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**Lecture on Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory" (for Longman Lecture Series)**

**Richard Cory**

**I.**

**EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON (1869-1935)**

**Richard Cory**

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 imperiallly slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human when he talked;  
But he still 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.

**II.**

Edwin Arlington Robinson was born in Maine in 1869. All his life he intended to be a poet, remarking at an early age, "I could never have done *anything* but write poetry. His life was marked

by many disappointments. His loss of his beloved, Emma Shepherd, who married his brother Herman proved to be hugely significant, as Robinson never married. Robinson's first books of poems were self-published, *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896), and a revision of this book the following year, *The Children of the Night* (1897). These early books contain many of Robinson's most famous poems, including "Luke Havergal," "Reuben Bright," and "Richard Cory."

In 1902, Robinson published *Captain Craig*, his first book with a commercial press. Though the book received positive attention, Robinson still found it very difficult to earn his reputation or even make a living. He held a number of odd jobs, some far beneath his aspirations, such as working beneath the ground to help build the New York subway.

Robinson's luck changed with a startling occurrence, one which we can hardly imagine happening ever, let alone in today's society. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had read *Children of the Night*, invited Robinson to the White House. Deeply concerned about Robinson's financial straits and lack of recognition, Roosevelt published a review of Robinson's book, which, of course brought him an entirely new slough of attention. Roosevelt also arranged a position for the poet at the New York Custom House; Robinson was only required to show up each morning and had no further duties. In 1908, when Taft became the President, Robinson was required to take on some actual duties at the Custom House, and he resigned.

Robinson tried to make a living as a writer, but found it very difficult. In 1913, when a close friend passed away, Robinson resolved to change his life, and stopped drinking; he took it up again, however, during the era of Prohibition, as a form of rebellion or protest. He chose his battles carefully.

In his lifetime, Robinson received three Pulitzer prizes. His work is known for a dark pessimism, and incidences of suicide, addiction, and other such problems. "Richard Cory" is a prime example of a poem which deals with such a dark subject, and in an unexpected way.

Robinson helped to define a new era of poetry. While he is not usually considered a modernist, his work did break with the flowery Victorian past and take on a plainspoken style which would influence a number of other writers in the twentieth century, most notably Robert Frost and James Wright.

### III.

A number of factors in Robinson's poem, "Richard Cory," set the reader up for a certain kind of expectation, which is then dramatically changed with the final line. The meter of the poem is iambic pentameter, and the rhyme scheme creates a lyrical, forward-moving motion, which lulls us into a false sense of security.

Consider, also, the diction. Robinson chooses words which describe Richard Cory as a regal figure: "a gentleman from sole to crown." Richard Cory, "imperially slim," is a man who "glittered when he walked./ And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—". The reader is fairly dazzled by his portrait. This helps to set us up for the shock of the man's suicide. Most notable, perhaps, is the word "calm" in the penultimate line. We hardly expect the final line after a tranquil one like "one calm summer night." It's the last thing we could imagine. So the closing line has the impact of a bullet to the reader as well.

Richard Cory has admirable qualities besides surface ones. He was kind to people, as can be noted from lines such as

"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 yet, because of his suicide, we can't help but imagine his deep unhappiness, the spiritual void in his life, perhaps. We don't know much about him, only the exteriors. We know far more about the "we" in the poem. The "people on the pavement" observe Richard Cory and all that he has. The people "waited for the light/ and went without the meat and cursed the bread. And yet, the irony is that it is Richard Cory who kills himself.

Though there is no historical Richard Cory, one feels that the figure could be one of many in Robinson's time. Many of his pieces depict figures who seem somehow tragic or spiritually starved. It is, in fact, possible that Robinson wrote this poem with his brother in mind. A serious rivalry existed between the two, as one might ascertain from the detail in the bio in Part II -- that Robinson's brother Herman married the woman Robinson loved. Though Herman did not commit suicide in the sudden an unexpected manner described in the poem, he did drink himself to death.

As I've already discussed, the first fourteen lines set us up for the shocking closure. Consider the

effect of this closure on the poem as a whole. The end of the poem "makes" the poem, because it is unexpected. The ending works not just because of the element of surprise, but because it reflects accurately the way such events feel when they occur.

Does the surprise ending affect the way this poem will be read after one's first reading? It does, because we will now read the poem, knowing the inevitable. And yet, the reason for his suicide is unknown, and despite many conjectures, remains unknown. This allows the poem to have a continued intensity, even after we know what to expect.

In Robinson's poem, Richard Cory's life is contained in only sixteen lines. Robinson doesn't have the luxury of the novelist or playwright, or, perhaps, the responsibility of explaining the reasons for suicide more fully. The poem reveals Richard Cory through the impact of his personality on others, but we don't really know anything about his inner life. This contributes to the reverberation of the closing lines.

Songwriter Paul Simon chose to adapt this poem into a song in the 1960's. He writes his "Richard Cory" "with apologies to E.A. Robinson." Though he chooses a different form, the ballad form, which works better as a song, the plot remains essentially the same. Simon chooses a more individual speaker, changing Robinson's third person, "we" to an angrier first person, "I". The details of Simon's version change to more contemporary ones, such as "the rumor of his party" and Richard Cory having "orgies on his yacht," yet the energy of the poem feels the same. One still feels a sense of the emptiness of Richard Cory's life, amidst all the glitter and glory.