

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 20
Issue 1 *March*

Article 6

March 1984

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 20, no.1, March 1984, p.47-50

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Allusion and Symbol in Robinson's "Eros Turannos"

by C. HINES EDWARDS, JR.

ATTEMPTS TO explain E. A. Robinson's "Eros Turannos" range from Chard Powers Smith's biographical interpretation to vaguely general statements about the tragic nature of the poem. According to Smith, the poem describes the situation of Herman and Emma Robinson, the poet's brother and sister-in-law, who had marital problems because of Herman's alcoholism. Smith explains the poem as Robinson's statement of sympathy for Emma and as perhaps an oblique statement of his love for her.¹ Though his biographical interpretation may have some merit for biographers, it gives little help in understanding the poem in terms of theme, images, and symbols. On the other hand, some treat the poem as if it can be understood only generally with no specification of detail at all. Several acknowledge that it contains symbols, but no one ascribes specific meaning to the symbols.² Critics discussing the poem speak of "the generalizing power of the poetic method,"³ the "high tragedy" in the poem,⁴ and its "classical . . . presentation of tragedy."⁵ Then they write briefly of the melancholy situation of the woman who made a bad marriage but who could see that any other situation would be worse.⁶ Louis Coxe notes, ". . . often Robinson hides elements of the poem's 'plot'; and he will sometimes hide the main character's motives and aims. . . . 'Eros Turannos' we might call the locus classicus for his greatest triumphs in this strategy."⁷ Elsewhere Coxe says that ". . . the reader must supply from the general materials provided, his own construction. . . ."⁸ In the construction which follows, I wish to show that the poem makes specific allusions to a classical tragedy, that two of the apparently nebulous symbols in it have specific

1. *Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 200, 204, *et passim*.

2. See, for instance, Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1948), p. 182: "There has been no such perfect blending of symbols from nature with human significance since 'Luke Havergal' . . ." See also Louis O. Coxe, "E. A. Robinson: The Lost Tradition," *Sewanee Review*, LXII (1954), 252. Coxe identifies the symbols of "waves, tree, stairs leading down" but says that "the language is general . . . the purpose of the poem communication rather than expression."

3. Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: New Directions, 1946), p. 33.

4. Neff, p. 180.

5. Hoyt C. Franchere, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 104.

6. Ellsworth Barnard conveniently sums up several such interpretations. See *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 278.

7. *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 117.

8. "E. A. Robinson: The Lost Tradition," p. 252.

meanings which contribute to the characterization and to the conclusion of the poem, and that the woman finds a specific solution to her problem consonant with that found by many of Robinson's other characters who discover themselves in intolerable situations.

Being stated in Greek, the title forces the reader to think at once of Greek drama (see Neff, p. 181). Several of Robinson's critics have pointed out the classical influence on Robinson's work in general and on this poem. Edwin S. Fussell, for instance, gives a long discussion of classical influences on Robinson but does not make any specific reference to "Eros Turannos."⁹ Joan Manheimer notes that the title "echoes Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*" but does not draw specific parallels between the two works.¹⁰ And Sigmund Skard points out the likeness between Robinson's and Sophocles' titles but attributes the main classical influence on the poem to Euripides' *Hyppolytos* rather than to Sophocles.¹¹ However, Robinson's allusion to Sophocles' *Oedipus* is really complex.

First, like *Oedipus* the word *Eros* has a feminine rhythm, and both words begin with the same vowel and end with the same consonant. These likenesses of sound force the reader of "Eros Turannos" to recall *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Then plot, characters, and motives are similar in the two. As in *Oedipus*, fate controls the lives of Robinson's characters ("What fated her to choose him"—l. 2). The wife, like Jocasta, has "all reasons to refuse" her lover (l. 4). The event here, as in *Oedipus*, results from striving with a god ("That with a god have striven"—l. 42). The wife, like Jocasta, dreads living longer without being able to maintain her situation as it was prior to her real knowledge of it:

But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years,
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him. (ll. 5-8)

And the male character wears an "engaging mask" over his true feelings, suggestive of the mask of Oedipus' hidden identity and of the real masks worn by Greek actors (l. 3).

Robinson's poem becomes significant not merely because it is modeled on certain aspects of an earlier great work but because it suffuses the tragic form of that work with modern values. Like O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Robinson makes use of the new Freudian understanding of man's sexual nature to give added depth to the old form. This concern is exhibited by the two major symbols in the poem, ocean and trees. Rather obviously, the water images represent the sexual

9. Edwin Arlington Robinson: *The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1954), pp. 136-54.

10. "Robinson's 'Eros Turannos' Reconsidered," *Literary Review*, XX (Spring 1977), 263.

11. "E. A. Robinson: 'Eros Turannos,' a Critical Survey," *Americana Norvegica*, LXI (1966), 301-03.

nature of the woman and the trees that of the man. The woman fears "the downward years, / Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs / Of age" (ll. 6-8). The image of the "foamless weirs," evidently stagnant water, represents her loss of desire in the future. For the present, she still has it: other significant water images are "The pounding wave" (l. 27), "waves breaking" (l. 45), and "the sea" (l. 47), all of which indicate that desire is still alive.¹² The first reference to trees couples them with the ocean: "A sense of ocean and old trees / Envelops and allures him" (ll. 17-18). But the trees here are old; later we learn that they are losing their leaves (l. 25), and near the end of the poem the image becomes "a changed familiar tree" (l. 46). Line 17 indicates that the marriage is between a woman in whom the life forces are still strong and a somewhat older man.

In the very middle of the poem, lines 25-28, Robinson indicates the source of the woman's problem:

The falling leaf inaugurates
The reign of her confusion;
The pounding wave reverberates
The dirge of her illusion. . . .

The man's aging and loss of desire (the tree's losing its leaves) and the continuation of her own desire (the "pounding wave") force her realization that he can no longer be a sexually satisfactory mate. In the last stanza Robinson states that the woman must "Take what the god has given" (l. 44) but does not explicitly define the god's gift. Rather, he vaguely suggests it through several comparisons. It is "like waves breaking" (l. 45), an image suggesting her strong but unsatisfied urges. Again, it is "like a changed familiar tree" (l. 46), which indicates the loss of potency in her husband. When it finally becomes "like a stairway to the sea / Where down the blind are driven" (ll. 47-48), her only course is suffocation by her own desire. Clearly, the tragedy of the woman stems from extreme sexual frustration.¹³

Mere sexual frustration, however, might likely be the subject for farce rather than for tragedy. Robinson avoids any possibility of humor by having the woman driven insane or nearly insane by her frustration. Her home becomes "a place where she can hide" (l. 30) because she is unable to mix normally with her neighbors, who in turn "Vibrate with her seclusion" (l. 32)—that is, gossip about the event. In the last two lines of the poem, where Robinson suggests the final likeness of "what the god has given," the combination of sounds in *down* and *driven* strongly suggests *drown*. Since the woman lives in a harbor town and so

12. Skard (p. 319) speaks of "The eternal rise and breaking of the waves of passion" but does not treat the sexual aspect of the sea image as a key to understanding the woman's tragedy and its probable conclusion.

13. In "A Note on Robinson's Use of *TURANNOS*," *Concerning Poetry*, IV (Spring 1971), 39, Benjamin W. Griffith briefly suggests that the tragedy results from a sexual problem due perhaps to the husband's "impotence or homosexuality."

much sea imagery is used in connection with her in the poem, drowning herself in the ocean would be the most obvious and appealing form of suicide open to her.

Some of Robinson's critics have considered suicide as a possibility for the woman but have not seen that the poem actually suggests it. Coxe notes that "Though the woman of 'Eros Turannos' must know there is a way out, such a way cannot be for her."¹⁴ Richard P. Adams says that ". . . the only real security, the only sure refuge from the uncountable ills of life, is in death"; but he does not read the poem as forcing the woman toward that end.¹⁵ The present interpretation should indicate that the poem plods as deterministically toward her suicide as other Robinson poems do for their characters. Thus, though she does not hang herself like Jocasta, like many of Robinson's other characters—Luke Havergal, Richard Cory, Leonora, the miller and his wife in "The Mill"—she does find an end to her wretched existence.

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14. *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, p. 131.

15. "The Failure of Edwin Arlington Robinson," *Tulane Studies in English*, XI (1961), 148.