

THE COP AND THE ANTHEM SUMMARY

How It All Goes Down

"The Cop and the Anthem" covers one night and one morning in the life of Soapy, a homeless man living in New York City in the early 1900s. When it's warm, Soapy lives in [Madison Square Park](#). Now that winter is coming, the park will be too cold. So, Soapy decides to do what he's done for several winters: get himself arrested so he can spend the winter in jail.

Soapy decides to fill his belly and get arrested at the same time by eating in a fancy restaurant and then not being able to pay for the meal. But the waiter figures out what he's up to just by looking at his clothes—Soapy doesn't make it through the door. Next, Soapy breaks a shop window. Since he doesn't run away, the policeman doesn't believe Soapy is responsible. After that, Soapy finds a cheaper restaurant to try his initial plan on. He gets in and eats a yummy meal. When Soapy reveals he can't pay for the meal, the waiters refuse to call the cops, and toss Soapy out on his ear instead.

From there, Soapy pretends to hit up on a lady, right in front of a cop. Well, the lady is game and says she'll go home with Soapy if he buys her some beers. Soapy runs away from her and tries to get arrested by yelling and dancing like a maniac on the street in front of a policeman. This policeman thinks Soapy is a drunk college guy, and he leaves Soapy alone. Finally, Soapy steals a man's umbrella, claiming it's his. The man confesses that he actually found the umbrella and that it could well be Soapy's. So, he doesn't call over the policeman watching them.

Soapy gives up trying to get arrested for the night, and heads back to his park bench. On the way, he comes to a quiet street with a church on it. He hears a beautiful anthem (religious hymn, in this case) being played on an organ coming from the church. Soapy knows the anthem and it reminds him of past days when had family and friends and church.

The anthem creates a huge change in Soapy's "soul" (42). He realizes that he can have a better life than this. Inspired and feeling empowered, Soapy begins making plans for the future. First thing he needs? A job. Lucky for him, he even

knows where he can probably get one. Tomorrow, he'll go and get that job and work toward the dreams and goals he used to have.

Soapy's thoughts are interrupted by the long arm of the law.

That long arm is attached to the sixth policeman we see in the story. He arrests Soapy for loitering, or vagrancy (not having a place to live or a way to support yourself). The next morning, a judge sentences Soapy to three months in jail.

Want to talk more about this very sudden ending? Check out our ["What's Up With the Ending?"](#) section.

THE COP AND THE ANTHEM STORY SUMMARY

- O'Henry's famous story is set in the early 1900s, in and around New York City.
- Meet Soapy (That's right. Just Soapy.), the hero of our story. Soapy is sitting on a bench in [Madison Square Park](#) when a dead leaf falls on him.
- Uh oh. Winter is coming and winter means cold. Some people go south for the winter, but Soapy isn't that big on traveling.
- All he wants is to spend three months at Blackwell's Island, just like he's done for several winters.
- (Soapy is homeless. He wants to spend the winter in the penitentiary on the Island to avoid the cold. Read the fascinating history of Blackwell's Island [here](#) and be sure to click on the links to the pictures.)
- Soapy doesn't really like to take charity because when people give him things, they think that gives them the right to invade his privacy. In jail, they lock you up, but they don't "meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs" (5).
- Now it's time for Soapy to try to get tossed in jail:
- Plan A: First, Soapy goes to a fancy restaurant on Broadway Avenue. He looks good from the waist up, but his pants and shoes have seen better days.
- If he can get to the table before the waiter sees his pants, he can order a fancy dinner and gobble it up. When he can't pay, the cops will be called and he'll be off to the Island.
- Soapy never makes it to the table. The head waiter sees his pants and shoes and knows just what he's up to.

- Plan B: On Sixth Avenue Soapy breaks a display window with a rock.
- A policeman instantly appears. He asks Soapy who broke the window. Soapy suggests it was he himself who broke it, but the policeman doesn't believe him. Who would break a window and then stick around to wait for the police?
- Plan C: Soapy finds another restaurant—this one not so picky about who they let in. He has a nice dinner and dessert. Then he tells the waiter he doesn't have any money.
- The waiter is mad, but he doesn't want to call the cops. Instead, two other waiters toss Soapy out onto the sidewalk, right on his ear. (Ouch!)
- A policeman is watching and he laughs at Soapy.
- Plan D: Soapy sees a pretty lady and decides to pretend he's a "masher" (20). (A masher is a guy who hits on ladies he doesn't know, in an intense way. You know, the kind of guy *nobody* likes.)
- A policeman is watching as Soapy hits on the lady. She sees the policeman watching, and she tells Soapy she'll go home with him if he buys her some beers.
- The policeman sees her take Soapy's arm and stops watching. Soapy runs away from the lady.
- Plan E: Soapy goes to a fancy area and starts screaming like a maniac, right on the sidewalk. But, the policeman thinks Soapy is a drunk college guy and he has orders to leave drunk college guys alone.
- Plan F: Soapy steals a man's umbrella from him, right in front of a policeman. But the man just lets Soapy have the umbrella, and the policeman goes to help a lady into a taxi.
- Soapy is pretty tired now and he heads back to his park bench in Madison Square.
- But, before Soapy gets home he comes to an old church. He can see a light glowing through the purple glass of the window.
- Someone is playing an "anthem" on the organ. Soapy is hypnotized by the beautiful music, by the moon, by the birds chirping.
- There are hardly any people on the street. Soapy feels like he's out in the country somewhere.
- Soapy remembers the days when he had things like "mothers and roses and ambitions and friends" (42) and church.
- All this makes Soapy experience "a sudden and wonderful change in his soul" (43).
- He feels bad about what his life has come to and wants to change. He's still young and he can follow the old dreams he used to have. Yep. He even knows where he can get a job. Tomorrow he'll go ask for it.
- All of the sudden Soapy feels a hand on his arm; to be exact, a policeman's hand.
- Soapy is arrested and sentenced to three months on the Island.

“The Cop and the Anthem”

The first thing one notices about “The Cop and the Anthem” is the storyteller’s use of elevated language typical of the central character, Soapy. Indeed, the character of Soapy is as important to this story as its ironic structure, in which every action that he takes creates a reaction opposite to the one he wishes. The basic irony of the story is that as long as Soapy is “free,” that is, loose in the city, he is not free at all,

because of the coming winter. If he were in prison, however, he would indeed be “free” to enjoy life without fear. Soapy is a proud man; he does not want something for nothing and is willing to “pay” for his room and board by going to some effort to commit an act that will get him in jail. He rejects charity, for he knows that he will have to pay for philanthropy by being preached at and lectured to.

The additional problem is that although Soapy breaks the law, he does not act like a criminal. Moreover, although he tries to be a “crook,” he keeps running into real criminals who thwart him, such as the umbrella thief, from whom he cannot steal what is already stolen, and the streetwalker, whom he cannot offend because she considers him a potential customer. Thus, Soapy seems “doomed to liberty.” A story with an ironic, mocking tone such as this one, in which a bum who talks like a gentleman tries to get himself thrown into jail but continually fails, can only end one way. The ultimate irony is that Soapy, who does not want something for nothing and who goes to a great deal to get thrown into jail, finally does get thrown into jail for doing precisely nothing.

Soapy's Epiphany

Soapy has been committing and attempting to commit petty crimes in the hope of being arrested and sentenced to three months in jail. He has been doing the same thing every year in the late fall and has always succeeded in getting room and board in a warm jail during the winter months. But this time it seems as if fate is against him. He is baffled. Then when he hears the organ music coming from the church he is held “transfixed.” He is experiencing a religious epiphany. He feels that God has been telling him to reform by preventing him from getting arrested. This epiphany is the result of three things: his failure to get arrested, the beauty of this little church (which apparently he has never seen before), and the beauty of the organ music. But the anthem is deceptive. God cares nothing about him. Soapy is beyond redemption. His destiny is already sealed. The epiphany has actually had an ironic result. Soapy is oblivious of his surroundings. He doesn't realize that he has strayed too far from his regular haunts and that he looks like a vagrant and a loiterer standing there pressed against the iron bars of the fence, which is set up to keep people like him outside. He is

arrested and sent to Blackwell's Island for three months as he originally wanted.

O. Henry is expressing his own feelings in this story. He served a little over three years of a five-year sentence for embezzlement in Ohio State Penitentiary and never got over it. He used a pen name instead of his real name of William Sydney Porter because he was trying to keep his criminal record a secret from everyone. The theme of his story is that once you are outside what he calls the world of "mothers and roses and ambitions and friends and immaculate thoughts and collars," like Soapy in "The Cop and the Anthem," you are out for good. There is no way back. O. Henry had a terrible drinking habit. At the time of his death he was said to be consuming two quarts of whiskey a day. He died at the age of forty-seven of cirrhosis of the liver. His heavy drinking is probably attributable to his feelings of shame, guilt, remorse, and depression. His sympathy for the underdog, so apparent in many of his stories, was due to his feeling like an underdog himself.

"The Cop and the Anthem" starts off with a heavily comical stylistic tone. All of the tricks that Soapy tries in his efforts to get himself arrested have their comical side, including the encounter with the umbrella man and his failed attempt to be a "masher." The episode in which he hurls a cobblestone through a plate-glass window seems like something we might see in a Charlie Chaplin movie. The comedy is intended for the sake of contrast with O. Henry's surprise ending, which seems especially tragic now that Soapy has had a religious experience and made the decision to reform.

Variety of Soapy's misdemeanors

O. Henry wanted to have Soapy commit a series of petty crimes in the hope of getting arrested and sentenced to spend the harsh winter months in jail. The author saw that these petty crimes would need to have variety in order to keep the reader interested. Soapy couldn't just keep going into restaurants and then revealing he couldn't pay for what he had eaten and drunk. One of the things that makes "The Cop and the Anthem" interesting is the variety of misdemeanors Soapy either commits or attempts to commit.

First he goes into an expensive restaurant intending to order the best the place has to offer. O. Henry itemizes Soapy's prospective banquet in order to characterize both the man and the establishment. "A roasted mallard duck, thought Soapy, would be about the thing—with a bottle of Chablis, and then Camembert, a demitasse and a cigar. One dollar for the cigar would be enough." But the head waiter escorts him out after seeing the condition of his shoes and trousers.

Next Soapy throws a cobblestone through a plate-glass window and stands waiting for a policeman to respond to the crash. But the cop who arrives on the scene will not believe that the culprit would still be standing at the scene of the crime.

Next Soapy goes into another restaurant "of no great pretensions," where his clothing will not prevent him from being seated and served. "At a table he sat and consumed beefsteak, flapjacks, doughnuts and pie. And then to the waiter he betrayed the fact that the minutest coin and himself were strangers." But instead of having him arrested, two waiters toss him out onto the sidewalk.

Then Soapy pretends to be a "masher" with a cop standing only a short distance away. Soapy probably expects to get arrested for disorderly conduct or possibly even assault, but the young woman he approaches turns out to be a prostitute, although O. Henry probably never used that word in print. The young woman walks off with Soapy as if they are old friends, and he has failed for a fourth time to get arrested. He could hardly have gone into another restaurant after gorging on beefsteak, donuts, flapjacks, and pie. O. Henry specifies that Soapy consumes four heavy items in order to make it understandable to the reader that Soapy would have to give up his restaurant trick for at least long enough to digest what he had consumed.

Soapy decides to go solo on his next attempt at getting arrested. "On the sidewalk Soapy began to yell drunken gibberish at the top of his harsh voice. He danced, howled, raved and otherwise disturbed the welkin." But the cop who observes his performance decides that he is a college boy celebrating a football victory and leaves him alone. The reader may wonder how Soapy has managed to get himself arrested over the past years. Has he tried all these tricks before? Does he have other tricks up his sleeve?

As his last attempt at fulfilling his goal of getting arrested immediately, Soapy steals an umbrella right in front of the umbrella's owner--but it turns out that the owner had stolen the umbrella himself and was afraid to call the policeman who was standing right on the corner.

Not only is there variety in Soapy's crimes and attempted crimes, but there is a sharp contrast between the comical tone of the first part of the story and the ironic tone of the end. Irony is usually like something that would be funny if it were not painful or sad or even tragic. Soapy was funny at first, but he becomes pathetic when he remembers his better days and then gets carted off to jail for loitering and vagrancy.

Soapy will be released in a few months, but winter will come around again. If he has lost some of his former jauntiness and bravado, he might end up having to spend next winter out of doors, in which case he could be found frozen to death on his park bench in Madison Square.

The cops in The Cop and the Anthem

Soapy is keen to get arrested by any policeman. He commits several of his misdemeanors in plain sight of a uniformed cop but fails to have his wish fulfilled. Even as the story begins, Soapy is committing one or two misdemeanors by sleeping on a park bench. He could be arrested every night for vagrancy. The cops who patrol Madison Square must see him there but leave him alone as long as he is gone by morning. When he hurls a cobblestone through a plate-glass store window he tells the cop he is the guilty party, but the cop doesn't believe him and doesn't want to have a lot of trouble hauling a prisoner to the station only to have him deny everything. He molests a woman in view of a cop who is standing nearby watching him. He acts drunk and disorderly in front of another cop who thinks, or perhaps pretends to think, he is a college boy celebrating a football victory. He steals an umbrella with a cop standing a short distance away but the owner is afraid to press charges because he stole the umbrella himself.

The plain fact is that cops past and present do not like to make arrests. Arresting people takes up a lot of their time. They may have to write up reports in legalese, and in many cases they may have to appear as witnesses in court on their own time, with or without compensation.

Judges do not want the police to bury them under heavy case loads. The public does not want to pay higher taxes to create more judges and more court houses. No doubt the police could arrest ten times as many people on one charge or another, but the courts can't handle the cases and the jails can't accommodate all the prisoners. Only a small percentage of crimes actually get punished. Nearly everyone commits crimes or misdemeanors at one time or another. As Hamlet asks: "Use every man after his desert And who shall 'scape whipping?" Or as Jesus says to the mob who want to stone a woman to death for committing adultery: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8.7). Which of us could cast that first stone? Another of the truths, or themes, of "The Cop and the Anthem" is that cops serve mainly as symbols of the law, and the law itself is largely symbolic because if all the laws were strictly enforced half the population would be in jail and the other half would be guarding them.

An article in Wikipedia quotes the following statistics:

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 2,266,800 adults were incarcerated in U.S. federal and state prisons, and county jails at year-end 2011 – about 0.94% of adults in the U.S. resident population. Additionally, 4,814,200 adults at year-end 2011 were on probation or on parole. In total, 6,977,700 adults were under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison) in 2011 – about 2.9% of adults in the U.S. resident population.