

Sight and Insight: Irony in E. A. Robinson's "Isaac and Archibald"

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On the surface, Edwin Arlington Robinson's blank verse narrative, "Isaac and Archibald," seems little more than a straightforward, lighthearted reminiscence of two old gentlemen who live in and near the poet's mythical Tilbury Town. The poem is so deceptive in its simplicity that Mark Van Doren dismissed it in 1927 as "an unusually sunny and engaging picture of two ancient rural men."¹ The few passing references to the poem since Van Doren wrote indicate that with time the critics have begun to concede a depth to the poem, although there appear to be no extended criticisms or explications of the poem in publication. Richard Crowder wrote in 1961 (without elaboration) that the poem dealt with an "awareness of the other as the completer, fulfiller of the self,"² and W. R. Robinson said in 1967 that the poem tells of how "two men of rough but ready friendship unconsciously instruct a boy. . . in the ways of humanity,"³ though he does not elaborate on how or what, exactly, the old men teach the boy.

J. C. Levenson, however, in an essay published in 1968 in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, treats the poem at greater length, finding in it examples of several techniques central to Robinson's poetry as a whole:

Robinson's speculative education affected the shape of reality as it is represented in his poems, and it affected the form of the poems as well. His preference for narrative over dramatizing techniques, so that context might give poetic effect to even the plainest words; . . . the irony that affirms by indirection—these hallmarks of his poetry all testify that his thought helps account for the the form as

well as the substance of his work.⁴³

Still, Levenson confines himself in the essay primarily to an enumeration of several instances of foreshadowing in the poem, without relating them much to the "substance" or the tension which forms the thematic center of the work. For while "Isaac and Archibald" is an entertaining narrative, it is a narrative carefully constructed upon irony arising from the misperceptions of the two old men, an irony which serves to develop the thematic tension between sight and insight, between old age and youth.

The irony works on several levels, of which the level of structure is perhaps the most obvious. On the one hand, the poem tells a comic tale about two old friends who spend their time together in quarrelsome one-upmanship. The poem is, after all, a narrative which recounts Isaac's condescension to Archibald about the proper way of harvesting oats and Archibald's glee at beating Isaac at cards. And yet a close reading of the poem reveals a carefully constructed pattern of motifs that point to another level of artistry: the recurrent imagery of light and shade, for example, or the parallel speeches of the two old men suggest that the poet is engaged in something more serious than merely the recouping of Isaac and Archibald's peculiar crochets. The structural irony, then, is that while the poem is cast as a comic narrative, it is more than just an amusing story.

This structural irony serves in turn as a context for the major irony of the poem—the irony of character—out of which develops the central thematic tension between sight and insight. On the purely narrative level, the tension seems to lie between Isaac and Archibald, while the boy, it would seem, functions merely as an objective observer who records the words and actions of the two old men. But again, a close reading of the text reveals that the tension lies precisely not between Isaac and Archibald, but between the two old men and the boy, between old age and youth. Despite the superficial differences between them, their subtle bickering, for example, or their condescending talk about one another to the boy, the author is at great pains to show the fundamental similarity between his two title characters.

The most striking example of their similarity lies in the nature of the long talk that each of the old men has with the boy. On their journey out

to Archibald's farm, Isaac tells the boy that he has known

“now for seven years
That Archibald is changing. . . .
And when the best friend of your life goes down,
When first you know him in the slackening
That comes, and coming always tells the end—
Now in a common word that would have passed
Uncaught from any other lips than his,
Now in some trivial act of every day,
Done as he might have done it all along
But for a twinging little difference
That nips you like a squirrel's teeth—oh, yes,
Then you will understand it well enough.”⁵³)

Compare that speech with Archibald's later in the poem:

“Yes, I have seen it come
These eight years, and these ten years, and I know
Now that it cannot be for very long
That Isaac will be Isaac. . . .
That's what it is: Isaac is not quite right.
You see it, but you don't know what it means:
The thousand little differences—no,
You do not know them, and it's well you don't;
You'll know them soon enough—God bless you, boy!” (30)

The poet links the two men in other ways as well. When Isaac and the boy come to Archibald's home, Isaac, surveying the oats, lets out an exclamatory “‘Well, well!’” just as Archibald when he comes to meet the travellers greets them with a “‘Well! Well! Well!’” (27) When the party moves to enter Archibald's house, Isaac leads the way, “as if his venerable feet / Were measuring the turf in his own door yard,” and when they taste the cider, Isaac looks “along the line of barrels there / With a pride that

may have been forgetfulness that they were Archibald's and not his own"; (28). The two men cast their substantially similar thoughts in remarkably similar language—which indicates that while these two men are undeniably different beings, they are both of them emblematic of the same old age.

One of the finest ironic touches resulting from this contrast between the old men and the boy lies in the condescending lectures of both Isaac and Archibald. Each speaks of the boy's having a literal, empirical sight and lacking an imaginative, internal vision. As Isaac says to the boy on their walk out to Archibald's farm,

“My good young friend,” he said, “you cannot feel
What I have seen so long. You have the eyes—
Oh, yes—but you have not the other things:
The sight within that never will deceive,
You do not know—you have no right to know;
The twilight warning of experience,
The singular idea of loneliness,—
These are not yours” (24).

Likewise Archibald later in the poem:

“But there's a light behind the stars
And we old fellows who have dared to live,
We see it—and we see the other things. . . .
You see it, but you don't know what it means. . . .”; (30).

These speeches, both of which are delivered by the old men when they are resting in the shade, underscore another tension in the poem—that between the imagery of light and darkness. Even a cursory reading of the poem reveals the studied contrasts of heat and coolness, of the blazing summer sun and deep shade. A closer reading reveals that Isaac and Archibald are always associated with the shade, while the boy is connected with the heat and light. In one sense, on the purely physical level of what

Richard Gunter calls the geography of a piece of literature,⁶⁾ the poem is a movement back and forth between the light and the shade. On the level of what Gunter calls the politics of the poem, it is a series of the predominance and recession of, alternately, the thoughts and speech of the boy and the thoughts and speech of the two old gentlemen. It is well to note that the boy's thoughts and commentary dominate when the characters move in the sunlight, while the thoughts and speech of the two men become primary when the action of the poem shifts to the shade.

Thus, at the beginning of the poem, when Isaac and the boy walk in the hot sun, the boy's thoughts are primary, while when the travellers stop to rest in the shade, Isaac dominates the discussion with his long assessments of Archibald's deterioration and the boy's lack of insight. When they emerge from the shade, however, the boy's thoughts and perceptions become primary, although they defer again to the musings of the two old men when the party descends to Archibald's cellar, "out of the fiery sunshine to the gloom, / Grateful and half sepulchral" (28).

And again, after Isaac has gone to inspect the oats and left Archibald and the boy in the shade, it is Archibald's speech which dominates, first in the tale of Stafford's cabin and then in his evaluation of Isaac. At this point arises the most significant contrast in the imagery of light and shade, which reflects the contrast between the men and boy, for as Archibald drones on, the boy begins to look beyond the shade,

Down through the orchard and across the road,
Across the river and the sun-scorched hills
That ceased in a blue forest, where the world
Ceased with it. Now and then my fancy caught
A flying glimpse of the good life beyond—
Something of ships and sunlight, streets and singing,
Troy falling, and the ages coming back,
And ages going forward: Archibald
And Isaac were good fellows in old clothes,
And Agamemnon was a friend of mine;
Ulysses coming home again to shoot

With bows and feathered arrows made another,
And all was as it should be. I was young (31).

Here the boy and his frenzy of vision and insight are at the same time linked to the sunlight and contrasted with Archibald, who, lying in the shade, talks only of Isaac's declining mental capacity. The boy concludes his thoughts:

I felt

Within the mightiness of the white sun
That smote the land around us and wrought out
A fragrance from the trees, a vital warmth
And fullness for the time that was to come,
And a glory for the world beyond the forest.
The present and the future and the past,
Isaac and Archibald, the burning bush,
The Trojans and the walls of Jericho,
Were beautifully fused; and all went well
Till Archibald began to fret for Isaac
And said it was a master day for sunstroke (32).

The immediate irony is that it is the boy who has suffered from sunstroke, for he has been overcome by the inspiration and insight which in this poem are associated with the light and heat of the sun. And the piquancy of Archibald's comment, the incongruity of the notion that Isaac could suffer from such a sunstroke, throws the boy into a convulsion of laughter, which offends both Isaac and Archibald.

The larger irony of the passage is that it is the boy who is the real seer, feeding on "the sight within," while the two men cannot see beyond the empirically obvious, beyond each other's faces, the fine weather, or a field of freshly cut oats. If Charles T. Davis is right, if in Robinson's "early poems, light stands invariably for the perception of spiritual truth,"⁷⁾ then the boy is genuinely capable of true insight, while the two old men are not. Isaac, for example, periodically thanks the Lord for the fine day or the

cider, but his vision never extends beyond what his senses perceive. The boy, on the other hand, does not suffer from a prosaic confinement of vision, even though both Isaac and Archibald say that he lacks true insight.

This discrepancy of vision between the old men and the boy reaches a fine climax in the penultimate section of the poem, in which the speaker describes the dream he had on the night after his excursion with Isaac to Archibald's farm. The boy has here an almost supernatural vision, while Isaac and Archibald, the subjects of his vision, are untouched by the splendor of their situation and confined by the petty and the immediate; they bicker, as usual, about the merely obvious, while the boy enjoys this visitation of the stuff of poetry.

We see, then, that while Edwin Arlington Robinson cast "Isaac and Archibald" as a humorous narrative, a careful examination of the structure of the poem—the functions of the characters, the structure of their speeches, the contrast in the imagery of light and darkness—points to a significance more profound than the narrative alone would suggest. Why Robinson employed such a structural irony is difficult to tell, though perhaps he means in this poem to say that the more perceptive among us apprehend truths and attain insight even in the most mundane circumstances—truths which are hidden from the impercipient observer, much as they were hidden from Isaac and Archibald or those hasty readers who see in this poem little more than a sunny tale of two old men in declining health and boy who tags along for fun.

Notes

- 1) Mark Van Doren, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Literary Guild of America, 1927), p. 39.
- 2) Richard Crowder, "Edwin Arlington Robinson and the Meaning of Life," *Chicago Review* 15 (1961), p. 6.
- 3) W. R. Robinson, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Poetry of the Act* (Cleveland: Western Reserve UP, 1967), p. 87.
- 4) J. C. Levenson, "Robinson's Modernity," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 44 (1968), p. 606.
- 5) Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Isaac and Archibald," in *Selected Poems of E. A. Robinson*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 24-25. Subsequent references to this poem will be made paranthetically. Numbers refer to pages.
- 6) Richard Gunter, *Reading Poems* (Columbia, S. C.: Hornbeam Press, 1975), pp. 46ff.
- 7) Charles T. Davis, "Image Patterns in the Poetry of E. A. Robinson," *College English* 22 (1961), p. 381.

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