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Irony in "Richard Cory"

by Peter Cohen

(English 1130)

Edward Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory" is a narrative poem illustrating how we, as individuals, should cherish that which we have, because the truly important things in life can be lost if our attention strays to envy. By being thankful, this would lead to a greater sense of fulfillment, thus negating the natural human urge to want what we do not, and cannot, have. Another point expressed by Robinson, to steal a basic literature reference, is not to judge a book by its cover. Although a cliché, the austerity of the message coincides with the fundamental principles of the poem's intent.

As a whole, Robinson uses irony as a foundation for the context of the poem. Specifically, the poem takes on a sense of tragic irony. Richard Cory's only accomplishment the reader has knowledge of is to commit suicide. Although Cory appears to have everything a man could desire (status, riches, charm, looks, etc.), he mentally collapses and all previous intentions are lost.

In this particular poem, Robinson includes himself as an admirer of Cory. To relate to the reader even more, Robinson is seen as one of the commoners telling this tale of woe. Writing from the first-person point of view, Robinson immediately casts Richard as a celebrity, explaining that "we people on the pavement looked at him." Richard Cory would go "down town" and the separation is established. The people are made to look up at him from the pavement, as if Cory were above the groundlings both literally and figuratively. The line creates imagery of Cory being carried on some kind of throne, exemplifying his regal existence in the similar fashion of an ancient king.

The structure of the poem itself plays into the saga of Richard Cory. There are four stanzas, each consisting of four lines (a quatrain), with each line containing 10 syllables. Everything appears to be formal and organized, until we reach the last line of the poem. The suddenness of death serves as both an example and a metaphor: an outer façade of perfection, thought to stand the rigors of time, but a foundation which is crumbling. The shock and surprise of a suicide turns this tale into a horrific outcome. Although there is not much suspense leading up to the climax, this works to Robinson's advantage because the gravity of the situation is now extremely enhanced. Even though Robinson refers to Richard Cory repeatedly in the past tense, our expectations for a conclusion are drastically exceeded.

Each stanza is similarly written in terms of mechanics (one sentence with a colon after the second line), and each stanza seems to contribute a specific purpose. The first stanza introduces Cory, and establishes his status. The second stanza focuses on humanizing Cory, as Robinson tells us that Richard "was always human when he talked." Yet Robinson maintains Cory's royal aura, amplified through "but he still fluttered pulses." Some may look at this as an indictment towards Cory's own nervousness around others, portraying his personality not as a "people-person." This stanza takes on the feeling of understatement, telling us that Cory "was always quietly arrayed," using Richard's downplayed wardrobe as an example. We get the sense that Cory is a humble man, despite being a model of envy. The third stanza completes our insight into Cory, externally speaking. We think we know all that there is to know about Richard Cory. At this point, Robinson's point of view towards Richard has reached its apex. Fittingly, the fourth stanza describes the subsequent tragic downfall of Cory. The first two lines express initial contempt towards Cory, and the final two lines are an abrupt end to a man who seemingly had everything.

Of particular interest are Robinson's choices of words in the fourth stanza. It begins with

“So on we worked.” This gives the reader a sense of chronology, for now the people are continuing with their respective lives, just as they will continue after Cory’s death. Life will go on after Richard Cory, and the people will slowly forget about him. Sadness is certainly implied, but not because this icon has perished. The melancholy tone could be because there is now no figurehead to admire. We instinctively aspire to become something greater, and this aspiration can be driven by a man such as Richard Cory.

Also interesting is that Robinson chooses a “calm summer night” as the stage for Cory’s suicide. The “calm” is completely opposite of the chaos currently taking place inside Cory’s mind. Graphic thoughts and visuals are aroused simply when thinking about a bullet through the head. To imagine the “great” Richard Cory actually performing such a heinous act is disturbing. The reader is left longing for an explanation, and since one is not given, we can only hypothesize and in turn be thankful to be alive.

Although there is no dialogue with Richard, Robinson explains how Cory, “fluttered pulses when he said, ‘good morning.’” These two words are the perfect template for comparison, because the difference between how we perceive Cory and who he actually is are night-and-day. It is ironic that “good morning” is the only words spoken by Richard, as his story shifts from that point to a suicide at night. Robinson does a great job combining a story-telling technique which fuses prose into poetry parameters. The ABAB rhyme scheme provides balance and stability, whereas creativity allows for a platform of anticipation. The story of Richard Cory can be told, and a lesson can be learned.

Works Cited

Robinson, Edwin Arlington. “Richard Cory.” *An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. 14th ed. Eds Sylvan Barnet, William Burto, and William E. Cain. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006. 692.