A Re-Examination of "Richard Cory"

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By CHARLES A. SWEET, JR.

"RICHARD CORY," one of Edwin Arlington Robinson's most anthologized poems, is also one of the least examined. Those critics who have considered the poem cast it in a familiar mold: that Richard Cory's "soul is black with despair,"1 that the people possess "the light,"2 and that finally the people ironically fail to see their wishing to be like Cory is ultimately ludicrous because of their own intrinsic spiritual values.

The main problem with the popular interpretation is that it fails suitably to account for the tale being filtered through the mind of a narrator, a single one of the "people on the pavement." The resulting view tends to thrust Richard Cory into the spotlight and de-emphasize the character of the narrator. Perhaps we would do well to remember D. H. Lawrence's admonition, "Trust the tale, not the teller," and begin to view Richard Cory through the eyes of an unreliable, unaware narrator. Moreover, such a focal point has the distinct advantage of helping to explain why Richard Cory really committed suicide.

As "Richard Cory" is only sixteen lines, we scarce need be reminded at the beginning that because of its compactness each word becomes infinitely important. While stanza one introduces the narrator, more importantly it emphasizes his limited view of Richard Cory. Line one introduces us to Cory while line two establishes that the narrator has only an external view of Cory. From this viewpoint, then, the narrator proceeds to make an assortment of limited value judgements. Richard Cory resembles a king ("crown," "imperially slim," and "richer than a king"); obviously the speaker's imagery (as well as movement in "sole to crown") reveal his concerns with Cory's status and wealth (further emphasized by "glittered"). Charles Morris notes the speaker's use of anglicisms ("pavement," "sole to crown," "schooled," and "in fine") pictures Cory as "an English king;"3 thus, the narrator can be seen expressing prejudices in terms of nationalistic pride.

Stanza two, however, appears to contrast and even contradict

3 "Robinson's 'Richard Cory,'" Explicator, XXIII (March 1965), item 52.
the previously established viewpoint. Lines five and six offer a different wording from any other lines as the “And he was always . . .” contrast with “(And) he was . . .” of lines three, nine, and eleven where the emphasis is on Cory's regal nature; not only the repetition of a similar structure in successive lines but also the addition of the word “always” suggest that while external appearances seem eternal verities, they are only temporary illusions. Whereas Richard Cory seems at times like a king the narrator admits he is always “quietly arrayed” and “human.” Thus, the speaker appears to contradict himself, or, more exactly, state the truth about Richard Cory: Cory is not a king; he is human. The narrator then confesses to his own hyperbole, his own exaggerated viewpoint of the man. In the next lines the narrator even acknowledges (“But still”) the collective fault of the people; the lines might be paraphrased as follows: even though we knew deep inside us Cory was human, something else inside compelled us to blow up his proportions (“he fluttered pulses” and “he glittered”). The narrator admits essentially to this view in lines eleven and twelve:

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

Why the people feel such a need has already been suggested by the representative narrator’s types of envy. Charles Burkhart remarks that their view of Cory is “a familiar illusion which brightens their drab lives.” Yet even these reasons conceal the deepest motivations. In fact, to understand the final effects of Cory on the people we need to see precisely what other information the narrator reveals and place it in its proper perspective.

In light of the narrator’s attitude line one establishes that it is Richard Cory who comes down town; in other words, Richard Cory makes an attempt to communicate with the people. His activity contrasts with their passivity or stasis (“on we worked and waited”). Consonant with his general communicative attempts in line eight the very “human” Richard Cory tries to talk with the people. As nowhere in the poem is it suggested that the people try to come to Richard Cory, nowhere is it either intimated that they approach him, much less respond to him. Quite simply the people have erected a barrier around themselves and their only reaction to Cory is stasis and silence. The

4 Burkhart, 257.
phrase "when he talked" even suggests that Cory makes more than a token effort. The importance of communication is revealed through a familiar Robinson image — light. In line thirteen the speaker claims the people "waited for the light" but in line eight the narrator has admitted that Richard Cory "glittered." We need not be reminded by Charles T. Davis that light in the early Robinson represents "the perception of spiritual truth" and in the later Robinson, "the understanding or truth in human relationships" to see that Richard Cory becomes a Promethean figure bringing the word of the necessity of human communication for survival. Cory, not the people, then, is the man of spiritual values (such a context is suggested by the obvious religious overtones of "meat," "bread," and "light"). The first three stanzas are not, as Wallace Anderson believes, "seemingly weighted in favor of Cory;" they are weighted in favor of Cory.

Richard Cory’s suicide can thus be seen in a different light. Instead of suicide because of "inner emptiness" or "an absolute commitment to despair," or because he was "sick," we are presented with a case of regicide; the townspeople with some degree of consciousness have extinguished the light. The irony of the ending, then, is not that the people were endowed with greater values than Cory or that simply they failed to understand his message, or even that the light they sought glowed in their midst all the time. The irony is that through their own mental prejudices and unfounded exaggerations the people, like eagles, claw at Prometheus so that the chains of inhumanity imprison him forever; it matters not that it is Cory who pulls the trigger since the people have pointed a weapon at his temple.

Furthermore, it is probative to examine the speaker’s voice to establish the results of enforced alienation. The tone of the last two lines is pure matter-of-factness; nowhere does the narrator betray any emotion over Cory’s death, and we might go so far as to say there is a certain satisfaction in the narrator’s voice. Whereas the narrator had once looked up at Richard Cory's

7 Ibid., 110.
9 Steven Turner, “Robinson’s ‘Richard Cory,’” Explicator, XXVIII (May 1970), item 73.
“crown,” he now looks down at simply “his head.” Appropriately the poem closes in darkness.

It obviously becomes necessary, then, to see Richard Cory certainly in more heroic proportions but also as more of a catalyst than focal point. “Richard Cory” is not a painting of a gentleman, but a portrait of the portraiteer. The poem serves as an indictment of those who study at a distance, of those who fail to get a feel of their subject, and of those who let petty personal emotions deprive themselves of human companionship. While Robinson’s temporal assessment may be exaggerated, his remark to Esther Willard Bates while walking up West Peterborough that he was “perhaps, two hundred years in advance of his time... in... his absorption in the unconscious and semi-conscious feelings and impulses of his characters”10 points to our need not to judge by appearances either when we examine his poetry.


HARDY’S “THE MIDNIGHT BAPTISM”

By NORMAN PAGE

The history of Hardy’s cynical dismemberment of the original version of Tess of the D’Urbervilles in deference to public prudery and editorial timidity is a familiar one. Most accounts of the earliest appearance of this novel, as serialized in the weekly Graphic between July 4 and December 26, 1891, refer to the publication as separate sketches of two portions deemed likely to cause special offense and accordingly removed from the magazine version. Both portions were, however, published elsewhere. They describe, respectively, the seduction of Tess and the midnight baptism of her dying baby. The precise relationship of these two sketches, as originally set before the public, to the corresponding sections of the novel as we know it has at various times been alluded to in terms that are often vague and sometimes inaccurate. What follows is an attempt to clarify the steps taken by the novelist in presenting one of these extirpated episodes to its first readers.