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Richard Cory

“Richard Cory,” which first appeared in *The Children of the Night* and remains one of Robinson's most popular poems, recalls the economic depression of 1893. At that time, people could not afford meat and had a diet mainly of bread, often day-old bread selling for less than freshly baked goods. This hard-times experience made the townspeople even more aware of Richard's difference from them, so much so that they treated him as royalty.

Although the people were surprised that Richard came to town dressed “quietly” and that he was “always human when he talked” (that is, he did not act superior), they nonetheless distanced themselves from him. This distance is suggested by the narrator's words “crown,” “imperially,” “grace,” “fluttered pulses,” and “glittered.” The townspeople never stopped to consider why Richard dressed and spoke the way he did, why he came to town when everyone else was there, or even why he tried to make contact with them by saying “good morning.”

Richard was wealthy, but (as his name hints) he was not rich at the life-core of himself. Despite his efforts at communal connection, Richard's wealth isolated him from others. He was alone. If the townspeople wished they were in his place because of his wealth, he in turn wished he were one of them because they were rich in one another's company. The townspeople failed to appreciate the value of their mutual support of one another, their nurturing communal togetherness. So one hot, breezeless summer night (before the availability of electric fans or air conditioners), Richard lay awake, unable to sleep or to stop painful thoughts. Depressingly lonely, he ended his friendless life. The poem's reader is supposed to understand what the townspeople did not understand about Richard's suicide: that there was a price, in a human rather than in a monetary sense, that he paid for being perceived to be “richer than a king.”

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