Richard Cory

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

Us lowly people on the streets would always stare at Richard Cory whenever he visited the downtown area. Cory was a refined, upper-class man from head to toe, always looking well-kept and thin.

Cory never wore attention-grabbing clothes, and he always seemed just like a regular person when he spoke. Even so, people got excited just by hearing his morning greetings. He had a special shine about him wherever he went.

Cory was extremely wealthy, well-mannered, and sophisticated. Basically, we thought Cory had all the qualities we wished we had. We all wanted to be Cory.

So we kept working, waiting for things to get better. We gave up fancy, filling food, even though we weren't happy to be eating so cheaply. And one quiet summer night, Richard Cory went home and shot himself in the head.

THEMES

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

As much time as the narrator and the narrator's community have spent observing, idolizing, and envying Richard Cory, no one fully understands Cory's psychology or humanity. The poem leaves the truth about whatever drives Cory to suicide unspoken and unknown, but readers don't need to know the exact reason for Cory's ending to get what the poem is trying to say—namely, that no matter how well-off a person may seem (and no matter how happy a person "should" be), people can't be easily understood based on appearances alone.

The poem presents Richard Cory as a *known* entity—he is often seen, heard, and admired by the narrator's community. Throughout the poem, the narrator (who speaks on behalf of the community, "we people on the pavement") portrays Richard Cory as a man who, on the surface, seems to have it all: money, good looks, gentility, and connection to others.

The community, meanwhile, must work hard and give up luxuries in order to survive, so Cory's perfect-seeming life appears in direct contrast to the other characters' struggles. The narrator and the narrator's community aspire to be, and to live like, Richard Cory, but as the end of the poem makes clear, these other people actually have *no idea* what the reality of Cory's life is like.

The poem reveals that the most significant aspects of Cory's life—whatever drives him, ultimately, to suicide—are beyond the knowledge of the community who assume him to be happy and satisfied. Despite all of Cory's success, the narrator reveals in the final moments of the poem, Cory kills himself, with no explanation provided. Whatever privilege, power, and success defined Richard Cory for the reader, some unknown other force or factor proves stronger than all the elements of Cory's life that "should" have made him happy.

The unchanging, calmly-paced structure throughout makes the final lines all the more jolting. The reader knows what to expect rhythmically from each line, just as the community believes they know what to expect from Richard Cory. Cory's suicide, then, arrives with no warning. The community believes they know who Cory is, and, therefore, are powerless to recognize his need for their support or intervention before it is too late.

"Richard Cory" offers a reminder—and perhaps a warning—about the hidden depths of people whose whole selves are supposedly known and understood. Beneath the trappings of wealth and success, the silent truth of Cory's unhappiness remained an unseen mystery. By elevating Cory to

something other than fully human and vulnerable, the community were unable to fathom Cory's unknown despair—which has been left, by his death, perhaps forever mysterious.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 15-16

WEALTH AND HAPPINESS

"Richard Cory" presents a sharp contrast between the rich and the poor. At the time of the poem's composition, this gap had been widened dramatically widened by the economic depression in the United States. The poem's emphasis on Cory's wealth, in comparison to the relative poverty of the narrator's community—a community that survives the poem when Cory does not—stresses one of the poem's possible morals: money does not guarantee happiness.

The narrator's community, "we people on the pavement," appear to be geographically separated from Richard Cory. They seem to be regular residents of these "down town" streets, while Cory only *visits* this neighborhood. Downtown neighborhoods are usually centers of business and commerce—meaning they are often louder, dirtier, and more crowded than other parts of the city. The fact that Cory does not have to live there, then, immediately suggests that he probably does not have to get his hands dirty with work in the same way as the rest of the speaker's community.

Indeed, throughout the first three stanzas, the narrator details Cory's wealth, first through language suggestive of financial prowess ("gentleman," "glittered") and then through an explicit, seemingly hyperbolic assessment of his economic prosperity ("and he was rich—yes, richer than a king"). To the narrator, it seems, Cory's wealth, whatever it actually amounts to, appears infinite and beyond measure.

In the final stanza the narrator provides an even clearer contrast between Cory and the narrator's community. The narrator's community must give up luxuries and delicacies ("went without the meat"), putting up instead with bland, repetitive meals ("cursed the bread"). They work hard for their money (perhaps, the poem suggests in its depicting Cory's downtown sojourn, Cory does not need to work much at all), and depend entirely on "the light," some external source that will relieve their financial need. Yet despite ostensibly suffering more than Cory, the narrator's community continue "on" while Cory ends his life. Cory's money, by implication, didn't shield him from pain and misfortune.

Some context is helpful here. The poem was written in 1897, a year after the Panic of 1893. As in the Great Depression, this panic led to the deaths by suicide of a number of Americans. While the poem does not indicate that Cory's suicide stems from financial issues, it is possible to interpret his death in that historical context as the result of a sudden change in fortune. In that light, the poem speaks more to the fickle finger of fate than to the power of unhappiness to reach even the most fortunate.

Whether the poem reminds readers that money isn't everything or warns readers against coveting cash that won't bring them happiness (or even condemns Richard Cory for wasting his lavish lifestyle), wealth and the comparison between those who have it and those who do not—remains central to the meaning of the poem.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Lines 13-14
- Line 15
- Line 16

ENVY VS. ADMIRATION

The narrator and the narrator's community harbor deep envy of Richard Cory, but they admire him too. Throughout the poem, there is the sense that the community feels torn: fundamentally, they want to *be* Richard Cory, but they also take pleasure in being around him. Both envy and admiration, though, *isolate* the community from Cory. Neither emotion allows the community to get to know Cory on a human level or to understand his personal pain in a way that might prepare them for Cory's eventual suicide (or perhaps even grant them a chance to prevent it).

The narrator's recounting of the people's interest in Cory sounds at first as if it may be purely based in admiration. Cory is a constant object of attention ("We people on the pavement looked at him") and the narrator riddles Cory with compliments: on his face, his weight, his bearing, his clothing. The narrator explicitly references the community's admiration when it comes to Cory's manners—they perceive Cory as "admirably schooled in every grace."

In the second stanza, the narrator begins to present Cory not just as an object to view but as a person with whom connection is possible. The narrator describes Cory as "always human when he talked," but there is little evidence of Cory actually forging *relationships* with the people who watch him—it is only "Good-morning" that the narrator recalls him saying. It is possible, from the narrator's version of events, that while Cory greets those around him warmly, their admiration for him (and

envy, too) prevents them from meaningfully connecting with him.

The narrator's suggestion that Cory's greeting also "fluttered pulses" indicates a level of attraction to Cory, whether merely admiring or romantic, that further sets him apart from the community: while he may seek connection with the people he passes, they experience his greeting as if he was some sort of divinity ("he glittered when he walked") rather than a fellow human being.

The penultimate stanza, however, shifts this admiration towards envy. All of this praise and adoration sums to the sense ("In fine") that Cory is "everything / To make us wish that we were in his place." Instead of being seen as a neighbor or a potential friend, Cory comes to represent what the community wants for themselves. The boiling of admiration into envy serves to further isolate Cory from the community. They experience his presence, ultimately, as a reminder of what they do not and cannot have—their desire to be him, in fact, to take his place *from* him replaces their idolization of him (almost with a sense of violent hostility).

The narrator and the narrator's community view Cory either as a glittering god to be worshipped from afar or as an enemy, the symbol of all they wish to have for themselves. Between these two poles exists the real Cory, a man who may strive to be "always human when he talked" but who ultimately takes his own life. Robinson offers the possibility that Cory's suicide derives from the isolation and loneliness he experiences as a result of the strong, but disconnecting, feelings that his community exhibit towards him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 11-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:

The poem opens with the speaker's instant separation of Richard Cory from the speaker's community. Cory only *goes* down town as a visitor, but the speaker's community seems to be *part* of the down town landscape; in other words, they live there, and cannot come and go as they please.

The speaker is also immediately identified with a community through the first person plural pronoun "we." Unlike the distinguished, attention-attracting Cory, who has the first line of the poem all to himself, no one in the speaker's community, the speaker included, will be given an individual identity in any way throughout the poem. Instead, the community appears as a collective—the "people on the pavement," a phrase which indicates that they are probably working-class individuals, and certainly not riding through the streets. To that end, note that "down town" is usually associated with the part of a city where business happens—and as such is usually more hectic, dirtier, and noisier than "uptown" areas (where Cory might be coming from). From the very start of the poem, even before it is established what makes Cory the object of their attention, the community's contrast with Cory becomes clear.

The use of "whenever" also paints a scene that is *routine*: Cory repeatedly goes down town and the community watches him each time. This hint of repetitive, perpetual behavior will evolve throughout the poem.

This first pair of lines establishes the iambic pentameter that will continue without variation for the entirety of the poem:

Whenev- | er Rich- | ard Cor- | y went | down town,

This consistent, familiar meter will prove significant in establishing in a sense of security and predictability, a comfort that will be shattered by the poem's final line.

There is also a strong pattern of alliteration and consonance in the first two lines. Richard Cory's entrance features a series of softer /w/ and /n/ sounds: whenever, went, down, town). The community's description seems tougher by contrast, with its hard, percussive /p/ sounds (people, pavement).

LINES 3-4

He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

In the second half of the poem's first quatrain, the speaker begins to list the reasons why Cory attracts so much attention and admiration. He begins by describing Cory as "a gentleman from sole to crown." While the use of the word "crown" launches a series of regal words used to describe Cory ("imperial," "king"), the word "sole" also potentially puns on "soul": Cory's gentleman status spans his physical, spiritual (soul), and intellectual (crown) identity.

The speaker goes on to focus more specifically on Cory's physical appearance, calling Cory "clean favored" and "imperially slim." The first phrase also carries multiple possible meanings. "Clean favored" could refer to Cory's good looks (as in, his face is clean favored as opposed to *ill*-favored) or to him being literally clean-shaven or cleanly dressed (i. e., well-kept). These last possibilities may present Cory in contrast to the people surrounding him in the downtown neighborhood. Cory stands out, perhaps, because he appears well-groomed and clean, while the poorer community does not.

The speaker's use of "imperially slim" also continues the

pattern of regal language established with the word "crown" in the previous line. The speaker imagines that there is something majestic or commanding in Cory's physical build. *His* slimness derives not, evidently, from a lack of food (whereas the final stanza will suggest that the speaker's community might be thin because of their poverty). The speaker sees Cory's slimness, instead, as a sign of his power and prestige.

The close of the first quatrain also establishes the ABAB rhyme scheme with clear, perfect rhymes between lines 1 and 3 ("town" and "crown") and lines 2 and 4 ("him" and "slim"). Along with the poem's consistent iambic pentameter, this predictable formal pattern will create a false sense of security for the reader—one that will be dismantled by the shocking violence of the poem's final line.

These lines also feature extensive alliteration and consonance, especially through the /c/, /n/, /s/, and /l/ sounds (crown, clean, sole, slim). All of these words are simple and familiar, but, when placed together, their shared sounds heighten them—making the line feel particularly *poetic*. Similarly, Cory, probably just an ordinary man, becomes elevated to a majestic status in the context in which the speaker sees him. The speaker's consonant, alliterative diction helps to create this sense of elevation.

LINES 5-6

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;

The second stanza opens with two more reasons for Cory to be admired: the way in which he dressed and how he communicated with others. The speaker's description of Cory as "quietly arrayed" suggests that Cory's attire was simple or humble, certainly not ostentatious or show-offy.

This portrait of Cory as a man who did not flaunt his wealth continues in the next line, in which the speaker recalls that Cory was "always human when he talked." Why would Cory's humanity be in doubt? This phrasing elevates the speaker's admiration of Cory to a sort of deification: even though Cory might be understood to be some kind of divine, majestic being, he nonetheless appeared to be a regular man with the ability to seek connection with other people.

Curiously, the speaker's treatment of Cory's humanity never depicts *mutual* engagement between Cory and the community. The poem notes that Cory "talked" or Cory "said," but the townspeople never respond to or converse with Cory; they only stare at him. The speaker seems to recognize that Cory *was* a human being just like everyone else in the community, but this trait (Cory's humanity) becomes, in itself, an object of praise: isn't it incredible, the speaker seems to ask, that Cory could both be god-like and mortal at the same time? The very *possibility* of Cory connecting with the community on a human level thus becomes a marvel, not an opportunity to actually make a connection with Cory. As a result, Cory remains isolated from, and by, the community.

The most significant poetic device found in these two lines in the use of anaphora, the repeated "and he was always" that begins each line. This repetition augments the growing sense of the speaker's breathlessness in the recitation of Cory's good qualities. The emphasis of "always"—Cory's consistent, constant behavior—also supports the poem's consistent, constant meter and rhyme scheme. By reminding the reader of Cory's predictability, the speaker ensures that Cory's tragic fate will come as a greater shock. The use of anaphora here also mirrors a quasi-religious language: the precise repetition of language recalls prayer, as the speaker deifies Cory (that is, makes Cory out to be god-like).

The use of alliteration and consonance in these two lines (the initial /h/ sounds in "he" and "human" as well as the initial and /w/ sounds echoing in "was," "always," and "when") continue the practice, established in the first quatrain, of heightening the sonic world of the poem to be more musical and chant-like, more *poetic*. The alliteration here seems to amplify to the awe of the speaker when discussing Cory.

LINES 7-8

But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

Rather than simply continuing the list of Cory's admirable traits from the previous four lines (his physical appearance, his bearing, his clothing, his manner of communication), the speaker uses the second half of the second stanza to contrast Cory's majesty with his humble attire and speech. The important words in this quatrain are "but still": the speaker suggests that there is a *contradiction* between Cory's humanity and the impression that Cory gives to others. Even though the community might recognize that Cory is just a man, capable of connection, humility, and warmth, the overwhelming glory of Cory's presence seems to overwhelm those human-to-human impulses. In other words, the community's awe of Cory prevents them from connecting with him on a personal level.

What are the aspects of Cory's walk through town that fuel this kind of response from the community? One of these elements seems to be Cory's recognition of, or willingness to engage with, the community. When Cory greets the "people on the pavement," their hearts start beating faster in excitement. Secondly, the speaker claims that Cory "glittered": the people ascribe an impossible, magical trait to Cory. They know deep down that he's just a human being, but they nonetheless see him as somehow superhuman. In the following quatrain, when the speaker expands upon Cory's great wealth, the link between Cory's financial prowess and the glittery, golden lens through which the community views him will become even more apparent.

The imagery here, of the pulses fluttering and Cory glittering,

especially when partnered with the bursts of consonance in the words "fluttering" and "glittering," creates a powerful effect. It is as if everywhere that Cory goes, excitement and beauty spring up.

The most significant poetic device found in these lines is the epistrophe found at the end of each line (joining line 5 as well): "**when** he talked"/"**when** he said"/"**when** he walked." As with the anaphora (the repeated "And he was always") in the first half of this quatrain, the repetition creates almost an incantation- or prayer-like quality, suggesting the worshipful way that the speaker and the speaker's community think about Cory.

LINES 9-10

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:

At the start of the third stanza, the speaker arrives at the heart of the matter, the root cause of why Cory is so admired (and envied) in the community: Cory is extremely wealthy. This is the first time in the poem that the speaker has explicitly referenced Cory's financial situation, although it can be inferred from the vocabulary of prior stanzas ("glittered," "gentleman," "crown," "imperially").

Here, too, through the use of hyperbole, describing Cory as "richer than a king," the speaker adds on to the previous usage of language describing Cory as royal in his appearance and bearing. It can be assumed that the speaker over-estimates Cory's wealth (could he really be richer than a king?), but the speaker and the speaker's community see Cory in contrast to themselves. In the next stanza, the vast gap between Cory and the speaker's community will become even clearer, but the fact that Cory's wealth on its own draws such interest from the people suggests that he is a far outlier in the community.

In Line 10, the speaker concludes his list of enviable qualities found in Cory: he is "admirably schooled in every grace." At the time, often in religious contexts, manly or chivalric graces were cataloged as the personal qualities that men should aspire to. These usually included courage, patience, and politeness, so the speaker's use of "every grace" here demonstrates that the community understands Cory as the perfect man, inside and out.

It is notable, though, that the speaker does not emphasize Cory's *performance of* these qualities but rather his *education in* these qualities: he doesn't say Cory "admirably embodied every grace" but that Cory has been "admirably schooled" in them. That suggests that Cory is not only naturally gentlemanly but that he probably comes from a family or upbringing that involved a rigorous education in good manners and behavior. The community cannot strive to be like Cory because, the speaker asserts, Cory is extraordinary because he was *raised* to be extraordinary.

In sum, then, the two lines, taken together, move away from merely describing how wonderful Cory looks and acts and instead emphasize a *background* of wealth, prosperity, and education that have allowed him to give off this impression in the present. This also hints at what will be revealed in the final stanza: Cory's glory is, to some extent, a performance; even though Cory has been given all this wealth and education, he does not embody or derive pleasure from these things in the way that the onlookers imagine he does.

The notable poetic device in these two lines is the use of the caesura in the middle of line 9. The dashes allow the speaker to emphasize Cory's wealth, slowing down to bask in imagining what having Cory's economic success would be like and also revealing to the reader how central Cory's wealth is to the admiration and envy that he receives.

The growth of "rich" into "richer" also makes those words stand out, suggesting that Richard Cory's name itself may be a pun. For the "people on the pavement," Cory embodies this idea of wealth—when they see him, they do not see "Richard" the man but "Richer," the tremendous contrast between a distant wealth and their own great poverty.

LINES 11-12

In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

The end of the third stanza moves away from the speaker's accumulation of reasons why Cory is worthy of admiration. Lines 11 and 12 offer summation of these observations that reveal the community's overwhelming *envy* of Cory.

More than simply enjoying the pleasure of being in Cory's company or watching him walk down the street, the community desperately wants to *be* Cory. The speaker's use of "in his place" in line 12 suggests both social status and geography. The community wants to possess Cory's societal capital (suggested by the wealth and schooling earlier in the stanza). Since Cory also seems to live at a distance from the "people on the pavement" downtown, the community also desires Cory's physical "place," a preferred, presumably more comfortable, luxurious home.

To be "in his place" suggests, too, that Cory would no longer be in his position if the community's wish was granted—the community imagines being where Cory is *instead* of him. There is not just wistful envy in the speaker's thoughts, then, but also a tinge of anger or even violence: why is Cory in his place and we are not?

Taken completely on their own, these two lines suggest neither a fierce admiration of nor an interest in connecting with Cory on a human level: instead, they give the community cause for *hating* Cory. The speaker's very language, "he *was* everything" rather than "he *had* everything," makes it clear that Cory ultimately amounts only to a *symbol* for the community rather than a person in his own right: he represents everything that

they do not have and cannot acquire.

If Cory is merely a symbol, is it a surprise that the community does not understand or question how Cory might be hurting on a human level? The shock of the poem's final line, then, is not only that Cory turned out to be so miserable when he seemed like he should be so content, but also that Cory turned out to be so *real* when he seemed to the community to be a metaphor. The poem warns of the dangers, then, of seeing any other human being as representative of something beyond an individual person with individual thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Line 11 is unique in the poem in that it is the *only* line without punctuation at the end of it. This distinctive enjambment makes the pair of lines stand out: this is the speaker's emotional climax, in a sense, the turn from admiration to jealousy or hate, and it cannot be confined to a single-line thought.

The word "everything" in line 11 also echoes the phrase "every grace" in line 10. It is as if the specifics of the speaker's list of fine qualities in Cory balloons from small details into absolutely *everything* that the community could desire. The repetition of the word "every" places extra emphasis on the expansiveness of the thought in lines 11-12 as the poem heats up: Cory doesn't only have a litany of nice traits, he *is* the embodiment of what the community wants to be.

These lines also feature more than half of the speaker's use of the first person plural pronouns, i.e., "we" and "us." The speaker's alignment with the broader community highlights Cory's isolation: it's Cory against the rest of the world, or, at least, the rest of the speaker's world. It also stresses the speaker's unwillingness to become a voice separate from this community—especially when confessing to the community's deep-seated envy, the speaker takes refuge in being part of a sentiment shared by a large group of people.

LINES 13-14

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

The fourth stanza opens with a smaller surprise before the shock of the final lines: for the first time in the poem, the speaker does not reference Cory at all. In fact, lines 13 and 14 demonstrate that, as much as the speaker's community might think about, idolize, and envy Cory, they recognize that they cannot be "in his place" and that putting all their energies into wishing that they could is useless.

The stanza begins with the word "so," linking the thought to the sentiment in lines 11-12: it is *because* the community has this envy and desire that they were in Cory's place that they go on working. Staring at Cory will not get them where they want to be, but toiling away might.

The final stanza's opening lines also leave Cory isolated. The community, in their shared identity as expressed through the speaker's use of the first person plural ("we"), have one another through their difficulties, but Cory has no place or role among them. The "people on the pavement" are unhappy, but they find solidarity within their united unhappiness and their commitment to pushing through these hard times.

The speaker's use of polysyndeton enforces the repetitive rhythm of the community's hard-working lifestyle. Each of the four elements of the clause, all separated by the word "and," comes like an evenly spaced action in an assembly line, hammer blows as the community labors.

What precisely do readers learn about the community? They have given up luxuries (the luxuries, presumably, that Cory has in excess) like eating meat. They lament the meager options they do have available to them, represented by the bread which they eat instead of finer delicacies. In this way, the meat and the bread reside on opposite ends of a spectrum of luxury, a symbol of the distance between what the community has and what they dream of possessing.

The speaker also describes how the community "waited for the light." This light can be understood both literally and figuratively. Literally, the light of daytime represents an opportunity to go back to work and make more money. It also may stand for the hope of a better life, the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel." Line 13 tightly juxtaposes two co-existing approaches for dealing with hard times: people can try to work their way out of it or they can try to hope and pray their way out of it. It seems, here, that this community does both. At the same time that they take the active step of working hard to put food on the table, they also are *waiting*, a passive choice, as if the light, the better day, will come on its own.

The light—the daytime—also contrasts with the "summer night" that will be introduced as the scene of Cory's suicide in line 15. Cory, unlike the community, will choose *not* to wait for the light. While he has all the wealth and luxury that the community lacks, he does not share their strength to carry on living in hopes of a better future.

LINES 15-16

And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

The final two lines of "Richard Cory," in which it is revealed that Cory shoots himself in the head, come as a shock for a number of reasons. Most significantly, the speaker has meticulously laid out the case for why Cory *should* be happy: he has everything that poorer people could desire to have; he has good looks, good manners, and good clothes; and he is admired by all as he passes the people in the streets.

There is nothing to suggest that Cory would be less than hugely satisfied with his life. This contrast is even present in the final lines themselves. In line 15, the speaker associates Richard Cory with the "calm summer night," an environment in which

one imagines Cory basking in his greatness rather than taking his own life. The violence of line 16 shatters the peace established by the setting conjured up in line 15.

What's more, the speaker, in the fourth stanza, has moved away from Cory, describing the toil of the speaker's community in lines 13 and 14. The expectation set by those lines is that the speaker and the community have put Cory to one side: they recognize that focusing all their admiration and envy upon a man will not help them acquire his great prosperity. The poem seems to have turned its focus to the speaker and away from Cory, making the poem's conclusion all the more unexpected.

Finally, the poem has maintained a consistent meter and rhyme scheme that lend it a sense of predictability and ease. Each stanza has been firmly in iambic pentameter with perfect ABAB end-rhymes. It seems impossible that anything should disturb the tranquility and stability of the poem itself. It is jolting, then, when the disturbance comes not from an external shift in the poem's meter or form but from the internal content of the poem's final seven syllables.

That these words fall within the meter and rhyme scheme that has seemed so safe and secure suggests that Cory's death—the ultimate unpredictable outcome—should have been predictable all along. It fits inside the poem's form as well as any other line does. The unpredictability of human nature is, the poem's form seems to argue, the most predictable element of all.

The shock of the final line may be compounded, too, by the contrast in consonants in line 15 and line 16. The "calm summer night" of line 15 is awash in the soft sounds of *m*'s and *n*'s, which continue up to the last possible moment in line 16's "went home and." But this consonant tranquility exploded with the poem's final words, which pop with the potent /p/, /t/, /h/, and /d/ sounds of "put a bullet through his head."

The poem makes no explicit mention of *why* Cory chooses to take his own life, but that seems to be the point. The speaker and the speaker's community feel a strong interest in Cory because of what he represents to them—unattainable prosperity and glory, both admirable and enviable—and not because of who he actually is as a person, even if the speaker acknowledges that Cory presents himself as an "always human" man. The speaker doesn't care—so readers don't know or wonder until the final line—what Cory's life is like beyond the visible, audible cues when Cory goes down town: does he have family? Is he healthy? Is he happy? The reader, too, probably shares in the speaker's lack of curiosity or empathy towards Cory until the final moments, accepting the speaker's deifying (and, thus, dehumanizing) of Cory.

Do the speaker and the speaker's community bear some responsibility for Cory's death? By failing to respond to Cory's apparent interest in connecting with them, and by shutting themselves off to the fullness of humanity, do they contribute to isolating him to the breaking point? That, too, is unknowable. But Cory's deep, fragile humanity, denied by the community, is what stands out most powerfully in the poem's final moment: Cory's head, once described as a "crown" by the speaker, not a symbol of royalty at all but the target of a seen and unseen man's final desperate act.

SYMBOLS

MEAT AND BREAD

The speaker's community has been stricken by poverty. The speaker describes the day-to-day toil and sacrifice of the community as they wait for a better opportunity to arrive:

> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

The contrast here between meat—an expensive food viewed as a delicacy—and bread—seen as simple, unappealing sustenance—symbolizes the difference between the lifestyle that the people long for and the one they actually lead. A table filled with meat is the lifestyle of a Richard Cory, unattainable to the speaker's community at the present time. Instead, these people lead lives that they perceive as being like the bread: enough to survive, but not enough to thrive and be happy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Much of the alliteration in "Richard Cory" centers around the initial /w/ sound, the same sound usually associated with an exhalation of awe or wonder—the kind people might have upon witnessing Cory in action. This is particularly clear in line 12, with the phrase "wish that we were." When combined with broader consonance, these /w/ sounds suffuse the entire poem, and seems to accelerate into the final stanza: in lines 13 and 14, five words feature the initial /w/ sound, each used to depict the collective toil of the speaker's community ("we worked," "waited," "went without").

Other sounds alliterate as well. For example, in line 8, the spark of the hard /g/ of Cory's "good-morning," the only actual spoken line quoted in the poem, finds its match in the similarly explosive start of "glittered," like little bursts of magnificence as Cory passes by.

Returning to the final stanza, in line 15 the hard /c/ sound of "Cory," in the character's final mention in the poem, pairs with that of "calm," an ironic juxtaposition given that Cory's unrest that is about to be uncovered. The final line also partners three initial /h/ sounds—"home" and "his head"—as if to hammer home the brutality of Cory's action. Indeed, there is a powerful contrast between the gentle alliteration of the /w/ sound, the poem's last picture of the suffering but united community of the speaker, and the brittle, hard sounds that accompany Cory through the final two lines.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "w"
- **Line 2:** "W," "p," "p"
- **Line 3:** "w"
- **Line 5:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "A," "a," "h," "h"
- **Line 8:** "G," "g," "w," "w"
- **Line 9:** "r," "r"
- **Line 12:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 13:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 14:** "w," "w"
- **Line 15:** "C," "c"
- **Line 16:** "h," "h," "h"

ANAPHORA

The use of anaphora in "Richard Cory" centers around, initially, the description of Richard Cory himself. In the second stanza, each of the first two lines begins with the phrase, "And he was always." The speaker's usage of the same words to open the characterization of Cory as "quietly arrayed" and then "human when he talked" helps to create the sense of the speaker's breathlessness in discussing why Cory is so admired.

It also links Cory's appearance (line 5) with Cory's manner of communication (line 6), as if one thought has led to the other. Indeed, the speaker's description of Cory as "quietly arrayed" not only conveys a physical description but also may imply a quality of humility or simplicity in Cory's wardrobe: he could demonstrate through his wealth through lavish dress, but instead he dresses "quietly." This thought, then, propels the speaker into a new idea, beginning in the same way, that serves as a correction: what makes Cory so spectacular is not his appearance but rather his humanity, which is represented, at times, through his dress as well.

The use of "and" as an opening for consecutive lines continues in the next stanza. First, in the third stanza, the speaker continues to deploy this technique in describing Cory (his wealth and his manners). Then, in the final stanza, the opening *and*s are transposed to the second and third lines of the stanza (rather than the first and second) and now describe the actions of the speaker's community and Cory's own last act.

The frequent use of "and" creates a new effect of breathlessness: rather than the speaker being in such awe of Cory, the speaker instead is at a loss of words (or, at least, at a loss for how to plan to tell this story). The ideas simply spill out one after another, the litany of praising words about Cory morphing into a briefer step-by-step chronicle of the actions of the community and Cory's death.

The predictability of this opening for many of the lines in the poem also sharpens the shock of what will lie behind the last of these *and*s: Cory's death.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "And he was always"
- **Line 6:** "And he was always"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "And"

ASSONANCE

The use of assonance in "Richard Cory" is minimal. However, there are a few significant examples that work powerfully throughout the poem. In line 7, for instance, the repeated short /uh/ sound in "fluttered pulses" comes as a bit of a sonic surprise, given the limited use of consecutive assonant words previously. This distinction, indeed, flutters the pulse of the poem, so to speak, illustrating the elevated heart rates of Cory's admirers.

The following stanza presents its most potent example of assonance in a familiar phrase, "richer than a king." The use of assonance here (the short /i/ sound) helps to emphasize Cory's wealth—that's what ultimately stands out most to the community, after all.

The last powerful use of assonance comes in the poem's final lines through the startling phrase, "put a bullet." The shared vowel sound here, especially when paired with the consonance of the final /t/ sound ("put a bullet"), can be in itself jolting, mirroring the shock of Cory's suicide. Tracing that vowel /u/ sound throughout the poem also yields an interesting result: the sound only appears two times elsewhere in the poem: first, in the word "looked" in line 2, as the people stare at Cory but do not make an attempt to connect with him; then, in "good-morning" in line 8, Cory's own futile attempt to connect with the downtown community. That vowel sound finally comes to rest in Cory's death, perhaps a direct result of his inability to find meaningful human connection with the community that worships and envies him.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e," "e," "e," "o," "o"

- **Line 2:** “e,” “e”
- **Line 5:** “A,” “a,” “ay,” “a,” “ay”
- **Line 6:** “A,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 7:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 9:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 11:** “i”
- **Line 12:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 14:** “e,” “ea”
- **Line 16:** “u,” “u”

CAESURA

Six lines of "Richard Cory" include caesura, half of those occurring in the poem's final stanza. Three of those caesuras come in the form of commas before an "and," separating items of a list. These caesuras combined with this polysyndeton contribute to the speaker's breathless quality and emphasize the use of accumulating lists—of Richard Cory's qualities and of descriptions of the actions of Cory and the speaker's community—throughout the poem. This is most noticeable in the final stanza, when the use of commas as both caesura and as end-stopped punctuation illustrate the perpetual toil of the speaker's community:

> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

There is no end, the caesuras suggest, to the community's labor and misery. Just when it appears to be over, there's another lament or task around the corner.

By contrast, in line 8, the comma after "Good-morning" may cause the reader to pause, emphasizing, and, perhaps, basking in, the glow of Cory's speech.

In line 9, the dash that gives way to the speaker's exclamation, "yes, richer than a king," emphasizes the community's interest in Cory's wealth. As much as the speaker recognizes the value in Cory's humility and humanity, it is his wealth, the only part of Cory's being that the community *cannot* attain, that inspires this pause for reflection and underlining.

Finally, the most dramatic use of caesura occurs in the poem's penultimate line. An added clause describing the setting ("one calm summer night") delays the reveal of Cory's suicide in the final line. By postponing the final line through caesura, the poem plays up the contrast between expectation and Cory's action. It as if the speaker intends to divert Cory from his ultimate action through caesura by describing the placid environment. Cory wrenches his story back from the speaker to end it on his own terms, much as Cory defies the expectations of all those lookers-on who believe him to be content with his life.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “, ”
- **Line 8:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “—”
- **Line 13:** “, ”
- **Line 14:** “,”
- **Line 15:** “,”

CONSONANCE

The prevalence of consonance in the opening stanza of "Richard Cory" helps to construct an air of slickness and grandeur, the speaker's vision of how Cory exists in the world. There is a smoothness and ease in the diction of the opening stanza, as if the speaker relishes each word when read aloud. This begins with the quartet of /r/ sounds in the opening line and is followed by the pairing of the final /nt/ of "went"with the medial /nt/ in "down town":

> Whenever Richard Cory went down town

This consonant creations a licking-of-the-lips sensation that continues as the speaker admiringly watches Cory in the second half of the first stanza, the /l/ sound carrying through "gentleman," "sole," "imperially," and "slim," with the sibilance of "sole" and "slim" echoing as well.

In line 14, the final, sharp consonance of the /t/ and /d/ sounds—

> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

—convey the laboriousness and grittiness of the lives of the speaker's community.

In the penultimate line of the poem, that biting edge of the hard /d/ and /t/ sounds meets with its opposite: a soothing pair of /m/ sounds in "calm summer." This, of course, sets up the ironic contrast between the restful, soft setting and Cory's shocking violence as depicted in the last line.

Indeed, consonance in "Richard Cory" is at its most powerful in the final line, in which the final /t/ sound of "put" and "bullet" crash like startling gunshots themselves. (In fact, the juxtaposition of the initial /p/ and /b/ sounds add to the effect of consonance, since /b/ is the voiced form of the /p/ sound.)

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “W,” “r,” “R,” “r,” “r,” “w,” “n,” “t,” “w,” “n,” “t,” “w,” “n”
- **Line 2:** “p,” “p,” “p,” “t,” “d,” “t”
- **Line 3:** “le,” “s,” “le”
- **Line 4:** “d,” “d,” “m,” “all,” “s,” “l,” “m”
- **Line 5:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 6:** “w,” “w,” “w”

- **Line 7:** “s,” “t,” “l,” “tt,” “l,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “d”
- **Line 8:** “G,” “d,” “g,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 9:** “r,” “ch,” “r,” “ch,” “r”
- **Line 10:** “d,” “d,” “s,” “d,” “c”
- **Line 11:** “t,” “t”
- **Line 12:** “w,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 13:** “w,” “w,” “d,” “w,” “t,” “d,” “t”
- **Line 14:** “w,” “w,” “t,” “t,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 15:** “C,” “c,” “m ,” “mm”
- **Line 16:** “h,” “m,” “t,” “t,” “h,” “h”

DIACOPE

Most of the use of diacope throughout "Richard Cory" emphasizes the speaker's ever-growing list of Cory's celebrated qualities. The phrase "he was" appears five times across the first three stanzas; the phrase "when he" appears in three consecutive lines (6-8) in the second stanza. Each of these usages of the two phrases illustrate an additional quality that makes Richard Cory the subject of both admiration and envy. The anaphoric openings to lines 5 and 6 ("And he was always") similarly build up this profile of Cory.

The use of diacope is so impactful here because the speaker is not just building a list; the speaker is building a *case* for why Cory should have been happy and should have lived. By the time the speaker reaches the final shocking line, the three aforementioned diacopic phrases have appeared *ten* times: if each of these phrases pair with a different reason for Cory to feel and be successful, how could Cory fail?

The use of these repeated phrases creates the sense of these arguments piling up. The diacope trio in lines 6-8 ("when he talked," "when he said," "when he walked") also gives the impression of comprehensiveness: if the speaker has so carefully cataloged Cory in each of these states of acting and being, is it conceivable that the speaker could have missed something in interpreting who Richard Cory is? (Note also that these phrases could arguably be interpreted as epistrophe.)

The additional significant use of diacope comes in lines 10-11: "every grace" is followed by "everything." Here there is a sense of the definition of Cory's greatness expanding. It is not just enough that he embodies "every grace": those are merely human. Instead, he encompasses *everything* which is somehow divine.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “He was”
- **Line 5:** “And he was always”
- **Line 6:** “And he was always,” “when he”
- **Line 7:** “when he”
- **Line 8:** “when he”
- **Line 9:** “he was”
- **Line 10:** “every”
- **Line 11:** “he was every”
- **Line 13:** “and”
- **Line 14:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 15:** “And”
- **Line 16:** “and”

END-STOPPED LINE

Although there are only four complete sentences (as signaled by four periods) in "Richard Cory," the majority of the lines in "Richard Cory" are end-stopped. The use of short thoughts throughout the poem contribute the poem's overall effect in two ways: first, it conveys, through the sense of one idea coming rapidly on the heels of the previous idea, the speaker's excitement about describing Richard Cory in lots of different ways. That excitement then develops into a sort of breathless eagerness to get through the story and reveal the ending.

The speaker's use of colons (in lines 2 and 10) suggests a desire to defend the points being made. Line 3 explains *why* the community stares at Cory in Line 2 (that is, because he looks so gentlemanly). Lines 11-12 summarizes the community's obsession with Cory's good qualities, framing their interest in terms of envy rather than purely admiration. As shown by the use of end-stopped lines throughout, the speaker is bursting with positive things to say about Cory but also tends to qualify and explain many of these statements, as if trying to justify these observations.

In general, end-stopped lines are demarcated by punctuation at the end of the line while enjambment is signaled by lack thereof, but there are three lines that we'd argue should *not* be classified as end-stopped, despite the use of end commas, because they derive their meaning from the next line. Line 1 does not describe what happens "whenever"; that explanation arrives only in Line 2. Line 7's comma only functions to introduce a speech clause in line 8; the actual end of the clause is, in fact, the caesura in the middle of line 8. Finally, line 15's comma functions to set off the adverbial phrase, "One calm summer night," not to provide the subject, "Richard Cory," with a predicate (which only arrives in the final line).

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “:”
- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “.”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “;”
- **Line 8:** “.”
- **Line 9:** “—”
- **Line 10:** “:”
- **Line 12:** “.”

- **Line 13:** “,”
- **Line 14:** “;”
- **Line 16:** “.”

ENJAMBMENT

"Richard Cory" features only four lines that conclude with enjambment, one per stanza. Three of them utilize commas, but we've chosen to classify these as enjambment rather than end-stopped because each line derives its meaning only in the context of the line that follows.

Line 1—

> Whenever Richard Cory went down town,

—requires line 2 to complete the thought introduced in the clause. By introducing Cory in his own line, the speaker sets Cory above and separate from the speaker's community, whose gaze only appears in the second line.

Line 7's comma only functions to introduce the speech clause in the following line. By making the reader wait until the next line for the conclusion of the clause—Cory's majestic "Good morning"—the speaker builds up the suspense and excitement surrounding Cory's presence and the bestowing of his greeting upon the passers-by.

In line 11, the enjambment delays the explanation of "everything": on its own, the line reads:

> In fine, we thought that he was everything

On its own, that unfinished thought *could* be a complete idea, one steeped in admiration. With the inclusion of the following phrase, though the idea evolves:

> In fine, we thought that he was everything
> To make us wish that we were in his place.

Now it becomes clear that it is not that Cory is *everything* but that he is everything *that we are not*. Admiration, here, blurs into envy. The use of enjambment demonstrates how fine that line can be, a line that, perhaps, ultimately prevents the community from connecting on a human level with Cory.

The final enjambed line is the penultimate one (line 15), in which the adverbial clause "one calm summer night" sets the scene and delays the deadly action of the final phrase. The use of enjambment here builds suspense but also allows the peaceful aura of the summer night to linger in the space between lines before the violent conclusion that follows.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “ everything”
- **Line 15:** “night,”

HYPERBOLE

The central use of hyperbole arrives in the speaker's declaration that Richard Cory is "richer than a king." Of course, one assumes, Cory is not *actually* richer than a king (at least, not a well-off king). The speaker intends to convey that Cory's wealth, from the perspective of the speaker's impoverished community, appears infinitely vast.

It is appropriate that this quality of Cory's should be the one that receives the speaker's hyperbolic treatment, since it is clear from the speaker's focus on poverty and toil in the final stanza how poverty-stricken this community has become. Cory's grandeur seems impossibly unreachable, and the speaker uses the hyperbolic phrase to emphasize that what Cory has is not reserved for mere humans but for royalty. The portrayal of Cory as majestic culminates here but echoes throughout the poem, in the use of the words "crown" and "imperially" and in the regal "glittered" that suggests perhaps even divinity.

The use of hyperbole, stretching the reader's conception of Cory so far from the average human experience, meets with ironic fate in the final lines when Cory seems extraordinarily human and fallible as he makes the ultimate decision to end his life. Vast wealth is not enough to make Cory happy—living hyperbolically, it seems, is not worth it.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** “richer than a king”

IRONY

The central irony of "Richard Cory" is that despite how beloved, attractive, majestic, and wealthy Cory may be, he is still more miserable than the impoverished, ill-fed community he passes by "down town." The speaker belongs to the "people of the pavement," who look at Cory with admiration and envy, wishing that they could share in his lifestyle and his grace, but what they see as a comprehensive set of gifts is not enough: Cory ultimately takes his own life while the community lives on, unhappy but with something—"the light"—to live for.

It is doubly ironic, perhaps, that the speaker's community, through the deep admiration and envy for Cory stemming from a firm conviction that Cory's life is desirable, may contribute to a sense of alienation that drives Cory to suicide. Despite Cory's "human"-ness when he talks, the speaker never depicts the community interacting with Cory, even when he greets them. Their treatment of Cory as an untouchable royal prevents him

from making the connections with people that it seems, through his "Good-morning[s]" that he may be seeking. Whether or not the community's deifying of Cory (i.e., making him god-like) contributes to his decision to take his own life, it is clear that Cory-worship blinds the community from recognizing Cory's inner turmoil or despair. By looking so intently at Cory, ironically, the community becomes unable to see him.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "And Richard Cory, one calm summer night, / Went home and put a bullet through his head."

METAPHOR

"Richard Cory" features two important metaphors. The first occurs in line 8 when the speaker describes Cory as having "glittered when he walked." Cory does not *actually* glitter, obviously, but the imagery conveys the gold-laden regality that the speaker ascribes to Cory. The word choice presents Cory as a radiant, almost divine being, but it also, perhaps, alienates him: if Cory is a majestic man who glitters, how can regular people really make an effort to understand who he is as a human being?

The second metaphor arrives in line 13 when the speaker describes the poverty-stricken community:

> So on we worked, and waited for the light,

Waiting for the light, of course, could be literal: at night, the people might literally wait for the light to come signaling a new day when more money can be made and better food can—one hopes—be purchased. The light, however, can also represent hope (like the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel). In waiting for the light, the speaker's community put their faith in the possibility of a better day. It is this light, or the possibility of it coming to them, that keeps them going. It is a light, it would seem, in which Richard Cory has lost faith. For the speaker's community, the light can stand for more literal prosperity—food, money, material comforts. For Cory, who already has all of those things, what is the light for which he waits? If it is happiness or inner peace, how will he know when the light arrives?

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "he ," "glittered"
- **Line 13:** "waited for the light"

POLYSYNDETON

The use of polysyndeton appears throughout "Richard Cory," which manages to use the word "and" an impressive 11 times in the space of 16 lines.

The first six of these *and*s contribute to the ever-growing list of behaviors and appearances that make Cory seem like such a marvel. The use of polysyndeton conveys the speaker's bottomless interest in Cory—there's always just one more thing to say. The absence of each "and" might suggest that the speaker has pre-planned which aspects of Cory's comportment should be discussed in an orderly sentence or two. Instead, the polysyndeton demonstrates that the speaker continually comes up with more ways to praise Cory—each *and* feels like a new, sudden thought, which endows the poem with its sense of momentum.

The use of the repeated *and*s shifts in the final stanza when each "and" no longer separates praiseworthy qualities of Cory but behaviors of the hard-working, unsatisfied community to which the speaker belongs. Just like all the reasons for Cory to be happy accumulate throughout the poem, so too do all the causes of the community's *un*happiness now amass:

> So on we worked, **and** waited for the light,
> **And** went without the meat, **and** cursed the bread;

It is a greater shock, then, when the final two *and*s ("And Richard Cory," "and put a bullet") do not continue either of these growing lists—the case for Cory's happiness and the case for the community's misery—but instead depict Cory's brutal suicide. Grammatically, these phrases do continue a list, but the horror of their meanings shatters the expectations that the previous use of polysyndeton has set.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "and"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "and"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "and"
- **Line 14:** "And," "and"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "and"

VOCABULARY

Crown (Line 3) - "Crown" here means "head" (as in "Jack fell down and broke his crown"). In the poem, the speaker describes Cory as being gentlemanly from "sole to crown," i. e., from "head to toe" (but in the other direction!). The use of the word "crown" also, when partnered with "imperially" and "richer than a king" helps to create the sense of Cory's innate majesty.

Clean favored (Line 4) - "Favored" here refers to a specified physical appearance; for example, "ill favored" would mean unattractive. The speaker's description of Cory as "clean favored," therefore, suggests that he is physically attractive and perhaps well-kept (literally clean) and clean-shaven.

Imperially slim (Line 4) - "Imperially" here means "majestically" or "royally"—that is, relating to an emperor. The speaker's description of Richard Cory's slimness, or thinness, as imperial suggests that Cory has a physical build that is somehow royal or commanding in its bearing. Partnered with the royal language elsewhere in the poem—"crown," "richer than a king"—this phrase helps to convey the sense of Cory as regal.

Arrayed (Line 5) - In this context, "arrayed" means "dressed." By describing Richard Cory as "quietly arrayed," the speaker suggests that Cory's wardrobe is simple, despite his great wealth.

Grace (Line 10) - "Grace" most nearly here means "an attractively polite way of behaving." The phrase "manly graces" was frequently used at the time of the poem's composition to describe the various qualities that a chivalrous gentleman should demonstrate (often with a nod to the Christian alternate meaning of "grace," the mercy and blessing of God). These graces might include courage, courtesy, patience, etc. The speaker suggests that Cory embodies each of these qualities.The alternate usage of "grace" to refer to elegance of movement (as in "graceful") may also come into play here. The speaker earlier references Cory's glittering walk, which may also be imagined as graceful.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Richard Cory" is made up of four heroic quatrains, four-line stanzas that follow an ABAB rhyme scheme. The expected meter of heroic stanzas differ by language; in English, as seen in "Richard Cory," the accompanying meter is iambic pentameter. The punctuation of each stanza is such that each stanza comprises a complete sentence ending with a period. This establishes a sense of momentum that hastens the poem to its shocking ending: it is as if the speaker shares these ideas in four big gulps of thought, and the final two lines, part of a larger sentence, catch the reader by surprise.

Heroic stanzas can also be called elegiac stanzas, linking this poem's form with the traditional form of an elegy, which usually mourns the death of an individual. In this way, the heroic stanza form of "Richard Cory" foreshadows Cory's death.

The consistency and predictability of the form, along with the regularity of the meter and rhyme scheme, create a sense of safety and reliability that is then shattered by the twist of the final lines. Since the form is so solid, familiar, and unchanging, the reader does not expect the jolt of instability provided by the content of the final stanza, in which Cory commits suicide. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the comfortable, recognizable form with the violence of the final line strengthens the impact of that ultimate shock.

METER

The entirety of "Richard Cory" is written in iambic pentameter, each line consisting of five iambs (two-syllable feet with an accent on the second syllable). The iambic pentameter is precise and strict throughout. Examine how this iambic pentameter plays out in the first line more closely (scansion of all sixteen lines would look the same):

Whenev- | er Rich- | ard Cor- | y went | down-town

This exact metrical pattern contributes to a sense of predictability throughout the poem (the rhyme scheme does the same). By the end of the second stanza, perhaps, there is no threat of variation; it seems clear that the poem will offer no surprises in its rhymes or meter. This proves to be correct, but the shock of the final lines comes across through the poem's content, not through any variations in meter or rhyme. In fact, it is the juxtaposition of the totally unexpected suicide of Richard Cory with the expected iambic pentameter chugging along nicely (to accompany the "calm summer night") that gives the final line its jolting effect. Whether in a life that seems straightforward and well-structured or in a poem that seems to play by the same rules, it's impossible to know what is bubbling all along beneath the surface.

RHYME SCHEME

"Richard Cory" follows a strict ABAB rhyme scheme throughout each of its four quatrains. All of the end-rhymes are full, perfect rhymes that fall on the final stressed syllable of the line.

While "arrayed" and "said" in the second stanza are not an exact rhyme in spoken English now, it is possible that "said" could have been pronounced with a hard "a" sound in 19th century American English. If the words did *not* rhyme when read aloud at the time of the poem's composition, the off-rhyme then also introduces Cory's only spoken line in the poem, a sudden shift in expectation that alerts the listener to Cory's impending majestic speech.

The consistency of the rhyme scheme contributes, alongside the steady meter, to a sense throughout the poem of predictability and reliability. The speaker shatters this feeling in the final line of the poem, like a bullet piercing a calm summer night, with the announcement of Cory's death. The poem's rhyme scheme supports an unexpected theme of the poem: even when things appear to be going along splendidly and easily, great unrest may be boiling below the surface.

The poem features minimal internal rhyme. However, in the first stanza, the second syllable of "pavement" finds rhyming echo in the next line's "gentleman." This gives a subtle emphasis to the speaker's definition of Richard Cory as a gentleman, as if the internal rhyme is a refined bow to the people of the pavement as Cory is introduced.

Internal rhymes also appear to accompany each end-rhyme in the first stanza (but only the first stanza). "Down town," of course, in itself contains an internal rhyme, and the phrase "imperially slim" pairs "im-" with "slim." In the introduction of Cory's personage, these additional rhymes serve as extra buttresses for the great man's regal entrance.

Small other internal rhymes like line 11's

> We thought that he was everything

help to propel the poem's momentum but do not significantly interfere with the solid sense of rhymes marching forward at the end of each line.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Richard Cory" appears to be a member of the impoverished downtown community that is so envious and admiring of Richard Cory. The speaker uses the first person plural ("we" or "us") in a number of lines (lines 2, 11-12, and 13-14) but never uses the first person singular. This endows the speaker with an exclusively *communal* identity. In other words, the speaker does not exist as an *individual* separate from the speaker's community. The speaker characterizes the community as people indistinguishable from one another. When Cory appears in their midst, only *he* stands out.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the community as "we people on the pavement," a phrase that is used to contrast the downtown throng from Cory. The speaker's community belongs to the pavement, but Cory merely glides in for a visit.

In the third stanza, after extensively expressing praise and admiration for Cory, the speaker clarifies that these feelings, now mixed with envy, are shared by the entire community: everyone wishes that they could have Cory's qualities and live his life.

In the final stanza, the speaker provides a clearer portrait of the community through a list of what "we" did, in toil: worked, waited for a better day, and lamented the simpleness of the life available to them. Still, in contrast to Cory, who is isolated in the final lines and in his final moments, the speaker describes a united, determined community. They may be miserable, but at least they have each other to share in that misery. Unlike Cory, the speaker describes the community as one that is capable, against the odds, of surviving.

SETTING

The speaker establishes two clearly distinct settings in the poem: the "down town" world of the speaker's community and the neighborhood of Cory's home. With the exception of the final couplet, the poem takes place in the speaker's neighborhood, as suggested by the speaker's self-inclusion in the characterization of the downtown community as "we people on the pavement." While there is no description of this setting, it is clearly a community beset by poverty—the people forego eating meat to save money while waiting for an escape from their situation, all the while wishing that they could live Cory's life.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker conjures up Cory's distant neighborhood (maybe "uptown") as Cory returns home to take his own life. The juxtaposition of the "calm summer night" and the violence of the gunshot suggests a peaceful, wealthy community jolted by this sudden disturbing act.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

In the late 1890s, when Edwin Arlington Robinson's wrote "Richard Cory," most leading American poets were avoiding the comfortable verse forms, like the heroic stanza to which Robinson still clung. Robinson had little interest in the free verse, modernist tendencies of his contemporaries. Supposedly, when asked why he did not take up looser verse forms, Robinson exclaimed, "I write badly enough as it is."

Even for Robinson, "Richard Cory" is a tightly-structured poem, and deliberately so. Only few other short works, like "Miniver Cheevy," share this poem's ironic tone and brevity. Robinson was particularly well-known for his sonnets and for several book-length poems like *Tristam*, for which he won one of his three Pulitzer Prizes.

"Richard Cory," in its heroic stanza structure and its loose elegiac themes, can be traced back to early modern influences like John Dryden's *Heroic Stanzas on the Death of Oliver Cromwell* and 18th century quatrains like those in Thomas Grey's *Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard*.

In the more than a century since the poem's composition, the character of Richard Cory has also inspired a number of adaptations, including a 1965 song by Simon and Garfunkel and a 1976 play by A. R. Gurney, which attempts to imagine the motives for Cory's suicide.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When "Richard Cory" was published in 1897, the United States was just beginning to recover from a pair of economic depressions, the Panic of 1893 and the Panic of 1896. The

former was the more severe, causing several major railroads to declare bankruptcy and hundreds of banks to close. Unemployment rose to over 18%. The latter's effects were less widespread, but it did have one particular deleterious impact: a number of bankers committed suicide in Chicago when the National Bank of Illinois failed.

The despair of the laboring "people on the pavement," with only bread to eat, seems to stem from these recent events in which the struggle to find work and food became viscerally real across America. Robinson's awareness of the pressures of economic depression on the wealthy may have found its way into Cory's story as well.

By the time that Robinson was writing "Richard Cory," however, the country's fortunes had begun to turn around. The "light" that the victims of the Panics of 1893 and 1896 had been waiting for was finally starting to appear for some.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Richard Cory" by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel — Watch a video of Simon and Garfunkel performing their 1966 song based on the poem. While the song closely follows the structure of the poem, including the last line, the lyrics also imagine more information about Cory's wealth (the son of a banker, Cory "owns one half of this town") and a backstory for the narrator (a worker in Cory's factory). Following Cory's suicide, the narrating worker, despondent in his own way, still expresses a desire to be like Richard Cory. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNmfhCbpbJU)
- The Children of the Night — Check out The Children of the Night, Edwin Arlington Robinson's 1897 book of poetry in which "Richard Cory" first appeared. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/313/313-h/313-h.htm)
- Edwin Arlington Robinson's Life Story — Learn more about the life of the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edwin-arlington-robinson)
- "Richard Cory," a Song by the 3D's — Check out folk group The Three D's 1964 setting of the poem. Unlike Simon and Garfunkel, this treatment of the song simply sets the complete text of the poem to music (although there is a creative interjection in the middle of the final line). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtD_rjLr_RM)
- Dramatic Reading of "Richard Cory" — Watch this dramatic reading of "Richard Cory," presented by student Michelle Cheng. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjrYFF27rQo)

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