The Cop and the Anthem

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF O. HENRY

Born William Sydney Porter, O. Henry was a prolific American short story writer known for his surprise endings. Sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement in 1898, Porter published 14 stories while serving time, writing under the pen name O. Henry so that publishers would not know he was incarcerated. After his release from prison in 1901, O. Henry moved to New York City, where he began his most prolific period of work and published an estimated 381 short stories in the years between 1902 and his death in 1910. Beloved by readers for his wit and twists, O. Henry's work was also often characterized by its realism and the attention it paid to ordinary people, including homeless men, police officers, and waitresses. In many ways his body of work is epitomized by the title of his second collection of stories, *The Four Million*. Responding to New York society-man Ward McAllister's assertion that there are only "Four Hundred people in New York City who were really worth noticing," O. Henry insisted that every citizen of New York City mattered to him and that he wrote his stories for the multitude of people who lived there.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Published in 1904, "The Cop and the Anthem" is set in New York City, much like many of O. Henry's most famous stories. In the first decade of the 20th century, immigration into the United States, particularly into New York City, reached a high of 9 million, with waves of immigrants arriving from Northern and Western Europe seeking economic opportunities and an increase of quality of living. Despite this fact, many immigrants struggled to achieve the "American Dream" and found themselves homeless as a result of work scarcity. O. Henry lived in New York City at this time, and often found himself loitering among its inhabitants in order to draw inspiration for his stories, leading him to title his second collection *The Four Million*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Gift of the Magi," published one year after "The Cop and the Anthem," is perhaps O. Henry's most well-known short story, and it features one of the twist endings for which the author is famous. The story tells of Della and Jim, a husband and wife who are too poor to afford Christmas presents for one another. In a moment of comic irony, it is revealed at the end of the story that Della has sold her hair in order to purchase Jim a watch chain, and Jim has sold his watch to purchase Della a set of combs, neither of which they can use. Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, while quite different from "The Cop and the Anthem," shares many of the features of O. Henry's story, including a focus on homelessness and comic irony. In *Godot*, a pair of homeless "tramps" spend the entirety of the story waiting for a man who never arrives, much in the same way that Soapy spends the entirety of "The Cop and the Anthem" chasing a goal that he can't attain.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Cop and the Anthem
- **When Published:** 1904
- **Literary Period:** Realism, Early Modernism
- **Genre:** Fiction, short story
- **Setting:** New York City, NY
- **Climax:** While listening to music coming from a church, Soapy decides to turn his life around
- **Antagonist:** Society, homelessness
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration: O. Henry famously wrote about the dramas and plights of ordinary people who lived out their lives in New York City. It's often said that he would loiter in the lobbies of which establishments in order to eavesdrop on conversations and gain inspiration for his short stories.

Name Change: According to writer Guy Davenport, there is some suggestion that O. Henry formed his pen name from the prison where he served a five-year sentence for embezzling money—the Ohio State Penitentiary.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Cop and the Anthem" begins with the arrival of winter in New York City. Soapy decides he must leave his bench in Madison Square Park and get himself arrested so he will be taken to Blackwell's Island, where he will be given a warm place to sleep during the winter.

Soapy's first effort at getting arrested finds him entering an expensive restaurant with hopes of ordering a decadent meal and being arrested for "insolvency." When a waiter spots his frayed trousers, however, he is thrown off the premises before he can even sit down. When he then smashes a storefront window with a cobblestone, the responding police officer refuses to recognize Soapy as the culprit.

Throughout the story, Soapy fails to get arrested not because

he can't commit a crime, but because other individuals refuse to identify him correctly. A second attempt at scamming a restaurant finds Soapy thrown out on the street once again by two waiters, and his efforts to harass a window-shopping woman on the street also prove futile when the woman, suggested to be a prostitute, happily responds to his advances. After trying and failing to get arrested for publicly insulting a police officer—who mistakes Soapy for a drunken Yale student—Soapy attempts to steal an **umbrella** from a well-dressed man in a cigar store only to discover that the man had in fact stolen the umbrella himself.

Discouraged, Soapy sulks off and finds himself outside the gate of a **church**. There, Soapy hears a beautiful anthem being played within the church, and after listening to this song he resolves to turn his life around and become a functioning member of society once again. However, as soon as he makes this resolution, a police officer arrests him for loitering and he is sentenced to jail time on Blackwell's Island the following day.

CHARACTERS

Soapy – The protagonist of "The Cop and the Anthem," Soapy is a homeless, street-smart man who is trying to escape the harsh New York City winter by getting arrested and taken to Blackwell's Island, where he will be given a warm bed. His efforts to do so, however—by scamming a restaurant, insulting a police officer, harassing a window-shopper, and stealing an **umbrella**—all prove futile. O. Henry's languages suggests that Soapy is an intelligent man of refined tastes. He is further defined by his savvy and confidence when it comes to navigating crime and homelessness in New York City, but these same traits ultimately fail him in his effort to get arrested. These failures, in turn, reveal Soapy's vulnerability, which is also what makes him an earnest, sympathetic character by the end of "The Cop and the Anthem." When he hears a church organ playing an uplifting **anthem**, Soapy is moved to change his life and re-enter society as the man he once was. This ability to change, and his failure to achieve this change on his own terms, make Soapy both a comic and a tragic figure within the story. O. Henry uses Soapy's story to highlight discrepancies in the American Dream and critique rigid class prejudice.

The Police – Soapy encounters police officers more than any other members of New York City society in "The Cop and the Anthem." Though they are never given names, the police officers in the story act as social gatekeepers and form a collective antagonist for Soapy, as he needs them to arrest him in order to make it to Blackwell's Island. The police refuse to do so until the very end of the story, when Soapy ironically no longer desires to be arrested at all after hearing the **anthem** at the church. Throughout the story, police officers repeatedly misidentify Soapy, ignore his crimes, and mischaracterize his place within society. In many ways, the police in O. Henry's story symbolize American society's relationship to its homeless and criminal populations. When Soapy shatters a storefront window with a brick in an attempt to get arrested, one police officer "refuse[s] to accept Soapy even as a clue," suggesting that Soapy is invisible to the police at times and he is only a criminal when the police see him as such. When Soapy shouts at a police officer and tries to get arrested for disorderly conduct, another policeman misidentifies him as a Yale student, once again determining how Soapy is viewed by the rest of the characters in the story. When Soapy does earnestly change his hopes and dreams at the end of the story and vow to turn his life around, the police once again fail to recognize their stake in derailing Soapy's aspirations.

The Waiters – At the second, less expensive restaurant where Soapy attempts to get arrested, he is tossed out on the street by two waiters who refuse to call the police on him when he can't pay for his meal. Though they are less powerful than the police officers throughout the story, the waiters likewise blockade Soapy from his goal by refusing to recognize him as a criminal.

The Window Shopper – When Soapy assumes the role of a "masher" and begins harassing a window shopper on the street, he fails to recognize that this woman is a prostitute. This woman likewise fails to recognize that Soapy is not a potential customer, despite the fact that the two characters, of everyone Soapy speaks to in the story, are the most similar in their social status.

The Umbrella Man – When Soapy attempts to steal an anonymous man's **umbrella** in a cigar shop, convinced this will get him arrested and taken to jail, this same man is at first irate and defensive, but backs down the more that Soapy pushes him, slowly revealing that he is in fact an umbrella thief himself.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POVERTY, HOMELESSNESS, AND CRIME

Essential to "The Cop and the Anthem," O. Henry's story of a homeless man's ill-fated attempts to get arrested in order to avoid sleeping in the cold, is an examination of the cruelties and inescapable realities faced by underclass citizens at the turn of the twentieth century. Soapy, the story's protagonist, intentionally commits a string of crimes in order to be taken to the "insular haven" of jail on Blackwell's Island, where he can survive through the winter. To this end, Soapy adopts various criminal personas; even as he personally

considers himself a "gentleman," he plays the role of the deadbeat diner who can't pay his bill, the vandal who smashes a storefront window with a brick, a "masher" who harasses a window-shopping woman, a belligerent engaging in disorderly conduct, and a thief. That he must lean into such delinquent behavior in order to obtain the basic necessity of shelter suggests the cyclical nature of homelessness, poverty, and crime. O. Henry, who himself spent time in jail for embezzlement and understood the immense difficulty of re-entering society after any sort of conviction, further uses this story to condemn indifferent or prejudicial treatment of the poor, which itself only serves to thrust vulnerable individuals deeper into the dire circumstances they wish to escape.

However eloquent and light-hearted his tone, O. Henry immediately establishes the harsh realities of living in on the street. Soapy, along with many others, sleeps on a park bench. Such accommodations are far from comfortable; the night before his criminal adventures begin, for instance, Soapy had slept under three newspapers, "distributed beneath his coat, about his ankles and over his lap," which "had failed to repulse the cold as he slept on his bench near the spurting fountain in the ancient square." This image helps readers sympathize with Soapy's plight and understand the urgent motivation behind his subsequent misdeeds. The notion of people shivering under discarded newspapers in this opulent, "ancient" square further creates the sense that the city—however grand—has failed many of its vulnerable residents. To be sure, Soapy's "hibernatorial ambitions" are modest enough: where "his more fortunate fellow New Yorkers had bought their tickets to Palm Beach and the Riviera each winter," Soapy just wants a warm bed. O. Henry's language here humanizes Soapy, establishing that he, too, is a New Yorker, and is just less fortunate—rather than less deserving—than others. The stark contrast between tropical getaways and Soapy's dream of spending the winter in the local jail subtly rebukes the extravagance of the wealthy, and underscores that, in comparison, Soapy's wish should be easily achieved; if some New Yorkers are flying to islands across the globe for fun, this man should at least be able to find local shelter from the cold.

Having established the simplicity of Soapy's desires, the difficulty of fulfilling them becomes all the more frustrating. O. Henry wrings ironic humor out of the increasingly ridiculous situations in which Soapy finds himself as he attempts to get arrested, yet these moments inherently reflect the unending insecurity and instability of Soapy's life—characteristics that surely make it all the more difficult to rise above his circumstances. Soapy not even being allowed to enter a nice restaurant further highlights the prejudicial treatment of those in poverty, whom polite society would apparently prefer to render invisible. Though Soapy presents himself at the restaurant as best he can—clean-shaven, with a "decent" suit jacket and tie—the head waiter conveys him "in silence and haste to the sidewalk" the moment he spots Soapy's "frayed trousers." Of course, Soapy had been hoping to enter the restaurant in order to swindle them out of a free meal and subsequently get sent to the "haven" of Blackwell Island. Yet that jail is a "haven" evokes an even more explicit connection between poverty and essentially forced criminality; denied more honest avenues to success or financial stability, Soapy resorts to crime, thus further entrenching himself in the cycle that landed him in this situation in the first place.

Soapy's ultimate ambition to reform his life, however noble, thus seems decidedly unlikely; how is he to find a job if he cannot even enter a restaurant, or procure a bed? Again, the story suggests this is not due to personal failings so much as a society that would prefer to ignore, hide, and/or punish the realities of homelessness. Indeed, that Soapy is eventually arrested for loitering appears to be the ultimate assertion that he is forever stuck in this lifestyle not entirely of his own accord, and in part because the rest of the world refuses to lend a hand to those in situations like his. Standing outside a church and imagining taking charge of his destiny, Soapy seems poised to finally lift himself from poverty and become a contributing member of society. Yet it is in this moment that a police officer approaches Soapy and asks what he's doing; when Soapy responds, "Nothin'", the officer arrests him. A man with nowhere to go has been arrested for doing nothing—that is, the only thing he really *can* do. Men like Soapy cannot extract themselves from the cycle poverty, homelessness, and crime, the story thus ultimately suggests, because they are criminalized simply by virtue of their existence.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Several of the words that Soapy uses to describe Blackwell's Island, including "refuge" and "haven," are reminiscent of the language that inspired waves of poor and homeless individuals to seek out the United States in the hope of a better life. Yet even as the "American Dream" promises prosperity to all who work hard, Soapy's experiences point to the American Dream as being far more selective and undemocratic than it pretends to be. Even if one shows determination and initiative toward life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, these opportunities are neither guaranteed nor equally available to everyone. The story thus highlights the inherent hypocrisy of a society that preaches opportunity for all yet only offers it to a few.

Rather than succumb to the cold like the dead leaf that falls into his lap at the beginning of the story, Soapy leaves his park bench to pursue the seemingly simple goal of staying alive. Yet his freedom to do so is, ironically, also what stands in his way of pursuing this basic tenet of the American Dream. The geese seen in the opening paragraph of the story offer a metaphor for Soapy's own version of liberty: they possess the freedom of flight but must migrate to find a new home every winter.

Likewise, Soapy's life is not encumbered by a mortgage or a job, yet within that relative freedom O. Henry writes that Soapy is "doomed to liberty." This suggests that liberty without *opportunity* is not really freedom at all; rather, Soapy has no chance to take his life into his own hands and better his circumstances as the American Dream would suggest, and, however "free," remains at the mercy of the world around him.

Nevertheless, Soapy's dogged determination to get arrested and find shelter remains the driving force behind "The Cop and the Anthem." That Soapy's hard work is repeatedly rebuffed, however, further illustrates the illusory nature of the American Dream. Several of Soapy's interactions—sneaking a meal at a restaurant, assuming the role of a "masher," and performing disorderly conduct in front of a police officer—can be read as parables of the workplace. Soapy is shaven and wearing a neat black coat when he enters the restaurant, as though he's entering a job interview. Soapy demonstrates his value as a role player willing to perform "despicable and execrated" work when committing street harassment. And he even code-switches when insulting a police officer—a person who, in this instance, might be considered his colleague—in order to achieve his objective of being arrested.

The story would be radically different if Soapy decided to give up after he's thrown out of his first restaurant. Instead, he refuses to be dissuaded by failure and digs deeper into his playbook, drawing upon his talents in order to pull himself up by his proverbial bootstraps and land himself in jail. It's easy to imagine how the determination Soapy displays might be praised if it were the story of an entrepreneur, but in Soapy's case the rules of the American success story apparently do not apply. This makes Soapy's decision at the end of the story, upon hearing an organ "**anthem**" emanate from a church, to seize control of his life and "find work" all the more poignant: no matter how inspiring this emblem of the American Dream, that dream is out of reach for men like Soapy.

It's crucial to "The Cop and the Anthem" that O. Henry calls the song Soapy hears within the church an "anthem." This implicitly links the song with "The Star-Spangled Banner," the national anthem of the United States and the piece of music most closely associated with the American Dream. All of the language O. Henry uses in this scene is deliberate and telling, in fact. For instance, the church anthem causes "a revolution" in Soapy and inspires him to "do battle with his desperate fate." It's possible to read this as a re-telling of the American origin story itself, in which the Revolutionary War created the conditions out of which the American Dream arose. That Soapy is on the outside looking in during this scene, barred from the church by an iron fence, can further be read as an analogue of homeless and underclass experience in the United States. Indeed, the church—a place of refuge and salvation—might be seen as a stand-in for the American Dream itself.

Though it presents itself as an equal-opportunity endeavor, the American Dream of "The Cop and the Anthem" is selective, brutal, and can't be achieved in equal measure by all members of society. The painful irony of O. Henry's story is that Soapy does achieve his original dream of being taken to Blackwell's Island, but it's only after he becomes determined to pursue new dreams altogether and has taken the initiative to change his life. This portrayal of the American Dream reveals its hypocrisy and shows the extent to which homeless individuals are often caught in a brutal relationship with the bedrock concepts of American culture.

SOCIETY, POWER, AND CLASS

The fact that it's nearly impossible to judge characters based on class indicators in O. Henry's story suggests that these indicators are both flawed and arbitrary. As in much of O. Henry's work, markers of social status are often misread and can prove misleading. For instance, Soapy mistakes a prostitute for a well-to-do young woman and finds himself confused for a rowdy Yale student. Soapy also seems to speak and think eloquently, and the language O. Henry uses to describe him is distinctly elevated—affording a certain empathy to this member of the lower class and also suggesting a similarity (or, at least, lack of meaningful difference) between Soapy and the higher class people he runs into. What's more, many members of this "upper class" prove no better or more refined than Soapy, which makes the story inherently critical of prejudicial snobbery.

Social status in "The Cop and the Anthem" is frequently determined by appearance, which in turn is shown to be deceptive. In the first restaurant he tries to enter, for example, Soapy's "telltale trousers" identify him as being of a lower-class than the other patrons, and he is accordingly kicked out. Not long after, however, he is misidentified by the police as both a drunken "Yale lad" and a football player. Soapy himself misidentifies people based on appearance. In his encounter with the prostitute, for example, he believes the window-shopping woman to be "of a modest and pleasing guise," while the woman believes Soapy to be a potential customer. This dual misidentification happens again later in the story, when Soapy sees a "well-dressed" man with a silk **umbrella**, and he and Soapy both misidentify each other as people belonging to higher rungs of society. Soapy is surprised, then, to learn that the supposed gentlemen had in fact stolen the umbrella—just as Soapy himself intends to. In each of these cases, appearance is easily manipulated and clearly a faulty method of determining social status.

O. Henry goes further in his critique of class hierarchy by pointing out the meaningless of that status in the first place. Despite "The Cop and the Anthem" being a story about a homeless man with no money to his name, the distinction between Soapy and more privileged members of society is actually rather blurry. The narrator uses learned, dandy-like

vocabulary ("soporific," "eleemosynary"), which elevates Soapy to a certain status within the story. However, it also underscores the foppish, jaunty tone of the story, and stands in contrast to the fact that it's about a homeless man's struggle to survive. When Soapy speaks, he often uses a street-smart tone that indicates he understands both grammar and metaphor ("Ah there, Bedelia! Don't you want to come and play in my yard?"), an indicator of education and power. By contrast, when characters in positions of power above Soapy use dialogue, they often use grammatically incorrect slang. "Where's the man that done that," says one cop. "No cop for youse," says a waiter. "Lave them be," says another police officer.

One of the ironies of Soapy's desire to be lodged at Blackwell's Island is that it lines up with the migratory vacation fantasies of the rich. Fortunate New Yorkers head off to Palm Beach and the Riviera, and Soapy heads off to his own island getaway at Blackwell's. For a man with no money, Soapy displays a surprising knowledge of food and wine. He enters his first restaurant with plans to order roasted duck, Chablis, Camembert, a demi-tasse, and a cigar, and it's only his clothing that differentiates him from the rich—not his knowledge of fine food and drink.

Yet even as O. Henry points to indicators of social class as shallow, he nevertheless reveals how class insulates certain members of society from facing repercussions for their actions—underscoring the essential injustice of class prejudice and suggesting the specific means by which class heirarchy maintains itself. Soapy receives a different reaction from the waiters in the first restaurant he'd attempted to infiltrate. In the first, fancier restaurant, upon his being found out, "Strong and ready hands turned [Soapy] about and conveyed him in silence and haste to the sidewalk [...]." The restaurant notably wants to avoid a scene, and his treatment is rude by relatively civil. By contrast, in the second, less swanky establishment, "Neatly upon his left ear on the callous pavement two waiter pitched Soapy."

When Soapy is later misidentified as both a drunken "Yale lad" and a football player, he isn't arrested because the police have instructions from their higher-ups to "leave them"—i.e. presumably upper-class Ivy League students—"be." This in turn points to the differential standards of treatment in either societal tier—tiers that, the story insists, are arbitrary, yet it's clear nevertheless have a direct impact on an individual's experience of the world.

There is a strong element of randomness to "The Cop and the Anthem," a story that portrays indicators of social status as murky, misleading, and often so arbitrary as to be meaningless. This is what ultimately what paints Soapy in such a heartbreaking and empathetic light, as it suggests that wealth and power are not obtained through hard work and determination, but rather they are randomly doled out in large doses for some and meager doses for others.

COMMUNITY AND HOME

The central conflict of "The Cop and the Anthem" is the fact that Soapy will die if he is unable to find a home. He is not alone in this conflict, as he is one of the "regular denizens of Madison Square" who must depart every year and find a new place to lay his head. In fact, "The Cop and the Anthem" is a story in which almost every character seems to be in search of a shared experience with other human beings. This suggests that community and home are vital yet often elusive parts of everyday life in the United States.

"The Cop and the Anthem" begins with a fracturing of Soapy's homeless community, which sets him off in search of a new home for the winter. Jack Frost is personified in this opening scene in order to show that he is kind to the homeless population of Madison Square and gives them fair warning about the coming winter so. that they can prepare themselves to seek shelter. This suggest a certain sense of communion between these people forced to live outside and the natural world. The wild geese honking overhead are both a parallel of this search and a stark reminder of Soapy's struggle: though the geese must also pack up and fly south, they do so by traveling as a community.

Much in the same way that Soapy looks forward to assured board and bed and congenial company on Blackwell's Island, his "fortunate fellow New Yorkers" are sauntering off to lavish vacations and "drifting in the Vesuvian Bay." There is a hint of restlessness in this description, suggesting even the privileged are in search of a place where they can belong—or at least find relief from the tedium of everyday life.

"The Cop and the Anthem" also contains a remarkable number of moments in which its nameless characters seek out human intimacy and community on the smallest scale. O. Henry's story appears to take place between Thanksgiving and Christmas, two holidays defined by communal interaction. It is telling that Soapy's first attempts at getting arrested both involve infiltrating spaces where New Yorkers are dining together in groups. Moments of intimacy are rare in "The Cop and the Anthem," but they are exemplary of a roaming desire for community when they do occur. Take for example the women who grow "kind to their husbands" when the winter draws near, or the prostitute who simply wants to share a beer with Soapy.

For much of the story, however, Soapy tries and fails to engage with his fellow New Yorkers as a community, whether this means dining together at a restaurant or interacting with strangers in the street. For instance, when he enters a district where he finds the "lightest streets, hearts, vows, and librettos," Soapy is incapable of interacting with his community and is instead seized by fear and flees. Yet when Soapy hears the **anthem** coming out of the church, he finally arrives at a sense of community within New York, and he shows signs for the first time of wanting to find a home within his environment. Notably,

this sense of communion is accompanied by the desire to improve his lot in life. Soapy vows that he will go "into the roaring downtown district" and find work. He even cites a fur importer who once offered him a position and vows to ask for the job outright instead of resorting to crime.

No sooner does this community revelation occur to Soapy than it is ripped away from him, ironically via the touch of a police officer's "hand laid on his arm," the interaction through which he had hoped to arrive at home at the beginning of the story. This suggests the elusive, bitter nature of searching for home: often it vanishes the moment one defines it.

As a nation composed of immigrants and refugees who came looking for a new home, America's literature is often defined by a sense of restlessness, wandering, and desire to find home within a community. If "The Cop and the Anthem" feels hopeless at times, it is because so many of its characters are trying and failing to share the slightest moments of human intimacy, a fact which sheds light on one of the darkest truths of O. Henry's story: one does not have to be homeless to be in search of a home.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CHURCH ANTHEM

At the end of "The Cop and the Anthem," Soapy has an epiphany after listening to a song—the "anthem" of the story's title—emanating from a church. While the church in O. Henry's story feels surprisingly void of its religious connotations, the anthem emanating from it does nevertheless symbolize hope and redemption for Soapy. He vows to "pull himself out of the mire" and "make a man of himself again" when he hears this song, and O. Henry even goes so far as to say that the church anthem causes a "revolution" in Soapy. Perhaps his most tangible vow is that he will go into New York's downtown district and find work. "There was time yet," the narrator remarks while Soapy stares at the church, underscoring his new feeling of potential. One could even argue that the church anthem is a metaphor for the National Anthem, and the feeling it puts in Soapy is symbolic of the promises of the American Dream. Soapy is notably on the outside of the church looking in this scene, barred from entrance by a fence (as many immigrants were at the turn of the 20th century), and yet the music he hears is so moving to him that he vows to change his life and chase life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That he is ultimately unable to, however, would suggest that the hope instilled in him by the church—and perhaps by the American Dream itself—is illusory for those at the bottom rungs of society as Soapy is.

THE UMBRELLA

The silk umbrella that Soapy attempts to steal symbolizes the deceptive nature of appearances as well as fact that there is no meaningful difference between the haves and have nots in O. Henry's story. Markers of wealth and status, such as the umbrella, are arbitrary and tenuous, and the status granted by these objects throughout "The Cop and the Anthem" can be stripped away just as easily as it is given. When Soapy enters the cigar store, markers of societal status greet him immediately. The man he steals the umbrella from is described as "well-dressed," the umbrella itself is made out of silk, and the entire scene takes place in a store that sells cigars, which are largely upper-class indulgences. Much in the same way that Soapy misidentifies the window shopper and the police misidentify Soapy as a Yale student, Soapy fails to identify the cigar-store man as a thief. When Soapy questions who the umbrella's rightful owner is, the cigar-store man backs down and outs himself as having stolen it, a fact which likewise makes Soapy inadvertently and reluctantly rise up as the owner of the umbrella. However, the umbrella's power as a symbol of wealth and status is only useful to Soapy insofar as he can use it to get himself arrested. Once the argument with the cigar-store man is resolved and Soapy has recognized the umbrella as his possession, he "hurl[s] the umbrella wrathfully into an excavation," indicating that the umbrella does not possess any inherent power itself.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library Editions edition of *The Best Short Stories of O. Henry* published in 1994.

The Cop and the Anthem Quotes

❝ For years the hospitable Blackwell's Island had been his winter quarters. Just as his more fortunate fellow New Yorkers had bought their tickets to Palm Beach and the Riviera each winter, so Soapy had made his humble arrangements for his annual hegira to the Island.

Related Characters: Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Here O. Henry establishes Soapy's primary motivation as a character as well as the force that sets "The Cop and the

Anthem" in motion. This passage, which comes early in the story, epitomizes the dramatic irony that is one of the defining traits of O. Henry's writing. While his fellow New Yorkers are planning extravagant vacations to escape the impending winter cold, Soapy is devising ways in which he can get himself arrested in order to have a warm bed. This passage also highlights the foppish, playful tone of the story, as O. Henry uses several modifiers, such as "hospitable" and "humble," that run counter to the tone one might expect when a man is planning to have himself jailed for an entire season. At the same time, that Soapy has completely resigned himself to being arrested year after year suggests the inescapability of the cycle of poverty and implicitly condemns a society that would quite literally leave many of its citizens out in the cold.

> Soapy, having decided to go to the Island, at once set about accomplishing his desire. There were many easy ways of doing this. The pleasantest was to dine luxuriously at some expensive restaurant; and then, after declaring insolvency, be handed over quietly and without uproar to a policeman.

Related Characters: The Police, Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is indicative of Soapy's determination and tenacity as a character, as shown to positive effect later in the story when he resolves to change his life after hearing the church anthem. Once Soapy's decision to get arrested is made, he pursues his desire immediately. This quote also showcases one of Soapy's defining traits as a character: his experience and savvy when it comes to his craft. "There were many easy ways of doing this," the narrator says, indicating that Soapy has successfully gotten himself arrested several times before in the past. As a veteran of his trade, Soapy opts to pursue the "pleasantest" and most luxurious route, dining at "some expensive restaurant," any of which will do. Soapy is as intelligent and thoughtful as any businessman; it just so happens that his business involves getting arrested. This, in turn, suggests that the divide between the upper and lower classes of society are largely surface-level.

> Soapy had confidence in himself from the lowest button of his vest upward. He was shaven, and his coat was decent and his neat black, ready-tied four-in-hand had been presented to him by a lady missionary on Thanksgiving Day.

Related Characters: Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Soapy prepares to enter a fancy restaurant, where he will gorge himself before failing to pay the check and, he hopes, thus get tossed into jail. A passage that is telling of Soapy's confidence and O. Henry's jaunty tone, this quote is also important for another reason: throughout "The Copy and the Anthem," Soapy attempts to perform certain roles in order to get arrested, and other characters continually fail to correctly identify him in those roles. Here Soapy is wearing a vest, he is shaven, his coat is clean, and his tie is tied, all the physical attributes of a man preparing to dine out at a luxurious restaurant. Despite the accuracy with which his physical appearance allows him to play this role, the waiters refuse to acknowledge Soapy as a customer and keep him from fulfilling his plan. This could again be read as underscoring the inescapable nature of American poverty.

> The policeman's mind refused to accept Soapy even as a clue.

Related Characters: The Police, Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Soapy has continued in his pursuit to get arrested by tossing a stone through a window, admitting to the crime, and then shouting obscenities at a nearby officer—who, unfortunately for Soapy, does nothing in response. The police are arguably the second most important character in "The Cop and the Anthem," though they appear in many different forms throughout the story and are never given names. As the antagonist to Soapy's protagonist, the police act as social gatekeepers throughout the story and serve as the last line of defense between Soapy and his desired goal. However, the police also have all the power when it comes to determining whether or not Soapy is identified as a

criminal and able to achieve this goal. In this quote, it is not necessarily the policeman's eyes that refuse to accept Soapy as a clue to the crime, but rather his mind. This is important, as it points to the way that different members of society think about one another based on visual appearance and status.

> A young woman of a modest and pleasing guise was standing before a show window gazing with sprightly interest at its display of shaving mugs and inkstands, and two yards from the window a large policeman of severe demeanor leaned against a water plug [...] It was Soapy's design to assume the role of the despicable and execrated "masher."

Related Characters: The Window Shopper, Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Soapy spots a well-to-do seeming woman window shopping and decides that harassing her (playing the role of a "masher") will be another good way to get arrested. This woman, however, is strongly implied by the story to be a prostitute. Thus it is not just the secondary characters in "The Cop and the Anthem" who fail to recognize Soapy in the various roles he performs—Soapy likewise fails to correctly identify several of the people he meets in the story, suggesting that there is perhaps very little difference between various members of society after all. The language the narrator uses in this passage underscores the degree to which Soapy is mistaken, as he comes to find out a few moments later that this window shopper is not "modest" or "pleasing," nor does she come across as a "sprightly" person who can afford the items she's gazing at. This causes Soapy to adopt another incorrect role—transforming himself into a "masher"—and once again fail to achieve his desired goal.

> "'Tis one of them Yale lads celebratin' the goose egg they give to the Hartford College. Noise; but no harm. We've instructions to lave them be."

Related Characters: The Police (speaker), Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Soapy next aims to be arrested for disorderly conduct and begins shouting drunken gibberish at a nearby officer—who this time not only fails to arrest Soapy but in fact confuses him for a rich student. The cop notably speaks in a much more colloquially tone than Soapy uses in his internal monologue. Indeed, one of the conflicts of "The Cop and the Anthem" is the degree to which the ornate, formal language often used by O. Henry—especially when applied to Soapy—runs counter to the ways the characters in the story speak. Jobs, physical appearances, and material objects are all used within the story to indicate social status and differentiate Soapy from the people he encounters. However, when it's time for the characters within the story to speak, they all sound remarkably similar and speak with a slang-heavy, New York quickness regardless of their implied level of education or their social status. The police officer in this passage speaks in a way that is both difficult to understand and cruder than Soapy's own speech, but this does not change his power in the situation, and he ultimately bars Soapy from arrest because he is unable to correctly identify him. Furthermore, he misidentifies Soapy as an ivy-league college student, which is arguably a social status above the police officer's own.

Additionally, the fact that a Yale student would be let off the hook for such conduct underscores how upper-class individuals are granted more leeway in American society than are men like Soapy for the most part. This, in turn, bolster's the story's conception of the American Dream as easier to reach for some—i.e. those with a certain degree of pre-existing social clout—than others.

> In a cigar store he saw a well-dressed man lighting a cigar at a swinging light. His silk umbrella he had set by the door on entering. Soapy stepped inside, secured the umbrella and sauntered off with it slowly. The man at the cigar light followed hastily.

Related Characters: The Window Shopper, The Umbrella Man, Soapy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Soapy's quest continues as he enters a cigar store and steals an umbrella from a man he believes to be upper-class. Of course, the man is quickly revealed to be a thief himself, who in fact had stolen the umbrella in question. Once again, appearances are deeply deceiving.

Much like clothing and appearance, material objects in "The Cop and the Anthem" often serve as red herrings—that is, something that is intended to be misleading. Though the man in this passage is well-dressed, carrying a silk umbrella, and smoking a cigar, Soapy fails to recognize that he is an umbrella thief. This is a callback to the scene with the window shopper, in which Soapy likewise misidentifies a person based on their appearance and the material objects that surround them. Part of what contributes to the jarring irony of "The Cop and the Anthem" is the fact that Soapy, though he is a sympathetic character, frequently commits the same errors as the characters who antagonize him, primarily because of his societal assumptions and prejudices. These assumptions, in turn, are revealed by O. Henry to be largely arbitrary.

> And the anthem that the organist played cemented Soapy to the iron fence, for he had known it well in the days when his life contained such things as mothers and roses and ambitions and friends and immaculate thoughts and collars.

Related Characters: Soapy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Having been unsuccessful in his many attempts to get arrested, Soapy is mesmerized by an anthem emanating from a church and stops to listen/ Apart from the fact that he gets himself arrested and taken to Blackwell's Island every winter, this passage highlights one of the only instances in which details about Soapy's backstory are revealed. Despite its brevity, the list hints at a detailed and voluminous past life for Soapy, filled with nouns that stand in for family, love, a social life, education, and wealth. In addition to suggesting that Soapy was once a man not unlike any common individual in New York, this list also points to two aspects of Soapy's character that remain. He still knows how to dress himself, as seen in the beginning of the story when he attempts to scam a fancy restaurant, and he still maintains ambition, as seen throughout the story in his attempts to get arrested and during the finale of the story when he resolves to change his life.

> He would pull himself out of the mire; he would make a man of himself again; he would conquer the evil that had taken possession of him. There was time; he was comparatively young yet: he would resurrect his old eager ambitions and pursue them without faltering.

Related Characters: Soapy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Having listened to the church anthem, Soapy becomes inspired to change his ways and lift himself out of his poverty and homelessness. Throughout "The Cop and the Anthem," the narrator's delivery and tone serve as stand-ins for Soapy's voice, creating a jaunty, street-wise atmosphere that set up the events of the story as a playful scenario that resembles a game. This quote marks a hard shift in tone for both the story and for Soapy. The foppish quality that initially defines the story is replaced with a dogged, earnest determination that mirrors Soapy's internal monologue. The ambition and tenacity that is reignited in Soapy is a vestige of his past life, and his conviction that he will "pull himself out of the mire" is also an echo of the idea that one can pull oneself up by the bootstraps, a phrase that is often adjacent to the American Dream.

> "Three months on the Island," said the Magistrate in the Police Court the next morning.

Related Characters: The Police, Soapy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

One of the stark, core ironies of "The Cop and the Anthem"

is the fact that Soapy does achieve his initial goal of getting arrested, but this only happens after he's decided with firm resolve to re-integrate himself into society. The fact that the story ends abruptly at this moment is also noteworthy. It is possible to imagine a version of this narrative in which Soapy explains himself to the Magistrate and states his intentions of re-entering the workforce and pulling himself out of the mire. However, the fact that O. Henry's story ends with this scene is commentary in and of itself. Soapy is trapped in a vicious cycle of homelessness from which he can't escape, which is ultimately the strongest prevailing social commentary in "The Cop and the Anthem."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE COP AND THE ANTHEM

On his bench in Madison Square, Soapy begins to feel the chilling effects of winter and decides he must leave his bench. His "hibernatorial ambitions" are modest, in contrast to those of wealthier New Yorkers who escape the winter via Mediterranean cruises. Soapy only wants three months of guaranteed room and board on "the island"—Blackwell's Island, where he has spent the past three winters just as other New Yorkers head to the Riviera or Palm Springs.

O. Henry's dark sense of irony is on display from the very beginning of the story, as Soapy's annual migration is treated as a natural occurrence (a "hibernatorial" pursuit) that is similar to the southern migration of geese. Soapy shares a kinship with his fellow New Yorkers, but the bitterly ironic fact is that he is headed to a much different island than his wealthy counterparts.

The newspapers under his coat no longer keep Soapy warm, but he resents the enforced humility of many of the citizens charitable institutions. He'd rather be "a guest of the law, which […] does not meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs."

Soapy remains a proud, dignified character who wants to preserve his independence despite his poverty. The comedic irony is that he plans to do so by going to jail.

Soapy thus resolves to get himself arrested in order to obtain lodging at Blackwell's Island for the winter. His first attempt occurs at a glittering café on Broadway, where he is confident he can scam a meal for himself because he is clean-shaven, his coat is decent, and he is wearing a tie. He imagines the decadent meal that awaits him: roasted mallard duck […] with a bottle of Chablis, and then Camembert, a demi-tasse and a cigar. One dollar for the cigar would be enough," he reasons. However, before he can even make it to a table, a waiter spots Soapy's frayed trousers. Instead of calling the police, the staff throws Soapy out on the street.

Soapy is a character with refined, expensive tastes, which suggests he was not always poor—and also that the poor are not so different from the wealthy, despite stereotypes of them as uncultured and uncouth. Despite his confidence in his ability to move fluidly through different layers of society because he knows how to dress and act the part, the reality of Soapy's social status is embodied in his frayed trousers, which give him away.

At a shop window lit up brightly with "cunningly displayed wares," Soapy hurls a cobblestone through the glass and shatters it. When a police officer arrives at the scene of the crime, Soapy identifies himself as the culprit and peppers in a few sarcastic, overly-friendly quips, but the officer's "mind" refuses to accept Soapy "even as a clue." Rather than arrest the perpetrator of the crime, the cop runs off to chase another man.

The comic, over-the-top quality of Soapy's crime and admission hint at his mounting desperation and raise the story's stakes. No matter how confidently he pursues arrest and how visually obvious his crime might be, all that matters is the police officer's perception *of Soapy, suggesting that a man is only homeless if a person in a position of power above him thinks of him that way.*

Despite thinking himself above it and considering the role despicable and execrated, Soapy decides to assume the role of a "masher," a man who harasses women on the street. Tilting his hat at a "killing cant" and flirting impudently with a woman he finds window-shopping, Soapy's plan backfires: he has failed to identify the woman as a prostitute, and she is in fact intrigued by his advances. The woman herself likewise misidentifies Soapy as a paying customer, embroiling the two characters in a sadly comic exchange that neither one can fulfill.

Soapy envisions himself as a gentleman and considers this role beneath him. Much in the same way that he was misidentified by a cop, Soapy misidentifies a character when he thinks he is above the role he must play. The stark irony, however, is that Soapy must engage in the behaviors of a "masher" in order to achieve his goal, thus making him into a masher himself in the process.

Panicking at the thought that "some dreadful enchantment" might have rendered him immune to arrest, Soapy attempts to engage in disorderly conduct and get arrested by shouting drunken gibberish at a police officer. He dances, howls, raves, and even goes so far as to "disturb the welkin." However, the police officer, who speaks in a jargon-heavy form of broken English, misidentifies Soapy as a Yale student celebrating a recent football victory over Hartford College and ignores him, noting that he has instructions to "lave them be."

There is a sense throughout the story that Soapy is doomed or cursed, suggesting that nothing he does can change the vicious cycle of homelessness in which he is trapped. Shouting obscenities at a cop causes a wildly outsize response: the cop perceives him as an ivy league student at a prestigious university, which further suggests that Soapy's fate is not in his own hands.

As his desperation deepens and his actions become increasingly flighty and desperate, Soapy somewhat resignedly enters a cigar store, where he approaches a well-dressed man lighting a cigar and steals his silk **umbrella**, almost arrogantly self-assured that this action will get him arrested. When a police officer witnesses the dispute, the man with the umbrella stutters and retreats, revealing to Soapy that he has once again misidentified this man as a wealthy member of a society when he is in fact an umbrella thief himself.

It is only once Soapy performs his crime that he sees this fellow criminal for who he is, shattering his confidence in his ability to identity individuals based upon his perception of their appearances and the material objects surrounding them. This once again reveals to Soapy that he commits the same errors of perception as the people he encounters throughout the story.

Dejected and discouraged, Soapy arrives at an iron fence surrounding an old **church**. The tone of the story shifts deliberately in this scene, creating a "lustrous and serene" atmosphere that is almost pastoral. From inside the church, Soapy hears an organist playing an anthem. The song is so moving to Soapy that he resolves to reform himself, get a job, and become a contributing member of society. He will pull himself out of the mire, he tells himself, because the organ notes have "set up a revolution in him." He will head into the roaring downtown district and find work, he tells himself. However, before he can put his plan into action, Soapy feels the familiar hand of a police officer on his arm, he is arrested for loitering, and he is sentenced to three months on Blackwell's Island the next morning.

O. Henry shifts deliberately from a jaunty, fast-paced tone to an earnest, slowed-down one in order to set up one of his infamous twist endings, but also to provide commentary. Rather than end the story on an uplifting note, in which a homeless man is so inspired by an "anthem" that he resolves to pull himself up by his bootstraps and chase the American Dream, the story screeches to a halt with a series of rapid-fire exchanges that reward Soapy with the thing that has eluded him the entire story, but which is ironically the thing he no longer desires. This provides tragic irony and social commentary in tandem, as readers once again see that Soapy is powerless to escape from his homelessness and the way he is perceived by the world.

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