

# Research on Textual and Spiritual Analysis of *Richard Cory*

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*Richard Cory* is a portrait poem written by Edwin Arlington Robinson, an American New England poet, at the end of the 19th century. This paper tries to analyze the relationship between the groups of image, figures of speech, tension, ambiguity, and theme in the text from the perspective of New Criticism, and further explores the spiritual world of Richard Cory, the protagonist of poetry, from the perspective of Psychoanalysis, so as to draw inspiration beneficial to the spiritual world of mankind.

**Keywords:** *Richard Cory*, New Criticism, Psychoanalysis

Edwin Arlington Robinson is a New England poet of America in the 19th century. He has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and the Nobel Prize for Literature for many times, but his poems have not received sufficient attention and analysis from readers at home and abroad. *Richard Cory* is one of his most famous portrait poems. This poem is full of images, figures of speech, tension, ambiguity, which are closely related to its theme. New Criticism conduces to such textual analysis. But in order to further explore the internal driving force of such similar suicide human experience, the text should also explore the spiritual crisis faced by human beings from the perspective of Psychoanalysis. Textual analysis is just the superficial level of verbal understanding, while the spiritual analysis is the deeper research on the utmost unconsciousness of human beings.

## Textual Analysis of *Richard Cory* From the Perspective of New Criticism

New Criticism emphasizes the unity of the elements of a text and the independence of its meaning. Each element includes images, rhetorics, tensions, and so on. "The paradox, irony, ambiguity and tension of the text produce multi-level, conflicting meanings that must be coordinated with each other, that is, harmoniously merged together to deepen the theme together" (Tyso, 2014, p. 163). The independence of the meaning of texts emphasizes that it is only from the text itself, regardless of the social background and the author's experience. The text is regarded as an independent work of art to excavate its internal meaning.

Because the new critics believe that their interpretation is based only on the context created by the text and the language in the text, they call their criticism practice internal criticism, which implies that the New Criticism only focuses on the internal things of the text. (Tyso, 2014, p. 163)

In view of that, there are two kinds of people or images in this poem. One is Richard Cory, the protagonist, who is unique and glittered like a king. The others are a group of "we" people who are wandering in the streets or doing manual work. The two groups are clearly not equal and do not intersect. The author describes the perfection of the protagonist from sole to crown in the eyes of "us". The author's choice of words is very

precise. Although this phrase can be replaced by from feet to head, the phrase from sole to crown uses ambiguity, which makes the image richer and more prominent. In addition to bottom of feet, sole has the meaning of unique. Crown not only refers to the head, but also highlights the image of king, imperial, and owning of everything. From the sole of the foot to the crown of the head, is obviously more thorough, to the utmost extent. In addition to being wealthy, he has the characteristics that other people envy, such as slim, but not thin; arrayed rather than dressed, human; not just polite, to meet strangers on the road. He is schooled, not only trained, but is also well-educated, and graceful. In short, he is everything. This enviable degree is also highlighted at the time level. Whenever he appears in front of the public, he is always attractive. By using the rhetoric of overstatement, the author draws the following conclusions: The protagonist is a perfect gentleman, regardless of his external behavior, language, body shape, degree of wealth, or his inner accomplishment, temperament and human feelings. On the contrary, “we” do not have the same characteristics as the protagonist. “We” have no wealth, not to mention meat; even bread is difficult to swallow. Our hearts are as disgusting and dark as these meals. “We” curse three meals a day. Even at last Richard shoots himself in public, which just becomes a topic of after-dinner gossip. So there must be no overlap between the two. We always look at him from afar. He has no talking object. Even if he says good morning, it is no wonder that the poem uses our tone to say the word “and” six times. The understatement is bound to be full of confusion and indifference to the death of Richard.

The readers are immersed in imagining that the protagonist must laugh and be happy every day, however, the shock of his suicide is coming. The poem uses “situational irony” which is contrary to the reader’s expectation and to arouse the readers’ curiosity and shock, and uses exaggeration to highlight the contrast between the two images, thus forming tension, wealth and poverty, cultivation and vulgarity, perfection and limitation. However, another group of tensions emerged and reached its peak at the end of the poem. Even though “we” were poor and worthless and looked forward to the light represented by the protagonist, Richard, who had everything and perfection, but he chooses a quiet night at home to end his life with a shot. The home at night symbolizes its hidden spiritual home belonging to the individual, and returning home to end life symbolizes the collapse of Richard’s spiritual home. The tensions between day and night, city and family, expectation and despair, pursuit and emptiness, which are displayed here, make readers urgently reflect on the theme of this poem. Why does the protagonist kill himself? Is the spiritual world of oneself directly proportional to the wealth of the material world, cultivation and the level of education received? What is the meaning of life? Is it to pursue everything like the protagonist? The main purpose of this article is to show in the ending of Richard’s death. He is so perfect that everyone admires. Spiritual world is not equal to material wealth and inner self-cultivation. The collapse of the spiritual world will bring catastrophic consequences, even if it is temporarily replaced by material; once everything has been achieved, it will be followed by deeper loneliness and emptiness.

However, obviously it is not enough to use the New Criticism to analyze it. Although we can draw the conclusion that protagonist’s spiritual world is empty, what is the psychological change or motivation behind his suicide, which needs to be further explored by psychoanalysis.

### **Spiritual Analysis of Richard Cory From the Perspective of Psychoanalysis**

According to Lacan, a French spiritual critic, human life can be divided into three stages. From zero to six or eight months, human life is a chaotic world with no individual consciousness and is in the stage of vague

ignorance. The period from six or eight months to mastering language is a mirror stage, in which children observe themselves from their mothers or real mirrors and believe that they are the center of the world and can control everything around them. Mothers are themselves; they are their mothers, and they are a harmonious and unified whole with their mothers. This stage of the world is called the imagined world. It is not the imaginary world, but the world of complete satisfaction and unity of matter and self-experienced by children. However, when children learn to speak, they are aware of their differences from others through language, because language is not only a tool of communication, but also a code used to define and identify things. Children realize that I am not the mother, nor the world, and therefore enter the symbolic world represented by language. The sense of intimacy and unity disappeared before, and this sense of loss would be hidden in people's unconsciousness, leading to even adulthood, and still want to find something or pursue to replace this imagination. Lacan expressed it in other cases, such as money, reputation, work, marriage, etc. In the symbolic world, our individual identity is governed by ideology, values, law, morality, and race, including language, which Lacan calls the symbolic world or capitalized "Other". Individuals do not have a unique or real identity, but are regulated by the symbolic world to become such individuals. We become me not because of the physical or biological sense of me, but because of the collective consciousness. When the individuals realize that the original symbolic world is only a veil of ideology, but the imaginary world cannot be completely retrieved, and can only be partially replaced. The individual enters the real world behind it. However, no one can really see, understand, or control the real world. Life becomes empty and meaningless, and people's hearts will be severely damaged. This trauma varies from person to person, and the subsequent reactions will be quite different.

Obviously, Richard Cory in this poem has experienced chaos and imagination and finally entered the symbolic world. "The relationship between us and the lost object of desire is very personal, and private, and our experience in the symbolic world is not so 'Other' has an impact on everyone" (Tyso, 2014, p. 31). In the symbolic world, the factors that regulate Richard Cory include those who look at him far away from us, and the whole poem is described from the perspective of "we", which belongs to the "bystander perspective of the witness in the first person narrative... therefore, it is also an external perspective" (Shen, 2015, p. 95). This poetry describes Richard in the eyes of "Other", such as when Richard Cory went down town, "we people on the pavement looked at him" (Perrine, 1977, p. 42). Richard's daytime image is completely exposed to "us". We observe Richard's every motion. The public perspective or values represented by "people" are regulated. This also implies from another side that "we" are one of the important factors in the symbolic world. Richard is so rich and perfect that the narrator "we" did not give him any chance to show his power of voice and inner thoughts. Success and perfection of a person should be determined by the rules of money, stature, education, and self-cultivation that "we" believe, but these may be substitutes for the other world that Richard once sought. When he really got it, he returned home on a quiet night which symbolizes his private inner world. Perhaps what he felt in his heart was the fact that imagination could not be completely replaced, that "Other" was everywhere, that they could not be compatible with each other, and that eventually he fell into the real world and felt the unbearable lightness of life, even meaningless. After being unable to deal with the trauma of the real world, Richard ended his life calmly like a calm night. The "other" and "Other" are both so far away from Richard.

The protagonist's name, Richard Cory, is also the use of verbal irony. In Old English, Richard means strong ruler. However, he is not as strong as the "we" who struggle to survive every day at the bottom of the

society. Seemingly he is as rich as a whole country, but in fact his heart is extremely fragile. Moreover, the saying “He is Richard again” in the old saying means to recover completely from illness or depression. The author gives Richard the name, but he himself could never recover from trauma and emptiness. And Cory is the meaning of a helmet. There are two meanings for the protagonist. One is that Richard interacts with the symbolic world with a mask. The other is that he keeps a distance and guards against harm. Although wearing a helmet, in any case, we cannot get rid of the pervasive and deep loneliness, loss and emptiness of the symbolic world, which may be the true reflection of Richard’s spiritual home in poetry. After we were amazed at Richard’s unusual act of shooting himself at last, it is not difficult to understand the protagonist’s choice between the other and the “Other” in the poem, the conflict between the social mask in front of the public and the loneliness and pain of his inner spiritual home. Richard is lucky to have everything that others envy, but he is the most unfortunate, because he is totally desperate for life and the world, seemingly brews for a long time, and eventually experiences death peacefully. “We” also has a certain ambiguity, not only referring to a constituent element of the symbolic world, but also to any individual. They have the same characteristics, expecting to become Richard one day, positioning their substitute for imagination as Richard’s standard of measurement. Readers cannot help but wonder what will happen if we, as individuals, realize this wish. Is it similar to Richard that he finally leaves the world quietly?

### Conclusion

This poem gives readers a thorough understanding of the structure and interaction between the image, rhetoric, tension, ambiguity, and other elements of the text and the theme. The author chooses two groups of characters as images and highlights the contrast between poverty and wealth, vulgarity and education through exaggeration. When the reader considers that the protagonist is naturally happy for the rest of his life, the situational irony of the protagonist openly shoots to end his life is coming to him, which makes readers reflect on whether the value and significance of life is directly proportional to material, culture, or reputation. It may also prompt readers to further reflect on where alternatives to the other in human imagination should be located. The protagonist can never wear armor like his name to resist the influence of the symbolic world and the trauma of the real world caused by the collapse of imagination. He can never recover as ridiculous as the saying goes. But as a reader, we should see through the “Other” of the symbolic world which is just a collection of ideologies, and it’s also a realization that we can never return to that beautiful, unified, and harmonious imagination. However, regardless of nationality, race, gender, and age of life, everyone should strive to find something different from Richard’s own or to adopt beliefs to support all the values and meanings of his life. This may be the essence of what the author wants to tell the readers, which is universal to everyone. Hence, this poem is a masterpiece of English portrait poetry, no matter the unity of textual elements and themes in the New Criticism, or the driving responses and enlightenment of the characters at the psychoanalytic level.

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