

Poem #8

“Richard Cory” by Edward Arlington Robinson

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.



Robinson, who won three Pulitzer Prizes for his poetry, likely based this poem on the life of his brother, Herman, who committed suicide. The main ideas of the poem, that things are not always what they seem and that money cannot buy happiness, develop slowly and only reveal themselves in the last, startling stanza.

Simon & Garfunkel recorded a song based on this poem called *Richard Cory*. You can view them performing it in concert here: [youtube.com/watch?v=euuCiSY0qYs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euuCiSY0qYs)

Taking it apart

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The narrator separates himself from Richard Cory by saying “We people” – like Cory is very different from everyone else. Also he comes “down,” implying that where he usually is is “up.”

“Sole” is the sole of his foot, and “crown” is a play on words here. It can be the top of your head, or it can be what a king wears. “Imperial” is another royal word that adds to the regal description.

The repetition of conjunctions in a series is called **polysyndeton**. Robinson uses this technique in the repetition of the word “and” at the beginning of sentences, phrases, and clauses. How many times do you see it?

Since no one can really “glitter” when he walks, the reader must imagine the effect Cory had on the town when he was there. It is similar to the term “star” applied to a celebrity.

Robinson uses simile and hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration) here to emphasize Cory’s wealth. Is he really richer than a king? He must have seemed so to the poor of the town.

Notice the juxtaposition of the “calm summer night” with the violence of Cory’s suicide. It makes it even more startling, more intense. Why is Cory’s suicide so surprising?

Memorizing it

Four stanzas of four lines with a rigid rhyme scheme make this one of the easiest poems to memorize in the list. Its meter makes the words fall into an easy, sing-song rhythm. Taking one line at a time, cover the text with a piece of paper or index card, and read over the line twice. Then try to write the first letter of each word of the line to the right of the line. The first one is done for you as an example. Once you have done that, cover the text and use just the first letters to practice.

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W R C w d t

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