You are to listen
 When I say to you that I'm alone.
 Like you, I saw too much; and unlike you
 I made no kingdom out of what I saw—
 Or none save this one here that you must rule,
 Believing you are ruled. I see too far
 To rule myself. Time's way with you and me
 Is our way, in that we are out of Time
 And out of tune with Time. We have this place,
 And you must hold us in it or we die."  

Merlin and Vivian live within their private world for ten years.
Living with and for each other, they move about within the gate-enclosed
beauties which surround them. Occasionally the lovers question the nature
of their love only to assert its permanence and to reassert their desire to
keep the world of Arthur from touching them. Vivian and Merlin will then be
as immutable as their love.

Even in these hours of bliss and affirmation, however, the powers
of Time and Fate begin to make themselves felt through subtle change.
Their moments of playfulness at times confuse Vivian. Merlin

Beguiled her with her own admonishing
And frowned upon her with a fierce reproof
That many a time in the old world outside
Had set the mark of silence on strong men—
Whereat she laughed, not always wholly sure,
Nor always wholly glad, that he who played
So lightly was the wizard of her dreams;
"No matter—if only Merlin keep the world
Away," she thought. "Our lyres have many strings,
But he must know them all, for he is Merlin." 45

This shadow is all that comes between the lovers until Dagonet arrives with a message from Arthur. The King in his grief has sent for Merlin and given the message to his Fool whom Merlin loved. The next morning, riding off with Dagonet, Merlin tells Vivian why he must leave and that he will return.

"This time I go because I made him King,
Thereby to be a mirror for the world;
This time I go, but never after this,
For I can be no more than what I was,
And I can do no more than I have done."
He took her slowly in his arms and felt her body throbbing like a bird against him:
"This time I go; I go because I must."
46

His departure leaves Vivian with a sad knowledge. She sees in him as he rides away neither the Merlin she loves nor the man of power who has made kingdoms. At that moment his soul is suspended somewhere between his worlds.

For it was then that in his lonely gaze
Of helpless love and sad authority
She found the gleam of his imprisoned power
That Fate withheld; and, pitying herself,
She pitied the fond Merlin she had changed,
And saw the Merlin who had changed the world. 47

The high point of love and the beginning of change are now presented. Robinson has analyzed the love of Merlin and Vivian. It is to protect them from life and its responsibilities; it is to protect them from death and its finality. Robinson has also prepared for the end of the love by including the specks in the wine, the doubts of Vivian, and the departure of Merlin from Broceliande.

The sixth section of the poem returns the narrative to the time of Merlin’s return from Camelot. He comes to Vivian again with promises of unending fidelity and permanent attendance. She is not satisfied for she knows that a change has taken place within her lover—a change that cannot be dispelled. The Merlin who stands before her is not the man who had ten years ago sounded her bell and waited before her gate. At his departure she noticed the change, and she wonders if his greater role can now be cast aside.

"The eyes you took away
Were sad and old; and I could see in them
A Merlin who remembered all the kings
He ever saw, and wished himself, almost,
Away from Vivian, to make other kings,
And shake the world again in the old manner.
I saw myself no bigger than a beetle
For several days, and wondered if your love
Were large enough to make me any larger
When you came back. Am I a beetle still?"

Not answering her question, Merlin evades her attempts to discover what has occurred in Camelot. He wants to escape—to wander in that freedom which at this moment Vivian is unwilling to grant him. The lovers part without restoration of understanding, and Merlin is filled with fear.

49Ibid., p. 284.
Merlin continually wanders in Broceliande, but he finds no peace in being alone.

Without her now there was no past or future,
And a vague, soul-consuming premonition
He found the only tenant of the present. 49

Yet Vivian is not enough to recall him from his musings on the past. He discovers one day that he has spent two years since his return from Arthur wandering and neglecting Vivian.

One day at the fountain, Merlin comes upon Vivian dressed again in the green she wore upon the day of his arrival. He comments upon the shade, while she in hurt anger tells him that she has worn every hue during the past two years to make him take notice of her. Vivian demands of him a reason for his strangeness.

He shook his head and tore another leaf:
"There is no need of asking what it is; Whatever you or I may choose to name it, The name of it is Fate, who played with me And gave me eyes to read of the unwritten More lines than I have read. I see no more Today than yesterday, but I remember."50

Vivian again asks what happened when he left her to go to Camelot and what memories haunt him. To make this strange and unhappy woman understand his feelings, Merlin tells her the story of Arthur and Camelot.

Arthur built his kingdom as a model for other men to follow. But his plan failed. Because he made of love "more than he made of life and death together,"51 Arthur made two human errors. He begot Modred of his sister, and he wed Guinevere knowing that she loved another. All these

49Ibid. 50Ibid., p. 287. 51Ibid., p. 289.
events occurred with Merlin's aid because the counselor saw in Arthur's state a mirror of the impermanence and sinfulness of man's condition.

"And with a kingdom built on two pits
Of living sin,--so founded by the will
Of one wise counselor who loved the king,
And loved the world and therefore made the king
To be a mirror for it,--the king reigned well
For certain years, awaiting a sure doom;
For certain years he waved across the world
A royal banner with a dragon on it;
The Dragon as it were the living God,
And not the living sin."52

Vivian loses patience as Merlin tells his story. Why should they, in their retreat, be concerned with kings and sins? Her voice is ironic and her eyes thin when she asks Merlin what all these things have to do with a woman--with her. Merlin replies that the story is the common one--true for every man and woman. Vivian rejects his implications. She asserts that they are not common people and, referring to his earlier dismissal of the specks, admonishes him to forget this living sin and this mirror of impermanence.

A final realization comes to Merlin. The fear which hounds him suddenly has a name, and it is change. He is no longer capable of keeping Arthur's world from his mind. Even this world of retreat, like the world he made for a mirror, is vulnerable. He foresaw the destruction of the latter; now he must face the ruin of the former.

To Vivian he could not say anything
But words that had no more of hope in them
Than anguish had of peace: "I meant the world....
I meant the world," he groaned; "not you--not me."53

52Ibid. 53Ibid., p. 291.
Vivian tells Merlin that the world of which he speaks is really not outside of them. Their gate has not proved a fortress against the forces that exist; their paradise is suddenly only another Eden.

"We have had
A man and woman in it for some time,
And now it seems, we have a Tree of Knowledge."54

Vivian leaves Merlin with these words, and what remained of his happiness departs with her.

Merlin has to face finally the reality of the change which has made of his paradise another Eden. He has to recognize that the path which he has chosen has unknowingly led him too far from greatness and too close to death.

"But let the man
Who saw too much, and was to drive himself
From paradise, play too lightly or too long
Among the moths and flowers, he finds at last
There is a dim way out; and he shall grope
Where pleasant shadows lead him to the plain
That had no shadow save his own behind him.
And there, with no complaint, nor much regret,
Shall he plod on, with death between him now
And the far light that guides him, till he falls
And has an empty thought of empty rest."55

As the speech indicates, Merlin's vision at this moment is one of self-revelation. He recognizes that death stands between him and the greatness of the Light which he must once again pursue. This is the message that he must bring to Vivian; this is the realization that makes him old.

"I see the light,
But I shall fall before I come to it;
For I am old. I was young yesterday.

54 Ibid., p. 294. 55 Ibid., p. 295.
Time's hand that I have held away so long
Grips hard now on my shoulder. Time has won.
Tomorrow I shall say to Vivian
That I am old and gaunt and garrulous,
And tell her one more story; I am old."56

This understanding which Merlin has purchased at such cost makes his
departure from Broceliande a necessity. Vivian watches him as he grapples
with the force of her love and the knowledge of his fate. She wonders if
this man who moves so slowly and who is so troubled were the Merlin for whom
she waited all her life—the founder of kingdoms, the wisest of men.

The struggle is finally resolved. Merlin comes to Vivian and tells
her that he must leave. Time and Fate will have their way with him as they
will have their way with Camelot.

"Tomorrow I shall go away again
To Camelot; and I shall see the King
Once more; and I may come to you again
Once more; and I shall go away again
For ever. There is now no more than that
For me to do; and I shall do no more."57

The next day Merlin departs from Broceliande. Wearing the black robe
which marked his office twelve years before, he bids Vivian good-by and
starts his final wandering. She too learns, as Arthur learned, that Merlin
can be no more than he was.

For long there was a whining in her ears
Of distant wheels departing. When it ceased,
She closed the gate so quietly
That Merlin could have heard no sound of it.58

The gate whose clang marked the entrance of Merlin into what he thought was
the eternal and grave-like permanence of his love shuts now without the

56Ibid., pp. 295-96. 57Ibid., p. 297. 58Ibid., p. 298.
slightest sound for him. Time and Fate have won.

The Broceliande idyll covers a span of twelve years. Robinson moves the action from Merlin's return from Arthur's kingdom back to his first appearance at Vivian's gate, then forward from his return through his final departure. This shifting time sequence allows the poet to maintain the integrity of the isolation of the world of Broceliande. It is intact—a remote and separate kingdom attempting to keep the world and its agencies out by means of an elaborate gate and delicate sensual pleasures. But the world of Broceliande for all of its remoteness is still vulnerable to Time and Fate. Merlin comes to Broceliande after he accepted the necessary ruin of Arthur's world. When the seer left Camelot, he left his role as man of vision. Now he has to accept the death of Broceliande and the passing of his role as a man of love. Both worlds are presented by the poet; both worlds come to ruin. The final section of the poem looks back at the destruction of these kingdoms and raises hopes for the emergence of a new, though not necessarily better, world.

As in the first parts of the poem, an overheard conversation brings to the reader the essential conflicts. During the two years since the brief appearance of Merlin in Camelot, the elements of dissension have moved relentlessly toward disaster. But even now, with Camelot preparing for ultimate and final physical conflict, Robinson chooses to present conversation rather than action. It is the words of Bedivere and Gawaine which reveal the events of the past to the reader.

Bedivere begs that Gawaine try to stop the King from seeking revenge upon Lancelot. Gawaine will not go to the King to ask for peace at this
moment of crisis. The knight is consumed with a desire for revenge upon Lancelot because in the act of saving the Queen from the flames to which she was condemned, Lancelot killed Gareth and Gaheris, the youthful brothers of Gawaine. For this act Gawaine seeks personal revenge, and he is using Arthur's anger as the tool of his hatred.

Gawaine and Arthur seek revenge upon Lancelot and Guinevere and, somewhere between, the world of which they are all a part is caught in the upheaval. Bedivere begs Gawaine to consider the consequences of his private and selfish goals.

"Is the kingdom of the world,
Now rocking, to go down in sound and blood
And ashes and sick ruin, and for the sake
Of three men and a woman? If it be so,
God's mercy for the world he made, I say."

The appearance of Dagonet interrupts Bedivere's futile pleas. With his customary irony, the Fool asserts that only if men were different would the results of men's actions be different. But men are what they are. Thus Lancelot wages war out of his love of Guinevere; Arthur wages war out of the madness produced by his love and his hatred; Gawaine wages war out of his desire for revenge upon Lancelot; and Mordred wages war out of his lust for the kingdom and the Queen.

Gawaine and Bedivere depart. As Gawaine sat before him, Dagonet sits upon Merlin's Rock and thinks of the strange way that Time has with all who dwell in Camelot. He ponders what Fate holds for them in the future. At that moment Merlin appears. Dagonet looks up to see a different face.

59Ibid., p. 301.
It is not the Merlin of old, nor is it the Merlin who roamed the forests of Broceliande.

Poor Dagonet, with terror shaking him,  
Stood up and saw before him an old face  
Made older with an inch of silver beard,  
And faded eyes more eloquent of pain  
And ruin than all the faded eyes of age  
Till now had ever been, although in them  
There was a mystic and intrinsic peace  
Of one who sees where men of nearer sight  
See nothing.60

Merlin has learned of the sad happenings which have transpired since he last saw Dagonet. His understanding of what is inevitable has led him back to his old place of meditation. Both men contemplate the end of Camelot.

"And in the end  
Are more beginnings, Dagonet, than men  
Shall name or know today. It was the end  
Of Arthur's insubstantial majesty  
When to him and his knights the Grail foreshadowed  
The quest of life that was to be the death  
Of many and the slow discouraging  
Of many more."61

Dagonet tells Merlin of the disruptive force of the Grail. The knights went in search of its light; Galahad found it and an eternal calm. The others in varying degrees found in the Grail an unsettling dissatisfaction with the world which they had known and a desire to attain the peace that Galahad had found.

Arthur's world must end of its own necessity, but there is hope for another kingdom for man. The Grail with the light that brought the necessity of the quest and human dissatisfaction is not the source of ruin in a land

60Ibid., p. 304.  
61Ibid., p. 305.
which had already begun to crumble. It is a beginning. The force of the Grail and the beauty of woman of which Dagonet spoke in the poem's opening speech are now seen in true perspective.

"All this that was to be
Might show to man how vain it were to wreck
The world for self if it were all in vain.
When I began with Arthur I could see
In each bewildered man who dots the earth
A moment with his days a groping thought
Of an eternal will, strangely endowed
With merciful illusions whereby self
Becomes the will itself and each man swells
In fond accordance with his agency.
Now Arthur, Modred, Lancelot, and Gawaine
Are swollen thoughts of this eternal will
Which have no other way to find the way
That leads them on to their inheritance
Than by the time-infuriating flame
Of a wrecked empire, lighted by the torch
Of woman, who, together with the light
That Galahad found, is yet to light the world."

Turning from the hope of the future to the present, Merlin sees again the vision of towers crumbling and a world on fire. There in the sunset is a world of black and red spilled like jewels from a woman's hand.

Here Robinson unites the figure of Vivian with the death of a world.

He bowed, and pressed his eyes: 'Now by my soul
I have seen this before--all black and red--
Like that--like that--like Vivian--black and red;
Like Vivian, when her eyes looked into mine
Across the cups of gold. A flute was playing--
Then all was black and red.'

Merlin realizes that both his worlds have passed. In this final section Merlin abandons his intention to see the king and to return to Vivian for one final moment. Both desires were manifestations of a vain hope against

63 Ibid., p. 309.
the inevitable coming of ruin and death. Now Merlin faces the truth. He will not see Arthur; he will not return to Vivian.

As he had departed just a little while before from Vivian's gate; now, with Dagonet, Merlin leaves his old place of vision and authority. The imagery of cold which dominates this passage marks the end of the world of Camelot.

They arose,
And, saying nothing, found a groping way
Down through the gloom together. Fiercer now,
The wind was like a flying animal
That beat the two of them incessantly
With icy wings, and bit them as they went.
The rock above them was an empty place
Where neither seer nor fool should view again
The stricken city. Colder blew the wind
Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot. 64

Structurally the world of Camelot provides a frame for the smaller but more personal world of Broceliande. The scenes at Camelot open and close the poem in sections one, two, three, and seven. The love idyll is contained within the frame in sections four, five, and six. Arthur's world and its destruction are presented in the first major division of the poem, the love idyll in Broceliande and its ruin in the second part; and in the third and final division, Merlin looks back and reflects upon the meaning of what he has visualized and lived. The larger world, the world which demands of Merlin his vision and his wisdom, frames his world of intimate human relationships.

64 Ibid., p. 314.
One hesitates to call this design a double action, for action has so little to do with the poem as a whole. Instead the poet creates a double focus which when merged becomes the total story of Merlin. The artistic problem was to create a distinct mood appropriate to the individual settings of Camelot and Broceliande and still achieve an overall unity. In the accomplishment of these ends the settings, meter, and diction are of secondary importance, while the imagery, characterizations, themes, and the moods which they convey are the primary poetic tools.

The settings remain for the most part the faintest outlines with the world of Broceliande being more fully realized. The opening Camelot sections are almost totally conversational. The physical setting includes vague references to towers and a city which is situated beneath Merlin's Rock. The sky which ranges above Arthur's kingdom is filled with feathery clouds. Color is notable because of its absence. The scenes are gray and black with only the promise of light.

The world of Broceliande is of a different order than that of Camelot. Here Merlin attempts to live through his senses, and the poet is obligated to create for the reader a world that can bring forgetfulness to Merlin for ten years. For this reason there is greater concern with physical detail. The fountains, gardens, cedars, and ferns of Vivian's home are mentioned, but they are without distinguishing details. The elaborate supper which Vivian prepares for Merlin consists of only delicious ortolans and fragrant wines. There is some use of color. The gardens are filled with green; the wine is golden. The sky is filled with the reds of sunset, and towers topple amidst red and black. Color is used to its fullest extent in the
descriptions of Vivian. Her black hair and olive skin are enhanced by her
dresses of red or green.65

The final setting of the poem is physically the vague region of
Camelot. As before, Merlin's Rock is there, and the city is below it. Color
is present, but the black and red of Merlin's final vision are less colors
than manifestations of the ultimate destruction. This effect is reinforced
by the total darkness and cold of a cloud-filled night sky. There is hope
of light, but the departure of Merlin and Dagonet demonstrates that the light
of the Grail and the torch of woman lie outside the world of Camelot.

The settings of the poem do not help to make the two worlds of Merlin
distinctive. Neither does Robinson's selection and use of blank verse for
the meter of the poem. For the most part Robinson's choice is a fortunate
selection. Since he makes such wide use of conversation, the choice of a
form which approximates the patterns of the spoken word is appropriate. The
verse is particularly successful in the sections which deal with the destruct-
tion of Camelot or in the passages where Merlin muses about Time and Fate.
Here the blank verse lines are most fitting to the seriousness of the subject.
The poetry is also highly effective in the passages where Merlin is speaking

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65Perrine states that the mixture of the natural and the exotic
which constitutes the character of Vivian is paralleled by the colors olive
and green. He makes no comment on Vivian's red dress (Perrine, p. 140).
Robinson reacted negatively to such interpretations of the colors. Comment-
ing on an article by W. S. Braithwaite, Robinson wrote, "I wish for the
most sordid of reasons that he wouldn't write such formidable long sentences,
or find such world shaking significance in the colors that Vivian put on to
make Merlin take notice before she got tired of having him around" (Robinson
cited in Bates, p. 6).
in a mood of restrained emotion. His final lines with Dagonet have force
without the additional weight of ornamentation.

"I need your word as one of Arthur's knights
That you will go on with me to the end
Of my short way, and say unto no man
Or woman that you found or saw me here.
No good would follow, for a doubt would live
Unstified of my loyalty to him
Whose deeds are wrought for those who are to come;
And many who see not what I have seen,
Or what you see tonight, would prattle on
For ever, and their children after them,
Of what might once have been had I gone down
With you to Camelot to see the King.
I came to see the King,—but why see kings?
All this that was to be is what I saw
Before there was an Arthur to be king,
And so to be a mirror wherein men
May see themselves, and pause."66

There are times, however, when an attempt to create a distinct met­
rical mood for Broceliande leads to unpleasant results. The majestic blank
verse often seems too stately for the playfulness of Vivian's speech.

"I'll never like a man with hair like that
While I can feed a carp with little frogs.
I'm rather sure to hate you if you keep it.
And when I hate a man I poison him."67

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
"Go on, and tell me all about the King;
I'll bet the King had warts or carbuncles,
Or something wrong in his divine insides,
To make him wish that Adam had died young."68

Whether intended or not, such passages where form and meaning clash strike
a harsh note upon the reader's ear.

The effect of the blank verse is almost the same throughout the poem.

The use of both masculine and feminine endings, the alternation of end-stop

and run-on lines, and the varying use of the caesura are not enough to produce variety in a poem in which action is relegated to speech and all of the characters speak in an identical fashion. Thus the meter in the various sections of the poem has a rather unfortunate note of sameness.

Simplicity of diction and syntax is maintained throughout the greater portion of the poem. The descriptions and conversations are marked by directness of statement and modernity of language. There are exceptions to these practices, however. In the opening section of Merlin, Robinson made use of a false antiqueness which he soon abandoned. Such lines as "What look ye for to see, Gawaine, Gawaine," are in conflict with the more direct phrasing and modern language of the later passages. Archaic words such as "gyved," "coombs" and "mazard" find their way into the poem.

Robinson tends to lapse into involved syntax in Merlin. The usual directness of statement is more welcome after the poet has fallen into clumsy rhetoric. In the following example the reader isn't certain if Vivian should be flattered.

"Are you always all in green, as you are now?"
Said Merlin, more employed with her complexion,
Where blood and olive made wild harmony
With eyes and wayward hair that were too dark
For peace if they were not subordinated:
"If so you are, then so you make yourself
A danger in a world of many dangers.
If I were young, God knows if I were safe
Concerning you in green, like a slim cedar,
As you are now, to say my life was mine:
Were you to say to me that I should end it,
Longevity for me were jeopardized.
Have you your green on always and all over." 70

69Ibid., p. 235.  
70Ibid., p. 263.
Such departures are unfortunate but are not frequent.

As in the past Robinson neglected detailed physical description, made use of a traditional metrical form, and was modern in language and statement. Of and by themselves these techniques provide a foundation for the artistic creation of Camelot and Brocéliande. The contribution is essential, but in Robinson's art, setting, language, and meter always are secondary to imagery, character, and theme. Through his artistic handling of imagery, his depiction of the struggles of Merlin, Vivian, and Arthur, and his unifying and integrating themes which demonstrate the nature and ruin of two worlds, Robinson creates the separate psychological mood of each kingdom and unites the poem's distinct elements.

Robinson's primary structural tool is the establishment of a set of oppositions which are played against one another to dramatize the conflict within Merlin and the differences and similarities of the worlds in which he works out his destiny. These oppositions help the reader to realize the individuality of each setting, and yet they create the tension which helps to unify the poem. The primary source of the tension is the imagery.

Perrine in his study of the sources of Robinson's Arthurian poems traces the development of traditional Arthurian imagery. He finds that the poet is indebted to Gurteen for his physical description of Brocéliande, Vivian, and the feast which she prepares for Merlin. Perrine's work does not explore the manner in which Robinson employs these images. In this study emphasis will be placed upon the patterns of images which the poet

71Perrine, p. 218.
establishes, for it is Robinson's ability to take traditional and simple references and organize them into thematic and unifying systems which constitutes a major element of his art.

One of the most interesting sets of images describes Merlin's physical appearance. The beard images are combined with references to Merlin's apparel to give a total visual description. The absence of Merlin's beard is a source of wonder and concern. It reflects the change that has occurred, "a pathos of a lost authority."\(^2\) Merlin himself realizes that the surrender of his beard is a symbol of his spiritual defection.

"Buried alive I told you I should be,  
By love made little and by woman shorn,  
Like Samson, of my glory; and the time  
Is now at hand."\(^3\)

That Merlin is not the man he was is apparent to Arthur when he sees Merlin beardless and wearing ornate purple silk. This attire suits the king of Brocéliande and not the seer of Arthur's kingdom.

Conversely, Robinson introduces Merlin to Brocéliande in his black robes and overwhelming beard. This picture connects Merlin with Camelot and, at the same time, lays a foundation for the change which is to come. Vivian realizes that Merlin will not be hers until he has forsaken the power and the life which his great beard and philosophic robes symbolize.

"Since I have had your name  
To dream of and say over to myself,  
The visitations of that awful beard  
Have been a terror for my nights and days--

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 260
For twenty years. I've seen it like an ocean,
Blown seven ways at once and wrecking ships,
With men and women screaming for their lives;
I've seen it woven into shining ladders
That ran up out of sight and so to heaven,
All covered with white ghosts with hanging robes
Like folded wings,—and there were millions of them,
Climbing, climbing, climbing, all the time;
And all the time that I was watching them
I thought how far above me Merlin was,
And wondered always what his face was like."

In the final part of the poem when the seer emerges from Broceliande, he wears the garb of authority and discards the purple ornate robes. Merlin's beard, however, is only an inch of silver, suggesting less authority than he once had and less glory than he once held.

The references to Merlin's past appearance or the descriptions of his present dress perform a double task. Readers are aware of what Merlin is at the moment and conscious of what he was. In this manner Robinson keeps both descriptions, both worlds, and both of Merlin's roles in constant view. These images, therefore, serve to indicate Merlin's various stages of development and because of their repetitious nature unify the poem through contrast.

The physical position of the scenes also produces a dramatic set of contrasting images. In Camelot Merlin's customary place of meditation was Merlin's Rock. Set above the city, this place is a solitary and imposing stone from which Merlin looked down upon the world he helped to make.

By contrast, the image that is constantly associated with Broceliande and which is repeated throughout every section of the poem is Merlin's grave. "Grave" carries with it not only associations of Merlin's death to his old

74Ibid., p. 274.
life and the permanence of the new which he hopes will be as lasting as death, but also a position of contrast with the heights of Merlin's Rock. The grave is of the earth and to reach it Merlin must come down from his prior isolation. Thus he enters personally into life and time, which leads to his ultimate vulnerability to change and death.

Robinson's use of heat and cold images throughout the poem is often in the traditional manner: the heat of passion is contrasted with the cold of indifference.

The king was long awake. No covenant
With peace was his tonight; and he knew sleep
As he knew the cold eyes of Guinevere
That yesterday had stabbed him, having first
On Lancelot's name struck fire... 75

Cold, however, is not always significant of indifference but is also used as awareness of the inevitability of change. The first such use occurs when Arthur sees Merlin "and on the King's heart lay a sudden cold." 76 After Merlin's departure the King is certain of the ultimate doom that will overcome his dreams.

And Arthur tramped the past. The loneliness
Of kings, around him like the unseen dead,
Lay everywhere; and he was loath to move,
As if in fear to meet with his cold hand
The touch of something colder. 77

The scene of Merlin and Vivian's feast is filled with imagery of fire, the source of heat. In these scenes it is the passion of the characters which overwhelms them.

75Ibid., pp. 256-57.  
76Ibid., p. 249.  
77Ibid., p. 254.
With a long-kindling gaze that caught from hers
A laughing flame, and with a hand that shook
Like Arthur's kingdom, Merlin slowly raised
A golden cup that for a golden moment
Was twinned in air with hers; and Vivian,
Who smiled at him across their gleaming rims,
From eyes that made a fuel of the night
Surrounding her, shot glory over gold
At Merlin, while their cups touched and his trembled.78

When change comes to this relationship, Merlin reads its early signs
on Vivian's mouth which is marked by a "frozen line of irony."79 Merlin's
farewell to Vivian is notable for the lack of fire which marked their earlier
embraces.

He drew her slowly into his embrace
And held her there, but when he kissed her lips
They were as cold as leaves and had no answer;
For Time had given him then, to prove his words,
A frozen moment of a woman's life.80

The realization of the ultimate destruction of his world comes to Merlin in
terms of an angel of cold. The cold which confronts Merlin at this moment
unites him with Arthur who also had to face the end of love.

He felt the sword of his cold angel thrust
And twisted in his heart, as if the end
Were coming next, but the cold angel passed
Invisibly and left him desolate,
With misty brow and eyes.81

The images of cold and change which cannot be reversed close the
poem. Merlin and Dagonet depart amidst the cold blowing winds. The recognition
of change, the inevitable death of what has been, is constantly associated with gravelfike coldness. In this way the cold which marks the end of

78 Ibid., p. 276.
79 Ibid., p. 291.
80 Ibid., p. 297.
81 Ibid., p. 294.
The tower imagery is a less subtle means of uniting the various worlds. In the first section, the characters speak of "castles and high towers." Such references prepare the way for Merlin's visions. In Brecon-Ifande the seer has two visions of towers. First he sees the towers of Vivian's world glowing in the sunset. The sight returns his thoughts to Arthur's kingdom,

his forsaken city
Made flame as if all Camelot were on fire.  

The second vision comes when the love of Merlin and Vivian is consummated amidst a glory of red and black that held for Merlin visions of "a far off town of many towers." The tower images are used to signify the world of Arthur, built on a foundation of sand and mud, and the world of Merlin, a retreat from the destructive forces of life. The ruin of both worlds is depicted in the final vision which Merlin sees at Camelot after he has left Vivian. In this moment the world of statecraft and the world of love share their agony of death.

The wizard shivered as he spoke, and stared
Away into the sunset where he saw
Once more, as through a cracked and cloudy glass,
A crumbling sky that held a crimson cloud
Wherein there was a town of many towers
All swayed and shaken, in a woman's hand
This time, till out of it there spilled and flashed
And tumbled, like loose jewels, town, towers, and walls,
And there was nothing but a crumbling sky
That made anon of black and red and ruin
A wild and final rain on Camelot.
The specks in the wine are images of imperfection. In handling these images, Robinson is artistic and delicate. Introduced at the moment of surrender, they foreshadow the ultimate ruin of the world of love which is just awakening. The reintroduction of the specks before Merlin's departure sounds the note of final defeat and makes universal the themes of imperfection and mutability. It is Vivian who recognizes the universality of these threats to man.

"And yet you tell me that you fear no specks!
With you I never cared for them enough
To think of them. I was too strange a lady,
And your return is now a speckled king,
And something that you call a living sin--
That's like an uninvited poor relation
Who comes without a welcome rather late,
And on a foundered horse."

This image is a delicate and original embodiment of the theme.

The use of references to vision and to sight form still another but less successful pattern. As has been stated, the partial vision of the knights in sections one and two forms a contrast with Merlin's powers which are seen in section three. The opening scene with Gawaine sitting upon Merlin's Rock and attempting to see what lies ahead is balanced by the close where Dagonet, in the same place, sees what has occurred and the doom that accompanies it. The images of sight contrast Merlin with other men, through his ability to see beyond them, at the same time that they unite Merlin with all mankind, through his inability to change what he sees.

"If they see not,
Or if they do see and they ponder not,
I saw; but I was neither Fate nor God."

86Ibid., p. 292. 87Ibid., p. 313.
While this image pattern does succeed in unifying at the same time that it makes distinctions, these images are overworked. Merlin tells Arthur of his vision.

"I saw
Too much and that was never good for man." 88

Merlin warns Arthur about his vision.

"Wherever I have warned you, see as far
As I have seen; for I have shown the worse,
There is to see. Require no more of me." 89

Vivian speaks of Merlin's vision.

"You are the only one who sees enough
To make me see how far away I am
From all that I have seen and have not been." 90

Merlin tells Vivian of his vision.

"I see no more
Today than yesterday, but I remember." 91

Merlin tells himself about his vision.

"The man who sees
May see too far, and he may see too late
The path he takes unseen," he told himself. 92

Merlin speaks to Dagonet of his vision.

"I saw too much; and this would be the end,
Were there to be an end, I saw myself--
A sight no other man has ever seen." 93

These selections represent a sampling of the references to Merlin's sight. That there are subtle differences which the poet makes is not disputed since each of these images is appropriate and meaningful within its

88 Ibid., p. 245  89 Ibid., p. 260.  90 Ibid., p. 280.
91 Ibid., p. 287.  92 Ibid., p. 294.  93 Ibid., p. 313.
individual context. The accumulated effect, however, is one of repetition which detracts from the poem as a whole.

While much of the imagery of the poem helps to create tension and unity, some of the effects, like that of needless repetition, detract from the more subtle accomplishments. The faint clouds which appear in the opening lines of the poem are such an obvious device that the reader immediately awaits the gathering darkness of the end. The name of Modred, the villain, is always accompanied by a reference to rats or snakes which tends to become tedious as well as to demonstrate a lack of originality. When the delicacy of the image of the specks within the wine is contrasted with the more heavy-handed approach in the above instances, the failures are even more noticeable.

In spite of these lapses, the overall effect of the imagery is positive. Robinson uses the image patterns to create the milieu within which his characters work out their destinies. The specks of imperfection in the wine, the physical descriptions of Merlin, the clouds of gathering disaster, and all the other patterns make concrete the psychological and cosmic conflict which constitutes the crisis of the poem. They give the poem the dimension and substance which the vague descriptions of setting fail to accomplish.

Robinson has created three central characters to unify the poem and embody the theme. The lesser portraits of Lamorak, Kay, and Bedivere are only used to contrast with Merlin's vision and to suggest the mood of Camelot. Gawaine is an embodiment of the destructive nature of the selfishness of revenge, while Dagonet sounds the note of irony and wisdom without
hope. It is really in the presentation of Arthur, Vivian, and Merlin that Robinson gives the reader an insight into the vision which he embodies in his poem. Through them Robinson depicts as the human tragedy the consequences of falling away from wisdom and the inevitability of that fall. In Arthur and Merlin, Robinson shows the inevitability of the fall; in Vivian and Merlin, Robinson shows the attempt to evade the consequences of the fall; and in Merlin alone, Robinson has shown the growth which comes when the inevitable is accepted and the folly of self is seen.

Arthur desired to create a kingdom towards which all men could look for inspiration. It was to be an example of human perfection, but it was not built by a perfect human. Arthur's failure arises out of his willingness to sacrifice his dreams of glory for his momentary satisfactions. Thus he sins with his sister, who brings forth a usurper who separates him from his state, and he weds Guinevere, whose love for Lancelot divides the knights of Arthur's kingdom into two factions. Brooding over both errors, he opens the way for his ultimate overthrow and death. Arthur's mirror is a mirror of his sins, the human imperfections which all men have. Arthur's unwillingness to act in the face of this knowledge brings about his ruin.

An intelligent and sensitive woman, Vivian is a complicated heroine, seeing in the world about her the imperfection and impermanence which she deplores and with which Arthur was unable to cope, Vivian abandons the world to seek a life of complete self-realization and fulfillment in a created ideal world. She desires Merlin as the supreme fulfillment of her ideals,

94 Winters, p. 68.
a triumph over the most glorious of the world's men, and she charges him
with the task of keeping her world free from the disorder and change of the
outer world. He is to protect and fulfill her.

"So let the first and last activity
Of what you say so often is your love
Be always to remember that our lyres
Are not strung for Today. On you it falls
To keep them in accord here with each other,
For you have wisdom, I have only sight
For distant things--and you. And you are Merlin."\(^{95}\)

In Merlin Vivian sees a man capable of the kind of love which she demands--
eternal, immutable, and total. Morris commented upon her character.

Vivian, especially, has a quality of infinite pathos; her tragedy
is that of a woman balked in her emotional potentialities, groap-
ing through love toward a more firmly integrated life. In Vivian
there seems to be expressed all of that dawning self-consciousness,
that curious and impressive search for fulfillment and evaluation
which characterize the contemporary feminine spirit.\(^{96}\)

Vivian waits for twenty years for Merlin's arrival. When he comes
she waits for him "to teach and feed me with an ounce of wisdom."\(^ {97}\) Vivian
works hard to change Merlin--to force him to forget Camelot and Arthur. She
is a jealous woman because she has built her whole existence around Merlin.
To lose him will mean the denial of immutability and eternity; to lose him
will mean that she too must change and die. Vivian does change him. Merlin
sheds his beard for her; he wears the robes of purple silk; he returns to
her from Camelot. But with the irony that marks Fate, Vivian does not like


the Merlin whom she has changed. She is

not always wholly sure,
Nor always wholly glad, that he who played
So lightly was the wizard of her dreams. 98

Her desires are not fulfilled, because to come to her Merlin abandoned the wisdom which she desires. Just as his surrender brings disaster to himself, Merlin's defection from power and glory and wisdom denies to Vivian the man of her dreams. A real Merlin enters Vivian's ideal world.

Since Vivian's love is motivated in part by her vanity, the decline in Merlin's powers and his inability to reign in her kingdom or to make her a queen in her own land moves Vivian to alternate between pity for Merlin and anger at his failure. She is not a villain. She is merely a woman who has so limited the world in which she exists that she can see no other end than self-gratification. She is without any sense of responsibility to others. Merlin is to fulfill her intellect, challenge her wit, arouse her senses, and keep death from her. She loves him for his ability to accomplish these ends and not for himself. Her love is self-serving. Her devotion, her willingness to allow Merlin freedom to roam, her feminine guile and poses are put into play so that she can

"make him willing, if he can,
To teach and feed me with an ounce of wisdom." 99

When the knowledge of the temporal nature of their love comes to Vivian, she blames Merlin for bringing his larger existence into their paradise. When he departs, Vivian remains in Brocéliande; she continues to believe in an ideal and sheltered world which can escape the ravages of

Time and Fate. She will live without Merlin. The nature of that life is an unanswered question. Cestre believes that Vivian will find new pleasures to blot out the realities she fears.\textsuperscript{100} On the other hand, Dauner asserts that Vivian's world comes to an end with Merlin's departure. "For one of her insistent, pleasure-loving, and vivid temperament her commitment to loneliness can be only a kind of living death."\textsuperscript{101} In either case, Robinson has pictured in Vivian a woman who has attempted to escape life's hardship and who will continue in that attempt whether it succeeds or fails. Vivian is woman dominated by self who cannot reach peace and fulfillment until she turns to the outer world and unselfish love. Merlin sees both her tragedy and her potentialities for greatness.

"Vivian, whose unquiet heart is hungry
For what is not, and what shall never be
Without her, in a world that men are making,
Knowing not how, nor caring yet to know
How slowly and how grievously they do it,--
Though Vivian, in her golden shell of exile,
Knows now and cares, not knowing that she cares,
Nor caring that she knows. In time to be,
The like of her shall have another name
Than Vivian, and her laugh shall be a fire,
Not shining only to consume itself
With what it burns. She knows not yet the name
Of what she is, for now there is no name;
Some day there shall be."\textsuperscript{102}

Like Arthur Merlin falls from wisdom and honor; like Vivian he attempts to retreat from the harshness of reality—Time, Change, Fate, and

\textsuperscript{100}Cestre, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{101}Louise Dauner, "The Pernicious Rib: EAR's Concept of Feminine Character," \textit{American Literature}, XV (September, 1943), 155.

\textsuperscript{102}Merlin," \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 311.
Death. But unlike those two who give themselves totally to the satisfaction and gratification of their passions, which is a complete departure from involvement with a world which needs them, Merlin learns from his defection and returns to the world of reality.

Merlin knows that Arthur will fall. The mirror that the seer envisions is not an ideal for men to emulate, but a reality for them to behold and become wiser for understanding. Though Merlin sees Arthur's fall, the sight does not prevent him from repeating the error. Merlin creates the quests for men, but he refuses to undertake them. He flees his own wisdom and tries to escape the truth which his vision makes apparent to him. He surrenders the powers of his mind with deliberation in a vain attempt to find permanent peace. His mind is the kingdom which he leaves open to ruin.

He wondered . . .
If his avenging injured intellect
Might shine with Arthur's kingdom a twin mirror,
Fate's plaything, for new ages without eyes
To see therein themselves and their declension.103

This man is no more than a man. He is wise, he is creative, and he is human. Forced to look into the mirror of human destruction, Arthur's kingdom, he fails to understand himself and flees to Broceliande. This man who has lived in the realm of thought, suddenly fears his own knowledge, and with constant awareness surrenders thought to sense. Forsaking unsatisfying wisdom for untried beauty, Merlin comes to Vivian.

"The beauty of all ages that are vanished,
Reborn to be the wonder of one woman."104

With her in Broceliande he seeks forgetfulness and peace.

Surrendering the powers and responsibilities that made him the wisest of men, Merlin begins a process of decline. He gives himself to Vivian to fashion according to her fancy, and he seeks to find a relationship that will bring satisfaction and end memories. For a time he finds in the beauty of Vivian and the charm of the world in which she lives all for which he had hoped. But it is only for a time. Though Merlin is always conscious of his lost authority and aware that he has forsaken the world of intellect for the world of sense, he is not aware that this world too is subject to change.

Merlin's supreme moment of growth comes when he faces the fact that he has created a second world which will fall because it too is founded upon a living sin--his spiritual cowardice. Knowing this fact he must leave Broceliande and seek to reestablish himself as a man who is aware of his fellow man. Barnard discusses the development of Merlin.

As Vivian's lover he enters a new realm of experience, and new qualities make their appearance--a youthful bent toward poetry, an unprophetic humor, a courtier's tact. But with this venture into ordinary human life come penalties of which he had no provision--conflict between his love for Vivian and his loyalty to Arthur, the bitter knowledge that all human ties are ultimately broken, the discovery that when he abandoned his godlike isolation and descended into the world of human desire and effort he became subject to Time and Change, age and disillusionment. It is with a humanized wisdom and a chastened hope that he takes his final departure.105

Knowledge is the fruit of Merlin's unhappiness. With it he reenters the larger world of affairs, and because of it he departs from the narrow world of self. He knows that a man cannot escape Time and Fate and, above

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all, that a man cannot escape himself.

"I saw too much when I saw Camelot;
And I saw farther backward into Time.
And forward, than a man may see and live,
When I made Arthur king. I saw too far,
But not so far as this. Fate played with me
As I have played with Time; and Time, like me,
Being less than Fate, will have on me his vengeance.
On Fate there is no vengeance, even for God."106

Stovall points out the fact that Merlin pays a high price for this knowledge.

"Then time had its revenge upon him; for although knowledge returned to him
when passion was spent, old age came with it and a weariness both of love
and of the world."107

Merlin returns to Camelot and overlooks its destruction; he leaves
Broceliande and brings about its destruction. In both instances he has the
courage to look into the mirror of reality and see both the vision of the
living sin which is common to all men and the image of self whose sin is his
alone. Merlin departs from both worlds knowing that it is the selfishness of
men which causes the ruin of kingdoms. He recognizes that men and women have
destroyed "the world for self."108 With this knowledge, this vision of self,
Merlin leaves with Dagonet to found a new kingdom. The reader has the words
of Merlin, who can see farther than all other men, that he will continue to
build in order to teach men that beauty and truth, the "two fires that are to
light the world,"109 can exist only when selfishness is destroyed. Bedivere

107Floyd Stovall, "Optimism behind Robinson's Tragedies," American
Literature, X (March, 1938), 13.
Vivian and Broceliande. For a time Merlin rejects duty for love, but then, having learned that it is fleeting while duty is unending, he returns to the nobler service.

This interpretation of the poem has some validity. For Merlin, the escape to Broceliande is an attempt to flee responsibility, but the opposition that Robinson sets up is not an oversimplified dichotomy between love and duty since these elements need not always be mutually exclusive. It is the tension between self-sacrifice and self-service that comes into play. The tragedy of Merlin comes when he attempts to flee duty through love—to flee his fellow man through self-gratification. The weakness of character which causes him to try to escape the world which he created is the very weakness that makes fulfilling love impossible for him.

The nature of that weakness is a lack of courage to continue his role as a visionary, a man of thought. Merlin has seen doom. The result is that he does not want to see more, and he does not want to face the realization of what he has seen. Thus he abandons thought. The consequence is his own destruction.

Merlin loses hope. His retreat to Broceliande is an admission of his hopelessness; it is a refusal to allow thought to remain in the future; it is an invitation to death and ruin. Although he does not know it, it is Merlin's hopelessness which ultimately destroys his retreat. For to achieve his state of existing in the present, Merlin sacrifices the powers that will bring happiness to Vivian. When Merlin recognizes that living for the moment and for self has cost him not only his glory and intellectual power but also the peace which he seeks, he confronts his own soul in a mirror of revelation.
Thus Merlin does betray duty but not for love. His surrender is of the same selfish nature that marks the demanding love of Vivian and the jealous love of Arthur. He is torn between the world of self and the world of unselfish fulfillment of one's abilities for the sake of mankind. It is Merlin's final recognition and submission to that destiny that marks the final meaning of the poem and the ultimate growth in his character.

In the tradition of the ancient Greeks, Merlin grows to meaningful wisdom through suffering. Merlin learns, and herein lies the hope of restoration. Merlin submits to his fate, which is as ominous and foreboding as that of any Greek tragedy. That submission with newly gained wisdom marks a return to the world of thought and human obligations. It marks the return of hope in the face of destruction. It is the motivation behind Merlin's departure and search for a new kingdom. Robinson commented upon this note of hope. "You may still call me an evangelist of ruin when you have read it, but you mustn't forget the redemption—even if you don't see it."113

The theme of Merlin is that man being what he is and Fate and Time being relentless, man will fall from wisdom, but that fall though inevitable can be a source of understanding and wisdom, which in turn will provide the foundation for a better kind of existence. Robinson does not promise that the new life will not end in ruin as well, but only holds out to the readers the hope of growth through suffering and the gradual overcoming of self in the process. It is this idea that Robinson presents in the truth of the

113 Selected Letters, p. 97.
Grail and the beauty of woman. As Barnard states:

The light of the Grail leads us to look beyond the world of time and matter, the world of passions and actions and things, to the ultimate good that poets have dreamed but never have been able to describe in "time-born words." "Woman," on the other hand—perhaps more properly "man's love for woman"—teaches that earthly existence also has a meaning: as the closest relation with another person that most human beings ever know, it puts the body to use in service of the soul, it exalts and purifies, it reveals (to those who are ready for the revelation) the need and capacity for union with another soul and hence with other souls, and it opens the way to the conquest, if not the cure of "self."¹¹⁴

Merlin learns his duty through his love for Vivian. She, however, is not capable of the vision which could make of their unhappy love an instrument of growth. She does not know that love cannot exist outside of the world of reality.

The meaning of Merlin is the necessity for selflessness and growth and the faint hope that it will occur. In so far as all of these ideas are true, they are true of the world situation at the time of the writing of the poem. Critics have taken great pains to point out that the world of Camelot reflects the world that was torn by the First World War. Hagedorn states that "behind the sunlit greenery of Broceliande, the towers of Camelot shook in the storm, and behind Camelot loomed menacingly the blackness of the World War."¹¹⁵ Stovall asserts that Merlin is a poem about the death of civilizations.

Several poems written in his later years, however, have as their theme the development of society as a whole, and describe the life and death of civilizations as stages in the advancement of the human race.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Barnard, p. 255. ¹¹⁵Hagedorn, p. 318.
¹¹⁶Stovall, p. 18.
Emery Neff goes beyond all the others by assigning symbolic roles to the characters. Arthur becomes Great Britain who is spurred on by Gawaine, the symbol of America, to pursue Lancelot, Germany. This critic leaves a question as to just where Merlin fits into the poetic rendition of power politics, but he suggests that it is the seer's role to preach the abhorrence of war.117

Though too close a reading can cause one to neglect the more universal significance that the poet states, Camelot does suggest the World War because Camelot is meant to be the mirror of all human weakness and failure. With Merlin, Robinson can say that his vision was the common one and true of all humanity.

"There is no man, or any woman,  
For whom the story of the living king  
Is not the story of the living sin.  
I thought my story was the common one,  
For common recognition and regard."118

Robinson's Merlin emerges as a poem which succeeds in the difficult task of creating two worlds which vie for attention. The poet realizes both of these worlds through the creation of a particular mood for each. Though the settings are not distinct, the mood is achieved through an emphasis upon psychological states. The opening section depicts the turmoil of soul which moves from a sense of foreboding to passive resignation. This mood prevails as a result of the overheard questioning of Arthur's knights and the confrontation of Arthur and Merlin. Through what the characters feel and say the initial mood of Camelot is created.

117Neff, p. 194.
In Broceliande the primary emphasis is still upon the setting within--the world of relations between Vivian and Merlin. It is they who create the mood rather than the birds, cedars, and fountains. This mood changes from one of pleasurable expectation which reaches its climax at the feast which Merlin and Vivian share, through the slow awakening of fears of change, to the final acceptance of the death of their world. The setting remains constant throughout these sections; only the lovers change. It is through them rather than detailed description that Robinson shows his reader the nature of Broceliande.

The final section gathers its mood from the two worlds which have preceded it. Psychological states again take precedence over descriptive detail. It is the violent anger of Gawaine, the unheeded pleas of Bedivere, the tragic irony of Dagonet combined with the cold and darkness that create for the reader the final defeat which confronts Camelot. The mood of disaster is alleviated by Merlin's hard won peace. As a result of his painful knowledge, he has gone beyond despair. When Merlin and Dagonet depart to search for another kingdom, the reader discovers the poetic redemption.

Thus the three sections of the poem have individual moods which reflect the stages of developing awareness on the part of the characters. Robinson succeeds in unifying these separately created kingdoms through the handling of imagery, characters, and themes which the imagery and characters embody. In these respects, Robinson has achieved artistic success.

As has been suggested, Merlin is not without defects which detract from its excellences. The primary artistic failure is a result of the cumulative effect of an over-reliance upon straight conversation, a tendency
to overwork the imagery, and an almost unvaried simplicity of meter and language. Since almost all of the narrative structure depends upon lengthy conversations and many of these conversations tend to be on the same subjects, with the same images, and in the same meter, the reader often has the feeling that he has been through all of this before. The result is that while the characterization, thematic development, and individual speeches are outstanding and moving, the whole of the poem is uneven and rises from prosaic repetitiveness to poetical heights.

The question arises here as to whether the stark and introspective style of Robinson is compatible with a long narrative on a subject whose past treatments have been one with action and detail. In Merlin Robinson's style does not sustain the vitality of the conception throughout the poem. The analyses of the other legends should throw further light on this problem.

Weaknesses do not totally overshadow the poet's accomplishments. Robinson has created a Merlin who can speak for all men, not by virtue of powers of magic, but as a result of experience and wisdom. If the character of Merlin has lost his magic, his stature of pre-eminence remains. He is "Merlin still, or part of him."119

119Ibid., p. 251.
CHAPTER III
LANCELOT AND THE LIGHT

Out of twelfth century France came a tradition and characters whose effects upon the legends of Arthur are felt even today. The emergence of a series of hero knights whose varied adventures emanated from the court of Arthur and the tradition of the romance with its emphasis upon courtly love, the elaborate code of conduct which dictated the behavior of a knight toward the lady he had vowed to serve, added to the chronicles of the feudal king an emphasis upon love and a wider cast of characters.

A hero whose creation and romantic adventures were to effect the later thematic development of the legends of Arthur came to prominence in the Lancelot, c. 1172, of Chretien de Troyes. In this romance, Lancelot of the Lake embodied all of the qualities of the courtly lover whose deeds were inspired and accomplished through and for his love. When Lancelot appeared in Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur in 1485, a new stature was given to the character through a modification of the artificial love code and a
renewed emphasis upon the relationship between the king and his knights. In this most influential of all the Arthurian works, Lancelot is the ideal of knighthood and the ideal lover. He is the picture of bravery, loyalty, and generosity; he is the lover of Guinevere, the Queen. In this early treatment the introduction of the Grail as a quest for an aesthetic ideal which Lancelot must forsake because of his earthly love is manifested in the divided conscience of the knight. Lancelot becomes a character torn between his love and higher pursuits. In the story of Malory, it is not Arthur whom Lancelot betrays; it is his own higher nature.

In Lancelot, 1920, Edwin Arlington Robinson told the story of the knight in the tradition of Malory. The principal source for the incidents which occur in this 3400 line poem and the concept of a hero who is torn between love and a higher realization are drawn from the Morte Darthur. Although Robinson follows the story of Tennyson by using the incident of Lancelot's journey to Camelford to bring Guinevere as a bride for Arthur, the poet rejects his Victorian predecessor's presentation of the love of Lancelot and Guinevere as the sinful cause of the destruction of Camelot. Robinson's emphasis is upon the struggle within the souls of these tormented characters who are helpless before the inevitable destruction of their world.

In Lancelot Robinson gave expression to his great love. The psychological drama of two men who love and desire the same woman has its counterpart in Robinson's life. The tale of Arthur closely parallels the

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1Perrine, p. 175.

2Smith, p. 57.
general circumstances and resolution of Robinson's love for his brother Herman's wife. When Robinson introduced Herman to Emma Shepherd in August of 1888, the scene was set for their love and marriage. The action is reminiscent of Lancelot's early love and surrender of Guinevere to the King. The gradual undermining and final collapse of Herman's financial empire in 1896 correspond to the destruction of Camelot. The growing coldness of Emma toward her husband, which was caused by his alcoholism and jealousy and which resulted in their final separation in 1903, is paralleled in the coldness of Guinevere and the jealousy of Arthur. Finally, Herman's death and Robinson's proposal to his sister-in-law in October of 1909 recall the final meeting of Lancelot and Guinevere after the death of Arthur. In that meeting Guinevere told Lancelot that they must remain apart for the good of their souls; in the poet's life Emma rejected the proposal and gave as her motive the necessity of Robinson's total dedication to his poetic calling. With all of these parallels to justify his claim, Smith concludes that Lancelot reveals the poet's life.

Lancelot, planned with Merlin in '15 and written in '17, is autobiographical in almost no physical detail. The great knight himself, being the world's leading bruiser and only a second-to-third rate intellectual, is hardly suggestive of Robinson. And "white and gold" Guinevere recalls Emma superficially in only a few minor, although telltale, gestures. The autobiography is internal; the great decision of Emma, and in consequence the great awakening of Robinson. 3

The incidents of Malory's tale were filtered through the imagination of a poet who had played a role in a romantic triangle. Yet the poem is

3Ibid., p. 230.
far more universal than any personal love story could be. Robinson transcends his experience and focuses upon the larger stage which Malory suggested to him. When *Lancelot* was published by Thomas Seltzer in 1920, it was a poem which mourned the death of a world and the death of a great love, while it celebrated the salvation of the lovers. The structure of the poem, which emphasizes all three aspects, is a single action which focuses upon the drama of the principal characters while the world conflict is seen through their struggle.

The first three sections of the poem depict the character of Lancelot. The present status of his love for Guinevere and the turmoil of soul within the knight as he struggles between this earthly love and the Light are presented through a series of conversations and a lengthy monologue. Behind these personal concerns, the poet draws a picture of the kingdom of Arthur on the brink of ruin.

The poem opens as Lancelot is joined in the King's garden by Gawaine. Though the knights join hands in a pledge of fellowship, Lancelot senses that the token is an empty one. Gawaine is incapable of a sincere relationship. He cannot understand Lancelot or his desire to leave Camelot and the Queen.

"Since we came back again to Camelot
From our immortal Quest--I came back first--
No man has known you for the man you were
Before you saw whatever't was you saw,
To make so little of kings and queens and friends
Thereafter."

Lancelot replies that he leaves Camelot out of concern for the Queen, the target of the foul planning of Gawaine's brothers, Modred and Agrawaine. Gawaine dismisses this concern with his characteristic casualness.

"Let Modred have his humor, and Agrawaine His tongue. The two of them have done their worst, And having done their worst, what have they done?"

Regarding Gawaine with forebearance, Lancelot recognizes a fundamental difference between them which allows no understanding on the part of his jesting friend. Lancelot no longer asks for sympathy; he only tells Gawaine that he must go.

"Meanwhile I lay upon your soul no load Of counsel or of empty admonition; Only I ask of you should strife arise In Camelot, to remember, if you may, That you've an ardor that outruns your reason, Also a glamour that outshines your guile; And you are a strange hater. I know that; And I'm in fortune that you hate me not."

Lancelot's words foreshadow the coming conflict between the knights, but Gawaine can only laugh at Lancelot's seriousness and state that the path of the Grail is not for him. In jest he mocks Lancelot's dilemma.

"God save you Lancelot. If I laugh at you, I laugh in envy and admiration."

The two knights are joined by the Queen. Having heard the words of Gawaine, she wonders if a note of finality has been sounded in Gawaine's blessing. He departs from the lovers with a comment about the Queen's
The final meeting with Lancelot.

The conversation of the first scene sets the stage for the meeting of the lovers. The reader is aware that Lancelot must tell the Queen of his planned departure from Camelot. Through the dialogue which ensues, Robinson reveals Guinevere's total devotion to Lancelot and his growing desire to leave her and pursue the Light. Her charms, however, still have a strong hold over him. This initial picture of Guinevere in the sunset-lighted garden is the symbol of her beauty and lure throughout the poem.

The flash of oak leaves over Guinevere
That afternoon, with the sun going down,
Made memories there for Lancelot, although
The woman who in silence looked at him
Now seemed his inventory of the world
That he must lose, or suffer to be lost
For love of her who sat there in the shade,
With oak leaves flashing in a golden light
Over her face and over her golden hair. 8

In spite of the beauty of the moment, Lancelot feels the strength to break his tie to Guinevere. Affirming what Gawaine has hinted, Lancelot states that he will leave Camelot because he can no longer offer excuses to himself for his dalliance.

'There are no more lies
Left anywhere now for me to tell myself
That I have not already told myself.' 9

Lancelot must leave his love because it has caused him to betray his King and to leave Guinevere vulnerable to the designs of Modred. The knight admits to her that his love was so strong that, until this moment, he could do nothing else but love her since he first gazed upon her beauty. A basic

8Ibid., pp. 371-72. 9Ibid., p. 375.
awareness of a conflict between his love and his duty to the King is
apparent in his admission.

"When I rode in between your father's guards
And heard his trumpets blown for my loud honor,
I sent my memory back to Camelot,
And said once to myself, 'God save the king!'
But the words tore my throat and were like blood
Upon my tongue. Then a great shout went up
From shining men around me everywhere;
And I remember more fair women's eyes
Than there are stars in autumn, all of them
Thrown on me for a glimpse of that high knight
Sir Lancelot--Sir Lancelot of the Lake.
I saw their faces and I saw not one
To sever a tendril of my integrity:
But I thought once again, to make myself
Believe a silent lie, 'God save the king'...
I saw your face, and there were no more kings."10

Guinevere, fighting for her love, dismisses the past and the offered
excuses of Lancelot. She asserts that it is not Arthur, whom Lancelot has
betrayed, nor Modred, who plots in darkness, that comes between them; it is
the Light that Lancelot saw when he pursued the Grail that causes him to
consider leaving her. She smiles and assures Lancelot that this Light will
burn on without him for some time, and her radiance makes

as much of his determination
As he had made of giants and Sir Peris.11

Guinevere senses her victory. Pressing her advantage, she evokes a promise
from Lancelot that he will come to her that night and tell her whatever he
must.

Lancelot attempted to explain himself to Gawaine and to Guinevere.
He failed both times. Alone in the garden, he tries to understand himself

10Ibid., p. 376. 11Ibid.
and state the nature of the forces that are at war within him. His ques-
tions reveal the motivating situation of the poem. The following passage
indicates the nature of the struggle revealed in this lengthy monologue.

"What am I?
What have I seen that I must leave behind
So much of heaven and earth to burn itself
Away in white and gold, until in time
There shall be no more white and no more gold?

Who is this Lancelot that has betrayed
His King, and served him with a cankered honor?
Who is this Lancelot that sees the Light
And waits now in the shadow for the dark?
Who is this King, this Arthur, who believes
That what has been, and is, will be forever,—
Who has no eye for what he will not see,
And will see nothing but what's passing here
In Camelot, which is passing? Why are we here?
What are we doing—kings, queens, Camelots,
And Lancelots? And what is this dim world
That I would leave, and cannot leave tonight
Because a Queen is in it and a King
Has gone some place where there's hunting—
Carleon or Carlisle! Who is this Queen,
This pale witch-wonder of white fire and gold,
This Guinevere that I brought back with me?"

In the darkness of the garden, Lancelot sees before him two faces
which appeal to him. The first is the changed face of Galahad who saw the
Grail: the second is the face of Guinevere with its beauty and love. There
is still time for him to leave the garden. For a moment Lancelot moves
toward the face which found the Light. With it he will find freedom: in
the garden there is only the growing darkness. Yet he remains. He does
not seize the chance which Time has given to him. He waits for further
darkness and his secret rendezvous. The knowledge of his self-betrayal

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12Ibid., pp. 383-84.
overwhelms him.

"God, what a rain of ashes falls on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old."13

While the personal drama of Lancelot and Guinevere occupies the
dominant position in the first part of the poem, the world of Arthur is
intimately connected with them. The plotting of Modred does not involve the
lovers alone. His design is for the whole kingdom as well as the Queen.
The words of Guinevere to Lancelot reflect their mutual fear for the fate
of Camelot.

"And I believe in your belief, moreover,
That some far-off unheard-of retribution
Hangs over Camelot, even as this oak-bough,
That I may almost reach, hangs overhead,
All dark now."14

Through the relationship of the principal characters to the world of Camelot,
Robinson is able to broaden the scope of his drama.

In the next sections, the narrative shifts to Arthur, Bedivere, and
Gawaine. In keeping with his tradition of subordinating action to the
psychological effects of what occurs, Robinson presents the discovery of
the lovers' tryst, the condemnation of Guinevere to the flames, and Lance-
lot's timely rescue of the Queen through the reactions of Arthur and
Gawaine. At first the characters are moved by compassion for the lovers,
but with the revelation of Lancelot's violent rescue of the Queen from the
flames, the sympathy changes to the jealousy and hatred which motivate the
ensuing action of the poem.

13Ibid., p. 385.  
14Ibid., p. 387.
Robinson presupposes a basic knowledge of the essential details of the story of Malory throughout his poem. One of the most apparent examples of the poet's dependence upon prior knowledge comes in section four. The plot to discover Lancelot and Guinevere together, Lancelot's fierce fighting as he escaped, and the condemnation of Guinevere to a flaming death are referred to without any expository preparation. The scene opens after these crucial actions have occurred. Bedivere and Gawayne are preparing to console the King. They will wait with him until dawn marks the time of Guinevere's death. These knights are to shield the King from the horrors that are about to occur.

"We are the two, it seems, that are to make
Of words and of our presences a veil
Between him and the sight of what he does."\textsuperscript{15}

At this point, Gawayne feels remorse for his earlier frivolity. He wonders if his lack of understanding of Lancelot's struggle has contributed to the knights tragedy.

"Bedivere,

Could I have given a decent seriousness
To Lancelot while he said things to me
That pulled his heart half out of him by the roots,
And left him, I see now, half sick with pity
For my poor uselessness to serve a need
That I have never known, we might be now
Asleep and easy in our beds at home,
And we might hear no murmurs after sunrise
Of what we are to hear. A few right words
Of mine, if said well, might have been enough
That I shall never know. I shall know only
That it was I who laughed at Lancelot
When he said what lay heaviest on his heart."\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 387. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 388.
Bedivere assures Gawaine that it was the Queen's charms and not his lack of sensitivity that led to this ominous night. They are joined by the King, and together they await "the fire--the sign--the law." 17

Faced with a spiritual crisis, Arthur reveals in a lengthy monologue his present state of mind. The King attempts to understand the sequence of events that have led him to condemn Guinevere to the fire. He knows that he is the victim of his own unwillingness to heed the counsel that Merlin gave him two years earlier--to end the "love that never was." 18 But he refuses to face the consequences of this inaction. Though he is horrified by the notion of the fire, he is still enraged and jealous as he reveals his sense of betrayal. Arthur's unwillingness to accept his guilt and his bitterness are vividly presented in one of the finer passages of the poem.

"If there's a slave
In Britain with a reptile at his heart
Like mine that with his claws of ice and fire
Tears out of me the fevered roots of mercy,
Find him and I will make a king of him!
And then, so that his happiness may swell
tenfold, I'll sift the beauty of all courts
And capitals, to fetch the fairest woman
That evil has in hiding: after that,
That he may know the sovereign one man living
To be his friend, I'll prune all chivalry
To one sure knight. In this wise our new king
Will have his queen to love, as I had mine,--
His friend that he may trust as I had mine,--
And he will be as gay, if all goes well,
As I have been: as fortunate in his love,
And in his friend as fortunate--as I am!" 19

Arthur's mind begins to wander as he moves back and forth between his sense of outraged honor and the realization of the horror that is about

17 Ibid., p. 389. 18 Ibid., p. 391. 19 Ibid.
to ensue. One minute he speaks of Guinevere's death as the just verdict of a kingdom "where treason's end is ashes." In the next breath he is repelled by a vision of her suffering.

"I cannot see her now in the smoke. Her eyes Are what I see--and her white body is burning! She never did enough to make me see her Like that--to make her look at me like that! There's not room in the world for so much evil As I see clamoring in her poor white face For pity. Pity her, God! God! ... Lancelot!"

This monologue is an attempt to dramatically portray the disintegration of the King. Finally forced to face the reality of his situation, Arthur cannot assert himself as a king. In the face of disaster, he is torn between his love and hatred. The sovereign gives way to the man who can only submit to the inevitable.

The next section opens upon the same scene at a later time. The characters are reacting to a sudden turmoil that has occurred in the city below them...

blows, groans, cries,
Loud iron struck on iron, horses trampling,
Death yells and imprecations, and at last
A moaning silence.

20Ibid., p. 392.
21Ibid.
22Winters cites this passage as an example of the fallacy of imitative form. He states that Robinson's attempt to parallel the disintegration of the King with a disorientated metrical pattern results in a double failure. First the verse itself is feeble; secondly the King emerges not as a man falling from greatness but as one incapable of it (Winters, p. 84).
These brief references are Robinson's only direct statements on the action which accompanies Guinevere's rescue. At this point Gawaine, Bedivere, and Arthur are joined by Sir Lucan, whose function it is to describe the rescue of Guinevere by Lancelot. In creating Sir Lucan, Robinson presented a character whose infatuation with words and details, whose unwillingness to come to the point, is to increase the tension within the hearts of his listeners. The effect, however, is that the reader becomes as impatient as Arthur and Gawaine. Lucan's opening statement is a clear indication of what is to follow.

"Sir, will your patience with a clement ear,
Attend the confirmation of events,
I will, with all available precision,
Say what this morning has inaugurated.
No preface or prolonged exordium
Need aggravate the narrative, I venture."\(^{24}\)

Lucan tells the King and his knights that Guinevere was led to the stake and the fire lit when Lancelot and his men suddenly appeared.

"I found a refuge, and there saw the Queen
All white, and in a swound of woe uplifted
By Lionel, while a dozen fought about him,
And Lancelot, who seized her while he struck,
And with his insane army galloped away,
Before the living, whom he left amazed,
Were sure they were alive among the dead."\(^{25}\)

Lancelot and his men have departed, but the dead remain behind. Among them are Gawaine's dearest brothers, Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris, who were struck down by Lancelot himself.

Gawaine reacts to the news with sudden and violent hatred. His past relationship with Lancelot is completely forgotten in the desire to avenge

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 394. \(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 395.
his brothers' deaths.

"An hour ago and I was all but eager
To mourn with Bedivere for grief I had
That I did not say something to this villain--
To this true, gracious, murderous friend of mine--
To comfort him and urge him out of this,
While I was half a fool and half believed
That he was going. Well, there is this to say:
The world that has him will not have him long."

The speech of Gawaine, like that of Arthur earlier, shows the effects of the knight's emotional upheaval. He is no longer in control of himself or of what he says. The King dismisses the other men and remains alone with his nephew. Resigned to what has happened, for a brief moment Arthur is glad that Guinevere is alive. His humility "yet might save the world that he had won." But as he looks upon Gawaine, Arthur realizes that peace is no longer possible. Arthur is no longer a king; he is the tool of the passions of others.

He shook his head: "The King has had his world,
And he shall have no peace. With Modred here,
And Agravaine with Gareth, who is dead
With Gaheris, Gawaine will have no peace.
Gawaine or Modred--Gawaine with his hate,
Or Modred with his anger for his birth
And the black malady of his ambition--
Will make of my Round Table, where was drawn
The circle of a world, a thing of wreck
And yesterday--a furniture forgotten;
And I who loved the world as Merlin did,
May lose it as he lost it, for a love
That was not peace, and therefore was not love."28

As the first sections of the poem explore the motivations and conflicts of Lancelot and Guinevere, the next part presents the crucial reactions

26Ibid., p. 399. 27Ibid., p. 400. 28Ibid., p. 401.
of Gawaine and Arthur to the rescue of the Queen. The hatred and jealousy that are depicted provide the impetus for the sequence of events in which the lovers must work out their destinies throughout the remainder of the poem. The fate of the world and the fate of the lovers have become one.

Joyous Gard, Lancelot's home, is the next scene of action. In a brief opening description, the reader is informed that the King, urged by Gawaine's hatred, is waging war upon Lancelot. The troops have stood and battled for so long that they are "disheartened with unprofitable slaughter." In the face of such constant and senseless death, both Sir Bors, Lancelot's kinsman, and the Queen attempt to persuade Lancelot to end the needless killing by the only means possible. They urge the knight to seek and kill Arthur and Gawaine. Sir Bors forcefully presents his case and urges Lancelot to end the useless sacrifice made for the sake of a kingdom which is already doomed to destruction. When Sir Bors departs, Lancelot must listen to the pleas of Guinevere. He anticipates her words.

"And you are here to say that if I kill Gawaine and Arthur we shall both be happy?"

Guinevere replies that she can only say what is in her heart, although she "may see but one side only." Her words are the same as Sir Bors', but they are motivated by her personal desires. She fears that Lancelot's love for her has so diminished that he will no longer do what is necessary to save her or himself.

"Am I not anything now? Is Gawaine, who would feed you to wild swine,

\[29\text{Ibid.} \quad 30\text{Ibid.} \quad 31\text{Ibid., p. 404.}\]
And laugh to see them tear you, more than I am?
Is Arthur, at whose word I was dragged out
To wear for you the fiery crown itself
Of human torture, more to you than I am?

How many thousand men
Are going to their death before Gawaine
And Arthur go to theirs—and I to mine?"32

Lancelot admits his unwillingness to slay Gawaine and Arthur. His
slaughter of the knight's two unarmed and innocent brothers placed a burden
of guilt upon him which he cannot escape.

"Even you, in your quick fever of dispatch,
Might hesitate before you drew the blood
Of him that was their brother, and my friend.
Yes, he was more my friend, was I to know,
Than I had said or guessed; for it was Gawaine
Who gave to Bors the word that might have saved us."33

Toward Arthur, Lancelot feels both gratitude and guilt.

"Had he made
A knight of you, scarring your name with his
Among the first of men—and in his love
Inveterately the first—and had you then
Betrayed his fame and honor to the dust
That now is choking him, you might in time—
You might, I say—to my degree succumb."34

For Lancelot there is nothing more to say. All else is futile. The
position in which he finds himself and in which he has placed the Queen seems
in the mist and fog of night to be a world of vain illusion.

"Sometimes I wonder if this be the world
We live in, or the world that lives in us."35

The next day brings a temporary end to the waste of war. A constant
rain forces the soldiers to cease the slaughtering. Out of the rain comes

34Ibid., pp. 407-08. 35Ibid., p. 408.
word of an even more permanent peace. The Bishop of Rochester rides to Lancelot to bring him news that the King, under pressure from Rome, returns to Camelot and seeks the return of his Queen and an end to the fighting. The Queen is to depart with Arthur within seven days, and her safety from recrudescence is guaranteed.

Lancelot accepts the terms without qualification. He tells his men of his decision, though for them it has "an evil taste of compromise."

He tells the Queen that there will be no more war and that she is free to return to Camelot.

But his words were said for no queen's hearing. In his arms
He caught her when she fell; and in his arms
He carried her away. The word of Rome
Was in the rain. There was no other sound.

The pleas of Bors and Guinevere, the guilt and anguish of Lancelot, and the chance to end the needless deaths and restore order to mankind prepare for the climactic meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere. In this scene at Joyous Gard, both lovers fight for what they most desire: Guinevere for a love that she knows is over, and Lancelot for peace and the freedom to pursue the Light. Their words to one another reveal the history of their relationship and the desires which motivate them.

It is still raining when Guinevere rejoins Lancelot. He speaks to the Queen and assures her that because their love is ended, the future will offer her no danger.

\[36\text{ibid.}, \text{p. 411.}\]
\[37\text{ibid.}\]
"The way before you is a safer way
For you to follow than when I was in it.
We children who forget the whips of Time,
To live within the hour, are slow to see
That all such hours are passing. They were past
When you came here with me." 38

Guinevere replies with angry irony. She mocks Lancelot by stating that nothing would bring her greater happiness than to be discarded by him and returned to Arthur.

"What more, in faith, have I to ask
Of earth or heaven than that! Although I fell
When you said Camelot, are you to know,
Surely, the stroke you gave me then was not
The measure itself of ecstasy? We women
Are such inveterates in our swooning
That we fall down for joy as easily
As we eat one another to show our love." 39

As Lancelot gazes upon her beauty, his soul's conflict is apparent to him. It is to be Guinevere with her earthly beauty or the Light with its heavenly gleam that will rule his life. He has lived between them both for too long.

... Guinevere--the glory of white and gold
That had been his, and were for taking of it,
Still his, to cloud, with an insidious gleam
Of earth, another that was not of earth,
And so to make of him a thing of night--
A moth between a window and a star,
Not wholly lured by one or led by the other.
The more he gazed upon her beauty there,
The longer was he living in two kingdoms,
Not owning in his heart the king of either,
And ruling not himself. 40

Lancelot wishes to share this struggle with Guinevere, but he cannot find the words. Nor would any attempt avail him. At this moment the Queen

38Ibid., p. 413. 39Ibid., p. 414. 40Ibid., p. 415.
only wishes that she were dead rather than unloved and the cause of so much suffering and death. Dismissing her guilt, Lancelot states that their fate has been one with the destiny of Camelot.

"They died because
Your world, my world, and Arthur's world is dying,
As Merlin said it would. No blame is yours;
For it was I who led you from the King."41

Yet even with these deaths and changes, Lancelot knows that their love has been a thing of greatness which has given their lives a meaning, a direction.

"Could I believe
Our love was nothing mightier than than we were,
I might be such a man--a living dead man,
One of these days."42

Lancelot's words are not wisely chosen. The Queen seizes his "then."

It wounds her to hear him speak of their love as a part of the past. While she is willing to sacrifice crowns and glories for the sake of his love, she fears that his reference to a love which has passed is his final token to her at their moment of parting. Guinevere makes a final plea. She wants Lancelot to give her a few minutes before he begins an eternal pursuit. Using the argument which she first expressed in the garden, she begs Lancelot for more time for their love.

"If our world--
Is going out now to make way for another,--
Why not before it goes, and I go with it,
Have yet one morsel more of life together,
Before death sweeps the table and our few crumbs
Of love are a few last ashes on a fire
That cannot hurt your vision, or burn long?"43

41 Ibid., p. 416.  
42 Ibid., p. 417.  
43 Ibid., pp. 418-419
Lancelot withstands her pleas, because he knows that the world's fate hangs in the balance. To flout the will of Rome would be to bring on further war and havoc. Lancelot will not be a cause of further destruction.

"There may be war to come when you are gone, For I doubt yet Gawaine; but Rome will hold you, Hold you in Camelot. If there be more war, No fire of mine shall feed it, nor shall you, Be with me to endure it. You are free; And free, you are going home to Camelot. There is no other way than one for you, Nor is there more than one for me. We have lived, And we shall die. I thank you for my life."44

Lancelot's words only increase the Queen's frustration and her sense of loss. There can be no freedom for her with Arthur. She cannot dismiss her hatred of the King and her memories of the fire. She can never find a home without Lancelot. She reminds him of her beauty in the garden, and begs him to send her any place where she might be free of Arthur. The King's guilt is indicated in her plea.

"I wronged him, but he bought me with a name Too large for my king-father to relinquish-- Though I prayed him, and I prayed God aloud, To spare that crown. I called it crown enough To be my father's child--until you came. And then there were no crowns or kings or fathers Under the sky. I saw nothing but you. And you would whip me back to bury myself In Camelot, with a few slave maids and lackeys To be my groveling court; and even their faces Would not hide half the story. Take me to France To France or Egypt,--anywhere else on earth Than Camelot!"45

Lancelot tells her that such a flight would be foolish and futile, because they would be recognized, pursued, and returned to Camelot, no matter

44 Ibid., p. 421.  
where they might flee. The cost of such a hopeless attempt at escape would be a longer war. Unwilling to pay such a price, Lancelot begs her not to be blind and to face the end of all that has been between them.

"You are a Queen,
And you may be no other. You are too brave
And kind and fair for men to cheer with lies.
We cannot make one world of two, nor may we
Count one life more than once. Could we go back
To the old garden, we should not stay long:
The fruit that we should find would all be fallen
And have the taste of the earth." 46

Guinevere still pleads for escape. If she cannot live in France then she desires to die there. But Lancelot remains firm in his decision. He takes her into his arms and holds there a broken and sobbing woman. There is no more time for them.

Alone in his chamber, Lancelot listens to the rain and gazes into the fire's remaining embers "that faded into feathery death-like dust." 47 This sign of finality turns his thoughts to the Light and his pursuit of it. In his heart he knows that not only Guinevere but also the unnecessary killings of the war have stood between him and his quest. An uneasy sleep ends his meditation.

In seven days the Queen departs, but the war does not end. Spurred on by Gawaine's hatred, the King and his army have followed Lancelot from Cardiff to Bayonne "for longer sorrow and for longer war." 48

In the scenes at Joyous Gard, Robinson has continued to depict both the personal and the world conflicts. Lancelot's decision to end the war and

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48 Ibid.
surrender Guinevere, the Queen's resignation to her fate, the lovers' knowledge that the vision of the garden can only be a memory, and their parting do not end the larger struggle. The force of Gawaine's hatred and the weakness of Arthur create a situation where Lancelot must continue to fight against his will and where men must suffer for one man's revenge.

The next section serves a double function. To move the story forward and to recount the essential details of the rebellion of Modred and Arthur's consequent departure from France, Robinson gives Gawaine a lengthy death bed speech in which he reveals this information. While Robinson advances the narrative, he brings to a conclusion the personal struggle between Lancelot and Gawaine.

As the section opens Lancelot learns that Arthur has gone and that Gawaine wishes to see him. The knight suspects that the King's sudden departure is evidence of Modred's rebellion. To gain evidence about his conjectures and to hear what Gawaine wishes to say, Lancelot goes to his enemies' tents. In a previous battle Lancelot unwillingly struck Gawaine, and now the knight is close to death. Gawaine describes the failure of Camelot as he speaks to Lancelot.

"There was a madness feeding on us all,  
As we fed on the world. When the world sees,  
The world will have in turn another madness."49

Gawaine tells Lancelot that Modred having seized the throne during Arthur's absence, the King has returned to Britain to reclaim his land and his Queen. Gawaine asserts that only with Lancelot's help will Arthur's end

49 Ibid., p. 430.
be averted. As for the destruction which the past has wrought and the future promises to continue, Gawaine sees that the price of maintaining the world of Arthur has been too high.

"And for ourselves
And all who died for us, or now are dying
Like rats around us of their numerous wounds
And ills and evils, only this do I know--
And this you know: The world has paid enough
For Camelot. It is the world's turn now--
Or so it would be if the world were not
The world."50

In his final moments of life, Gawaine offers his hand hesitantly to Lancelot, who shivers "knowing the chill of it."51 The clasping of hands recalls the earlier gesture in the garden and emphasizes the restoration of peace between the knights. Hours pass, and Lancelot remains at Gawaine's side until he "would have closed his eyes. But they were closed."52

With Gawaine dead and the King in need of aid for his war with Modred, Lancelot gathers an army and returns to Brittan. His return and final meeting with Guinevere constitute the subject matter of the final section of the poem.

Upon landing at Dover, Lancelot receives word that the King is dead. The following passage is an example of the way in which Robinson compresses essential background information into brief introductory passages.

Arthur was dead,
And Modred with him, each by the other slain;
And there was no knight left of all who fought
On Salisbury field save one, Sir Bedivere,
Of whom the tale was told that he had gone

50Ibid., p. 433. 51Ibid., p. 434. 52Ibid.
Darkly away to some far hermitage,  
To think and die. There were tales told of a ship.53

There are rumors that the Queen is still alive, having fled to the west after her release from the Tower. These words of death and rumors of life are all that is left of Camelot. Lancelot understands the necessity of its passing.

"A played-out world,  
Although that world be ours, had best be dead,"  
Said Lancelot: "There are worlds enough to follow."54

Lancelot tells his men to return to France if he does not join them in a fortnight. Although everything is changed, Lancelot cannot escape the past, which now stands like a cloud between him and the Light. He rides to the west to find the Queen.

And there was no Camelot now—  
Now that no Queen was there, all white and gold,  
Under an oak tree with another sunlight  
Sifting itself in silence on her glory  
Through the dark leaves above where she sat,  
Smiling at what she feared, and fearing least  
What most there was to fear. Ages ago  
That must have been; for a king's world had faded  
Since then, and a king with it.55

Forced to pursue his memories by the vision of a Guinevere changed by suffering or loneliness, Lancelot rides without knowing how or where he will find her. In his heart he knows that what has changed essentially is not the Queen, whose love has remained intense and constant, but his own desires.

"No, it is I—  
I who have changed. She is not one who changes.  
The Light came, and I did not follow it;

53Ibid., p. 436.  
54Ibid., p. 436  
55Ibid., p. 438.
Then she came, knowing not what thing she did,
And she it was I followed. The gods play
Like that, sometimes: and when the gods are playing,
Great men are not so great as the great gods
Had led them once to dream."56

Because he sent Guinevere away from him, Lancelot feels compelled to find her and restore her to the gold and white splendor of the garden scene.

"If I do ill to see her, then may God
Forgive me one more trespass. I would leave
The world and not the shadow of it behind me."57

When Lancelot rides to Almsbury, he finds the Queen in a convent. It is here that Guinevere plans to live out her life without him. Lancelot is shocked by the sight that is before him.

He found the Queen,
But she was not the Queen of white and gold
That he had seen before him for so long.
There was no gold: there was no gold anywhere.
The black hood, and the white face under it,
And the blue frightened eyes, were all he saw--
Until he saw more black, and then more white.
Black was a foreign foe to Guinevere:

That was destroying and dishonoring
All the world held of beauty.58

The sight of Guinevere cloathed in darkness fills Lancelot with sad anger. He does not want to allow this destruction of her beauty to continue, but Guinevere has made her decision. Ironically, their roles are now reversed. It is Lancelot who pleads for more time, while the Queen sees that what they had is ended.

"There is nothing now
That I can see between you and the Light

56Ibid., p. 439. 57Ibid. 58Ibid.
That I have dimmed so long. If you forgive me,
And I believe you do—though I know all
That I have cost, when I was worth so little—
There is no hazard that I see between you
And all you sought so long, and would have found
Had I not always hindered you. Forgive me—
I could not let you go. God pity men
When women love too much—and women more."

Lancelot pleads with her to come with him to France. With gentle
irony, Guinevere tells him in his own words, used at Joyous Gard, that it is
too late for them.

"Was it you,
Or was it Gawaine who said once to me,
'We cannot make one world of two, nor may we
Count one life more than one. Could we go back
To the old garden'... Was it you who said it,
Or was it Bors?"

Alone in the tower, with Modred's desires an ever present reality,
Guinevere achieved an understanding of the necessity of Lancelot's quest.
She even found forgiveness for Arthur and the fire to which he condemned her.
It is Guinevere who has the courage to see that Lancelot must pursue the Light,
while she, though she lacks his capacity for vision, will find her redemption
through allowing him his freedom.

"I, who have not prayed much,
May as well pray now. I have not what you have
To make me see, though I shall have, sometime,
A new light of my own. I saw in the Tower,
When all was darkest and I may have dreamed,
A light that gave men the eyes of Time
To read themselves in silence. Then it faded,
And the men faded. I was there alone.
I shall not have what you have, or much else--
In this place. I shall see in other places
What is not here. I shall not be alone.

59Ibid., p. 441. 60Ibid., p. 443.
And I shall tell myself, that you are seeing
All that I cannot see.\textsuperscript{61}

It is Guinevere's will that prevails. When the bell rings, Lancelot departs, admonished by the Queen to banish regret for her and to remember her as she was. Riding into the fields that are filled with grain, Lancelot tries to recapture the vision of the gold and white Guinevere. The fields around him are filled with gold, but his picture of the Queen is not. Though peace apparently has come to the world, represented by the fertile golden fields through which he rides, Lancelot cannot find serenity. He feels regret for Guinevere and remorse for the wars he helped to cause; these emotions prevent peace of soul.

"Why should I look for peace
When I have made the world a ruin of war?"
He muttered; and a Voice within him said:
"Where the Light falls, death falls: a world had died
For you, that a world may live. There is no peace.
Be glad no man or woman bears for ever
The burden of first days. There is no peace."\textsuperscript{62}

While the vision of Guinevere becomes dimmer, until at last her face disappears from his memory, Lancelot rides in pursuit of the Light. Her image is replaced by a new vision and a new glory. The face of Galahad is before him, and now Lancelot follows it to the Light and death.

He turned
Again; and he rode on, under the stars
Out of the world, into he knew not what,
Until a vision chilled him and he saw,
Now as in Camelot, long ago in the garden,
The face of Galahad who had seen and died,
And was alive, now in a mist of gold.

\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., p. 445. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{62}Ibid., p. 448.
He rode on into the dark, under the stars,  
And there were no more faces. There was nothing.  
But always in the darkness he rode on,  
Alone; and in the darkness came the Light.

Sir Thomas Malory created a gigantic canvas of action upon which the story of Camelot was told through the adventures and struggles of its King and his knights. In telling the story of Lancelot, Edwin Arlington Robinson turned from his source and eliminated knightly encounters, heroic rescues, and the pageantry of war. The action which dominated the loosely knit work of Malory is never directly presented by the poet. Robinson relates the larger story by examining the internal world of conflict within those involved in the destiny of Camelot. As their story and fate are worked out so is the destiny of the kingdom traced. All essential background is either presumed by the poet, compressed into brief introductory accounts which are found in the opening passages of the sections, or referred to by characters in their conversations. The Robinson poem is a narrative in which action is subordinated to conversation and reflection.

The structure of the poem is dictated by Robinson's understanding of Lancelot's dilemma. The knight feels the necessity of commitment to the Light, but the world of human relationships and that of men's affairs stand in his way. The inner world of self and the outer world of destiny are in conflict with Lancelot's emerging desires. The design of the poem is a single action which depicts the knight's struggle to gain the freedom which is essential to his quest for the Light. The nine sections of the poem fall

63Ibid., p. 449.
into two major thought divisions. In sections one through five, Robinson presents the forces which stand in the way of Lancelot's quest. The major obstacle is his love for Guinevere, which constantly forces him to postpone his pursuit. The second obstacle arises as a result of his relationship with the Queen. When Lancelot rescues her, he sets into operation the passions of Gawaine and Arthur which find expression in destruction and war. Until these forces are set aside, Lancelot cannot pursue the Light of the Grail.

The complications which are presented in the first part of the poem are resolved in the second. In sections six through nine, the obstacles which have stood in Lancelot's way are eliminated. The war comes to a conclusion when both Arthur and Gawaine die. The earthly love is ended when Guinevere has the courage to send Lancelot from her. Thus the poem ends as Lancelot makes use of his expensively purchased freedom and goes in pursuit of the Grail.

As the story of Lancelot unfolds, so does the vision of Arthur's kingdom and its destruction. The reader sees the ruin of a "played-out world" through the actions of the individuals who are involved. When Camelot is lost, it is the natural result of the destructive acts of Gawaine, Modred, and Arthur. One world has passed, but there is hope for another world. It is seen in the continued quests of Lancelot and Guinevere.

The direct and simple narrative design focuses attention upon the characters. In their struggles the reader is to find the dramatic action of the poem and discover the vision which Robinson desired to present. This
design sets the pattern for all of the elements which constitute a part of the artistic whole. The metrics and language are simple. The images are minimal. There is no attempt to create physical settings. These elements are secondary to the characters and theme of the poet.

The simplicity of the narrative structure is reflected in the meter and language of Lancelot. The basic metrical pattern is unrhymed iambic pentameter. As in the case of Merlin, the selection of blank verse as the pattern for a poem in which the action is presented through dialogue and monologue is appropriate, since this meter is most representative of the English spoken word. It is interesting to note, however, that Robinson initially included dactyls and pterodactyls in the poem.64 In the second draft of the work, he eliminated the more elaborate passages.

I find, in seeing the poem in the full flare of type, that I shall dispense with many of my experimental lines, and restore them, more or less, to the general metrical scheme of Merlin. I gather from your marginal comments that this will not displease you; and I fancy it will have the same effect on others. The long lines are all right, if read with the proper stress and speed, but I know well enough that I cannot count upon the attention and indulgence that such reading will require. Hence the knife.65

The original desire of the poet suggests that he sought variety and richness in the metrics of his poem. The verse which survived the cutting, unfortunately, lacks both qualities. It is stately, solemn, and unvaried. Although the speeches of the characters are moving, the continued series of unbroken conversations in the same pattern results in a cumulative effect of repetition.

64Hagedorn, p. 319.  65Robinson cited in Bates, pp. 5-6.
The language of the poem is suited to the use of blank verse. The
diction is plain and yet formal. Occasionally there are colloquial passages,
"one of these days,"66 or archaic words, "cramoisy,"67 which are inappropriate
to the formal and yet modern emphasis, but they represent infrequent depart­
tures from the rule. The syntax of the poem represents the normal word order
of everyday speech with one notable exception. Whether Robinson was attempt­
ing to alleviate the simplicity of language and meter or whether he unintention­
ally lost control of his use of repetitions is not certain, but the poem
is filled with speeches which use repeated words and phrases for their major
poetic effects. In the following speech of Guinevere, the use of the word
"fear" illustrates the unfortunate results.

"I tell you that I fear Gawaine no more;
And if you fear him not, and I fear not
What you fear not, what have we then to fear?"68

The simplicity of the poem's language and meter is complimented by
the poetic imagery. Robinson uses only a few images throughout the poem.
None of them are used for ornamentation alone. Their functions are to create
an atmospheric setting and mood in place of physical ones, to unify the poem,
and to reinforce the themes which Robinson develops.

The world of Camelot is depicted in a series of colorless images.
Here is a world where passion has led to hopeless struggle, which is destroy­
ing the glory of what once had been. The scenes in Arthur's chambers, at
Joyous Gard, and on the coast of Britian are described in somber and gray
tones.

67Ibid., p. 367.  
68Ibid., p. 377.
In Camelot the knights await the news of Guinevere's death at the "grim light of dawn."69 Arthur envisions himself walking in the "gray shine of our dreams."70 At Joyous Gard there is only mist and rain. In this world even the beauty of Guinevere is diminished: she was "like another mist, / all gray."71 When the troops of Arthur and Gawaine follow Lancelot to France the scene is gray. In the darkness Lancelot sees the coming end of Camelot.

For Lancelot,
When he was hurried amazed out of his rest
Of a gray morning to the scarred gray wall
Of Benwick, where he slept and fought, and saw
Not yet the termination of a strife
That irked him out of utterance, found again
Before him a still plain without an army.
What the mist hid between him and the distance
He knew not, but a multitude of doubts
And hopes awoke in him, and one black fear,
At sight of a truce-waving messenger
In whose approach he read, as by the light
Itself, the last of Arthur.72

Lancelot's fears are verified when he arrives at the coast of Brittan "where the white cliffs were ghostlike in the dawn."73

The physical description of Guinevere in the garden contrasts with the dimness of the world about her. It is her physical beauty and Lancelot's attraction to it which provide the major obstacles to his quest. The picture of the Queen becomes the symbol of earthly beauty and consolation; it becomes the symbol of that which is desirable in Camelot--the good that Lancelot must forsake.

69Ibid., p. 386.  70Ibid., p. 390.  71Ibid., p. 403.
72Ibid., p. 428  73Ibid., p. 435.
The woman who in silence looked at him 
Now seemed his inventory of the world 
That he must lose, or suffer to be lost 
For love of her who sat there in the shade, 
With oak leaves flashing in a golden light 
Over her face and over her golden hair. 74

When Guinevere pleads with the knight to remain with her, she alludes to her 
beauty and the spell which it creates.

"Have I lost myself 
So fast that what a mirror says I am 
Is not what is, but only what was once? 
Does half a year do that with us, I wonder, 
Or do I still have something that was mine 
That afternoon when I was in the sunset, 
Under the oak, and you were looking at me?" 75

Lancelot's refusal to allow Guinevere to remain with him or to retreat 
into the past is stated in terms of the garden scene. It was the ideal moment 
of beauty which can never be recaptured now that time and war have made the 
way back to its wonder an impossibility.

"Could we go back 
To the old garden, we should not stay long; 
The fruit that we should find would all be fallen, 
And have the taste of earth." 76

When Lancelot returns to Britian, he finds Arthur dead, Camelot 
destroyed, and the Queen fled from the tower. He equates the passing of that 
world with the death of his golden moment of love.

And there was no more Camelot now-- 
Now that no Queen was there, all white and gold, 
Under an oaktree with another sunlight 
Sifting itself in silence on her glory. 77
In an attempt to restore the splendor of that moment and world, Lancelot rides to find the Queen. Before him is the lure of a hope "still white and gold." When he finds her, he finds change which he must accept. "There was no gold; there was no gold anywhere." The black robes of the convent, the color of death which marks the passing of a world, covers the glory of what was. The Queen was "Alcestis-like," and Lancelot makes a desperate attempt to bring back to life that which has gone. This time it is Guinevere who recognizes the inevitability of change. There is no garden vision left for them.

"There is not even the world, Lancelot,
For you and me."81

When Lancelot leaves the Queen, he tries to recall her as she bid him: "See me all white and gold, as I was once." All he can envision, however, is a "wan face and two dim lonely hands." The farther he rides the dimmer his vision becomes, and the gold for which he yearns is never seen again. The picture of the Queen in her garden, the world of love and consolation which he knew, is lost to him forever.

... he could see only
That all he saw was fading, always fading;
And she was there alone. She was the world
That he was losing; and the world he sought
Was all a tale for those who had been living,
And had not lived.84

78Ibid.
79Ibid., p. 440.
80Ibid.
81Ibid., p. 442.
82Ibid., p. 444.
83Ibid., p. 447.
84Ibid., p. 449.
The earthly world of Guinevere is passing away. The beauty of Camelot is being destroyed by the struggles of men who have rendered its gold colorless and ghostlike. The final moments of love and Camelot are reflected in the poet’s flame and ash images.

The fire that had marked the lovers’ passion has passed for Lancelot. There is only a glowing remnant of what had once been his dominant emotion.

Embers that break slowly into dust,
Where for a time there was a fire.85

The realization of the passing of his love and the inability to leave Guinevere and pursue the Light that calls him gives to Lancelot a knowledge of destruction.

"God, what a rain of ashes fall on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!"86

Yet Lancelot realizes that Guinevere’s passion has not lessened. To leave Guinevere is to destroy the beauty which he so loved.

"What have I seen that I must leave behind
So much of heaven and earth to burn itself
Away in white and gold, until in time
There shall be no more white and gold."87

When Lancelot sends Guinevere from Joyous Gard, he reads the end of love in a dead fire that gives no heat to him.

All night the rain came down on Joyous Gard;
And all night, there before the crumbling embers
That faded into feathery death-like dust,
Lancelot sat and heard it.88

85Ibid., p. 385.  
86Ibid.  
87Ibid., p. 383.  
88Ibid., p. 426.
Like the passion of love those of hatred and jealousy create a consuming fire that brings destruction. The war over Camelot adds the costly toll of human lives to the burden that must be read in ashes. Gawain, Arthur, and Modred bring destruction through the flame of their passions. The result is that Camelot must end in "grief and ashes." The sentencing of Guinevere to the stake is a destruction of the beauty of Camelot itself, "all alive, and they are burning her." This is a kingdom where the end is "Ashes. Ashes." The burning passions of Gawain and Arthur bring with them the death of the innocent who are caught up in their personal struggle. Lancelot learns that his love and the war which resulted from it have marked his life and Camelot with inescapable consequences.

Now and again he buried
A lonely thought among the coals and ashes
Outside the reaching flame and left it there,
Quite as he left outside in rainy graves
The sacrificial hundreds who had filled them.

As the dying embers and ashes mark the final moments of love and empire, the use of cold images marks the end—the inevitable and irrefutable moment of change. As Robinson has associated the coming of change with ashes, so now he brings that imagery to its logical conclusion with a series of references to finality in terms of cold.

The end of Lancelot's passion is reflected in his "cold show/ Of care" for the Queen. The night when he sits alone after deciding to return Guinevere to Arthur, "he was cold." In the scene at Almsbury, the parting

89Ibid., p. 412. 90Ibid., p. 392. 91Ibid.
92Ibid., p. 412. 93Ibid. 94Ibid., p. 426.
of the lovers is expressed in terms of death-like finality.

He crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling
Away from him like flowers into a grave. 95

As the end of love is associated with cold, so is Lancelot's release
from the forces of Gawaine's hatred and Arthur's jealousy. When Gawaine dies,
he gives Lancelot his hand. "Lancelot shivered, knowing the chill of it." 96

The news of Arthur's death greets Lancelot's arriving ships, and the word "of
the dead King's last battle chilled the sea." 97

The past of Camelot, the golden glory of Guinevere, is dimmed into gray
by the selfishness of men and is consumed by the fiery passions which burn
until death marks all with the coldness of the grave. In contrast is the
golden glory of Galahad, which demands self-denyal though it offers no peace.
The contrasting and developing image patterns of gold and gray, flame and ash,
reflect the changing moods of the characters as they move from earthly love
through the dark necessity of war to the final acceptance of a ceaseless
quest. They establish the tone of eminent disaster and ultimate resignation,
and they lay a foundation for the central thematic image of the Light.

As Perrine points out, Robinson is indebted to Arthurian tradition
for his picture of the golden Guinevere and for the concept of the Graal as a
Light. 98 It is the use of these images, however, that illustrates Robinson's
artistry. It is the contrasts which he draws to the golden Guinevere and the
spiritual Light as well as the thematic reiteration of these patterns that
unifies his poem.

95 Ibid., p. 446. 96 Ibid., p. 435.
97 Ibid. 98 Perrine, p. 176.
The principal source of unity and thematic development is the Light of Lancelot's vision. "There is the secret of the unity of the work; there is the integration for which the uncertainty, the shiftings of scene and action, and for which the gravity have been the background." As an image the Light contrasts with the fading glory of Guinevere and the darkness of Camelot: as an unifying device, the Light is the test which each of the characters must confront; and as a thematic element, the Light represents the nature and significance of Lancelot's quest. Each of these functions of the central image will be discussed in turn.

The references to the Light are constant throughout the poem. The spiritual Light contrasts with the earthly lure of the Queen, her gold and white beauty, and creates the central dilemma for the hero. The Light also causes conflict within Arthur's kingdom and represents a higher world than that of the dark Camelot. "The fires of God" which led the knights from the "destruction, dissolution, desolation," within Camelot were the first forces to disrupt the apparent serenity of the kingdom of Arthur.

The poet continues the contrast between the unearthly gleam and the darkness of Camelot in Lancelot's struggle. The Queen tells him:

"I say the dark is not what you fear most.
There is a Light that you fear more today
Than all the darkness that has ever been."

Throughout the poem the lure of the Light is emphasized in the midst of the

101Ibid., p. 368.                      102Ibid., pp. 378-79.
darkness until the poem ends with references to the contrasting images of light and dark.

But always in the darkness he rode on,
Alone; and in the darkness came the Light. 103

The Light is set apart from all other experiences and all other images. It functions by contrast with the other patterns of the poem. This contrast is to further stress the distinction between the old and the new--the world of Camelot and the world which Galahad found. Further, it is the significance of the Light as a quest that should be made which dominates the meaning of the poem. It provides the test of the characters' abilities to move from one world to the next--from self-indulgence to self-denial.

The characters of Arthur and Gawaine are fixed before the poem opens. Arthur is a passive tool; Gawaine is a victim of his own instability. Arthur is not a king when the reader meets him in Lancelot. The scenes which Arthur dominates depict the disintegration of power. The past has put its mark upon Arthur, and he cannot escape it. The King's attempts to set a pattern of moral perfection were destroyed by the nature of the pattern which he set. His sin with Morganse and his marriage to an unwilling Guinevere led to war and destruction. Now rather than admit his faults and act to save the world, Arthur only broods over what has been and blinds himself to the future. Refusing to exert his will, Arthur becomes the tool of Gawaine's revenge and the victim of Mordred's plotting. His submission is conscious and deliberate. He allows himself and his world to be destroyed because he cannot move himself to do anything else.

103 Ibid., p. 449.
"Gawaine or Modred—Gawaine with his hate,  
Or Modred with his anger for his birth,  
And the black malady of his ambition—  
Will make of my Round Table, where was drawn  
The circle of a world, a thing of wreck  
And yesterday—a furniture forgotten;  
And I who loved the world as Merlin did,  
May lose it as he lost it, for a love  
That was not peace, and therefore was not love."104

Arthur refuses vision, the Light, and he brings about the destruction of his kingdom. There is no struggle, only fatal acceptance.

"I saw—but I saw nothing. Like the bird  
That hides his head, I made myself see nothing."105

Gawaine's weakness is akin to that of Arthur's. To this knight nothing is serious but the fulfillment of driving passions. Yet even these desires dissipate themselves for Gawaine. The knight goes in search of the Light. Incapable of the sacrifice and growth that the quest demands, he is the first to return from the search. He is even aware of his own weaknesses as he admits to Lancelot.

"Had I gone with you, and seen with you  
Your Gleam, and had some ray of it been mine,  
I might be seeing more and saying less.  
Meanwhile, I liked this world; and what was on  
The Lord's mind when He made it is no matter.  
Be lenient, Lancelot; I've a light head.  
Merlin appraised it once when I was young,  
Telling me then that I should have the world  
To play with. Well, I've had it, and played with it."106

It is not the vision of the Light, but the long and difficult quest which demands a denial of self and a sacrifice of pleasure that Gawaine finds impossible. From the opening of the poem until the knight's death scene, Gawaine remains the same; he cannot care enough about anything to make

sacrifice for it. Even the deaths of his brothers, though they motivate him to lead men into a long and arduous war, do not give Gawaine the will-power to deny his whims. His revenge is merely another self-indulgence. Such selfishness causes the world of Camelot to pass.

Arthur and Gawaine are a part of the material world of Camelot. They live while its glory lives; the death of Camelot and their deaths coincide. Because they are incapable of growth, they are incapable of confronting the Light or the future.

In contrast with the static nature of Gawaine or Arthur is the growth of Lancelot and Guinevere. It is their ability to face the denial of self, to sacrifice for the sake of the pursuit of a higher ideal, which marks their realization of the Light and their ultimate attainment of it. Although the natures of their redemptions differ, the characters are one in their turning away from the selfishness and sin of their past lives toward a higher ideal.

Guinevere is totally dominated by her possessive love of Lancelot. She believes in her love and fights for it as long as she has any hope of keeping it alive. She sees this love as her God-given destiny.

"If I were God," she said,
"I should say, 'Let them be as they have been.
A few more years will heap no vast account
Against eternity, and all their love
Was what I gave them. They brought on the end
Of Arthur's empire, which I wrought through Merlin
For the world's knowing of what kings and queens
Are made for; but they knew not what they did--
Save as a price, and as a fear that love
Might end in fear. It need not end that way,
And they need fear no more for what I gave them;
For it was I who gave them to each other.'
If I were God, I should say that to you." 107

107Ibid., p. 420.
While Lancelot goes in search of gleams, Guinevere clings passionately to love. She has no vision of another existence; she has no quest to begin. Instead of a search, Guinevere must live with the threat of the end of her world as she watches Lancelot's conscience waver. This is the nature of the Queen of Camelot and Joyous Gard, but when Lancelot finds a dark-robed Guinevere at Almsbury, a profound change has taken place.

Guinevere has achieved self-denial; she is willing to let Lancelot forget her. The Queen, who used all her beauty, her arguments, and her weaknesses to keep Lancelot with her, suddenly sends him away. The change is attributed to her solitary suffering during her imprisonment and a dream-like vision of the Light. She is now aware of the end of love and reconciled to its passing.

"I found in the Tower,
With Modred watching me that all you said
That rainy night was true. There was time there
To find out everything."108

She is even capable of forgiving Arthur for condemning her to the flames. She has come to understand that Lancelot's quest is a necessary one and that her salvation lies in his departure. In this final scene it is the Queen who tells Lancelot that he must pursue the Light no matter what happens to her. She cannot make a search but his quest, accomplished through her self-denial, will bring a new life to the Queen.

"I saw in the Tower,
When all was darkest and I may have dreamed,
A light that gave to men the eyes of Time
To read themselves in silence. Then it faded,
And the men faded. I was there alone.

108 Ibid., p. 442.
I shall not have what you have, or much else—
In this place. I shall see in other places
What is not here. I shall not be alone.
And I shall tell myself that you are seeing
All that I cannot see.”

Guinevere tells Lancelot to remember her beauty and love and to forget the pain of parting. This memory will free him from guilt and allow him to follow the Light with his whole being.

"When you see me—before you in your fancy,
See me all white and gold, as I was once.
I shall not harm you then: I shall not come
Between you and the Gleam that you must follow,
Whether you will or not.”

The sudden dramatic change from clinging love to selfless denial is an accomplished fact when Lancelot and the reader encounter Guinevere at Almsbury. During the first eight sections of the poem, the Queen has lived for love alone and has been unwilling and unable to surrender the knight to his fate. Even Lancelot, who knows her best, has informed the reader that "She is not one who changes.” Now in the last section of the poem, she has gained the knowledge and achieved the growth that she has resisted throughout all of the previous action. The references to the events which have effected this change are so fragmentary that it is not completely probable. While Guinevere’s growth satisfies the thematic development of the poem, it leaves much to be desired in terms of character credibility.

While Guinevere’s character grows only at the very end of the poem, Lancelot has changed before the poem opens. He perceives a higher existence when he goes in search of the Grail. When he returns to Camelot, he is aware

that this intimation has changed his relationship with the Queen and the kingdom. He wants to leave but he feels tied to Guinevere.

There was too much regret; there was too much Remorse. Regret was there for what had gone, Remorse for what had come.112

Lancelot's problem is further complicated by the consequences of his rescue of Guinevere. Now he must contend with Gawaine and Arthur as well as his own conflicting desires. "He had aspirations toward greatness, but the tangled web of circumstances and his own innate qualities prevented the realization of these ideals."113

Lancelot is not an intellectual; he is not a man of thought like Merlin. His ordinary role is one of action, but Lancelot has suddenly perceived something beyond the world of Camelot and the beauty of Guinevere.

"When I came back from seeing what I saw, I saw no place for me in Camelot. There is no place for me in Camelot. There is no place for me save where the Light May lead me: and to that place I shall go."114

Without ever achieving an intellectual or even emotional understanding of his quest, Lancelot feels the necessity to sacrifice everything for the promise of what is to come.

Though Lancelot wavers for a while—he goes to Guinevere when Arthur goes hunting and to rescue her from the fire—he does so out of a sense of loyalty to what has been. He does not wish that the death of one world be the necessary and essential prerequisite of the life of another. He does not

112Ibid., p. 382.  
113Pipkin, p. 199.  
wish to see Camelot destroyed or Guinevere left alone without love. He refuses to kill Arthur or Gawaine, and he returns Guinevere to the King in the hope that needless destruction will be avoided. As Cestre states, Lancelot is a man "who gives himself up to love with his whole soul, in the season of love, and knows that a moment comes when love must break its own coils and let the soul free for further self-realization." It is his reluctance to see the destruction that forces Lancelot to waver between the Light and Guinevere. It is this reluctance that causes him to consider forsaking his quest when he finds Guinevere at Almsbury. It is not passion and desire that motivate Lancelot, but his awareness that his new life means the forsaking and destruction of the old. He sees a higher good that he would serve; and yet in serving it, he would bring destruction to a lesser good. He states the nature of his whole dilemma:

"God, what a rain of ashes falls on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!"

Although Lancelot does follow the Grail at the end of the poem, it is because the obstacles have been removed from his path rather than as a result of a renewed dedication on his part. Arthur and Gawaine are dead because of Modred's rebellion; Guinevere has realized that she must surrender Lancelot to his destiny. Passively, Lancelot accepts the changes in his circumstances, and with the same sense of regret at the passing of the old, he begins his final quest. In reality, then, the change which has occurred within Lancelot takes place before the poem begins. The poem itself depicts the realization

115 Cestre, p. 90.
of an intention made without the reader’s knowledge or understanding. The result is that the reader never fully sympathizes with Lancelot’s character. He seems set apart from the world of Camelot and remote in his relationship with Guinevere. The reader shares Gawaine’s perception of the knight.

"You are a thing too vaporous to be sharing
The carnal feast of life. You mow down men
Like elder-stems, and you leave women sighing
For one more sight of you; but they do wrong.
You are a man of mist, and have no shadow."

Gawaine and Arthur cannot develop. Guinevere changes suddenly and without narrative preparation, and Lancelot’s character has changed before the poem opens. The growth which is essential to the theme occurs, but the struggles and conflicts which shape it are never fully realized.

"And for ourselves,
And all who died for us, or now are dying
Like rats around us of their numerous wounds
And ills and evils, only this do I know—
And this you know: The world has paid enough
For Camelot."

On his death bed Gawaine meditates upon the passing of his world. The world of the past, the Camelot which Arthur shaped and then let Gawaine and Modred destroy, has had its time and exacted its toil. In its place is the promise of the Light, the hope to which Guinevere and Lancelot direct themselves. The exact nature of that hope is difficult to define.

The critics who have attempted to pinpoint Robinson’s meaning have difficulty in assigning a specific value to the Light. Pipkin can find nothing specific in the Light. "It has become merely a symbol to a light that leads men on, luring them to ideals as yet ill-defined, but clear enough

117 Ibid., pp. 369-70. 118 Ibid., p. 433.
to make them dissatisfied with the existing order." Winters says that the references to the Light are extremely weak and vague cliches for the new life which Lancelot seeks. Davis, in his study of Robinson's imagery, states that the Light stands "invariably for the perception of spiritual truth . . . understanding or truth in human relationships." Barnard makes the most specific observation. For him the vision of the Light means to pass from the love of individual persons to the love of God and then back to a more inclusive love of the human beings who share his nature. It is this wider life and higher wisdom that are given a symbol in "the light that Galahad found."

Hagedorn reaches into the personal history of Robinson for a solution to the Light's meaning.

Burnham who had interested him in oriental philosophy had told Robinson that the word divine had its origin in the Sanskrit word meaning light. The sense of Light as a symbol of ultimate truth became established in his mind.

Robinson himself wrote to Hagedorn on the meaning of the Light as it functioned in both Merlin and Lancelot.

Galahad's "light" is simply the light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of Things and their significance. I don't see how this can be made any more concrete, for it is not the same thing to any two individuals.

While the critics discuss the Light in terms of truth, spiritual insight, and humanistic growth, Robinson's statement indicates that the Light is an abstract representation of a uniquely personal experience. It is the

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119 Pippin, p. 193.  
120 Winters, p. 78.  
121 Davis, p. 381.  
122 Barnard, p. 253.  
123 Hagedorn, p. 94.  
124 Selected Letters, p. 113.
realization of a spiritual reality beyond the material. The nature and effect of this realization will differ for each man. Thus the question in the poem is not whether the Light has a universal significance, but rather whether Robinson has been able to create Lancelot's individual experience of this spiritual reality in a concrete fashion. The answer, unfortunately, is no.

The Light functions on the level of imagery, but it rarely transcends the figurative to allow the reader a perception of the truth or ideal or existence which Lancelot seeks. The reader is presented with the vision of Galahad's face, the Light of the Grail, and references to a gleam that cannot be forgotten. Even Lancelot is unable to formulate the nature of his quest. He asks "What have I seen?" and his most perceptive answer is a "star"--a gleam that was not "of earth." On the one side is the very substantial beauty and love of Guinevere, and on the other are faint and insubstantial gleams of light. Although Lancelot's desire for the latter is essential to the meaning of the poem, his choice is not wholly satisfying to the reader.

In spite of the vagueness of the Light as a central thematic image, Robinson does make apparent the inevitable destruction of a world where sin and selfishness rule. The poet offers Camelot as evidence. "The world has paid enough for Camelot" is the most significant line in Merlin and Lancelot, Robinson wrote to Hagedorn. Men have all too often been like Gawain and played with the world only to destroy it for their selfish ends. Such foolishness and failure constitute the lot of man. His own selfish desires and

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125 Ibid., p. 383.

126 Ibid., p. 415.

127 Selected Letters, p. 113.
the circumstances of his existence, combined with the remorseless presence of change, dictate his fate. But there is the hope that out of tragedy and pain will come the wisdom or at least the willingness to forget oneself in the pursuit of another and better world whose nature is as vague as the gleam of Lancelot's vision. This depiction of man's failure and the hope that from it he will rise up to pursue a spiritual reality constitute the theme of Lancelot.

The design of the poem successfully reveals through the actions of Lancelot, Guinevere, Arthur, and Gawain the large world of empire. The various poetic elements are unified through the use of the central image of the Light, which provides a contrast to the world of the past, offers the possibility of growth to the characters, and embodies the ideals which Lancelot pursues and Guinevere hopes eventually to discover.

On the other hand, the language and meter of the poem are notable for their lack of variety. The concentration upon relatively few images results in extremely bare sections and the overworking of key patterns, especially those dealing with the Light. The repetitious use of images only adds to the effect of the meter and conversational patterns.

The Light itself remains a vague embodiment of the ideal which Lancelot seeks. While the reader recognizes that Robinson did not and could not describe the world that Galahad discovered, it is imperative that the appeal of that world be made as concrete and effective as the alternative world of Guinevere's love. The characters of the lovers do realize the denial of self which Robinson envisions as essential to their redemption. But the changes within these characters take place outside of the poem itself and, therefore, the dramatic effect of the poem is lessened.
Lancelot is an uneven work. While the poem has certain moving passages, it fails as an artistic whole because Edwin Arlington Robinson's techniques are not sufficient to sustain the reader's interest and emotion. A dramatic realization of the conflicts never occurs, and the techniques employed lack the variety and richness needed in a poem of this length.
CHAPTER IV

TRISTRAM AND THE TORCH

With the appearance of Tristram in 1927, a profound change occurred in the fortunes of Edwin Arlington Robinson. The financial and critical success of this long narrative poem brought an end to the constant poverty in which Robinson had lived and made a reluctant celebrity of the shy and aging poet. It had been seven years since the appearance of Lancelot, but the idea of returning to the times of Arthur and writing a poem on the love of Tristram and Isolt had intrigued Robinson for at least ten years.

Esther Bates recorded a conversation with the poet in which he expressed his desire to write a poem on love alone. In the Tristram story he found the embodiment of his vision of a love which is the solitary motivating force in the lives of men. Bates recalls his words. "'You know this sort of thing happens every day,' and to my look of inquiry he added, 'I mean people love the way Tristram and Isolt were supposed to. . . . It is not rare. . . . it happens.'"

1Bates, p. 19.
In Robinson's mind it had happened to his brother and sister-in-law, Herman and Emma. Chard Powers Smith states that the poet had come to realize that the relationship between his brother and the beautiful Emma was very different than that which he had recorded as the Arthur-Guinevere marriage in Lancelot. The poet now believed that Herman was Emma's only love.

Robinson's belief when he started writing Tristram in '25 was, and for at least five years before had been, that Emma had never loved him, that any kindness she had shown him had been the result of "pity," not of "love." Furthermore, with the dubious exception of Roman Bartholow, the recent autobiographical poetry had revealed his current belief that she had had a great, passionate, and irreplaceable love for Herman. If the poem involves the triangle essentially, it is as a salute to Herman and a celebration of a kind of utterly enthralling, unimaginative passion of which Win himself was incapable.²

The selection of the famous legend of Tristram to embody Robinson's conception of an overriding love and to express his awareness of this kind of love in the life of Herman and Emma is not at all surprising. As has been mentioned, it was Richard Wagner's Tristan und Isolde which gave the poet his greatest moments of operatic pleasure. Further, there is no other legend that has the drama and the color of the tale of the fated lovers who struggle against the world and the universe in an effort to realize their passions. Of all of the stories that were incorporated into the legends of Arthur, the tale of Tristram and the two Isolts most clearly indicates the pagan spirit of its early sources. Filled with magic and wonder, it is a story of lawless and immoral love.

Tristram, prince of Lyonesse, offers his services to Mark of Cornwall, his uncle. The knight goes to Ireland to engage in combat with the Morhaus,

²Smith, pp. 259-60.
who is exacting tribute from Cornwall. In a titanic struggle, Tristram, though badly wounded, slays the giant. He is nursed back to health by Isolt of Ireland, who is unaware that the knight she aids is the slayer of her uncle, the Morhaus. When Tristram regains his health, he returns to Mark's kingdom.

Tristram's adventures in Ireland are not over, however. Sent as an envoy for his uncle, Tristram is to gain the hand of Isolt of Ireland for Mark. The marriage is agreed upon, and Tristram and Isolt set sail for Cornwall. On the voyage the two unknowingly partake of a love potion which had been prepared for Isolt's wedding night. The potion binds Tristram and Isolt in an unescapable and eternal passion.

In Cornwall Isolt of Ireland marries Mark, but her love for Tristram does not end. The lovers have a series of clandestine meetings until Mark, suspicious of his nephew, banishes Tristram from Cornwall. The knight goes to Brittany where he weds Isolt of the white hands, the daughter of King Howel of Brittany. However, out of loyalty to his true love he refuses to consummate the marriage, and Isolt of the white hands seeks to gain revenge upon him.

In a war with a baron named Bedalls and his six brothers, Tristram is victorious but is again severely wounded. He sends for Isolt of Ireland whose healing powers can alone save his life. If she returns with his messenger, their ship is to fly white sails; if she refuses to come, the ship is to fly black sails. Isolt of Ireland does come to Brittany, but the jealous Isolt of the white hands tells Tristram that the ship shows black sails. The knight dies of his wounds and his disappointment. He is soon joined in
death by Isolt of Ireland who cannot live without his love.

Such was the nature of the tale told in the famous poetic versions of Gottfried von Strassburg and Thomas of Brittan. There was also a prose tradition which deemphasized these love elements to achieve an integration with the Arthurian tradition. When Sir Thomas Malory came to write his Morte Darthur, he continued this trend away from the love emphasis. Thus Tristram was changed from a peerless lover to a peerless knight, the character of Mark was debased in an attempt to gain sympathy for the lovers, and many of the picturesque details and incidents of the old traditions were lost.

While the impact of these earlier versions is seen in Robinson's _Tristram_, the final product eliminates much that was traditional in the story of the lovers. As in the case of Merlin, Robinson was not interested in telling a tale of magic, but rather in recounting the dilemma of humanity. His treatment of the legend reflects his intention. In the summer of 1925, he wrote of his desires to Mrs. Laura Richards.

The fool potion or philtre in the Tristram story has always been an incurable source of annoyance to me, and after fighting it away for four or five years I have finally succumbed to telling the story of what might have happened to human beings in those circumstances, without their wits and wills having been taken away by some impossible and wholly superfluous concoction. Men and women can make trouble enough for themselves without being denatured and turned into rabbits.³

Robinson used the legendary material as a vehicle for his personal vision. The legend was to be transformed from a tale of pagan passion to a depiction of man's struggle within the circumstances of his own existence. The poet's use of sources was dictated by this artistic intention. Thus

³_Selec ted Letters_, p. 145.
meetings were telescoped, and many details of the early relationship of the lovers were completely eliminated. All of the magical elements are omitted so that the growth of the love from passion to transcendent emotion is not obscured by potions or spells. The use of Andred, a nephew of Mark, as the slayer of Tristram is a departure from Malory where Mark is the murderer and from the famous version of the black and white sails found in Thomas of Britian where the guilt belongs to Iseult of Brittany. By ignoring both of these traditions Robinson made the characters of Mark and Iseult of Brittany more sympathetic, and thus their value as tragic figures is enhanced.

As in the case of Lancelot, it is the treatment of Malory from which Robinson takes the principal incidents for his poem. However, it is not Malory who dictates the emphasis and mood of the poem. Robinson made use of Joseph Bedier's The Romance of Tristan and Iseult, which was in the library of his friend Louis Ledoux. This work, which gathers materials from Gottfried von Strassburg, Thomas of Britian, Eilhart von Oberg, and the fragment of Beroul, emphasizes the lovers themselves and the overwhelming passion which consumes them. Although the majority of the incidents of Robinson's poem come directly from Malory, it is from Bedier that Robinson gained both his insight into the prominent position of the love relationship as well as his plan to place the Arthurian material well in the background.

There was still another influence upon Robinson. This was the music of Wagner. The operatic treatment with its skillful blending of leitmotifs with undying passion and its emphasis upon a love-death consecration was a

4 Perrine, p. 318. 5 Ibid., p. 234.
strong artistic influence. The structure and mood of the poem owe much to Wagner.

_Tristram_ is not a study of magic, but of man's struggle and growth within the painful and tragic circumstances of his own existence. The Robinson poem cannot be reduced to a simple love story formula. There are basic conflicts which the poet sees underlying the surface tension of the love of _Tristram_ and _Isolt_. The first conflict is between love and apparent duty. _Isolt_ asks her lovers:

"Are you sure that a word given
Is always worth more than a world forsaken?
Who knows there may not be a lonely place
In heaven for souls that are ashamed and sorry
For fearing hell?"

And then there is the second conflict - man caught in the perplexity of his own existence. After the death of the lovers, _Mark_ states the nature of the dilemma.

"There are some ills and evils
Awaiting us that God could not invent;
There are mistakes too monstrous for remorse
To fondle or to daily with, and failures
That only fate's worst fumbling in the dark
Could have arranged so well."

While the surface story of _Tristram_ concentrates on the love between a man and a woman, Robinson goes beyond it into the depths of its psychological and cosmic implications. These ends dictated the structure of the poem. Robinson would not concentrate on action; it was the effects of action upon character which intrigued him. Thus it was necessary to compress or eliminate

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7Ibid., p. 199.
great quantities of the traditional material. That which remained is found in brief passages, and most of the poem consists of the characters' meditations upon the meaning of what has occurred. Scenes of violent action, the numerous journeys which take place, the wooing of Isolt of Brittany, and the slaying of the lovers flash by so that the meaning of these actions can be the primary concern. Barnard summarizes the nature of the method used.

Ten lines are enough for Tristram's rough treatment of the spying Andred; ten more are given to his seduction by Morgan; Griffon is taken care of in five; the marriage of Isolt of Brittany is never told of at all, but is presently found to have occurred; the voyages are taken for granted; ten lines or so again suffice for the catastrophe; and the dramatic possibilities of swoons and kisses are soon exhausted. So the poem is made up mostly of observation, analysis, and talk. 9

Because the poet was not only interested in the lovers, Tristram and Isolt, but also in the influence that their love had upon the characters who were involved in their destiny and yet who were unable to share or even understand the nature of their transcendent love, Mark of Cornwall and Isolt of Brittany were worked at length into the fabric of the poem. This additional emphasis necessitated an even more complicated design.

To accomplish all his aims, Robinson told the story chronologically and relied upon leitmotifs to unify the various plot elements and the thematic strains of his 4,400 line poem. The poem opens and closes with Isolt of Brittany, the embodiment of passive resignation. In between these portraits the story of the lovers is told--their meetings, their separations, their deaths.

Tristram is a balanced poem. The calm expectation of the opening scene is paralleled by the stoic resignation of section ten, the closing

9Barnard, p. 164.
scene. Robinson prepares the reader for tragedy with the initial picture of Isolt of Brittany, and he closes the poem as both Mark and Isolt look back upon the havoc that has occurred. In this final scene, the reader becomes aware that their fate is more tragic than that of the lovers.

The opening and closing sections encase the story of Tristram and Isolt. Since it is their wisdom and growth which Robinson wished to emphasize, he contrasts the initial meeting of the lovers at Tintagel with their reunion at Joyous Gard. In between is the interval of suffering and separation through which the self is overcome. Thus in sections two and three the reader sees the lovers dominated by fear, regret, and hatred. Their concern is for the future, and their regret for the past. In sections four, five, and six the purgative adventures of Tristram are related. The hatred which dominated him is released during his affair with Morgan; the attempt to deny himself and live for others is reflected in his battle with Griffon and his desire to serve Isolt of Brittany's need of him. During this two year interval Tristram grows as a man, and, in proportion, his love for Isolt of Ireland grows. In sections seven and eight the lovers are reunited in a brief summer of love. With a new wisdom and maturity, they forget pain and fear as they concentrate on the joy of the moment. There is no thought of the future for they realize that the bliss which they share cannot last for long. The end comes in section nine when the release from separation comes through a united death which gives to the tormented pair a peace that life could never bring.

In the first section of the poem, Robinson introduces us to one of the principal characters, Isolt of Brittany, and to the image patterns associated with her throughout the work. At the same time, some essential expo-
situation is given through Isolt's conversation with her father, King Howel.

The setting is Brittany: the time is the day of Mark's marriage in distant Cornwall. Isolt of the white hands patiently awaits the promised return of Tristram. This child-woman, with her "calm gray eyes"\(^9\) believes the knight's casual promise to return to her peaceful land. Thus her life centers around her waiting, and Robinson's opening portrait with its references to her white hands, the flying birds, and the blank ocean captures her spirit.

Isolt of the white hands, in Brittany,
Could see no longer northward anywhere
A picture more alive or less familiar
Than a blank ocean and the same white birds
Flying, and always flying, and still flying,
Yet never bringing any news of him
That she remembered, who had sailed away
The spring before—saying he would come back,
Although not saying when.\(^10\)

King Howel fears that Isolt's hope is a foolish delusion. He suggests to his daughter that Tristram may never return from Cornwall where tonight Isolt of Ireland is to wed King Mark. The mention of this woman of legend leads Isolt to question her father about her rival. Howel's reply prepares for Robinson's later presentation of Isolt of Ireland.

"The few who have told of her to me
Have told of silence and of Irish pride,
Inhabiting too much beauty for one woman."\(^11\)

These references to pride, silence, and beauty indicate the character of Isolt of Ireland before she changes through her love for Tristram.

References to Cornwall, to Isolt of Ireland's beauty, and to the

possibility of Tristram not returning and redeeming his promise make no impression upon Howel's daughter. Isolt of the white hands is resolute in her faith and love. In her assertions of confidence in her destiny, she gives an early indication of the resignation which she embodies.

"He will come back," she said, "And I shall wait. If he should not come back, I shall have been but one poor woman more whose punishment for being born a woman was to believe and wait. You are my King, My father, and of all men anywhere, Save one, you are the world of men to me. When I say this of him you must believe me, As I believe his eyes. He will come back; And what comes then I leave to him, and God."  

Howel listens to his daughter and wonders at the strange combination of delicacy and strength which dwells within her. She is so much a child and yet so much a woman. Looking out toward the sea, the King assumes Isolt's constant vigil and questions what Fate will move across those waters.

Nothing in the cold glimmer of a moon Over a still, cold ocean there before him Would answer for him in the silent voice Of time an idle question. So the King, With only time for company, stood waiting Alone there in the window, looking off At the still sea between his eyes and England.  

This scene in Brittany provides a prelude to the central action of the poem. In a spirit of calm expectation, Isolt of the white hands awaits her destiny and gazes at the same sea that washes against the Cornish rocks where Tristram battles in anger with his fate.

To focus upon Tristram's mental state and to prepare for the meeting of the lovers, Robinson develops at length a scene in which Tristram reflects

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12Ibid., p. 16.  
13Ibid., pp. 18-19.
upon the wasted opportunities of the past and the unthinkable horror of the present. Although the poet opens the second section with the images of the moon and water which close the scene in Brittany, the contrast between Tristram's desperate mood and the calm resignation of the preceding episode is immediately apparent.

Partly to balk his rage, partly to curse
Unhindered an abject ineptitude
That like a drug had held him and withheld him
In seizing once from love's imperial garden
The flower of all things there, now Tristram leaned
Alone upon a parapet below
The lights of high Tintagel, where gay music
Had whipped him as a lash and driven him out
Into the misty night, which might have held
A premonition and a probing chill
For one more tranquil and less exigent
And not so much on fire.14

Unable to bear the gaiety of the celebration, Tristram stands alone and muses over the events which have brought him to this moment of misery. Central to his anguish are his recognition of his own foolish promise to Mark and his hatred for his uncle for exacting it from him. Although he recognizes that pride stood between himself and Isolt of Ireland, Tristram focuses his frustration upon his uncle. The slaying of Norhaus, the silence that stood between the lovers, an unawareness of growing love, and the stubborn refusal to acknowledge passion when its presence could no longer be denied are admitted by Tristram; but it is Mark who remains the villain in his nephew's

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14Ibid., pp. 20-21. This opening scene at Tintagel has a parallel in the life of the poet. Robinson departed from the housewarming party at Herman and Emma's cottage on Capitol Island. He withdrew to the cliff overlooking the ocean, and Emma tried to persuade him to rejoin the party (Smith, p. 112).
eyes. The knight is sick with his sense of loss and horrified at the thought of what is to come. In his imagination he visualizes the union of Mark and Isolt. Colored by his hate, his thoughts are of a vile animal destroying the beauty of Isolt of Ireland.

There would be silence; and the King would hold
Isolt--Isolt of the dark eyes--Isolt
Of the patrician passionate helplessness--
Isolt of the soft waving blue-black hair--
Isolt of Ireland--in his vicious arms
And crush the bloom of her resisting life
On his hot, watery mouth, and overcome
The protest of her suffering silk skin
With his crude senile claws. And it was he

Tristram, the most obedient imbecile
And humble servant of King Mark his uncle,
Who had achieved all this.15

Aside from developing an insight into Tristram's sad state of mind, this passage also indicates the key physical images which are associated with Isolt of Ireland. Isolt of the dark eyes and the blue-black hair contrasts in physical qualities with the white Isolt of Brittany.

Tristram's self-derision and his hatred for Mark are manifested in Tristram's response to the emissaries sent by the King. Gouvernail, the knight's friend and teacher, is the first to come to Tristram. He urges his student to gain control over himself and return to the feast before he angers Mark. Tristram tells Gouvernail that he will not return, and his hatred for his uncle is apparent in his words.

"Say to the King I'm sick. If he doubts that,
Or takes it ill, say to the King I'm drunk.
His comprehensions and remembrances
Will compass and envisage, peradventure,

15 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
The last deplorable profundity  
Of my dejection if you say for me,  
That in my joy my caution crept away  
Like an unfaithful hound and went to sleep.  

The continued urgings of Gouvernail have no effect upon Tristram.  
The friend returns to the party and leaves Tristram with his thoughts.  
The knight is not alone for long, however.  
The "troubling sound of cloth" announces the arrival of Morgan le Fay who comes  
to persuade Tristram to rejoin the party and, more importantly, to "acknowledge  
her obscure existence." While Gouvernail pleaded out of friendship and attempted  
to reason, Morgan's motives are less selfless and her appeal is certainly not  
intellectual. Aware of the love that the knight has for Isolt of Ireland,  
Morgan comes to remind Tristram

"That there should be a woman or two left  
With even Isolt no longer possible."  

Her obvious offer is rejected by Tristram, who bids her return to the King  
and tell him that the knight cannot return to the feast because he is ill.  
A disfiguring smile passes over Morgan's face in acknowledgement of Tristram's  
rudeness. She leaves him but promises that they will meet again.  

The anger and frustration of Tristram which dominate the second section of the  
poem give way to regret and fear when the lovers meet in section three. In this scene of  
reunion, Robinson contrasts the all-consuming and fiery passions of the lovers with the  
cold and indifferent universe which surrounds them. Tristram and Isolt of Ireland are  
isolated for only a moment,  

\[1^6 \text{Ibid., p. 26.} \quad \] \[17 \text{Ibid., p. 29.} \]  
\[18 \text{Ibid.} \quad \] \[19 \text{Ibid., p. 32.} \]
but during that brief interlude, they ponder the nature of the Fate that brought them to such tragedy, and they wonder if Time offers them any solace. While nature remains cold, the lovers move beyond sound and place in the depths of their passion.

Isolt of Ireland,
With all her dark young majesty unshaken
By grief and shame and fear that made her shake
Till to go further would have been to fall,
Came nearer still to him and still said nothing,
Till terror born of passion became passion
Reborn of terror while his lips and hers
Put speech out like a flame put out by fire.
The music poured unheard, Brangwaine had vanished,
And there were these two in the world alone,
Under the cloudy light of a cold moon
That glimmered now as cold on Brittany
As on Cornwall. 20

Avoiding for a moment their inevitable separation, the lovers look back to the lost and wasted moments that Time gave them. In the past they seek an answer to the present and a hope for the future.

"What have we done
To Fate, that she should hate us and destroy us,
Waiting for us to speak? What have we done
So false or foul as to be burned alive
And then be buried alive--as we shall be?" 21

The answer to Isolt of Ireland's question is only partly understood by the lovers. They admit that pride stopped the words of love from being spoken. Isolt remained silent out of indignation for Morhaus' slaying; Tristan remained silent out of his sense of obligation to his uncle. Yet these actions do not seem to them sufficient cause for the misery of this moment, nor does knowledge of them give any insight into the future.

20Ibid., p. 38. 21Ibid., pp. 36-37.
Iseult begs Tristram to tell her if he can believe in Time as an ally to them in their struggle. In doing so she questions the whole premise upon which they have brought their relationship to this moment of tragedy.

"Are you sure that a word given
Is always worth more than a world forsaken?"22

Realizing that this moment offers them nothing, Tristram replies that Time is their only source of hope. To attempt to run away would be an act of folly resulting in ignominy for Iseult. To kill the King would only bring death to them both. Even these thoughts of death offer them no solace at this point. Thus for them relief can only come with the passage of time.

The future offers the only hope, and it is a slender chance to which the lovers cling. Yet even in the face of the inevitable, Iseult has come to realize that the love which they share is something with an existence and reality of its own. Such love will not be denied or ended by the events of the future. Their lives have been unalterably changed by the nature of the love which they share.

"Tristram, believe
That if I die my love will not be dead,
As I believe that yours will not be dead.
If in some after time your will may be
To slay it for the sake of a new face,
It will not die. Whatever you do to it,
It will not die. We cannot make it die,
We are not mighty enough to sentence love
Stronger than death to die, though we may die.
I do not think there is much love like ours
Here in this life."23

Hope for the future and speculation about the eternal nature of their love cannot stop the arrival of the moment when Iseult of Ireland must go to

22Ibid., p. 43.  
23Ibid., pp. 48-49.
Mark. It is the awareness of this doom that constantly intrudes itself into the words and actions of the lovers. Confessions of fear and hatred are mixed with admissions of love. They read in each others eyes the knowledge that they are in the hands of Fate,

that like an unseen ogre
Made hungry sport of these two there alone
Above the moaning wash of Cornish water,
Cold upon Cornish rocks.\(^24\)

To shut out what is drawing so near, the lovers enter an embrace

In which the world was melted and was nothing
For them but love.\(^25\)

This isolation is interrupted by a shouted warning. However, the words of Brangwaine, Isolt's servant, come too late. Tristram discovers that Andred, the snake-like nephew of Mark, has hidden himself and overheard the lovers. In a rage Tristram seizes Andred and throws him against the parapet wall. With this act of violence the lovers' interlude ends, and a long and painful period of separation begins. It is the suffering of this parting which constitutes a period of purgation and growth for Tristram and Isolt of Ireland, Robinson focuses upon Tristram's banishment, his spiritual anger and sickness, his interlude with Morgan le Fay, and his marriage to Isolt of Brittany in sections four, five, and six.

When Mark discovers Tristram and Isolt of Ireland together on the parapet, he sends Isolt back to the feast. Tristram's final sight of her continues to haunt him throughout their separation. He cannot escape the "look in her frightened eyes."\(^26\)

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 48. \(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 53. \(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 59.
Suddenly aware of his real stature in his wife's eyes, Mark accuses Tristram of unthinkable deception. He confronts his nephew with controlled anger, while Tristram can only respond with hatred and recklessness.

"And as for all that you have done for me, There are some tenuous items on my side. Did I not, fighting Morhaus in your name, Rid Cornwall of a tribute that for years Had sucked away the blood and life of Cornwall, Like vampires feeding on it in the night? And have I not in my blind gratitude For kindness that would never have been yours If it had cost you even a night's rest, Brought you for Queen the fairest of all women?"27

The references to the victory over Morhaus and Tristram's promise to bring Isolt of Ireland to Mark are indications of the knight's past loyalty which contrasts with his present attitude toward his uncle.

Mark replies that to bring him Isolt and, at the same time, steal her love was no act of gratitude. To punish Tristram, Mark decides to take from him the one thing that means life itself to the knight—the sight of Isolt of Ireland. Mark banishes his nephew from Cornwall forever.

"Your speech to me before Was nearer your last than you are near to me— Yet I'll not have your blood. I'll have your life, Instead—since you are sure your life means only One woman—and I'll keep it far from you: So far that you shall hunger for it always."28

Wandering through rain that falls steadily upon him for two days, Tristram moves like a man in a dream. He wanders from Cornwall and directs himself toward Camelot. In his fury and hopelessness, he is like a living fire that cannot be quenched. His mind keeps wandering to the vision of Isolt in the clutches of Mark and to the expression of fear in her eyes. Finally

27Ibid., p. 65.  
28Ibid., p. 67.
he falls into a death-like sleep.

He is discovered sick and helpless by Gouvrernal. This friend seeks aid for the knight at the castle of Morgan le Fay. The Queen still desires Tristram's love and uses all of her charms to make him forget his lost Isolt of Ireland. After a long period of restraint, the knight gives himself to the seductive Queen. It is not love, however, that he brings to her. With Morgan he seeks an outlet for the fury of emotion which rages inside of him. He comes to her with hatred.

And after long chagrin
Of long imprisonment, and long prisoned hate
For her that in his hatred of himself
He sought now like an animal, he made
No more acknowledgement of her cajoling
Than suddenly to rise without a word
And carry her off laughing in his arms,
Himself in hers half strangling.29

Tristram remains with Morgan for two weeks until his indifference becomes unmistakably apparent. She tells him to leave, but promises that they shall meet again. The knight departs, aware that he has made another enemy whose vengeance may exact a terrible price. His words to Gouvrernal in which he compares the hatred of Morgan and Andred unite the pair in vengeance and foreshadow the end of the poem.

"Doom,
Which I feel waiting now like death in the dark,
Shall follow me and strike, unrecognized,
For the last time. Away from that snake's nest
Behind me, it would be enough to know
It is behind me, were it not for knowledge
That in a serpent that is unsubdued
And spurned, a special venom will be waiting
Its time. And when the serpent is a woman,

29Ibid., p. 78.
Or a thin brained and thinner blooded Andred,
Infirm from birth with a malignant envy,
One may not with one thrust annihilate
The slow disease of evil eating in them
For one that never willed them any evil. 30

The appropriateness of the interlude with Morgan le Fay is questionable. Aside from degrading the character of the hero, the section weakens the structural unity of the poem. Barnard's criticism expresses the opinion of the majority of scholars. He states that the poem is difficult enough with the presence of two Isolts without adding a third love interest in the person of Morgan le Fay. "He Robinson creates new difficulties by introducing a rather unpleasant and seemingly pointless liaison with Morgan . . . the unity is impaired by the presence of material that is not made clearly relevant to the main plot." 31

While the section may be a distracting element which does very little to enhance the character of Tristram, Robinson does make it function in the plot and in relation to the theme. In terms of plot motivation, this interlude provides a motive for Morgan's scheming with Andred to kill the lovers. The episode has a thematic function as well. What passes between Tristram and Morgan is lust which comes in the heat of a moment and then dissipates itself. Robinson wished to demonstrate the nature of this fleeting passion and contrast it with Tristram's love for Isolt. Their love, star-crossed by circumstances, is a deep and abiding emotion. This brief interlude demonstrates by contrast the nature of Tristram's real love, a love which he can never escape.

30 Ibid., p. 81.
31 Barnard, pp. 95.
In search of peace, Tristram recalls the calm beauty of Isolt of Brittany and the promise which he gave to her. He tells Gouvernail that he will return to Howel's kingdom and try to learn wisdom and strength in this peaceful land. He realizes that only when he has subdued the pride and fire that are within him can he discover his own reality. He leaves Gouvernail with words of his desire to grow as a man.

"There's a contentious kingdom in myself
For me to rule before I shall rule others.
If it is not too dark for me to fight
In there for my advantage and advancement,
And if my armor holds itself together
So long as not to be disintegrated
Before it breaks and I am broken with it,
There may be such a king as you foresee;
And failing him, I shall not fail my friend,
Who shall not be forgotten."32

The use of battle imagery in this passage seems most appropriate to the warrior hero.

In section four Robinson takes Tristram through the depths of passion and humiliation. Out of a purgative fire that burns within him comes a desire for peace and for conquest of the emotions that struggle to dominate the man he would be. In search of growth and understanding, Tristram returns to the land of Isolt of Brittany to redeem the promise he made to her. His relationship with the second Isolt is depicted in sections five and six.

There is no peace in Brittany: Griffon has brought war to the kingdom. Yet this fighting offers a rare opportunity to Tristram. The chance to enter combat is like a wine offered to a man aflame with thirst. Tristram formulates his spiritual dilemma when he tells Howel of the opportunity which the

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32 Tristram, pp. 83-84.
troubles of Brittany offer to him.

"I have been groping slowly out of life
Into a slough of darkness and disuse--
A place too far from either for life or death
To share with me. Yes, I have had too much
Of what a fool, not knowing its right name,
Would call the joy of life. If that be joy
Give me a draught out of your cup of trouble,
And let it be seen then what's left of me
To deal with your neighbor." 33

Tristram leads the forces of Brittany and kills Griffon. In triumph he returns to Howel and Isolt of the white hands. In his heart he feels a tenderness for this maid's gentle beauty: in her heart she acknowledges love that is now her whole being. Tristram is overwhelmed by his pity for her and by the irony of Fate which offers him this white Isolt and not the dark Isolt of his desires. In a moment by the sea, he comes to realize that his life must be joined with that of Isolt of Brittany.

Realizing that to return to Tintagel would only bring ruin to himself and Isolt of Ireland, Tristram reconciles himself to a life without passion--a life in which he will feed this other Isolt's "white need of him." 34 Yet his thoughts reflect the dilemma that Fate has prepared for him.

"Isolt
Of Brittany? Why were two names like that
Written by fate upon my heart
In red and white? Is this white fire of pity,
If pity it be, to burn deeper than love?" 35

He knows the answer even as he asks the question. As he gazes into the calm gray eyes of Isolt of the white hands, he can only see

Isolt of the wild frightened violet eyes
That once had given him that last look of hers

33Ibid., p. 86. 34Ibid., p. 91. 35Ibid.
Above the moaning call of these cold waves
On these cold Cornish rocks.\textsuperscript{35}

He has turned from love only because he must.

In Isolt of Brittany's need of him, Tristram finds a frightening
obligation. In her belief and certainty, her childlike reliance upon him,
Tristram finds an appeal that he cannot escape. Thus he marries the daughter
of Howel, but he does not forget Isolt of Ireland. For two years the knight
strives through energy and activity to lead Brittany and to forget love. He
fails in both instances. His actions gain him the dislike of his countrymen,
and his memories don't fade.

One day Tristram and Isolt of Brittany are seated in her garden
watching a ship approach from the north. Suddenly moved to wonder if she
might lose Tristram, Isolt asks what would become of her if he died or left
her. Tristram tries to dismiss such thoughts, but his wife, sensing in the
arrival of the ship a new danger, tells her love that she will always wait for
him. Her passive acceptance of Fate is again emphasized.

"I should not cry for what had come between,
For I should have you here with me again.
I am not one who must have everything.
I was not fated to have everything.
One may be wise enough, not having all,
Still to be found among the fortunate."	extsuperscript{37}

Her fears of separation are justified in the sixth section of the
poem. The ship they have watched is from Camelot, and its passenger is
Gawaine, who comes to Tristram with a message from King Arthur. Once again
Robinson uses Gawaine to provide essential background and to contrast with

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 89. \hspace{2cm} \textsuperscript{37}Ibid., p. 98.
the lovers through his fickle charms. He brings word to Tristram that Arthur wishes him to come to Camelot and become a knight of the Round Table. While he is in Brittany, Gawaine is not above a brief flirtation with Isolt of the white hands. With gay words he praises her beauty, but she laughs at his foolishness and asks him the question which she ponders within her heart.

"What right name should an innocence like mine
Deserve, if I believed he would come back?"38

Gawaine assures her that Tristram will return to her from Camelot. Mark has been imprisoned for forging the Pope's signature to a document that would have sent Tristram to fight the Saracens and to death. Thus Mark as a danger to his life has been removed. Gawaine gives her further encouragement by asserting that when Tristram does return he will belong to her completely.

"He will come back;
And you, if you are wise--and you are that
Beyond the warrant of your sheltered years--
Will find him wiser in his unworthiness,
And worthier of your wisdom and your love,
When this wild fire of what a man has not
Reveals at last, in embers all gone out,
That which he had, and has, and may have always,
To prize aright thereafter and to pray for."39

Gawaine does not reveal the same belief when he speaks to Tristram. He does not dismiss danger or swear of an awareness of gifts to be cherished. He warns the knight that the removal of Mark's arm from Cornwall is not the removal of the power of the King. Tristram should return at once to Brittany after Arthur has made him one of the Round Table's company.

When Gawaine's warning is delivered, Tristram remains alone near the shore. He listens to the sea echo the message that Gawaine has spoken. Yet

38Ibid., p. 106. 39Ibid., p. 108.
Tristram can think only of Isolt of Ireland.

Alone, he saw the slanting waves roll in,
Each to its impotent annihilation
In a long wash of foam, until the sound
Became for him a warning and a torture,
Like a malign reproof reiterating
In vain its cold and only sound of doom.

He left the crested wash of those long waves
Behind him to fall always on that sand,
And to sound always that one word——"Isolt." \(^{40}\)

Tristram joins his wife in the garden. He wishes to dispell any of her doubts about his safe and speedy return. What remains unspoken is the knowledge that Isolt of Ireland stands between them. In her frustration, Isolt of the white hands is angered and hurt. To her has come an understanding of the nature of Tristram's feelings. She was now

an angry woman
Whose unavailing alchemy of hope
No longer, or not now, found love in pity. \(^{41}\)

Tristram leaves Brittany without speaking any further meaningless lies to the white Isolt. Looking again to the sea in the north, she resumes the waiting and patient attitude of the opening of the poem. The imagery of that scene is repeated.

And there was nothing left
That day, for her, in the world anywhere,
But white birds always flying, and still flying,
And always the white sunlight on the sea. \(^{42}\)

Section six ends with the departure of Tristram from Brittany.

Through the events which occur during the knight's banishment, Robinson depicted the hero's growing strength of character. In him was the desire to

\(^{40}\)Ibid., p. 123. \(^{41}\)Ibid., p. 121. \(^{42}\)Ibid., p. 123.
build a new life and to find in his wife's need of him a serenity and peace that was essential to his turbulent soul. Yet he cannot escape his love or his destiny. Tristram cannot dismiss the eyes of Iseult of Ireland from his mind nor the hand of Fate from the shores of Brittany. Gawaine has come to call him back to love, to suffering, and to death. These events constitute the material of sections seven, eight, and nine of the poem.

At the beginning of section seven, Robinson takes time to inform the reader of the plight of Iseult of Ireland. While Tristram is searching for peace, she is working out her destiny in Cornwall as the wife of Mark. It is not long after his wedding that Mark becomes aware that there is nothing but hatred for him in the heart of Iseult. The results of his awareness are a consuming hatred which fixes itself upon Tristram and a desire to gain further revenge upon the banished knight. Iseult lives with this hatred in a ceremonious but empty relationship with Mark. As Tristram has suffered and burned through a penitential period of separation, so Iseult was alive only to feel pain and await release.

The fires of love and fear
Had slowly burned away so much of her
That all there was of her, she would have said,
Was only a long waiting for an end
Of waiting—till anon she found herself,
Still waiting.43

After bringing the reader up to date on the fortunes of Iseult of Ireland, Robinson shifts the scene to Joyous Gard where Tristram, now a knight of the Round Table, has remained after Lancelot's departure. Tristram stands looking out toward Tintagel and wondering if it were possible for Iseult

43Ibid., p. 125.
of Ireland to defeat time and place to join him at this moment. He envisions her as a ghost who has come to peace only after life has destroyed her. Death is a possible release from the agony which was in her eyes at their last meeting.

She would be dead, but there might be no pain
In that for him when the first death of knowing
That she was dead was ended, and he should know
She had found rest.44

Suddenly Tristram is joined by Isolt of Ireland who was brought to Joyous Gard by a whim of Guinevere. In this scene of reunion, Tristram and Isolt dismiss the world that surrounds them in favor of each other and the love that binds them. The world and time die so that these two might share briefly a love untouched by change. This meeting of the lovers demonstrates the growth they have achieved during the past two years. In contrast to the meeting on the parapet at Tintagel, there is no anger or rage in the lovers. All the pride and fury of the past dissolve into the ecstasy of reunion. Even as Tristram's gaze falls for the first time on Isolt, he sees change in her eyes. The frightened look is gone.

It was not there.
Woman or ghost, her last look in the moonlight
Was not in her eyes now. Softly, behind him,
The coming of her steps had made him turn,
To see there was no fear in her eyes now.45

Her fear is gone, and in its place has come wisdom born of past suffering. It is this that Tristram sees now in the face of Isolt.

Still in his arms, and sure that she was there,
She smiled at him as only joy made wise
By sorrow smiles at fear, as if a smile

Would teach him all there was for life to know,  
Or not to know.⁴⁶

Joined together again, the lovers do not wonder what hope the future 
has to offer them. They have each other outside of Time. With wisdom has 
come an awareness that this moment is all that exists for them, and this 
moment will be brief.

They were not made for time as others were,  
And time therefore would not be long for them 
Wherein for love to learn that in their love,  
Where fate was more than time and more than love,  
Time never was, save in their fear of it—  
Fearing, as one, to find themselves again  
Indifferently as two that were not there.⁴⁷

Throughout the scene the lovers toy with the idea of death as they 
waver between a belief in the reality of the moment and a fear that it is all 
an illusion. They speculate over the meaning of the past, although the fear 
and hatred which were one with it have gone. They ponder the nature of Time 
and Fate and the eternal quality of their love. The following words of Isolt 
are representative of the numerous and lengthy speeches of a similar nature 
which dominate the section.

"Were I the shadow  
Of half so much as this that you are seeing  
Of me, I should not be Isolt of Ireland,  
Or any Isolt alive. All you can see  
Of me is only what the Lord accomplished  
When he made me for love. When he made you  
His love remembered that; and whether or not  
His way was the most merciful, he knows—  
Not we. Or was it fate, stronger than all?  
A voice within me says that God, seeing all,  
Was more compassionate than to let love see  
Too far—loving his world too well for that.  
We do not have to know—not yet. The flower

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 129. ⁴⁷Ibid.
That will have withered from the world for ever
With us, will die sometime; and when it fades,
And dies, and goes, we shall have gone already,
And it will all be done. If I go first,
No fear of your forgetting shall attend me,
Leaving with you the mind and heart of love—
The love that knows what most it will remember.
If I lose you, I shall not have to wait—
Not long. There will be only one thing then
Worth waiting for. No, I shall not wait long...
I have said that. Now listen, while I say this:
My life to me is not a little thing;
It is a fearful and a lovely thing;
Only my love is more. 

The speeches of this section are all of comparable length. In them there are
the same references to a love fated to be eternal, to lives that were designed
for love alone, and to death which will not end this love. The resigned and
speculative mood of this quote is also indicative of the whole tone of this
section.

In an attempt to objectify the fiery love which consumes her, Isolt
of Ireland looks to the stars which shine over Joyous Gard. In their constant
light fed by a constant flame, Isolt sees a nature similar to her own.

"Leave me the stars
A little longer," said Isolt. "In Cornwall,
So much alone there with them as I was,
One sees into their language and their story.
They must be more than fire; and if the stars
Are more than fire, what else is there for them
To be than love?"

Tristram seizes the symbol which she has suggested and uses the stars
to emphasize the eternal quality of their love. Fear, death, and Time,
itself, have no power over their love. It is to be triumphant.

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48Ibid., pp. 143-44.  
49Ibid., p. 147.
"Whether your stars are made of love or fire, 
There is a love that will outshine the stars. 
There will be love when there are no more stars. 
Never mind what they say of darkness coming 
That may come sometime, or what else they say 
Of terrors hidden in words like life and death. 
What do they mean? Never mind what they mean 
We have lived and we have died, and are alone 
Where the world has no more place for us, 
Or time a fear for us, or death ... Isolt!!"50

Even as the knight speaks of eternal love, the sea, indifferent to 
the lovers, sounds its eternal note of warning and death. Through this image 
Robinson foreshadows the inevitable end of the lovers.

A measured sea that always on the sand 
Unseen below them where time's only word 
Was told in foam along a lonely shore, 
Pour ed slowly its unceasing sound of doom-- 
Unceasing and unheard, and still unheard, 
As with an imperceptible surrender 
They moved and found each other's eyes again. 
Burning away the night between their faces.51

This scene of reunion blends Robinson's principal themes of love and 
death, illusion and reality, time and eternity. The lengthy conversation of 
the lovers is a meditation on life and love, but it comes at an inappropriate 
time. Suddenly after two years of separation, Tristram and Isolt, who have 
almost died from passion and love, are reunited, and they spend all of their 
time conversing. The reader is left to wonder about the nature of such 
intellectualized passion.

In section eight of the poem, the love of Tristram and Isolt of 
Ireland is consummated during a summer idyll. By delaying the consummation 
of the love until after the lengthy separation, Robinson emphasized the

50Ibid., p. 151. 51Ibid., p. 150.
maturity of the love and the conscious decision of the lovers to sacrifice all for the sake of each other. Although the threat of Mark's hatred hangs over them, they no longer feel bound by pledges given to the King. Thus they live with the threat of constant danger during a summer of bliss.

Robinson chooses to relate the effect of this love by focusing upon Tristram's state of mind. The knight's joy is reflected by nature in a lengthy passage in which the hero sees his own unbounded happiness all around him.

To think at all
Would be a more perfidious insolence
To fate, he felt, than to forget the sun
That shone this morning down on Joyous Gard,
Where now there was all joy. He felt it shining,
And throughout time and space he felt it singing;
He felt and heard it moving on the grass
Behind him, and among the moving trees
Around him, and along the foaming shore,
And in the ocean where he splashed and swam
Like a triumphant and almighty fish,
Reiniquishing the last concern of earth,
Save on~ that followed him.52

This joyful state of Tristram is confirmed for him in the eyes of Isolt. They are calm and moist with the joy that she shares. Although they both sense danger and fear an end to this moment, they become passive in their acceptance of happiness and the inevitable. It is not long in coming.

With autumn comes change. Tristram, returning from a trip taken only to experience the joy of reunion, does not find Isolt at Joyous Gard. Gawaine is there to tell him that Mark has escaped from prison and taken Isolt to Cornwall. With his usual lack of tact, Gawaine relates the

52 Ibid., pp. 154-55.
unhappy events.

"They carried her off with them in a small boat,
And now she's on a ship that sails to Cornwall.
I do not know a land that has a law
Whereby a man may follow a king's ship
For the king's wife, and have a form of welcome
Better than battle. You are not trimmed for that." 53

At the sound of these words, Tristram falls in a faint. In one of
the weakest passages of the poem, Robinson likens his warrior hero to a
senseless log. Like the interval with Morgan, this scene does very little
to enhance the knight's stature.

Each word of Gawaine's, falling like a blow
Dealt viciously by one unseen, fell slowly,
And with a not premeditated aim,
So accurate and unfailing in its proof
That when the last had fallen--without reply,
And without time to summon will or reason,
Tristram, the loud accredited strong warrior,
Tristram, the learned Nimrod among hunters,
Tristram, the loved of women, the harp-player,
Tristram, the doom of his prophetic mother,
Dropped like a log; and silent on the floor,
With wild flowers lying around him on the floor--
Wild roses for Isolt--lay like a log. 54

Although Robinson includes a series of references to the legendary roles of
his hero in order to emphasize the depth of his grief, the passage has the
opposite effect. It seems less than likely that such an heroic character
would react as Tristram does.

The knight remains in a deathlike state until he receives a letter
from Morgan le Fay. The note, an inducement to lure Tristram into the trap
which she has set, tells the knight that Isolt is at Tintagel and is near
death. Morgan urges Tristram to hurry to Mark's land if he would see Isolt

53 Ibid., p. 169. 54 Ibid., pp. 169-70.
alive. In his mind Tristram sees again the vision of Isolt of Ireland with her "two dark eyes, / Frightened and wild again." No matter what the danger, he is determined to go to Cornwall and join her.

In section nine the lovers' dilemma is resolved. It is only death which can offer them release from the pain of life, and it is death to which their love leads them. Through Mark's gropings toward understanding, through the lovers' passive acceptance of death, and through the imagery of calm, Robinson creates the peaceful mood which dominates the final meeting of the lovers and their deaths.

Mark has gained no triumph from his seizure of Isolt. By separating her from Tristram, the King has brought her to the point of death. As he looks at her pale face and weak body, his desire for revenge leaves him.

The poor dominion that was his Of her frail body was not revenge enough To keep even hate alive, or to feed fury. There was a needlessness about it now That fury had not foreseen, and that foresight Would never have forestalled.

Resigning himself to his destiny, Mark begins to doubt the wisdom of his own past actions and the actions of all men in general. He will no longer stand between Tristram and Isolt; there is no point in demanding that Isolt die for her love.

Isolt accepts his kindness. She is aware of the injury done to him, but she is also aware that his generosity comes too late.

She smiled at him,
And touched his hand with hers: "You are good to me. Whatever you do, I shall not be here long.

55Ibid., p. 175. 56Ibid., p. 176.
Whatever you are, you have been good to me.
I shall not be afraid of you again."57

Mark is also aware of the nearness of death. Gazing out upon the
calm sea on which only a motionless ship stands, he wonders if he should or
could have foreseen the ultimate outcome of so much hatred and so little
understanding.

He cried, "God knows what else I should have seen!
Had I been made with eyes to read in the dark
All that was written there, I might have seen,
By straining them, some such effect as this.
How could I see where there was nothing shown
Or told for me to see? There was yourself,
But I believed that home was in your eyes,
Rather than hate, and that a crown to wear
Would outshine all your tears. Had I known early
All that I knew too late ... I do not know.
I am not sure."58

Mark's skeptical questioning of Fate and man's inability to read it contrasts
with Isolt of Ireland's complete resignation to her destiny. She is like the
calm sea--silent but expectant.

The arrival of Tristram is announced by Brangwaine. True to his word,
Mark departs to leave the lovers together for whatever time is left to them.
In this final meeting, the lovers resign themselves to a peace which only
death can bring. They know that their lifetime together was lived in one
brief summer. It was enough for Tristram; it was enough for Isolt. She
awaits death with this confidence.

She smiled. "I am not afraid to die,
Tristram, if you are trying to think of that--
Or not to think of that. Why think of it?
My cup was running over; and having had all

57Ibid., p. 179. 58Ibid., p. 180.
That one life holds of joy, and in one summer,
Why should I be a miser crying to God for more?"\textsuperscript{59}

The love which they share has given them flight beyond Time. Comparing their love to the soaring of birds, Isolt of Ireland states that she must return to earth forever, while Tristram will fly again when he rejoins Isolt of Brittany.

"Wings are but once for most of those who fly
Till they see time lying under them like a mist
That covers the earth. We have had wings and flown,
And one of us comes to earth again; and time,
Not to find much time left; and that is best
For her. One will have wings to fly again;
And that is best for him."\textsuperscript{60}

The calm of this speculation is reinforced by the stillness of the sea. The ominous moans of the past and the raging crash of water have passed. This moment is one of supreme calm, for the lovers have come to seek peace in death.

"The sea was never
So still as it is now, and the wind never
So dead, It is like dying, and not like death."\textsuperscript{61}

The peace of the moment becomes eternal for Tristram and Isolt of Ireland. Andred, urged by Morgan's hatred and hoping to gain favor from Mark, creeps forward and plunges a knife into Tristram. The knight's death words are ones of gratitude; he shall not be left alone. In the same instant Isolt dies. The lovers are united forever beyond the touch of Time and Fate.

When Mark comes upon the scene of the deaths, he is torn between a sense of horror at the deed Andred's hatred has wrought and a feeling that

\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., p. 185. \textsuperscript{60}Ibid., p. 189. \textsuperscript{61}Ibid., p. 190.
this peaceful scene is not an end for Tristram and Isolt. The specific nature of what is before him remains a mystery.

"Nothing was ever so still as this before... She said it was like something after life, And it was not like death. She may have meant To say to me it was like this: and this Is peace."52

Mark cannot condemn Andred; his doubts are his only certainties in the face of this death and peace.

The tenth and final section of the poem focuses upon Mark and Isolt of Brittany. Left behind, they must continue to live without the love that transcends Time or the peace which death offers. They can only hope for understanding and an end to pain. Through Mark, Robinson raises the central questions about the meaning of what has occurred; through Isolt of Brittany, Robinson indicates the stoic resignation which suffering demands.

Alone upon the parapet at Tintagel, Mark watches the calm sea and the gradually fading ship that barely moves upon it. In his contemplation he reveals an inability to understand what has happened and his recognition that it is in some way meaningful.

"If I were the world's maker I should say that fate was mightier than I was, Who made these two that are so silent now, And for an end like this. Nothing in this Is love that I have found, nor is it in love That shall find me. I shall know day from night Until I die, but there are darknesses That I am never to know, by day or night; All which is one more weary thing to learn, Always too late. There are some ills and evils Awaiting us that God could not invent: There are mistakes too monstrous for remorse

52Ibid., p. 197.
To fondle or to daily with, and failures
That only fate's worst fumbling in the dark
Could have arranged so well. And here once more
The scroll of my authority presents
Deficiency and dearth. I do not know
Whether these two that have torn life from time,
Like a death-laden flower out of earth,
Have failed or won. Many have paid with more
Than death for no such flower."63

Mark's thoughts which weave together the thematic strains of fate and love, death and peace, time and eternity, present the essential questions which Robinson raises. Is there a meaning to what has happened, and if so, how do we who can only see the darkness find the light of meaning?

In Brittany Isolt of the white hands learns of Tristram's death. At the opening of the poem, Howel tried to warn his daughter that Tristram's love was not destined to be hers. Now he feels the need to console her and offer the hope of love in the future. He warns her that she must surrender her dreams of Tristram. Isolt tells her father that she must believe in her dreams as she believed in Tristram's promise. Her life has no meaning without them.

"If I am wiser now than while I waited
For Tristram coming, knowing that he would come,
I may not wait so long for Tristram going,
For he will never go. I am not one
Who must have everything, yet I must have
My dreams if I must live, for they are mine."64

Her father submits to her will as he has always done. He leaves her by the sea which fascinates her still. There is nothing to wait for now, yet she will not abandon her love. On the shores of Brittany, Isolt of the white hands must continue to stand and watch the birds which soar beyond the land.

63Ibid., pp. 198-99.  
64Ibid., p. 206.
Alone, with her white face and her gray eyes,
She watched them there till even her thoughts were white,
And there was nothing alive but white birds flying,
Flying, and always flying, and still flying,
And the white sunlight flashing on the sea.  

The structure of Tristram is dictated by Edwin Arlington Robinson's
thematic emphasis. The love of Tristram and Isolt of Ireland is the source
of their suffering and joy. Through this love they are able to triumph over
Time and Fate—to transcend the finite through an infinite sharing. Incap-
able of such love, Mark can only be puzzled by the apparent paradox of life
and death, joy and suffering, wisdom and pain. Isolt of Brittany would offer
herself fully to Tristram, but she cannot share a transcendent love when her
affection is not returned. These psychological and cosmic implications are
emphasized by the poetic design with its tranquil opening and closing which
encase the love story.

Although the poem's structure is well conceived, there are some dis-
tracting elements apparent in the execution. The interval with Morgan le Fay
is needless. While Robinson does make use of the affair for thematic contrast,
such a device is really unnecessary since the intellectual love of Tristram
and Isolt of Ireland could never be confused with lust. As for the use of
Morgan as an agent to encourage Andred in his pursuit of revenge, the blow on
the head and his envy of Tristram seem motive enough. Positively, Morgan's
presence adds little to the poem; negatively, she is a confusing third love
interest whose relationship with Tristram is degrading to the hero.

The final section of the poem offers still another problem. The turn
from the death of the lovers to the account of Isolt of Brittany's reaction

to the news is essential to the proportions of the poem. Yet the shifting of scene does provide an emotional anti-climax. Barnard comments upon the problem which Robinson's ending produced.

... when the story of Isolt of Ireland has been told to the end, and the reader is prepared to pause for meditation, to review the events and estimate the significance of her life and Tristram's, there is still Isolt of Brittany to receive a farewell and to bequeath new materials for reflection, while the impact of the earlier ending is diffused and weakened.

Robinson's characteristic elimination of action in favor of reflection and conversation is evident throughout Tristram. This tendency is over-indulged throughout the poem, and as a result the dramatic and lyric effect of Robinson's design and sentiments is sharply diminished. It is particularly apparent in the scenes between the lovers, who talk incessantly and constantly on the same subjects. The critical awareness of this particular weakness in the poem is almost universal. Of the scenes between the lovers, Emery Neff comments as follows: "For over 400 lines Robinson's lovers discourse of love, while the reader's mind and imagination yawn. ... For the first and last time he was verbose and ineffectively repetitious." 67 Coffin finds that the poet's powers diminish "... in the latter part of Tristram. There the singing goes on and on, only--remarkable to note--in phrases as exact as prose." 68 Barnard finds the conversations of the lovers inappropriate and distracting.

Their folk-tale simplicity is metamorphosed into ultrasophisticated intellectualism. ... they discourse lengthily in impeccable meters

66 Barnard, p. 96.  
67 Neff, p. 224.  
68 Coffin, p. 84.
about the conflicting claims of love and honor, anatomize in detail their own motives and emotions, and discuss the correct values to be assigned in the equation of life, to fate and free will. Passion is vaporized into speech, and although this is periodically interrupted by breathless embraces, we begin to question whether a love that is so much talked about but so rarely evident in real action is as overpowering as it is declared to be. Robinson's own feeling while working on the poem--"I am still in doubt as to some of the mushy parts"--may be shared by some readers of the completed work.69

Margaret Reid feels that although Robinson's sentiments are just, they are overworked. 'There are many passages which show a fine sensitiveness and analytic powers, but the general effect of the long speeches is apt to be monotonous."70 Edmund Wilson finds the poem "full of long, well bred conversations of which the metaphysical archness sounds peculiarly incongruous in the mouths of the barbarous heroes of medieval legend."71

The speeches of the lovers are too long and too philosophical in content. While the growth of the characters is demonstrated through a paralleling of the conversation of the initial meeting of the lovers with the later meetings, it was not necessary that Tristram and Isolt of Ireland do nothing but talk, and at such great length, to achieve the balance which Robinson desired. The results of the passages are that the reader is bored by repetition and surprised by the lack of passion within the world's most famous lovers.

This feeling of repetition is not alleviated through variety in metrics and language. The blank verse seems almost mechanical in its exactness through great portions of the poem, and the language, for the most part, is stark and simple. In other passages, however, the verse has a rugged and unfinished quality. This harshness is most apparent in the sections where

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69Barnard, p. 151. 70Reid, p. 242. 71Wilson, p. 319.
the syntax becomes involved. Often in the past Robinson chose a method of
indirect statement which necessitated a complicated grammatical pattern. In
Tristram the involved syntax is not the result of indirection. The statements
are not suggestive; they are poorly phrased. Howel says

"Have you kept hid
Some promise or protestation heretofore,
That you may shape a thought into a reason
For making always of a distant wish
A dim belief?"72

Tristram wonders about the love of the two Isolts in the following manner.

They were not
There now, and there was now no need of them
To make him ask, in a self-smitting rage
Of helpless pity, if such a love as hers
Might not unshared be nearer to God's need,
In his endurance of a blinder Fate,
Than a love shared asunder, but still withheld
Apart for time to play with.73

This syntactically awkwardness becomes even more distracting in passages
where the language lacks concentration or the diction seems inappropriate.
The following speech of Howel is stilted and verbose.

"It may be fancy and fantastic youth
That ails her now: it may be the sick touch
Of prophecy concealing disillusion.
If there were not inwoven so much power
And poise of sense with all her seeming folly,
I might assume a concord with her faith
As that of one elected soon to die.
But surely no infringement of the grave
In her conceits and her appearances
Encourages a fear that still is fear;
And what she is to know, I cannot say."74

Tristram's speech combines awkwardness with distracting diction.

"Whenever I set myself to count the pounds
Of beauty you have for your not having them,"
Through fear for me, perhaps,—I could affirm
That your disturbance has a virtue in it,
Which I had not foreseen. Were you too happy
Your face might round itself like a full fruit. 75

While these examples are not representative of the general pattern, the presence of weak passages is frequent enough to be distressing.

The design of the poem, the balance and proportion which Robinson wished to achieve, is weakened by the Morgan le Fay episode, the anti-climactic ending, and the lengthy conversations of the lovers. The metrical techniques and the language of the poem do little to add to the richness or the success of the design. The strength of Tristram as a poem lies elsewhere.

The real force of the poetic structure is found in Robinson's use of images as unifying devices and thematic embodiments, his conception of love and suffering as a source of wisdom which is depicted in the lovers, and his thematic emphasis upon the ultimate meaningfulness of life.

One of the major difficulties which confronted Robinson resulted from the presence of two Isolts: he had to keep them distinct in the mind of the reader. The poet solved the problem by creating contrasting sets of images for the women. These images relate to their respective roles in Tristram's life. Isolt of Ireland is the red queen of love; Isolt of Brittany is the white queen of pity.

He built a royal garden for Isolt
Of the white hands to bloom in, a white rose
Fairer than all the roses in the world
Elsewhere—save one that was not white but dark,
Dark and love-red for ever, and not there,
Where the white rose was queen. 76

75 Ibid., p. 158. 76 Ibid., p. 95.
Isolt of Brittany is constantly associated with calm and white. She stands at the shore looking at the white birds flying in white sunlight. As in the legendary treatments, she is called Isolt of the white hands, and her beauty is emphasized by calm gray eyes and golden hair. Gawaine's words in praise of her loveliness combine the various images which Robinson unites throughout the poem.

"You are supreme
In a deceit that says fragility
Where there is nothing fragile. You have eyes
That almost weep for grief, seeing from heaven
How trivial and how tragic a small place
This earth is, and so make a sort of heaven
Where they are seen. Your hair, if shorn and woven,
The which may God forbid, would then become
A nameless cloth of gold whiter than gold,
Imprisoning light captured from paradise.
Your small ears are two necessary leaves
Of living alabaster never of earth
Whereof the flower that is your face is made
And is a paradisal triumph also--
Along with your gray eyes and your gold hair
That is not gold."

Isolt of Ireland is associated with passion and darkness. She is a red flame that burns constantly. In her, pride and passion are transformed into love.

Wherever he looked,
He saw dark eyes and hair and a white face
That was not white, but was the color of love:
Or that was near enough to being a name,
He thought.

Robinson follows Tennyson in his description of Isolt of Ireland. Her hair is blue-black and her eyes, the mirror of her emotions are violet. It is the fear in these eyes which haunts Tristram through his time of banishment. In

77 Ibid., p. 102. 78 Ibid., p. 154. 79 Perrine, p. 318.
those eyes he also reads the joy of reunion.

He was blind
At first with many a shaft of laughing fire
All shot from somewhere out of violet eyes. 80

And finally he sees in them calm resignation to death.

Under the darkness of her waving hair,
And with a pallid loveliness not pale
With life around them, the same violet eyes
Fixed upon his and with a calm that hurt him,
Telling him what they told, and holding more
Than it was good to tell. 81

The nature of love is also depicted through the image patterns. Lust and uncontrolled emotions are associated with animals. Morgan is feline or reptilian throughout the poem. She ranges from "feline slenderness" 82 to a "snake with two warm arms/ And a warm mouth." 83 Andred is called Tristram's "lizard-cousin." 84 Mark, who has lived an early life of dissipation, is a "man-shaped goat." 85

The early love of Tristram and Isolt is passionate and proud. The fire and heat imagery of the first meeting of the lovers indicates the nature of their feelings. Tristram's rage and desire are apparent in the fiery thoughts which haunt him.

Now there was time
For him to weigh them, and to weigh them well,
To the last scorching ounce of desperation,
Searing his wits and flesh like heated mail
Amidst the fiery downfall of a palace,
Where there was no one left except himself
To save, and no way out except through fire. 86

80 Tristram, p. 155. 81 Ibid., p. 187. 82 Ibid., p. 77
83 Ibid., p. 78. 84 Ibid., p. 63. 85 Ibid., p. 22
86 Ibid., p. 20.
Isol is also aware that their love is a consuming fire when she asks

What have we done,
So false or foul as to be burned alive!"87

Their moments of union are moments of intense heat and passion.

Isol, almost as with a frightened leap
Muffled his mouth with hers in a long kiss,
Blending in their catastrophe two fires
That made one fire.88

When the lovers are finally reunited, they have gone beyond passion
as they have gone beyond the world. The star image suggests that their love
is now more than fire.

"They must be more than fire; and if the stars
Are more than fire, what else is there for them
To be than love?"89

In their final meeting the love which is to be eternal is likened to the birds
which leave the earth and Time behind them. Isol of Ireland's final wish is
ultimately granted.

"I would to God
That we might fly together away from here
Like two birds over the sea."90

This association of the lovers with the flying birds adds new meaning to the
portrait of Isol of Brittany. The opening and closing scenes which show her
gazing at the flight of the birds emphasizes her separateness. Fate has
denied her an escape from Time through a transcendent love; she can only
stand on the earth and guess from the flight of the birds the happiness she
has missed.

87Ibid., p. 38. 88Ibid., p. 41.
89Ibid., p. 147. 90Ibid., p. 190.
Thus Robinson contrasts animal lust, fiery passions, and transcendent love through his contrasting references to animals, flames, and stars which burn beyond fire and birds which fly beyond Time.

The sea is one of the central images of the poem. It serves to unite the scenes, to reflect the emotions of the characters, and to suggest the changeful indifference of Fate and Time. The blank ocean which Isolt of Brittany gazes upon first with expectation and then resignation opens and closes the poem. It is by means of this sea that Tristram comes to her and then departs. Destiny and the sea are one for Isolt of Brittany. In its sounds she hears the name which dominates her life.

Her father found her by the sea, alone
Where the cold waves that rolled along the sand
Were saying to her unceasingly, "Tristram--Tristram."91

When Robinson shifts the action of the poem from Brittany to Cornwall, it is the sea that provides a transition. But the water has a different mood in Mark's kingdom. Here it is united with the turbulent and fateful love of Tristram and Isolt of Ireland. Thus the calm water of Brittany changes to the "moaning wash of Cornish water/ Cold upon Cornish rocks."92 To Tristram the sea reflects Fate's indifference to him in particular and to mankind in general.

He gazed at nothing, save a moving blur
Where foamed eternally on Cornish rocks
The moan of Cornish water; and he asked,
With a malignant inward voice of envy,
How many scarred cold things that once had laughed
And loved and wept and sung, and had been men,
Might have been knocked and washed indifferently

91 Ibid., p. 203.  
92 Ibid., p. 48.
On that hard shore, and eaten gradually
By competent quick fishes and large crabs
And larger birds, not caring a wink which
Might be employed on their spent images
No longer tortured there, if God was good.93

The turbulence of the "waves foaming on the cold rocks"94 reflects the confusion of the lovers in their first meeting at Tintagel. Their mood changes when the waves whisper the name of Isolt to Tristram as he seeks peace in Brittany. Here they reflect his sense of "impotent annihilation/In a long wash of foam."95 The calm waters of the final scene at Tintagel reflect the quiet majesty of the transcendent love achieved and the peace beyond death that is to come. Isolt sees the relationship between the sea and her mood.

"The sea was never so still as this before,"
She said, "It is like something after life,
And it is not like death."96

Mark suggests that the sea is the mirror of man's emotions in all of his possible moods.

"Perhaps the sea is like ourselves," Mark said,
"And has as much to say of storms and calms
That shake or make it still, as we have power
To shake or to be still. I do not know."97

After the deaths of the lovers, Robinson unites the sea with the stars and suggests an eternal calm for the lovers.

The silent water
Was like another sky where silent stars
Might sleep forever, and everywhere was peace.98

Thus the sea reflects the calm of Isolt of Brittany and the questioning of Mark as well as the passion and final resignation of Tristram and

93Ibid., p. 21. 94Ibid., p. 57. 95Ibid., p. 114.
96Ibid., p. 177. 97Ibid. 98Ibid., p. 200.
Isolt. This image unifies the poem by intensifying the moods of the characters and by serving as the primary vehicle by which Tristram moves back and forth between Cornwall and Brittany. Through its constant indifference—its cold, ceaseless movement—the sea further embodies the changing and irrational aspects of life which have thwarted the lovers. It is the wash of a cold foam

Below them on those cold eternal rocks
Where Tristram and Isolt had yesterday
Come to be wrecked together.\(^9\)

Davis, in his study of Robinson's imagery, finds the sea among the poet's most delicate and suggestive tools.

In general, the sea image in Robinson's hands is a tool of rare flexibility, employed with great skill to indicate subtle shifts in attitude and dramatic tone. It manages to retain great emotional power, too, despite the delicacy in gradation and shading.\(^10\)

Closely related to the sea imagery is Robinson's use of ships as vessels of destiny. It is a ship which twice brings and takes Tristram to and from Isolt of Brittany. Aboard the ship which brought Isolt of Ireland to Cornwall, the silence of the lovers sealed their doom. When Mark seizes his wife at Joyous Gard, she is returned to Tintagel in a ship. All of these references prepare for the symbolic use of the ship which moves so silently on the Cornish waters at the time of the lovers' deaths.

Looking out upon the calm sea, Isolt of Ireland perceives in the vessel the continuous journey of life.

"And ships in their last port;"
She said, "have still a farther voyage to make,"

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 51.  \(^10\)Davis, p. 386.
Wherever it is they go. Were it not for love, Poor life would be a ship not worth launching."101

After the deaths of Tristram and Isolt, the ship moves slowly and gently across the horizon. Mark watches its peaceful journey, until it gradually fades from view.

Alone he stood there, watching
The sea and its one ship, until the sea
Became a lonely darkness and the ship
Was gone, as a friend goes.102

This peaceful movement parallels the final journey of the lovers. Calm and silent as the ship, Tristram and Isolt of Ireland have embarked upon the farther voyage whose exact nature is a mystery which neither Mark nor Robinson can solve. Perrine sees the ship's movement as the embodiment of the lovers' passing from one sphere to the next.

It seems to me that in the sailing of the ship out to sea, in Tristram, Robinson suggestively, but with a purposeful vagueness, symbolizes his belief that somewhere the life that was in Tristram and Isolt, and the love that gave life meaning for them, live on.103

Although the images which Robinson employs in Tristram are few and ordinary, his handling of them is restrained and artistic. While he is directly indebted to previous treatments only for his depiction of the two Isoltis, the sea, animals, fire, and cold are not novel materials. It is the handling of these ordinary things which demonstrates the poet's artistry. Psychological moods, the thematic growth of the lovers, the indifference of nature to the needs of man, the mysteries of life and death are reflected in

103Laurence Perrine, "Robinson's Tristram," Explicator, VI (May, 1948), 44.
the image patterns. Woven throughout the poem, these devices serve as his leitmotifs which unify the four principal characters in their tragic destinies. The sea with its ships and the coldness of the moon are apparent in both Brittany and Cornwall. The dark Isolt and the white Isolt through their contrasting appeals to love and pity embody the forces which motivate Tristram. The fiery stars and the flights of the birds are symbols of the lovers and ironic realities to Mark and Isolt of Brittany. By repeating these distinctive patterns throughout the poem, Robinson artistically unites the various narrative strains, enhances the depiction of character, and suggests his thematic vision.

Like the images of the poem, the characters are embodiments of Robinson's theme. While the poet develops only four of the characters in depth, Morgan le Fay, Andred, and Gawaine serve as foils for the principal tragic figures. In Morgan and Andred, Robinson shows the degenerate influence of total selfishness. Moved by lust, envy, and jealousy, this pair are tools which Fate uses to give the lovers release from pain. Ironically the vengeance which Morgan seeks by encouraging Andred's action becomes the source of peace for Tristram. Andred, on the other hand, seeks to establish himself with Morgan, whose shallowness is obvious, and to secure a position with Mark, who is appalled by his deed. The selfishness which motivates this animal-like pair brings them no satisfaction or gratification; it is merely the instrument which destiny uses in the larger tragedy.

Gawaine is more shallow than evil. In his fickle pursuit of love, he seeks no real involvements, for he will not pay the price which true emotion demands. His rejection of selfless love is apparent when he realizes the
nature and depth of Tristram's suffering. His position is in direct contrast to the emotional maturity which Tristram and Isolt achieve. He will not suffer for love.

"Tristram is mad,
Or dead, or God knows what's the name of it,
And all because a woman had eyes and ears,
And beauty enough to strike him dumb with it.
Why must a man, where there are leaves and fishes,
See only as far as one crumb on his table?
Why must he make one morsel of a lifetime?
Here is no place for me. If this be love,
May I live all alone out on a rock,
And starve out there with only the sea to drink,
And only myself to eat. If this be love,
May I wear blinkers always, or better yet
Go blindfold through the perils of this world,
Which I have always liked, and so, God help me,
Be led to safety like a hooded horse
Through sparks and unseen fire. If this be love,
May I grow merry and old and amiable
On hate."104

The tragedy of Mark is that he learns the emptiness of his actions too late to avert disaster. The King of Cornwall is not an evil man; he is a man of spiritual and intellectual limitations. Robinson intimates that the gratification of his passions has led to the physical ugliness and spiritual insensitivity of Mark. Thwarted in his desire for Isolt of Ireland, he becomes a wounded animal seeking revenge. The reader's first meeting with Mark suggests the indulgence of the past and the fury of the future.

Tristram saw
Confronting him two red and rheumy eyes,
Pouched in a face that nature had made comely,
And in appearance was indulgently
Ordained to wait on lust and wine and riot
For more years yet than leeches might foresee.

104 Tristram, pp. 171-72.
Meeting the crafty sadness always in them,
He found it more than sad and worse than crafty,
And saw that no commingled shame and rage
Like that which he could see in them tonight
Would go out soon.105

Mark's hatred of Tristan is intensified when he realizes that Isolt
will love no other man. His only desire is to avenge himself upon his
nephew, and in his pursuit he brings about disaster. His was

A nature not so base as it was common,
And not so cruel as it was ruinous
To itself and all who thwarted it.106

Mark must learn that his hatred is hollow. Facing the reality of
death which surrounds Isolt, he finally recognizes the futility of his selfish pursuits. He will no longer come between the lovers because there is no point in it. A gradual realization of the folly of his actions is what motivates Mark to tolerate the situation in which he finds himself.

"When there is nothing left for us to lose,
There's no great mercy in our not losing it,"
He said. "God will not hear you if you thank him
Only for that. A weary spark of sense,
Or a dull feel or reason, is not mercy.
I have not changed. I'm only some days older
Than when they brought you back from there—brought you
And your white face together. You looked at me,
And I saw your white face."107

Mark's wisdom comes too late. With the lovers dead, he is aware of
an experience which he can never share and a mystery which he cannot explore.

He must learn everything too late.

"Nothing in this
Is love that I have found, nor is it love
That shall find me. I shall know day from night

105Ibid., p. 61.  106Ibid., p. 123.  107Ibid., p. 179.
Until I die, but there are darknesse
That I am never to know, by day or night:
All which is one more weary thing to learn
Always too late."108

While Mark is enraged by his destiny and strikes out against it only to learn that such fury is destructive to himself as well as the lovers, Isolt of Brittany is resigned to whatever Fate holds out to her. Isolated from the passions and turmoil of life, she lives in a dream world which is dominated by her vision of Tristram. She demands nothing of the knight; instead, she would give him all that she is. Her tragedy is that he could not accept her love.

"I would have been the world
And heaven to Tristram, and was nothing to him;
And that was why the night came down so dark
On me when Tristram died."109

It is in the nature of her resignation that she contrasts with Mark of Cornwall and indicates the purity and unselfishness of her love. As Dauner states, "Isolt is too generous in nature to be able to do anything but try to understand a harsh fate, and endure."110 It is the quality of endurance in the face of the blankness of her existence, symbolized by the empty sunlight and water upon which she constantly gazes, which marks her final state. She looks at life with its inevitable tragedy and accepts her role. Without understanding the why of her dilemma, she remains at peace and serene.

"Isolt of Brittany changes from a child whose dreams are touched by an un-childlike solemnity to a woman whose vision of reality has the tragic sim-

Robinson's portrait of Isolt of the white hands is one of the major achievements of the poem. Through her simplicity and thoughtfulness, he is able to create a distinct mood and capture the spirit of her stoic endurance. Her momentary jealousy when Tristram departs with Gawaine makes her human and sympathetic since it allows the reader to see the mixture of frailty and strength which constitutes her nature. Surrounded by the flying birds and the sun-touched waters, Isolt of Brittany is both poignant and real.

Love is the agency through which Tristram and Isolt of Ireland gain wisdom and humility. The dark Isolt is a woman made for love. In her the promise of Vivian and Guinevere is fulfilled. All of her passion and pride are overwhelmed by her devotion to Tristram. She is unselfish passion personified. Isolt herself indicates her nature.

"There must be women who are made for love,
And of it, and are mostly pride and fire
Without it."112

From a moment aboard the ship bringing her to Cornwall when Isolt realizes her love though she remains silent, the dark maiden surrenders her identity to love. Her love for Tristram is the cause of all her fears. Her life is his for the asking.

"Tristram, believe, whatever the rest may be,
This is all yours—let God to weigh at last,
And as he will. And if it be found wanting,
He will not find what's left so ordinary
As not to say of it, 'This was Isolt—
Isolt who was all love.' He made her so,
And some time he may tell her why it is
So many that are on earth are there to suffer."113
"Now listen, while I say this;  
My life to me is not a little thing;  
It is a fearful and a lovely thing;  
Only my love is more."114

In her love Isolt moves from fear and hope to peace and resignation. "The character of this dark Isolt suggests the reconciliation of passionate, physical experience with the old ideal of wisdom."115 What she learns is the transcendent nature of her love; what she accepts is the brevity of her happiness. In her wisdom she is able to forget that Time and Fate are indifferent to her desires. She is capable of leaving Tristram and reconciled to his return to Isolt of Brittany. She desires that he will love and fly beyond Time even without her. In this supreme denial of the self, she has become love itself. She is the torch of woman whose unselfish devotion was the source of salvation seen in Merlin's vision.

Tristram must learn from Isolt of Ireland and from his isolated suffering the need for the subjugation of the self. The knight's first encounters with passion were frivolous experiences.

"... love was yet no more for me  
Than a gay folly glancing everywhere  
For triumph easier sometimes than defeat."116

When he finally realizes the depth of his feelings for Isolt of Ireland, he is forced to confront the ironic hand of Fate for the first time. His reactions are hatred for Mark, self-derision, and rage at his destiny.

114 Ibid., p. 144.
116 Tristram, p. 40.
Through the first days of his banishment, his spiritual dilemma is manifested in his physical illness and in his hateful relationship with Morgan. Out of all this excess of passion and suffering comes an awareness that he must overcome his own weaknesses before he can meet his destiny with any dignity.

"There's a contentious kingdom in myself
For me to rule before I shall rule others." 117

This struggle within the knight is resolved in Brittany where Tristram offers himself to Isolt of the white hands and her need of him. In his attempt to rule her land and to bring her happiness, he forgets himself, although he can never forget Isolt of Ireland. When Gawaine comes with a summons from Arthur, Tristram is anxious and ready to confront his destiny. This time he is prepared to accept whatever it offers him. The rage and self-pity are gone: love and resignation have triumphed. The ultimate emergence of an unselfish love comes when Tristram, like Isolt of Ireland before him, is willing to sacrifice life itself for the sake of his love.

"God knows," he said,

"How well my love, which is the best of me,
Knows what a gulf of trust and understanding
There is in yours, where I would drown and die
So gladly and so soon, could I, by going
That way, leave you behind me here, and happy." 118

Love chastens both Tristram and Isolt. Barnard summarizes the growth of the lovers.

They do not die until they have learned that love is more than passion and possession; until their feeling for each other has been disciplined and humanized by a long separation and then a period of almost domestic life together; until each has so far transcended "self" as to think of the other first (perhaps Isolt always did so), and even to spare a thought for Mark and the other Isolt. 119

While the thematic emphasis upon the growth of selfless love is realized in Tristram and Isolt, the characters themselves leave something to be desired. The reflective and introspective qualities which Robinson assigns to them clash with their presumed passionate motivations. The breathless kisses and embraces which occasionally interrupt the lovers' discourses are hardly of the nature of all-consuming love. The artist attempted to treat his lovers as he did his more passive and speculative characters, Mark and Isolt of Brittany. "This method of fine etching in the neutral tints of black and white and gray does not suit so well the delineation of the stormier passions of Tristram and Isolt of Ireland, which requires stronger and more vivid colours."120

Through the contrasts between Andred, Morgan, and Gawaine with the lovers, through the groping realizations of Mark and the stoic resignation of Isolt of Brittany, and through the growth of Tristram and Isolt of Ireland from pride and passion to humility and selfless love, Robinson makes his thematic statement. Love, the torch which forces man to purge himself in its pursuit, is a source of joy and pain together. Out of this ironic mixture comes wisdom and resignation which influence not only the lovers themselves, but also those who are involved in their tragedy. Isolt of Brittany and Mark are wiser and tragically better because of the lovers. Carpenter sees two basic statements made within the poem.

First, it proclaimed repeatedly that individuals who suffer defeat and death "in time," while gaining spiritual salvation, actually do influence the world about them so powerfully that their individual deaths seem unimportant. Second, Robinson's Tristram emphasized that those ecstatic moments which transcend "time" by their intensity and power are not

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120Reid, p. 243.
merely intellectual insights but deeply felt moments of living experience.\footnote{121}

Thus love as an experience which brings wisdom, pain, and happiness is depicted. However, the love of this poem goes beyond the physical universe. The exact nature of the lovers' union in death is vague, but it is suggested by the image of the ship and the ceaseless flight of the birds that attend the vigil of Isolt of Brittany. Like the Light of Lancelot's vision, like the world which Merlin seeks after the fall of Camelot, the deaths of the lovers become an affirmation of the meaningfulness of life. The sea may move on as ceaselessly and indifferently as Time and Fate themselves. Its force, as their forces, may stand in direct conflict with the aspirations of Mark, the two Isolts, and Tristram. But there is the final peace whose nature is as vague as the destination of the ship which passes from Mark's sight. This love, this power to go beyond the real and material into an ideal and spiritual peace, is the true triumph over the self and over the universe and its forces. Isolt of Ireland sees the ultimate achievement.

"But when two loves like ours
Wear down the wall of time dividing them,
Two oceans come together and flow over
Time and his evil work. It was too long,
That wall, but there is nothing left of it,
And there is only love where the wall was."\footnote{122}

\textbf{Tristram}, the last poem of Robinson's to deal with the Arthurian material, raised the same problem for the critics which Merlin and Lancelot had. Carpenter asks the central question. "How could a poet morally and intellectually disciplined and even inhibited as Robinson was, suddenly

\footnote{121}{Carpenter, pp. 521-22.} \footnote{122}{Tristram, p. 54.}
write a poem describing vividly and celebrating wholeheartedly one of the most passionate love stories of all literature?" The answer is that Robinson did not write such a poem. The legend of Tristram is transformed from a passionate love story into an introspective meditation on love as a force in man's life which is a paradoxical and tenuous thing in itself.

The narrative design with its lengthy conversations and passages of analysis is a result of the change in emphasis. While this structure is admirable in its conception—-the balance of the opening with the closing scene and the episodes with the lovers receiving the central focus—-the realization of the design is less successful. The lengthy passages where the lovers converse constantly about the same things lack proportion, are repetitive, and bore the reader. This effect is increased by the mechanical nature of the blank verse, by an unusually stark diction, and by some confusing grammatical constructions.

Where Robinson does succeed in the poem is in the vision—-his emphasis upon a love that makes life meaningful through its purgative force. This vision is rendered through artistic image patterns and the presentation of characters. Although Tristram and Isolt of Ireland are lacking in vitality, they do raise the central questions and provide many of the essential answers. Mark and Isolt of Brittany are well-drawn and interesting embodiments of the tragedy of those left behind.

Overall there is a lack of variety and richness in the poem which is made more apparent by the essential richness of the legend itself. The images, the characters, and the themes do not sustain the force of this long narrative poem. Like the lovers whose tale it tells, Robinson's Tristram lacks vitality.
CONCLUSION

During the ten year period from 1917 to 1927, Edwin Arlington Robinson produced three long narrative poems based upon the Arthurian legends. The motivations behind these works were a desire to find a myth appropriate to the poet's vision of the decline of western civilization, a personal domestic triangle whose correlative was apparent in the love relationships of Camelot and Cornwall, a weakness in narrative design which could be overcome by the use of ready-made plots, and the provocative and artistic stimulations of the legends themselves.

Contemporary critics—Amy Lowell, Edmund Wilson, Louis Untermeyer, and others—were unhappy with Merlin, Lancelot and Tristram. They feared a literary retreat on the part of a poet whom they admired for his dedication to modernity in subject matter and methods. It was apparent that Robinson had forsaken the common man and his experiences as his subject matter, and they hoped that this venture into the medieval past did not mark a definite trend.

Robinson had not abandoned his unique style. He had attempted to wed his modern artistry to the medieval material. The portrait of man struggling
with self and destiny, the psychological character portrayal where the inner strengths and weaknesses of men are explored, the dramatic narrative design in which characters reflect rather than act and setting is established through psychological mood, the thematic unifying imagery, the simplicity of language, and the traditional meters are just as apparent in the Arthurian poems as they are in the work done before 1917.

Like the early Robinson poems *Merlin*, *Lancelot* and *Tristram* are concerned with the individual souls of heroes who are caught in a conflict between their desires and the circumstances of their existences. In each of the poems, Time, in the guise of change, and Fate, in terms of character and circumstances, stand between the hero and his happiness. The results of such conflict are suffering and pain which produce wisdom and growth. This development is evidence that suffering is significant and meaningful. Though Merlin loses Vivian and Camelot, he gains self-knowledge and the courage to seek a new world; though Lancelot must leave the beauty and love of Guinevere, he finally makes a total commitment to the quest of the ideal in his search for the Light; though Tristram has to suffer humiliation, separation, and death, he achieves an ideal love which gives to him a peace beyond Time and Fate. Having gone through purgative flames and having forsaken their desires, the heroes of the poems exemplify in their suffering and growth Robinson's belief in a universe of pain and meaning.

This theme is developed through the psychological depiction of character. In all three poems, contrasting secondary characters—Gawain, Arthur, Modred, Morgan le Fay, and Andred—illustrate negatively the necessity of growth. The heroines differ from poem to poem and provide an interesting
contrast. Vivian remains in her world of selfish isolation and refuses to grow; Guinevere overcomes her possessive love, releases Lancelot, and hopes for greater spiritual insight; Isolt of Ireland achieves total self-denial in her love of Tristram and develops to the fullness of her capacities. The heroes of the poems are provided with an essential conflict which causes them suffering but out of which arises wisdom and hope. For Merlin the test was one of courage: he had to face the ruins of Camelot and Broceliande and then strike out in search of another and hopefully better world. For Lancelot the forsaking of the old life and love with their beauty must be achieved so that the new life of the Light can be pursued. For Tristram the self must be overcome so that a love which can triumph over circumstances will be achieved.

Evidence of Robinson's attempt to modernize the legends is also discernable in his handling of the primary sources: S. Humphreys Gurteen's The Arthurian Epic, Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur, and Joseph Bedier's The Romance of Tristan and Isolde. Robinson's selective use of these materials demonstrates that the poet's primary focus was the psychological depiction of the cosmic and personal struggles of men. The action of knightly encounters, the magnificence of pageantry, the wealth of detail and incident, and the magic and mystery which constitute such large elements of the legends' literary tradition are consistently eliminated. The struggle of Merlin between the world of Arthur and the world of Vivian, the struggle of Lancelot between Guinevere and the Light, and the struggle of Tristram between his love for Isolt and the fatal forces which stand in his way are the materials of which Robinson makes use. Actions and details are included only when they are essential to the illumination of these conflicts.
The designs of the poems also follow a consistent pattern. Specific physical setting is never developed; psychological mood provides the necessary atmosphere. Thus Camelot, Broceliande, Joyous Gard, Cornwall, and Brittany are never physically created. The moods of their inhabitants dominate the scenes. These characters are seen in conversation and reflection rather than action. Merlin, Vivian, and Arthur talk about the decline of Camelot and love; Lancelot and Guinevere discuss the end of love and the quest for the Light; Tristram and Isolt converse about love that triumphs over Time and Fate. Action and essential details are compressed into brief passages so that the conversations which delineate character and emphasize growth receive the primary focus.

These designs are unified through dominant image patterns. The creation of ordinary images into elaborate patterns is an essential element of Robinson's art. In Merlin the development of contrasting sets of images for the worlds of Camelot and Broceliande creates the unifying tension of the poem. The Light which is the central image pattern and the principal moral test for the characters in Lancelot provides the necessary unity. In Tristram the sea, indifferent to the ways of man and a primary vehicle of his destiny, touches both Cornwall and Brittany. In all three poems these primary patterns are reinforced by other thematic images like the flame, ash, and cold which illustrate the moments of passion and the moments of change.

Appropriate to the grandeur of the subject and suited to the conversational emphasis of the designs, blank verse is employed as the metrical pattern in each of these long narrative poems. The diction of the lines is unpretentious and lacking in connotative qualities: the syntax, for the most
part, has a conversational naturalness. There is no departure from the
traditional metrics or stark language of Robinson's earlier works.

Judgments of the merits of these poems must be made not upon Robin-
son's selection of subject matter but upon the nature of his treatments.
This brief comparison of the poems indicates that there was no departure
from the poet's stated modernity. Indeed, there was a deliberate attempt to
modernize the legends through emphasis upon psychological dimensions, through
the elimination of unrealistic materials, and through the use of an unadorned
style and meter. All of the characteristics which endeared Robinson to the
critics are present in Merlin, Lancelot and Tristram, and yet, the poems
fail as artistic wholes. While their designs are admirable, their themes
and characters on the whole well developed, and their elements unified, the
poems are bare and repetitive. This failure suggests that the poet selected
material that was not suited to his artistic abilities.

There are definite weaknesses that are apparent in Robinson's work
as a whole. Writing in 1937, Morton Dauwen Zabel perceptively pointed out
the negative aspects of the poet's work.

There is too little in his work of "growth" or variety to make him a
creative force like Yeats or Pound; too little invention to make him
a discoverer like Eliot or Auden; too little of journalistic tact to
give him the popular following of Sandburg or Millay; only a small
part of the proverbial Americanism that endears Frost; of course none
of the spasmodic brilliance and sentiments that divide him as by a polar
distance from the expert sleights and trade tricks of the average talents
who outbid him in esteem. What is lost by these defects is obvious. It
appears in the low vitality of his language, the reluctant energy of his
style, the monotony and repetition of his effects, his shortcomings in
focus, contrast, and decision."

\[1\] Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Robinson: The Ironic Discipline," Nation,
CXLV (August 28, 1937), 222.
These characteristics become even more apparent in the Arthurian poems for two reasons. First, the length of the poems demands greater variety and richness than Robinson was willing or able to produce. The tendency to repeat, the lack of vitality, the starkness of the style are more apparent in these longer works than in the shorter poems. It is interesting to note that Robinson was aware of a change in his artistry when he began to write these longer pieces. He wrote

"People ask me why I do not do the short poems any more. I can't. They don't come any more. At least, not good ones. And I'm not willing to publish poems I know are inferior to the early ones."

Ironically, length demands greater richness and variety than brevity.

The second reason for the reader's awareness of Robinson's weaknesses in the Arthurian poems is found in the legends themselves. While the reader must allow the author freedom to choose his subject and to treat it as he must, the reader cannot control his conscious or unconscious tendency to compare and contrast. To what extent the previous associations influence critical judgments is an immeasurable quantity, and yet there can be no doubt that those readers who know the medieval materials may only feel a loss over the elimination of Merlin's magic, Lancelot's knightly prowess, and the incident of the black and white sails. There is inherent in the Arthurian materials such richness, vividness, and vitality that the lack of these qualities in Merlin, Lancelot and Tristram is all the more obvious.

The challenges of length and the nature of the subject matter of the Arthurian legends provided major obstacles which Robinson could not overcome.

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2 Bates, p. 22.
Thus his characteristic weaknesses are all too apparent. In spite of these flaws, his strengths are also obvious to the reader. His psychological insight and his stoic outlook reinforced by the simplicity of his style are his contributions to the Arthurian legend. His attempts to modernize the tales resulted in a realism that is sustained throughout the poems. As Zabel states, Robinson maintains his "realism by analysis, skepticism, and the long-tested endurance of intellectual honesty and passion."³ Both the weaknesses and the strengths of the artist are part of his Arthurian vision.

Poets often see themselves as visionaries—prophets of the human race. It is their insight into human complexities and their ability to see beyond the surface incident into the essence or core of life that endow them with the ability to speak for all men. A unique example of this insight dictating the nature of poetry is seen in Robinson's handling of the Arthurian materials. The stories were not enough for him; they were the kernels, the seeds around which he attempted to form a fruit of his own experience. That every aspect of the attempts was not successful does not lessen the meaning of his vision. Edwin Arlington Robinson found something of the eternal in the stories of Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram, and he left them with something of himself.

³Zabel, p. 222.
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III. Unpublished Material

The dissertation submitted by Patricia O'Donnell Ewers has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

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Date

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