Reflection and Analysis of Richard Cory

Richard Cory is a narrative poem that illustrates a wealthy, but lonesome man in a collection of verse titled The Children of the Night published early in the career of poet Edwin Arlington Robinson. Using monetary assistance from close friends and acquaintances, The Torrent and the Night Before was privately published in 1896 as Robinson’s premier collection of works, but then reissued and revised as The Children of the Night the following year in 1897. This early era contains some of Robinson’s most lasting dramatic poems that portray “Tilbury Town, a fictional New England village” modeled after Gardiner in Maine, the town Edwin had called home since age 1 and at the time of the work’s publication (“Edwin Arlington Robinson”; “Richard Cory”). Initially, these works failed to make a strong impact in the literary world, but by 1905 had been uncovered by United States President Theodore Roosevelt (“Edwin Arlington Robinson”). The President was so impressed that he personally published a review in Outlook Magazine, offering Robinson a well-needed foothold and generous job to develop his life as a career writer (“Peschel”).

The dark style and unfair life-commentary that would emerge in Robinson’s work is undoubtedly a combination of harsh life circumstances. It is suggested that the character portrayed in the work Richard Cory is modeled after Edwin’s brother Dean, and along with
*Miniver Cheevey*, (another Robinson poem) embody the dreary undertones of Robison’s most notable works that discuss the misfortune that can befall humans, namely “incest, alcoholism, loneliness, and failure” (Harbour). Even the fictional Tilbury Town is believed to be a reflection of the “Puritan-ethic town” Edwin grew up in, a society that was very critical and repressed “public failure” (“Edwin Arlington Robinson”). In *Richard Cory*, Edwin Arlington Robinson combines these bleak impressions with a lyrical poetic structure and dramatic irony to set the reader up for an ending that proves appearances and happiness are not always what they seem.

Since the beginning of his life E.A.R. was overshadowed by his two older brothers, Herman and Dean respectively. Herman was predestined to inherit the family fortune, and Dean to become a prominent physician, both favored by their mother Mary Elizabeth Palmer who had desired (Edwin to be) a girl after birthing two males (“Peschel”). In 1887 Edwin had met the girl of his dreams who had actively supported his pursuit in writing, but just three years later Herman had swooped in and married her; in time the marriage weakened due to Herman’s alcoholism and financial struggles. Eager to leave the mess behind, Edwin moved away to Harvard for an education (which was unsupported by his father) but returned a few years later following his father’s death and mother’s deteriorating health leading to her death in 1896. Also at this time Dean, the middle brother and happily-married physician began to succumb to a morphine addiction that would result in his death from overdose in 1899 (“Edwin Arlington Robinson”).

In 1897, at the time that *Richard Cory* was published, the United States people were experiencing one of numerous “Panics” to be recorded in our history – a time when investors and citizens alike overwhelm the financial market due to mistrust among banks coupled with degraded economic conditions. The Panic of 1893 was initiated by the residual effects of a global financial crisis that occurred in 1873 from speculation, insecurities, and overextended credit that
led to the bankruptcy of many families and numerous bank closures (“Panic”). This economic phenomena and the years following would lead to the loss of the family fortune that Robinson’s family had once possessed.

This poem is an example of narrative poetry – a poem that uses a narrator to tell a story based on actual, or made-up events. It is comprised of four stanzas, using iambic pentameter (a rhythm of syllables determined by unstressed/stressed) and the rhyme scheme ABAB; this simple lyrical format can be easier for the everyday reader to digest, follow, and predict. By the time the reader reaches the final stanza, the entrancing poem has a songlike quality and can make the rhyme-scheme predictable, given the language remains simple as it does it in Richard Cory. The narrator in this poem is either a villager in Tilbury Town or part of the working-class, and through simple language describes Richard Cory as wealthy and well-respected among the townspeople, in a typical “haves” versus “have nots” fashion. Given this context, it is important that E.A.R. would utilize common language to convey the impression that it is simply one these working-class “have-nots” that is telling you this story, describing Richard Cory for you as if you were conversing on the street. Along with the knowledge of typical middle-class life during the financial Panics of the late 19th Century, we can paint a picture of the speaker’s life and thus conclude an idea of how they may regard a citizen such as Richard Cory. Phrases like “to make us wish that we were in his place,” (line 12) and “So on we worked…and went without the meat, and cursed the bread” (lines 15, 16) illustrate the struggles of that period, when many went without eating meat, and resolved to day-old bread because of its affordability (“Scheick”)

Parallel to the personal problems of Robinson’s early life, Richard Cory is portrayed as a wealthy man ostracized from the common people in society by his wealth and reputation. Although well-mannered and likeable, E.A.R. uses allusive language to describe Richard Cory as
royalty, and thus separate from the working-class people – this is even suggested with the character name borrowing the word “rich.” The following words used by the speaker help portray Richard Cory more imperial than that of the common people we know the town to be comprised of: “crown, imperially slim, fluttered pulses, glittered, grace” all tie into the imagery and word choice that E.A.R. uses to quickly and fluidly set the tone of admiration surrounding the enamored narrator (“Scheick”).

Other literary devices that Robinson uses in this poem are alliteration and anaphora. Alliteration uses initial consonant sounds throughout a sequence of words or lines to create a more tasteful phrase. In Richard Cory we see examples of this in the phrase “people of the pavement,” (line 2) and through the words “wish, we were, worked, waited” (lines 12, 13). The use of alliteration along with the lyrical style contributes to the easy-to-follow diction that effortlessly leads the reader right through the poem into the dramatic ending. Anaphora is a literary device that uses a word or phrase in a repetitious manner, for example in lines 5 and 6 we see “and he was always (quietly arrayed), And he was always (human when he talked.)” The use of this anaphora reinforces the conversational feel that Robinson builds between the reader and one of the local villagers, possibly after work or on the street – and contributes to the fluidity of the poem.

Irony is an element Robinson utilizes particularly well in this poem. Dramatic irony can be described as a difference between what they audience may expect to happen, and what the speaker knows or believes (Mays). In Richard Cory we are introduced to a man who seems to have it all; he is wealthy, in good health, educated and well-mannered, but despite all of this the reader can conclude that Cory has been living with depression, and so resolves to take his own life. As the play moves along, Robinson uses the simple structure discussed earlier in order to
create a feeling of happy-go-luckiness, but in the final two lines we are struck with the dramatic irony, on a calm evening this affluent man puts a “bullet in his head.”

This poem definitely contains themes that draw from Robinson’s own life experiences. One being the issue of wealth versus poverty. Although born into a comfortable life, Robinson witnesses his family’s fortune dwindle away between his irresponsible brothers, and his own struggle with doubt and alcoholism during the difficult years of his career. Although E.A.R. was able to make a living out of his passion, he was no stranger to poverty, and because of this can successfully blur the lines of life between the “haves” and “have-nots” in this poem. Despite having substantial social flare, Richard Cory carries internal feelings of isolation and loneliness, being rich in money, but poor in community, as opposed to the speaker of the poem. Another theme in Richard Cory explores the feeling of unjust human loss and happiness. Using the narrator’s admiration, a relationship between Richard Cory and the reader develops, making the suicide more shocking while the reader is unable to lend help or intervene with this loss of a respectable citizen. This directly ties into past feelings experienced by E.A.R. regarding the loss of his parents, and middle brother Dean. Whether expected or unexpected deaths, the loss of human companionship was hard on Robinson’s life.

This poem continues to resonate with readers today because of its relevance to modern societies. We live in a world that heavily values monetary and materialistic accumulation, where we are periodically reminded that this does not necessarily equate to happiness or fulfillment. Suicide and depression are still prevalent today, and can be connected to the same feelings of isolation that were experienced by Cory, despite his education and abundant amount of wealth. Also I believe that almost anyone, despite their circumstances can relate to being envious of another’s position or possessions, just as the speaker appears to be of Cory. Robinson plays on
this feeling in the end, with a twist of an irony that is Cory’s suicide, bringing the reader to feeling remorseful and sympathetic for such a person’s true inner turmoil.

**Works Cited**


