

Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

Richard Cory (1910)

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good-morning,” and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

ANALYSIS

In “Richard Cory” the poet skillfully springs a surprise ending on us. But the ending is not there simply for surprise. By setting up an ironic contrast it suggests a number of truths about life: that we cannot tell from outside appearance what may be going on inside a person; that often those people we envy have as many troubles as we, or more; that birth, wealth, breeding, taste, and humanity do not ensure a happy life. None of these meanings is *stated*. The poet simply places two sets of data side by side in a poetic solution, and like the positive and negative poles in an electric storage battery they generate a current of meaning between them.

But even without the surprise ending the poet creates a memorable portrait, and he does so largely by charging his words with extraordinary meaning. The word *gentleman*, for instance, has two meanings: a person of high birth; a courteous, considerate person. Robinson uses both meanings. He brings out the former meaning by fitting the word into a whole context of words suggestive of aristocracy or royalty: *king, crown, imperially, glittered, arrayed, favored, grace, fine*. Several of these words function in more than one way. Thus the word *crown* means here the top of the head (cf. “Jack fell down and broke his crown”), but it also suggests a king’s coronet. The word *grace* means a social nicety, but it is also a title given to a duke or duchess (“Your Grace”). Even the seemingly unimportant transitional phrase *in fine* (literally, “in conclusion”) suggests a second meaning which fits this context. Thus the word *gentleman* fits into a pattern of words which work together in their associations to increase Cory’s splendor and good fortune.

But Cory is envied by the townspeople for his gifts of person as well as his gifts of fortune. He has impeccable taste (the word *quietly* before *arrayed* dresses Cory in clothing of the finest material and cut but keeps him from ostentation). He has perfect manners, is “admirably schooled in every grace.” Most of all, he is “always human” when he talks: this word saves him from condescension, makes him warm and friendly, with sympathy and respect for the person he is talking to.

If we read this poem carelessly, we may vulgarize its meaning by reducing it to a sentimental cliché: riches don't guarantee happiness. The true meaning is deeper—and darker. The speaker concludes, "we thought that he *was* everything (not *had* everything) / To make us wish that we were in his place." The gifts of fortune and personality that make a man appear to others perfectly enviable, may still conceal some inner emptiness that causes him to collapse when less gifted and less fortunate souls endure.

Laurence Perrine
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In April 1897 Robinson, reporting the local news to [a friend] wrote, "Frank Avery blew his bowels out with a shot-gun. That was hell." By the end of July he had completed... "a nice little thing called Richard Cory.... There isn't any idealism in it, but there's lots of something else—humanity, may be. I opine that it will go." It has become one of the most familiar of Robinson's poems. But poems, like people, sometimes suffer from what familiarity so often breeds. This is especially true if the work appears to be fairly simple and uncomplicated. It may be what led Yvor Winters to remark that "In 'Richard Cory'... we have a superficially neat portrait of the elegant man of mystery; the poem builds up deliberately to a very cheap surprise ending; but all surprise endings are cheap in poetry; if not, indeed, elsewhere, for poetry is written to be read not once but many times." This remark is itself surprising, for not all surprise endings are cheap, nor does a surprise ending prevent a work from being read with pleasure more than once. The use of surprise is a legitimate device that occurs in all literary forms. The issue is not whether the reader has been surprised but whether the author has so prepared the ground that the ending is a justifiable one, consistent with the total context. Actually, "Richard Cory" has a rich complexity that becomes increasingly rewarding with successive readings.

A wealthy man, admired and envied by those who consider themselves less fortunate than he, unexpectedly commits suicide. Cory's portrait is drawn for us by a representative man in the street, who depicts him as "*imperially* slim," "a gentleman from sole to *crown*," "richer than a *king*." An individual set apart from ordinary mortals, Cory is, in their opinion, a regal figure in contrast to his admiring subjects, "the people on the pavement." This contrast between Cory and the people, seemingly weighted in favor of Cory in the first three stanzas, is the key to the poem. Nowhere are we given direct evidence of Cory's real character; we are given only the comments of the people about him, except for his last act, which speaks for itself. Ironically, Cory's suicide brings about a complete reversal of roles in the poem. As Cory is dethroned the people are correspondingly elevated. The contrast between the townspeople and Cory is continued in the last stanza. The people "worked, and waited for the light, / And went without the meat, and cursed the bread"; but they went on living.

Cory, wealthy as he was, did not live; instead, he "put a bullet through his head." This occurred "one *calm* summer night." Calm, that is, to the people, not to Cory. Because the people "went without the meat, and cursed the bread," it might seem that life was both difficult and meaningless; in fact, Robinson is suggesting just the opposite. "Meat" and "bread" carry biblical overtones that remind us that man does not live by bread alone. It is the "light" that gives meaning. In opposition to meat and bread, symbols of spiritual nourishment and material values, light suggests a spiritual sustenance of greater value. As such it clarifies the intent of the poem, for it reveals the inner strength of the people and the inadequacy of Cory. Belief in the light is the one thing the people had; it is the one thing Cory lacked. Life for him was meaningless because he lacked spiritual values; he lived only on a material level.

Once this is realized, the characteristics attributed to Cory in the first three stanzas take on added significance and become even more ironic: He was "a gentleman from sole to crown" (appearance and manner); he was "clean favored" and "slim" (physical appearance); he was "quietly arrayed" (dress); he was "human when he talked" (manner); he "glittered" (appearance); he was "rich" (material possessions); he was "schooled in every grace" (manner). "Glittered" not only emphasizes the aura of regality and wealth but also suggests the speciousness of Cory. Even his manner is not a manifestation of something innate but only a characteristic that has been acquired ("admirably schooled"). All these details are concerned with

external qualities only. The very things that served to give Cory status also reveal the inner emptiness that led him to take his own life.

Wallace L. Anderson
Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction
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Michael Hollister (2015)