

Is the Grass Greener on the Other Side?

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Course: English 101

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Essay Type: Poetry Analysis

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him;
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and 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 we went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

The early 1900s seemed like a time of great prosperity, and the American Dream was in the forefront of the working class, but was it actually good to live the American Dream? Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem “Richard Cory” is an example that the idea of the American Dream is not always so bright. Even though narrator of the poem seems to show envy for Richard Cory until the last stanza, the poem actually contrasts what Richard Cory has and what the workers have with each wanting what the other has; thus, the cliché of “the grass is always greener” is at the heart of this poem.

When one reads “Richard Cory,” one will feel in awe of what Cory has achieved and be envious of it just as the speaker is. Cory is a high member of society, which is proven through the allusions to King Richard the Lionhearted of England. Cory is a “gentleman from sole to crown” (3) and is “richer than a king” (9). Until the last stanza of the poem, the workers long to be Cory and have his status, wealth, and power, as well as being humble and “quietly arrayed” (5) like Cory. When one analyzes the first three stanzas of “Richard Cory,” one will notice that Cory longs to be part of the community that the workers have just as much as the workers want to be a part of Cory’s world. Cory “[is] always human when he talk[s]” (6) and “[is] always quietly arrayed” (5) because he wants to be part of a community. Cory dresses modestly and speaks plainly to downplay his wealth and status and not flaunt them. Were he to flaunt his money and use his status to his advantage, he would be even more set apart from the workers than he already is. What is comical is that neither Cory nor the workers are aware that the other wants what the other has. The workers think that Cory is happy because he has attained the American Dream, when Cory is actually depressed because of the lack of community within his life, which the workers have long forgotten because they have become so accustomed to it.

The poem expresses the feeling of community through several methods. First, the speaker of the poem itself is a collective group of workers who give their feelings and reactions to Cory. This can be seen from the first-person, plural subject ‘we’ that is seen in lines 2, 11, 12, and 13. There is never a reference to one single person except Richard Cory, which allows the reader to see that Cory is set aside as a figure who stands alone instead of being part of a group. Another example that shows the feeling of community is that the group of workers always did things together. For example, “We people on the pavement looked at him” (2) and “So on we worked, and waited for the light” (13) show the communal feelings among the workers.

The form within “Richard Cory” helps to heighten the impact of Cory’s death on the reader. The use of iambic pentameter makes the tone sound aloof and pleasant. This misleads the reader from seeing that Cory is alone and only makes the knowledge that Cory shoots himself “one calm summer night” (15) much more of an impression upon the reader. The impression that wealth, power, or high social status can bring happiness is questioned after the reader learns of Cory’s fate. Though the workers want so much to be like Cory, they do not realize that they have something that Cory could not have and commits suicide because he cannot have it. Both Cory and the workers feel that the grass on the other person’s side of the fence is greener when it is actually the same color.

E.A. Robinson’s poem “Richard Cory” is an example of happiness not being created by achieving the American Dream of wealth, status, and power. Cory has gained all that the Dream has to offer, but he lacks in one basic need: community. The workers are envious of Cory even though they are actually richer than he. Cory is envious of the workers even though he is monetarily richer than they. Thus, the idea that “the grass is always greener” remains true in the sense that people cannot recognize what they have and can only be envious of what others have.

Work Cited

Robinson, E. A. “Richard Cory.” *The Harper Single Volume American Literature*. Ed. Donald McQuade. 3rd ed. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999. 1806-1807.

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Ms. Acosta's Comments: *All of Jacob's papers were exemplary, but his thoughtful insight into "Richard Cory" exhibits the sort of well-supported critical analysis that is often difficult for students to achieve.*