Richard Cory

BY [EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/edwin-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.

**About the Poet:**

On December 22, 1869, Edwin Arlington Robinson was born in Head Tide, Maine (the same year as [W. B. Yeats](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/w-b-yeats)). His family moved to Gardiner, Maine, in 1870, which renamed “Tilbury Town," became the backdrop for many of Robinson’s poems. Robinson described his childhood as stark and unhappy; he once wrote in a letter to [Amy Lowell](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/amy-lowell)that he remembered wondering why he had been born at the age of six. After high school, Robinson spent two years studying at Harvard University as a special student and his first poems were published in the *Harvard Advocate*.

Robinson privately printed and released his first volume of poetry, *The Torrent and the Night Before,* in 1896 at his own expense; this collection was extensively revised and published in 1897 as *The Children of the Night*. Unable to make a living by writing, he got a job as an inspector for the New York City subway system. In 1902 he published *Captain Craig and Other Poems*. This work received little attention until President Theodore Roosevelt wrote a magazine article praising it and Robinson. Roosevelt also offered Robinson a sinecure in a U.S. Customs House, a job he held from 1905 to 1910. Robinson dedicated his next work, *The Town Down the River* (1910), to Roosevelt.

Robinson’s first major success was *The Man Against the Sky* (1916). He also composed a trilogy based on Arthurian legends: *Merlin* (1917), *Lancelot* (1920), and *Tristram* (1927), which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1928. Robinson was also awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems* (1921) in 1922 and *The Man Who Died Twice* (1924) in 1925. For the last twenty-five years of his life, Robinson spent his summers at the MacDowell Colony of artists and musicians in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Robinson never married and led a notoriously solitary lifestyle. He died in New York City on April 6, 1935.

**Type of Work**

Richard Cory" is a short dramatic poem about a man whose outward appearance belies his inner turmoil. The tragedy in the poem reflects in its spirit the tragedies in Edwin Arlington Robinson's own life: Both of his brothers died young, his family suffered financial failures, and Robinson himself endured hardship before his poetry gained recognition—thanks in part to praise from an influential reader of them, Theodore Roosevelt.
Robinson published the poem himself in 1897 as part of a poetry collection called *Children of the Night*. The poem is a favorite of students and teachers because of the questions it poses about the the title character.

**Setting**

Although the poem mentions no specific locale, readers of Robinson’s poetry know that Richard Cory lives in fictional Tilbury Town, a community modeled on Robinson’s hometown of Gardiner, Maine. Gardiner is on the Kennebec River in southwestern Maine a few miles south of the state capital, Augusta. Robinson used Tilbury Town as the setting of many of his poems, including the highly popular [Miniver Cheevy](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/miniver.html#Top), although his poems seldom mention the town by name.

**Text of the Poem**

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown,
We people on the [pavement](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes)1 looked at him;
He was a gentleman from [sole](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes) to [crown](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes),2
Clean favored, and [imperially](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes) slim..............................4

And he was always [quietly arrayed](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes),3
And he was always [human](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes)4 when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good-morning," and he [glittered](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes)5 when he walked. .....8

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace;
[In fine](http://cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/RichardCory.html#Notes),6 we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place................12

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............16

**Notes**

1 pavement: Sidewalk.
2 sole: Bottom of a shoe; also, soul
3.crown: This word has a double meaning: (1) top of the head; (2) crown worn by a king.
4.imperially: In the manner of a ruler, such as an emperor or king
5.quietly arrayed: Dressed in fine but conservative attire.
6.human: Down to earth; not condescending.
7.glittered: Reflected light from his jewelry, shiny buttons, etc.
8.In fine: In summary, in short.
9.light: better day, better life

**Title Meaning**

The name *Richard Cory* appears to allude to England’s King Richard I (born, 1157; died, 1199). Here’s why: Richard I, a descendant of the French Normans who conquered England in 1066, earned the byname*Richard Coeur de Lion* (*Richard the Lion-Hearted*) for his valiant fighting in the Crusades. Arlington chose Richard Cory as the name of the character in his poem for two reasons: (1) because Richard Cory has kingly characteristics and (2) because the name resembles the first two words of King Richard I’s French byname, *Richard Coeur*–hence, *Richard Coeury*, or *Cory*. That Richard Cory has the characteristics of a king is subtly hinted at in the poem. For example, in line 3,  we learn that Cory is a “gentleman from sole to crown." Here, crown not only refers to the top of his head but also to a crown worn by a king. In line 4, we learn that Cory is “imperially slim." The word imperially means “having the qualities of a sovereign ruler." We also discover that Richard Cory “glittered" (line 8), that he was “richer than a king" (line 9), and that he was “admirably schooled in every grace" (line 10). Finally, we have a hint that Richard Cory is being compared to an Englishman because of the use of the word *pavement* in line 2. *Pavement* is a British term for *sidewalk*.

**Narrators (Speakers)**

As the poem indicates with the pronoun “we," the people of the town are the poem's speakers. Obviously, they are working-class citizens who have little of material value and sometimes can’t afford meat to put on their tables (line Line 2, Stanza 4). They admire Richard Cory because of his possessions and his elegant demeanor. But they also envy him because he seems to have everything. They wish that they could take his place—until that fateful evening when Richard takes his own life.

 **End Rhyme**

In each stanza of "Richard Cory," the final syllable of the first line rhymes with the final syllable of the third, and the final syllable of the second line rhymes with the final syllable of the fourth. The first stanza illustrates the pattern.

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**.

**Internal Rhyme**

Robinson also used internal rhyme in "Richard Cory." Following are examples.

Wh**e**n**e**ver Richard Cory w**e**nt d**ow**nt**ow**n (line 1)
To m**a**ke us w**i**sh that we were **i**n h**i**s pl**a**ce (line 12)
W**e**nt home and p**u**t a b**u**ll**e**t through his h**ea**d (line 16)

**Meter**

Most of the lines in the poem are in iambic pentameter. Lines 1-3 demonstrate this pattern:

.......1..............2...............3................4................5
When **EV**..|..er **RICH**..|..ard **COR**..|..y **WENT**..|..down **TOWN**,

.......1.............2..............3.....................4..................5
We **PEO**..|..ple **ON**..|..the **PAVE**..|..ment **LOOKED**..|..at **HIM**;

.......1.............2..............3................4...................5
He **WAS**..|..a **GEN**..|..tle **MAN**..|..from **SOLE**..|..to **CROWN**,

.......1................2................3...........4............5
Clean **FA**..|..vored **AND**..|..im **PER**..|..i **AL**..|..ly **SLIM**

**Themes**

Three themes stand out in this poem:

1. Appearances are deceiving—or, put another way, you can’t tell a book by its cover.
2. Money can’t buy happiness.
3. You can’t judge people by what they have, but only by what they are.

It turns out that beneath his veneer of wealth and respectability, Richard Cory is a deeply disturbed, very unhappy man. Even though he has everything in one sense, he has nothing in another. He is an emotional pauper.

**Why Does Richard Cory Kill Himself?**

The poem does not answer this question. But, of course, the reader may freely speculate. Perhaps, because he has everything, he has nothing to do and feels useless. Or could it be that he lacks the one thing that others in the town have: a caring family? Maybe he is in bad health or has suffered a financial reversal. What is your view?

**Figures of Speech**

Following are examples of figures of speech in the poem. (For definitions of figures of speech,  Alliteration

**W**henever Richard Cory **w**ent downtown (line 1)
**p**eo**p**le on the **p**avement (line 2)
**w**ish that **w**e **w**ere in his place (line 12)
**w**e **w**orked, and **w**aited

Anaphora

**And he was always** quietly arrayed,
**And he was always** human when he talked (lines 5-6)

Metaphor

So on we worked, and waited for the light
**Comparison of light to improved life or better times**

**Study Questions and Essay Topics**

* Why does Richard Cory kill himself? The poem does not answer this question. But of course the reader may freely speculate on it. Perhaps, because he has everything, he has nothing to do and feels useless. Or it could be that he lacks the one thing that others in the town have: a caring family? Maybe he is in bad health or has suffered a financial reversal. What is your opinion?
* Write an essay that compares and contrasts Richard Cory with Miniver Cheevy, the subject of another Robinson poem. To access the "Miniver Cheevy" study guide,
* It has been speculated that Robinson modeled Richard Cory after his brother, Herman. Read a short biography of Robinson, then tell your class whether you believe Herman was in fact the model for the title character. Explain your answer.
* Write an essay based on the theme of the poem.