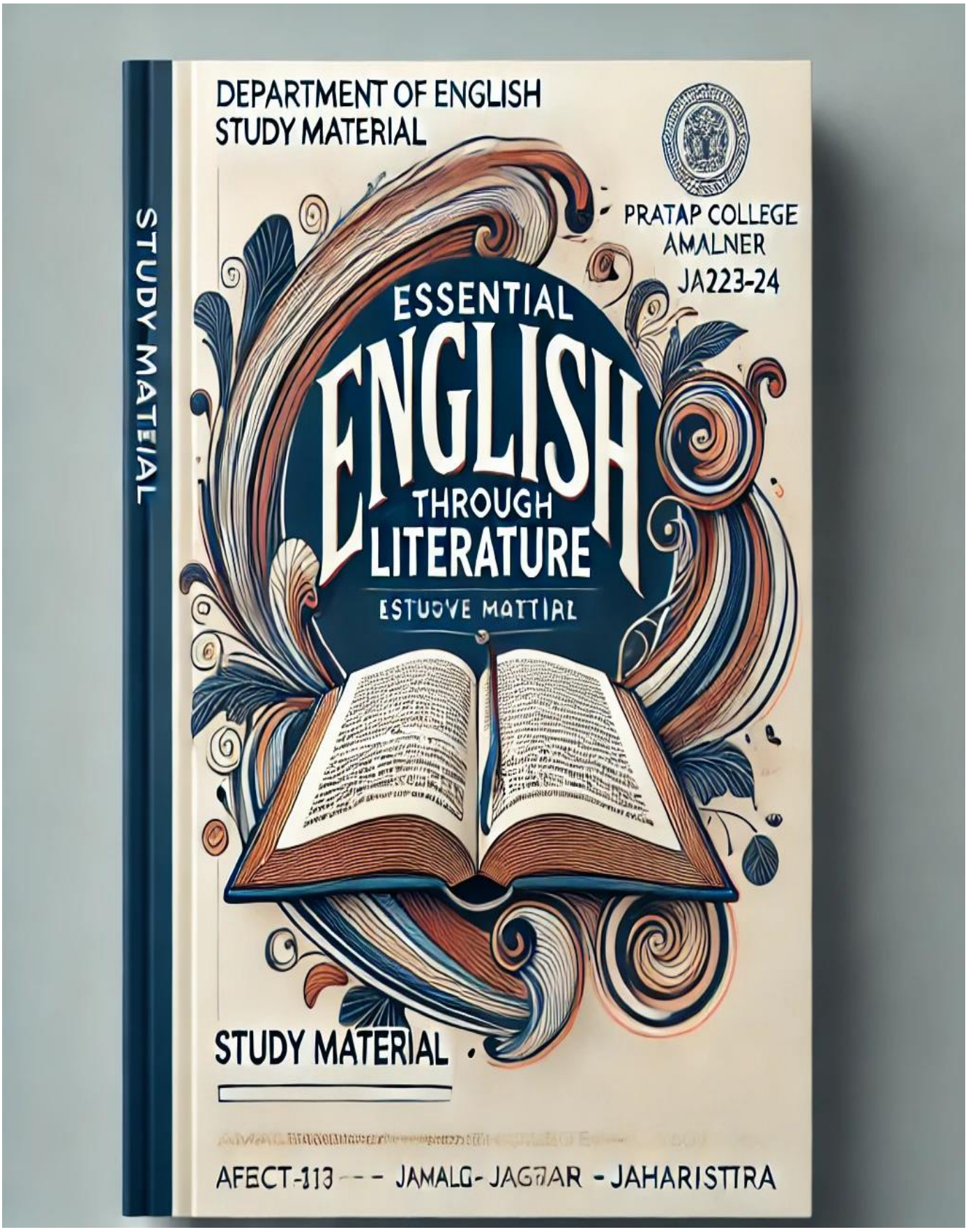
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The Cop and the Anthem

O. Henry

Character Analysis

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.

Summary &Analysis

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.
overty, Homelessness, and Crime

Themes

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 behaviorin 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.

The Happy Prince

Oscar Wilde

Characters

The Happy Prince

The Happy Prince is both the protagonist of this story and its namesake. Once a sheltered prince who led a life of pleasure, the Happy Prince was turned into a gilded statue upon his death and placed upon a pedestal overlooking his town. The Prince is described as exceedingly beautiful with golden skin, sapphires for eyes, and a ruby on his sword-hilt. Although his external beauty impresses everyone around him, he sees that beauty as only skin-deep; his true worth lies in his compassion for his townspeople and his willingness to sacrifice for them. The Happy Prince suffers, however, due to his sympathy for all of the misery he can see from his high perch. The "happiness" of this name is thus ironic, as the Prince describes having only experienced a false happiness in his previous life of pleasure, when he was ignorant of the true misery surrounding him. The Prince is ultimately a Christ-like figure, looking over humanity and sacrificing his life to alleviate their pain. Descriptions of the Prince also allude to classical understandings of wisdom and mentorship. The figure of the Prince, with his eloquent rhetoric and affinity for morally upstanding behavior, represents classical Greek and Roman ideals—in particular, the relationship that he develops with the younger Swallow alludes to classical mentor/mentee relationships.

The Swallow

The other protagonist of "The Happy Prince," the Swallow, is a bird en route to Egypt for the winter. His trip is initially delayed due to his temporary passion for a Reed, foreshadowing to the thematic importance of love in this story. Although he wants to join his companions in the sunny land of Egypt, he begins to love the Happy Prince and remains in the town to help him deliver jewels and gold to townspeople in need. Although not as selfless as the Happy Prince—he repeatedly emphasizes his desire to leave and enjoy all of the beautiful things abroad—the Swallow comes to love the Prince and understand the value of doing good. In the mentor/mentee relationship developed between the pair, the Swallow plays the role of a younger mentee who needs to be set on the right track—at the start, he expresses trepidation at delaying his own pleasure for others, speaking in the context of the typical Victorian ideals Wilde criticizes throughout the story. However, his love for the Prince helps him grow and proves that moral behavior can be learned. In the end, the Swallow makes the ultimate sacrifice out of love—because the Prince goes blind after giving away his sapphire eyes, the Swallow decides to stay by his side forever, even though he knows that remaining through the winter will mean certain death. This sacrifice ultimately lands him a place in Paradise for eternity, reinforcing the story's moral that anyone can change and choose to do good instead of acting selfishly.

The Reed

Although she appears relatively briefly in the story, the Reed still has an important role. The Sparrow initially falls in love with her for her slenderness and beauty and delays his migration to warmer territory in order to wait for the Reed. However, all his friends disapprove due to her poverty and having so many relations. She decides not to travel with the Sparrow, which ends their relationship and drives him away to the town where he meets the Happy Prince. However brief, this romance sets the stage for the romantic love between the Sparrow and the Prince. The ill-fated love between the Reed and the Sparrow also introduces the theme of judging falsely by appearances and the negativity of gossip and peer judgment.

The Little Match Girl

A young girl selling matches on a street corner whose father beats her if she does not return with sufficient money. Having dropped her matches, she appears to be in a tragic situation until the Happy Prince sacrifices his other sapphire eye to help her. Though she plays a relatively small role in the story, the narrator emphasizes her youth and innocence in contrast with the evil and neglectful adults that populate the town.

God

God appears in the very last lines of the story to rescue the Sparrow's body and the Happy Prince's leaden heart and to promise them eternity in Paradise for their sacrifices. Although his mention is brief, God cements both the theme of Christianity and proves explicitly that the narrative takes the side of compassion over corruption and sacrifice over greed.

Summary

A Swallow delays his trip to Egypt for the winter because he falls in love with a Reed—upon giving up that romance, he flies past a town where he happens to settle on a pedestal underneath a gilded statue. This statue, the Happy Prince, speaks to the Swallow about all of the poverty and suffering—especially the suffering of children—that he sees in the town from his high perch. He begs the Swallow to assist him in relieving some of that suffering by delivering the valuables from his person to those in need.

First, the Swallow delivers the ruby from the Happy Prince's sword-hilt to a seamstress struggling to feed her sick son. One of the statue's sapphire eyes goes to a playwright freezing in his garret, and the other to a young match-girl whose father would beat her if she came home empty-handed. As the Sparrow has come to love the Happy Prince, he opts to remain by his side after the loss of his eyes makes him blind, and tells him stories of Egypt to keep his world vibrant as the winter gets colder.

Ultimately, the winter grows too cold and the Sparrow realizes that death is looming—he confesses his love to the Happy Prince and the two exchange a kiss. The Sparrow perishes and the Happy Prince's lead heart cracks.

Later, the Mayor and Town Councillors walk by the statue. Disturbed by its shabbiness, they decide to have it melted and remade. Since the lead heart won't melt, however, it gets tossed on a dust-heap with the Sparrow's body. God asks one of his angels to deliver the two most precious things in the city, which turn out to be the corpse and the broken heart. He promises an eternity in Paradise in exchange for the brave sacrifices of the Prince and the Sparrow.

Summary Analysis

The gilded statue of the Happy Prince stands on a pedestal overlooking a town. Covered in gold leaf with sapphires for eyes and a ruby on his sword-hilt, the statue receives admiration from all passersby, including town councilors who want to foster a reputation for artistic tastes.This establishes both the prominence of the Happy Prince in the city and the admiration he receives. However, that reputation stems from superficial places—first of all, the statue is "gilded," meaning that gold leaf has been added only to the surface. Secondly, the councilors care too much about their reputations, revealing their narcissism. This beginning sets up the central themes of greed and the superficiality of beauty, which the later plot will elaborate.

A Swallow flies over the city on his way to Egypt. He had been delayed after falling in love with a Reed, attracted to her slender waist and gracefulness. When she wouldn't

accompany his travels, the Swallow left alone, but ended up stopping under the statue of the Happy Prince to rest.

The Swallow's backstory with the Reed establishes the centrality of romantic love as a theme in this story. However, his love for the Reed was also based on artificial qualities—her external beauty—rather than a deeper connection the two shared. His aspirations toward Egypt continue to show a relative selfishness on the part of the Swallow, as he puts his own needs and desires over either the health of his relationship or any loftier goals.

Surprised at what he takes to be rainfall on a clear night, the Swallow realizes that the Happy Prince has been crying. They introduce themselves, and the Happy Prince describes his childhood in a gated palace, when he lived in San Souci and played in a walled garden—a time full of superficial pleasures when he was ignorant of the suffering in his city. The Swallow is surprised to learn that the Statue is not made of solid gold, but he agrees to help the Happy Prince after he describes his pity for a seamstress sewing passion-flowers on the satin gown of a lady in waiting. She lives in the poor house and cannot care for her sick son, so the Swallow agrees to deliver the ruby from the Prince's sword hilt to her.

Although the Prince bears an epithet describing his "happiness," these tears and the story he subsequently tells show that this name is merely ironic. The Swallow's initial surprise that the Prince's beauty exists only on the surface shows his naivety—like the Prince in his boyhood, the Swallow fixates on superficial pleasures and beauty and cannot see beyond the surface. Nevertheless, he experiences pity—the first stage of compassion—for the Prince, and agrees to help him serve this seamstress. She represents the real irony of the town's poverty, as her job is to beautify the world for the aristocrats, but she does not earn enough in doing so to protect her sick son.

On the way to deliver the ruby, the Swallow sees "old Jews bargaining with each other." He delivers the ruby and stays in order to cool the feverish boy by flapping his wings. After delivering the ruby, the Swallow returns and describes feeling "quite warm" in spite of the cold, due to his good deed. He still intends to go to Egypt and describes to the Happy Prince what marvels await him there, from the river-horses to the God Memnon on his great granite throne. Nevertheless, the Prince begs him to stay and help a young playwright freezing in his garret. The man needs to finish a play for the theater director but has become too cold. In the end, the Swallow agrees to stay another night and plucks out one of the Prince's sapphire eyes to deliver to the young man.

The observation of Jews bargaining betrays a more negative aspect of the story's Christian roots, as it depicts a very stereotypical and anti-Semitic picture of Jewish individuals. However, the Swallow's decision to help the boy in addition to delivering the ruby shows a positive spiritual transformation in him. In the Classical period, relationships between older and younger men existed which were both marked as romantic and pedagogical—Wilde clearly models the pairing of the Swallow and Happy Prince after these relationships, as the Swallow begins to receive a moral education (learning that it feels good to help others) from following the Prince's requests. This first task has not completely diverted him from his plans to go to Egypt, where he paints an exotic picture of their fauna and religious traditions. This, combined with the Prince's compassionate desires to assist the downtrodden townspeople, strengthen the story's connection to Christian values. However, this time a playwright requires assistance, which indicates that even the artistic world succumbs to inequality and corruption—the very people producing art for the elite class languish in poverty.

Beauty and Morality

Oscar Wilde was notably committed to aestheticism and the aesthetic movement—associated with the mantra "Art for Art's sake"—and this theme recurs throughout his literary works. The titular protagonist of "The Happy Prince" is himself a statue meant to decorate the city, and through him, the story explores the relationship between art and usefulness. However, "The Happy Prince" also demonstrates the darker sides of society's obsession with beauty—that is, the extreme poverty and social inequality required to support decadent lifestyles for those living at the top of society. This turn to morality resonates with Victorian values while still condemning that society for its hypocrisy.

The initial description of the Happy Prince focuses on his aesthetic beauty: he is "gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold," has eyes of "two bright sapphires," and on his sword-hilt "a large red ruby glowed." Although these descriptions focus on his outer beauty, the word "gilded" reveals that such beauty is superficial. Similarly, although the Prince's name is "happy," he weeps upon his tall column when the Swallow first meets him; the Prince's name thus also disguises—or, perhaps, gilds—reality. The Prince goes on to describe to the Swallow his childhood in a palace "where sorrow is not allowed to enter," where he was carefree because everything was "so beautiful." They called him the Happy Prince, and he said he was happy "if pleasure be happiness." True happiness, this quote hints, differs from pleasure, while beauty often hinges on obscuring suffering.

Indeed, the happiness of the Prince's childhood was the happiness of ignorance. After dying and becoming a statue, he says, "they have set me up here so high I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep." The city, then, only seemed beautiful to the Prince when disguised by high walls—that is, when he couldn't see the suffering that existed alongside his own pleasure. Beauty, at least in a shallow, physical sense, is thus tied to deceit and even cruel indifference.

Every time the Prince identifies someone living in poverty, meanwhile, the cause of their suffering ties back to some object of beauty. A seamstress living in the poorhouse embroiders "passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids-of-honour," while her own little boy lies ill with a fever. Although he wants oranges, his mother "has nothing to give him but river water." The tragedy of their situation is deepened by the luxury goods she is working so hard to produce—not only will she not be attending any balls herself, but her work to add flowers to this satin gown does not earn enough money to even buy oranges or medicine for her sick son.

Later, a young playwright "is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre" but cannot move from cold—"there is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint." Even the town's arts and culture are driven by deep social inequalities. Here, as in the Prince'schildhood palace, beauty is built on the backs of poor townspeople yet essentially masks their suffering.

Importantly, Wilde's story doesn't disavow beauty altogether. Instead, it critiques the fixation on outer beauty at the expense of compassion and also rejects the equation of such beauty with innate value. When the Prince readily gives up his beauty, in the form of his jewels, to help the poor, he is relieving himself of that which previously brought him such pleasure—and in the process, redistributing some of its power.

Notably, the jewels' grandeur in and of itself proves less impressive than their simple usefulness. When the playwright finds a sapphire on his desk, for instance, he doesn't marvel at this item "brought out of India a thousand years ago"; he merely celebrates his work being appreciated. When the match-girl finds a jewel, she says, "What a lovely bit of glass" before running "home laughing." This emphasizes that, however lovely, the jewel is ultimately nothing more than a trinket; the true value of the jewels lie in their ability to protect the match-girl from her cruel father's beatings, or to provide the playwright with much needed food, firewood, and moral support to, in turn, produce more beauty himself via his art.

In keeping with this complication of the idea that external beauty connotes inherent worth, it is the ugliest part of the statue—his leaden, broken heart—that leads him to the highest reward. At first, the Town Councillors dismiss the "shabby" statue as "little better than a beggar," and pull him down, saying "as he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful." This confirms the overriding opinion among this privileged class of people that outer beauty is what imbues things with value. However, because the Prince's heart doesn't "melt in the furnace," it's thrown "on a dust-heap where the dead Swallow [is] also lying."

Though the Happy Prince has lost all outer beauty, and with it all his use and value in some people's eyes, his heart's refusal to melt demonstrates a durability and steadfastness that stems from inner goodness. That's why, when God asks one of his angels for "the two most precious things in the city," these items turn out to be the dead Swallow and the leaden heart. This conclusion proves that true value and external appearances are not always the same—the most precious things sometimes come disguised as the ugliest.

Love and Compassion

Many of Oscar Wilde's works contain allusions to homosexuality, in large part due to his own sexual preferences—he was famously put on trial and imprisoned in 1895 for his homosexuality, as Victorian society at the time was still notoriously conservative. In "The Happy Prince," love—arguably including homosexual love—forms the central motivations for the protagonists. In contrast, narcissism drives the story's main antagonists and leads people to make judgements about others—judgements that benefit their own worldview but cause moral impoverishment. Love and compassion, in turn, combat the devastating consequences of the status quo. As the story presents an extremely positive perspective on love and compassion, it also defends homosexuality as a positive form of love.

The Happy Prince's compassion for the townspeople and the Swallow's love for the Prince motivate their heroics. When the Prince initially describes his transformation into a statue, he outlines the feeling of compassion that seeing the townspeople's suffering awoke in him. As he says, "they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep." Seeing suffering leads him to weep, a clear proof of the compassion that will come to motivate him.

Although the Swallow starts out with more selfish motivations, the Prince evokes a similar sense of compassion in the bird. The Swallow at first expresses the desire to leave for the warmth of Egypt, but the Prince looks "so sad that the little Swallow" ends up promising to stay and act as messenger despite the cold. The allusion to the cold foreshadows the scale of sacrifice that remaining will demand from the Sparrow—it will eventually grow so cold that he will perish.

However, the Sparrow's compassion pushes him to overcome his fears in the name of helping both the Prince and those the Prince cares about.

Actions born of compassion also notably lead to personal feelings of pleasure. When the Swallow returns to tell the Prince about his success in helping distribute his jewels to those in need, he remarks, "It is curious […] but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold." The Prince replies, "That is because you have done a good action." The story draws a direct connection between seeing suffering to compassion and from acts of compassion to feeling good about oneself.

The Swallow's love for the Happy Prince also alludes to homosexuality, ultimately affirming it as a positive form of love and catalyst for compassion. Non-human characters throughout the story are gendered. For example, the Swallow had initially delayed his trip to Egypt for "he was in love with the most beautiful Reed," yet he soon "felt lonely and began to tire of his lady-love." Though the two characters are not human, their relations match a traditionally heterosexual pairing and present the Swallow as a creature in search of a romantic partner. When the Swallow initially meets the Prince, he sees him weeping and is "filled with pity." He continues to delay his trip to Egypt to help the Prince, and ultimately promises "I will stay with you always" once the Prince is left blind. The extremity of this dedication and lifelong promise exceeds the bounds of platonic love—it also shows the ways that compassion can result in and harmonize with love.

The scene of the Swallow's death, in turn, exposes the reciprocal love between the Prince and the Swallow. As winter comes and the Swallow begins to freeze, "he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well." He bids farewell and asks to kiss the Prince's hand, but the Prince replies, "you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you." In the end, he kisses the Happy Prince and "[falls] down dead at his feet," after which "a curious crack sounded inside the statue […] the leaden heart had snapped right in two." Not only does this death scene include a confession of love—the heartbreak that the Prince undergoes resembles similar conclusions in other heterosexual fairy tales, where love and heartbreak take on a mythical scope. Their love forms the heart of their ethical actions, which leads to a deep defense of the moral purity of homosexuality (in stark contrast to the strict homophobic norms popular at that time in Victorian England).

In the end, Wilde uses this story both as a subtle defense of homosexuality and a more direct proclamation of the centrality of love and compassion in human affairs. Love trumps all other values in this fairytale universe, from materialistic to artistic. Whereas beauty generates shallow pleasures, love leads directly to the eternal—to the kinds of actions that warrant praise from God, in this case. These conclusions, while quite optimistic on the surface, carry real nuance in the context of the difficulties that Wilde faced for his own sexuality—homosexuality would not have been seen as a theme appropriate for children, let alone a subject of proper morality.

Poverty, Inequality, and Greed

Oscar Wilde was a proclaimed socialist and lived in London during a time when millions of the impoverished residents risked dying of starvation. At other points, he wrote texts like "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" outlining anarchistic beliefs and a criticism of charity as opposite to a socialist reordering of society. According to "The Happy Prince," the majority of humanity

leads lives of great misery and suffering in order to support the greed of the few with money and power. The greed of the wealthy causes immense suffering, and this story takes a scathing stance against the state of inequality that forces so many people into lives of destitution and hardship. Because problems of corruption extend so widely throughout the empowered classes in society, remedies to this inequality require acknowledging the flaws in their values.

The politicians and individuals responsible for the town's welfare use their power for selfish and corrupt reasons, instead of fulfilling their duties to serve the wider community. Wilde portrays the Town Councillors in the most negative light. At the start of the story, they are presented as people with selfish motivations, like the Councillor "who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes." This emphasis on his reputation betrays both a narcissism and a shallowness underpinning his desires—not only does the Councillor disregard his political responsibilities, his relationship to art is also borne only of appearances.

A strain of corruption and superficiality extends into the academic realm as well. When a professor of Ornithology decides to write a long letter about the Swallow, "Every one quoted it, it was full of so many words that they could not understand." Rather than seeking out knowledge, both the Professor and the people citing him focus only on their reputations and the appearance of intelligence.

Even the teachers and policemen responsible for children disregard their suffering. A Mathematical Master scolds the Charity Children "for he did not approve of children dreaming." Later, in winter, "two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm." When they complain of hunger, a passing Watchman merely shouts in reply, "You must not lie here." In both of these instances, the very people entrusted with social welfare choose to disregard the innocent suffering of children out of their own spite.

In contrast to the portrayal of politicians as cruel, the suffering townspeople appear hardworking and innocent. The Prince has no interest in superficial stories or appearances—even when the Swallow tries to distract him with positive stories, he says, "you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery." This quote simultaneously establishes misery as the story's focus and targets the behaviour and blindness of all of the town's officials who are able to disregard that misery.

In the winter, the Swallow flew "and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates." Although the rich could look right outside and see the suffering, they remain ignorant of it—which seems almost impossible, given the proximity that the Swallow describes. After the Swallow dies and the Prince's heart breaks, the Mayor remarks, "how shabby the Happy Prince looks!" Even worse, "How shabby indeed!" cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor." The Mayor calls the Prince a "beggar" and deplores the dead bird at his feet, saying, "We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here." To the very end, these figures appear ridiculous in their cold-heartedness and superficiality.

The selfishness and shortsightedness shown by privileged individuals in this story reveal the deep flaws behind hubris and conceit. Human greed and obsession with appearances result in evil and true ugliness. These corrupt tendencies extend to all parts of society, from education to politics to art and justice—counteracting them requires that all people open their eyes to the realities "at the gates." Although Wilde was a proponent of a decadent and wealthy lifestyle, this story demonstrates his consciousness of the costs that can be wrought by profound inequality.

Ultimately, those who choose to ignore the brutal realities outside their doorsteps ought to be condemned, as the most important questions humanity struggles with involve suffering.

Religion

Wilde was a dedicated Christian throughout his life, and religious themes run through "The Happy Prince." The titular Happy Prince represents a Christlike figure who supports analogous teachings to those of Christian parables. Much like Christ in the Bible, the Happy Prince chooses to sacrifice himself to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and downtrodden. Ultimately, God rewards the Prince in paradise, confirming both the narrative's religious subtext and the Christian roots of the Happy Prince's values. Although the intended parallels between the narrative and Christianity lie in its values, the story also portrays other religions using stereotypes. In doing so, religious values in "The Happy Prince" sometimes fall flat. Ultimately, the intended religious influences in this story teach one to value making sacrifices for those who are oppressed by poverty and cannot advocate for themselves.

The story draws clear thematic parallels to biblical teachings, centered on its Christlike central figure. The heroic statue in "The Happy Prince" spends the story sacrificing his beauty to save the citizens of the town from poverty. The statue gives up the ruby from his sword-hilt for the seamstress and one of his sapphire eyes for the playwright, and even gives up his other eye for "a little match-girl" who "has no shoes or stockings" and will be beaten by her father if she comes home with no money.

The Bible includes many examples encouraging great sacrifice—from Jesus giving his life on the cross to an old widow sacrificing her last two coins in Luke's gospel. In this story, as in the Bible, the wealthy end up greedy and corrupt whereas those living in poverty are industrious and generous. The Christian God himself appears at the end of this story, in fact. He asks one of the angels to bring "the two most precious things in the city," and says the angel has "rightly chosen" for bringing "the leaden heart and the dead bird," for "in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me." The Happy Prince receives the gift of eternity in paradise for his sacrifice, which confirms the importance that the narrative places on trying to protect and save people oppressed by poverty.

Despite the altruistic roots of its Christian moral teaching, the story also shows its loyalty to Christianity through its treatment of other religions. Many of the Swallow's stories about Egypt paint an exoticized picture of the country's culture and values. He describes how "on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon. All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy, and then he is silent." He also cites his companions as "building a nest in the Temple of Baalbec." These references to Egyptian religion do not provide an accurate picture of their faith, but rather some exotic color to situate the story's town as Western and Christian in contrast.

Even depictions of other religions in the town contain stereotypes. In a short cameo, Wilde describes an arguably anti-Semitic—but certainly stereotypical—scene in Jewish ghetto. The Swallow "passed over the Ghetto, and saw the old Jews bargaining with each other, and weighing out money in copper scales." The association between Judaism and moneylending has a long history in European literature, and these anti-Semitic stereotypes led to prejudice and violence at various points in history, from the Crusades to the Holocaust.

While the story's religiosity primarily shines through its moral dedication to combat poverty, there is a darker undercurrent. On the one hand, Wilde presents a parable of Christian teachings of compassion, martyrdom, and care for the oppression of the poor. On the other hand,

there is some hypocrisy in the story itself—for a story that condemns judgment, especially appearance-based judgment, the matter of religion remains mired in stereotype. In this case, Wilde's intended evocations of religion—Christianity, specifically—clash with his treatments of other religions.

Obituary

A.K. Ramanujan

'Obituary' by A.K. Ramanujan explores the universal toll a parent's passing can have on a child and all the ways that their memory remains even after their death.A.K. Ramanujan is remembered as a playwright, folklorist, and translator. Ramanujan wrote in numerous genres and in both English and Kannada.This well-known A.k. Ramanujan poem depicts a son's reaction to his father's death. The piece takes the reader through a variety of images that relate to where and how the father died as well as what has changed now that he's gone. Lines like: "And he left us / a changed mother / and more than / one annual ritual" help convey the speaker's experience in 'Obituary' in clear language.

Summary

'Obituary' by A.K. Ramanujan describes the aftermath of a father's death and all the things he left behind, physical and emotional. The poem begins with the speaker telling the reader that his father died. When he died, he left behind a lot. There are unless and meaningless things, like dust and old papers. But there are also memories and rituals which are going to last a lifetime.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker describes how they cremated this father and threw his leftover bones into the river. He also speaks about something he learned but is yet to see with his own eyes. Apparently, his father left an obituary in a local paper. Now, the son is searching the most popular papers for it, hoping to see this other thing he left behind. The poem ends with an emphasis on the importance of the rituals that came from his father and are now established parts of family life.

Detailed Analysis

Stanza One

Father, when he passed on,
left dust

(...)

named by the toss
of a coin after him,

In the first stanza of 'Obituary,' the speaker begins by telling the reader who died– his father. The speaker focuses on what the father left behind. There were utterly normal things that have taken on new importance. Such as dust on a "table of papers" and "debts and daughters." The father also left behind a grandson named after him. Little details, like the fact that the grandson was named after him because of a "toss of a coin," are interesting and bring the reader closer to the speaker's family.

Stanza Two

a house that leaned
slowly through our growing

(...)

he burned properly
at the cremation

In the second stanza of 'Obituary, he lists things that the father left behind grows. There was a house that had been leaning slowly throughout the speaker's years. It is on a coconut tree in the yard.

In the next lines, there are a number of things the "burning" could allude to. Practices associated with farming are the most obvious. To make it more complicated and relate it more easily to the loss, the speaker compares his father's habit of burning to the way he burnt promptly when he was cremated. The humor here lightens the mood a bit and tells the reader that the speaker does not intend to speak too heavily on loss and depression. Instead, he is celebrating his father's life.

Stanza Three

as before, easily
and at both ends,

(...)

several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons

In the next lines of 'Obituary,' he refers to the "eye coins." This is related to the tradition of putting coins on a dead person's eyes when they are buried, or, in this case, before they are cremated. He draws attention to the fact that that the coins didn't burn. They were left in the ashes, looking the same as when they went into the fire. Alongside the coins are "several spinal discs. These, unlike the coins, are rough.

Stanza Four

to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest

(...)

no longstanding headstone
with his full name and two dates

The sons, the speaker, and his brothers engage in a ritual of throwing these bits of bone "facing east / where three rivers met / near the railway station." The speaker mixes traditional and mysticism with reality. This ritual happens somewhere normal, right near a train station. He goes on to describe how they chose not to have a headstone for their father. They didn't think that "his full name and two dates would do him justice.

Stanza Five

to holdin their parentheses
everything he didn't quite

(...)

and his death by heart-
failure in the fruit market.

The "parentheses" which would go around the dates would've represented "everything he didn't quite / manage to do himself." The kind of things the speaker is thinking of is the father's birth and his death. He was born in a "brahmin ghetto," and he died "by heart- / failure in the fruit market." Simple places are again contrasted with important events.

Stanza Six

But someone told me
he got two lines

(...)

exactly four weeks later
to streethawkers

The sixth stanza relates directly back to the title of the poem, 'Obituary.' The father has left something behind, "two lines / in an inside column / of a Madras newspaper." The son doesn't know exactly which paper or where the lines are. But he did hear that it is sold by the kilo and would turn up with the "streethawkers," or those on the street selling goods, "four weeks later." In these lines, the poet makes use of half-rhyme with "newspaper" and "streethawkers."

Stanza Seven

who sell it in turn
to the small groceries

(...)

in newspaper cones
that I usually read

These sellers bring their papers to the grocery stores where the speaker goes to buy normal everyday products. Usually, he buys a newspaper along with spices such as coriander. In these lines, "groceries" and "jaggery" are half-rhymes connected due to their "e" sounds.

Stanza Eight

for fun, and lately
in the hope of finding

(...)

and more than
one annual ritual.

In the last seven lines, the speaker describes reading the paper and hoping to find the "obituary lines." Their presence is one thing the father left behind, along with everything else mentioned in the previous stanzas. The poem ends with the speaker describing how his mother

has changed. Now, he adds the family is left with annual rituals which were started by a man who is no longer alive.

Themes

The poet engages with themes of loss and father/son relationships. The speaker addresses his father's death in different ways throughout the poem. The tone is mostly conversational and direct in these lines, contemplating what's been lost and what else has changed. His relationship with his father has been altered by the man's death. He now sees him as far more human and less divine than he did before.

Structure and Form

'Obituary' is an eight-stanza poem that is separated into sets of seven lines. These lines do not do follow a specific rhyme scheme, but that does not mean that there aren't moments of rhyme and rhythm in the text. For example, Ramanujan makes use of slant or half-rhymes. These are seen through the repetition of assonance or consonance. This means that either a vowel or consonant sound is reused within one line or multiple lines of verse. There are a few examples of this kind of rhyme in the first stanza with the words "papers" and "daughters" and "on" and "grandson." These words do not rhyme perfectly, but they are clearly similar. In the fourth stanza, the endings of the first three lines are connected due to a similarity in assonance. The long "e" sound is repeated in "gingerly," "priest," and "east."

Literary Devices

Throughout 'Obituary,' the poet makes use of several literary devices. These include but are not limited to:

Alliteration: helps to create additional moments of rhyme for the text and also, at times, helps support the tone. One example is "debts" and "daughters" in the first stanza. The relationship between these two words is somewhat humorous, and the fact that they begin with the same letter only emphasizes this fact.

Imagery: can be seen when the poet creates especially powerful descriptions. For example, "he burned properly / at the cremation" and "his death by heart- / failure in the fruit market."

Enjambment: occurs when the poet cuts off a line before its natural stopping point—for example, the transition between lines two and three of the first stanza.

FAQs

What is the purpose of 'Obituary?'

The purpose is to explore the aftermath of the speaker's father's death. This includes everything he left behind as well as the way his death changed the speaker and his other family members.

How does A.K. Ramanujan feel about his father's death in the poem 'Obituary?'

Throughout this poem, the speaker addresses his father's death without much emotion. But, the amount of detail that's in the poem makes it clear that he is moved by his passing. At times, the speaker seems to be disappointed by his father's death.

Who is the speaker in 'Obituary?'

The speaker is someone whose father has recently passed away. He's considering all the things his father left behind. These are some physical things and some emotional changes. For example, "a changed mother" and more than one "annual ritual."

What is the tone in Obituary?'

Throughout this piece, the poet's speaker uses a conversational poem. He states facts about his father's death without imbuing them with too much emotion. This makes the poem quite easy and direct to read.

If

Rudyard Kipling

Many people consider 'If—' to be one of the most inspirational poems ever written. It is certainly a poem that has garnered a great deal of attention in popular culture.This is an introspective poem that imparts valuable life lessons and moral guidance. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining integrity, resilience, and humility in navigating the complexities of life.

In fact, any lover of tennis can probably tell you that several of the lines of 'If—' are hanging in the player's entrance at Centre Court Wimbledon in England. The lines that are displayed read, "If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same." The piece has been voted as one of Britain's favorite poems. While Kipling wrote poetry, novels, and articles, he is most notably known for his collection of short stories called The Jungle Book, written in 1894. A British writer, Kipling, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907.

Summary

'If—' is an inspirational poem that provides advice on how one should live one's life. The poem takes the reader through various ways in which the reader can rise above adversity that will almost certainly be thrown one's way at some point.

Throughout the poem, the speaker gives the reader multiple scenarios, both positive and negative, along with a glimpse into how one should conduct oneself, including lessons in manhood, humility, willpower, composure, and living a virtuous life.

The poem has an almost mathematical proof about it with its if-then scenario. Kipling leaves the "then" until the final two lines, revealing to the reader that if he or she is able to do all that was just mentioned, he or she will not only have the world at his or her fingertips but he or she will also be a "Man."

Themes

In 'If—,' Kipling engages with themes of masculinity and success/defeat. The first of these is incredibly central to the poem. From the speaker's point of view, there are very specific things the young listener has to do to become a man. The speaker celebrates attributes that are traditionally masculine, like strength, while also, in a contemporary setting, raising questions in regard to what role women have to play in society.

The "inspirational" part of this poem comes from the speaker's motivational message for the young listener. He helps this young man try to understand what it takes to be successful in life, experience self-restraint and perseverance, and how to handle defeat when it occurs, which, the speaker says, it certainly will.

Structure and Form

Rudyard Kipling separates his poem into four stanzas of equal length, all of which contain eight lines. Each stanza has a set rhyme scheme of ababcdcd, with the exception of the first stanza, which has the following rhyme scheme: aaaabcbc.

In terms of meter, the poem is written in iambic pentameter, with five feet consisting of an unstressed and then a stressed syllable. The speaker of the poem, presumably Kipling, keeps

a positive and upbeat tone throughout the work, informing the reader what he or she needs to do in order to be a successful person in life.

Kipling makes this a very personal poem by his use of the pronoun "you." In fact, one could even interpret the poem as Kipling talking to himself or giving himself a pep talk.

Analysis of If—

First Stanza

The first stanza wastes no time in setting up the if-then scenario. Kipling writes,

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,

In this first, "if" scenario, Kipling reminds the reader of the importance of maintaining a level head even when those around the reader do not have one and are blaming the situation on the reader. It should be noted here that the reader soon realizes the poem is really one long sentence. The poem ends on a particularly high note, which Kipling emphasizes with his use of an exclamation point.

The third and fourth lines present the next "if" situation. Kipling writes, "If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, / But make allowance for their doubting too […]" Here, the speaker emphasizes two traits that all people must possess: self-trust and the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others, even if that means understanding that people will not always like or agree with you. The final four lines of the first stanza flow together nicely, almost sounding as though they are one complete thought. Kipling writes:

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,

Or being hated, don't give way to hating,

And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise…

In these lines, the speaker is telling the reader to have patience. In addition, he informs the reader that even if he or she is lied about, he or she should not stoop to the level of a liar. If he or she is hated, he or she must not become hateful, and finally, the reader should not appear to be better than he or she actually is, nor should he or she talk in a manner that does not reflect who they are morally or spiritually.

Second Stanza

The "if" clauses continue into the second stanza, but they are structured differently. In the first stanza, the "if" clauses were grouped in lines of two, with the exception of the final four

lines. In the second stanza, the form of the first two "if" clauses is similar to the second half of the first stanza, where the lines build upon the previous lines. Kipling writes,

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;

If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,

Here, Kipling urges his reader to dream and think but not to get so caught up in dreams and thoughts that the reader loses his grasp on reality. Kipling uses personification in his next two lines:

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same;

Kipling's diction here is also worth mentioning. The word impostor suggests a pretense or disguise. Perhaps he uses this word to showcase the fleeting nature of both: success never stays, nor does disaster. Additionally, he could possibly be suggesting that these two words often come with disruption or change. In any case, the reader should not dwell too much on either triumph or disaster because they will soon disappear. Kipling continues right on to his next "if" clause:

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

The speaker informs the reader that he or she must be able to endure hearing his or her words being twisted by dishonest and harmful people in order to serve their own agendas. He continues this thought in the last two lines of the stanza, writing:

Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,

And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools,

The speaker demonstrates in these lines the importance of being able to pick oneself up and start again if they fail—even if the thing they've failed at has taken all of their life to attempt. The reader must always be prepared to start again.

Third Stanza

The third stanza starts with the "if" clause, continuing on into the first four lines. Kipling writes:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

And lose, and start again at your beginnings

And never breathe a word about your loss…

The theme in these lines is very similar to the one in the last two lines of the previous stanza: if you lose everything, you must be willing to begin again. Not only that, but you must also be willing to forget about the loss and not dwell on it.

The next four lines of the third stanza are also tied together. The speaker states,

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

To serve your turn long after they are gone,

And so hold on where there is nothing in you

Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

These lines are particularly powerful. The speaker is imploring the reader to endure, even if that feels both physically (sinew) and emotionally (heart and nerve) impossible. It is also worth noting the capitalization of "Will." Perhaps Kipling wanted to emphasize the resilience of the human spirit here by making it a power that is separate from the person who possesses it.

Fourth Stanza

In the fourth stanza, the consequence of doing all of these "ifs" is finally revealed, but not before Kipling presents us with three more scenarios. The first one deals with how to treat others, regardless of their station in life. He writes:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,

Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,

It should not matter with whom the reader is walking; he or she needs to treat the lowest of the low and the highest in a society exactly the same–with kindness. Kipling then dives right into the next "if":

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,

If all men count with you, but none too much,

Kipling is reminding his reader that it is important to be able to bounce back from disappointment or pain. One must not dwell on his enemies or the hurt a loved one could potentially cause. Finally, the poet gives the reader his final piece of advice:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

He is telling his reader never to give up or waste even a single second of time. If you are given a minute, make sure you use all sixty seconds of it. Finally, in the last two lines, the outcome of abiding by all of these tidbits is revealed:

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,

And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

If one is able to keep all of these things in check, one will have the world at one's fingertips.

Literary Devices

Kipling makes use of several literary devices in 'If—.' These include but are not limited to repetition, anaphora, enjambment, and caesura. The latter is a formal device that occurs when the poet inserts a pause into the middle of a line. This might be done with punctuation or with the meter. For example, lines one and two of the second stanza read:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;

If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim.

Just glancing at the poem, the reader is immediately hit with the word "If—." Not only is it the title of the poem, but through his use of repetition, Kipling emphasizes the word throughout the entirety of his work. This makes the poem move, as the reader is working his or her way through it in order to get to the effects of what will happen if he or she is able to accomplish all that it mentions. Kipling does not disappoint. The reader discovers what will happen in the final two lines of the work.

On the same point, the use of the word 'if' is a form of anaphora. This is because the word 'if' is repeated at the start of many of the lines of the poem, creating both a sonic effect as well as a listicle style to the poem (you have to do all of these things to be considered a man at the end of the poem).

Enjambment is another interesting device, one that occurs when the poet cuts off a line before the natural stopping point of a sentence or phrase. For example, the transition between lines two and three of the second stanza as well as one and two of the third stanza.

Historical Context

'If—' was written in 1895 and first published in 1910 in "Brother Square Toes," a chapter of Rewards and Fairies. Today, the poem's philosophical outlook is considered to be one of the best examples of Victorian stoicism. It provides traditional advice about how to live a good life with the understanding that one has to make the most of every minute they have. It requires self-

discipline and a good moral character. But, no matter when the poem was written, it is still resonant today.

Kipling wrote the poem after he was inspired by Leander Starr Jameson's actions, leader of the Jameson Raid, to overthrow the Boer Government of Paul Kruger. Although the raid failed, Kipling was still struck by his tenacity.

FAQs

When was 'If—' written?

'If—' by Rudyard Kipling was written in 1895. The poem was first published in "Rewards and Fairies" in 1910. It appears in the chapter titled "Brother Square-Toes" of the book.

Why did Rudyard Kipling write 'If—'?

In his autobiography, "Something of Myself" Kipling said he was greatly influenced by the character of Leander Starr Jameson. This character influenced him to write the poem, 'If—.' Besides, he wrote this poem as a piece of advice to his dear son.

Why is the poem titled 'If—'?

Most of the lines of this poem begin with the word "If." To become a "Man," readers have to incorporate those ideas into their minds. Only then can they succeed in life. The choice is conditional. Whether to adopt them or not is up to the listener. Therefore, the poem is titled, 'If—.' If one reads the poem wholeheartedly and obeys those principles, only then he or she can get success.

What type of poem is 'If—'?

Kipling wrote 'If—' in the form of paternal advice to a child. Here, the child is none other than the poet's son, John. It is a type of didactic poem that teaches readers how to be an ideal human being.

What is the meaning of 'If—'?

Kipling's poem is all about how to be an ideal human being. The text presents a series of advice following which one can become a "Man." That's why this poem does not have a single meaning. Readers can find a variety of ideas in it.

Why are "Triumph" and "Disaster" called impostors?

In this poem, Kipling's speaker personifies triumph and disaster. He calls them imposters, as both of these events don't last long. The small triumphs of life indeed taste sweet. But, staying in the hallucination of victory is an addiction and enslavement. When disaster or failure comes, the mind remains in such a state that it becomes tough to face it. Interestingly, defeat doesn't last for a long time either. That's why both triumph and disaster are traps in themselves.

What does the phrase "unforgiving minute" mean?

The phrase “unforgiving minute” is a metaphor for life. Besides, time is always unforgiving. If we fail to understand the importance of time, it is not going to forgive our ignorance. Ironically, we are going to repent for the time wasted. That’s why the speaker urges the readers to make the most of every minute of their lives.

What is the theme of ‘If—’ by Rudyard Kipling?

The main theme of Rudyard Kipling’s ‘If—’ is Victorian-era stoicism. This theme is present throughout the work, along with some important themes such as being human, success, failure, life, strength, and self-control.

What feelings are evoked from the poem ‘If—’ awaken in you?

The poem, ‘If—’ by Rudyard Kipling, awakens the positive feelings in a reader’s mind. While reading the lines, readers become enlightened concerning how to tackle the odds of life. Not only that but also they start to realize what success means. It is not about winning a battle. Rather, it’s about how one fights in the war and stands courageously until the end.

What are the values represented in the poem?

There are several values represented in the poem, ‘If—.’ For example, readers can find values such as self-control, believing in oneself, patience, honesty, kindness, humbleness, being rational, etc. Each stanza presents a set of values that form an ideal character.

About Rudyard Kipling

Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay, India, in December of 1865. As a boy, he took pleasure in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Wilkie Collins. He was around eleven years old when he first started writing. Kipling’s best-known work, The Jungle Book, was published in the late 1890s. Kipling’s life took a tragic turn in the 1930s with the death of his second child.After developing an ulcer and undergoing surgery, Kipling died less than a week later. His ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey in Poet’s Corner.

Daffodils

William Wordsworth

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' is one of the best-loved poems of the fountainhead of romanticism William Wordsworth. This poem features how the spontaneous emotions of the poet's heart sparked by the energetic dance of daffodils help him pen down this sweet little piece. On 15 April 1802, Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy came across a host of daffodils around Glencoyne Bay in the Lake District. This event was the inspiration behind the composition of Wordsworth's lyric poem.

'Daffodils' or 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' has been dissected methodically for illustrating the poet's mood, the surrounding location, the allegorical meanings, and the beauty of nature in full motion. The poet's love and proximity with nature have inspired and moved generations after generations of poetry lovers and young minds.

Daffodils

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Summary

'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' by William Wordsworth(Bio | Poems) describes how a host of golden daffodils dancing in the breeze of the Lake District mesmerized his heart.

The speaker, likely William Wordsworth(Bio | Poems) himself, is wandering down the hills and valley when he stumbled upon a beautiful field of daffodils. The speaker is transfixed by the daffodils seemingly waving, fluttering, and dancing along the waterside. Albeit, the lake's waves moved as fervently, but the beauty of daffodils outdid with flying colors. The poet feels immensely gleeful and chirpy at this mesmerizing natural sight. Amongst the company of flowers, he remains transfixed at those daffodils wavering with full vigor. Oblivious to the poet is the fact that this wondrous scenery of daffodils brings the poet immense blithe and joy when he's in a tense mood or perplexed for that matter. His heart breaths a new life and gives him exponential happiness at sight worth a thousand words.

Meaning

Though the poem's title hints at a cloud, it is not about it. Instead, it is about a group of golden daffodils dancing beside the lake and beneath the trees. Wordsworth's poetic persona, at some point, visited that spot, and he is describing how he felt having the sight of those beautiful flowers. The poet metaphorically compares him to a cloud for describing his thoughtless mental state on that day. Like a cloud, he was wandering in the valley aimlessly. The sudden spark that the daffodils gave to his creative spirit is expressed in this poem.

Structure and Form

The poem is composed of four stanzas of six lines each. It is an adherent to the quatrain-couplet rhyme scheme, A-B-A-B-C-C. Every line conforms to iambic tetrameter. The poem 'Daffodils' works within the a-b-a-b-c-c rhyme scheme as it uses consistent rhyming to invoke nature at each stanza's end. Moreover, it helps in creating imagery skillfully as the poet originally intended. The poem flows akin to a planned song in a rhythmic structure. Consonance and alliteration are used to create rhymes.

This poem is written from the first-person point of view. Therefore it is an ideal example of a lyric poem. The poetic persona is none other than Wordsworth himself. This piece contains a regular meter. There are eight syllables per line, and the stress falls on the second syllable of each foot. There are four iambs in each line. Thus the poem is in iambic tetrameter. For example, let's have a look at the metrical scheme of the first line:

I wan-/dered lone-/ly as/ a cloud

Figurative Language and Poetic Devices

Wordsworth makes use of several literary devices in 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.' These include but are not limited to similes, hyperboles, personification, and allusion. Similes are also used since the poet alludes to an aimless cloud as he takes a casual stroll. Moreover, daffodils are compared to star clusters in Milky Way to explicate the magnitude of daffodils fluttering freely beside the lake. At times, hyperbole is used to explicate the immensity of the situation. The allusion of daffodils to stars spread across the Milky Way is one such instance.

Furthermore, the daffodils are even made anthropomorphous to create a human portrayal of Mother Nature in this instance.

Moreover, the poet has also used reverse personifications, equating humans to clouds and daffodils to humans with constant movement. Using this clever tactic, the poet brings people closer to nature, becoming a hallmark of William Wordsworth's most basic yet effective methods for relating readers with nature, appreciating its pristine glory. Daffodils celebrate the beauty of nature and its purity, along with the bliss of solitude. He deems his solitude as an asset and inspires him to live a meaningful life.

Wordsworth makes use of imagery figuratively to display his feelings and emotions after encountering the daffodils. Firstly, the image of the cloud describes the poet's mental state, and the images that appear after that vividly portray the flowers. These images, in most cases, are visual, and some have auditory effects (For example, "Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.") associated with them.

Detailed Analysis

Stanza One

I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o'er vales and hills,

When all at once I saw a crowd,

A host, of golden daffodils;

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

In the first stanza of 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,' Wordsworth explains his one-day occasional aimless wandering. The term "wandered" means walking free of their own accord. The poet is referring to himself as the "cloud" in a metaphorical sense of the word. Although the clouds mostly travel in groups, this cloud prefers singular hovering. However, he clearly mentions his passing through valleys and hills on a routine walk, simplifying the narrative.

The poet comes across a bunch of daffodils fluttering in the air. He's dumbfounded by the beauty of those "golden daffodils." Although yellow would be more suitable for daffodils, the poet intends to signify its beauty by using golden color. The daffodils are termed as "host" or crowd since they are together in a collective bunch. They are a source of immense beauty for the poet hailing from the Romantic Era.

Those daffodils are firmly perched beside a lake, beneath some trees. It's a windy day overall, and the flowers dance and flutter as the wind blows. Let's take a step back for a brief moment to locate the premises of the poet's inspiration. The poet resided in the famous Lake District, a region rich in scenic locations entailing hills, valleys, and lakes. As a result, the location is realistic in its entirety. Wordsworth refers to daffodils dancing, a trait relatable to humans.

Stanza Two

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way,

They stretched in never-ending line

Along the margin of a bay:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,

Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The above allegory is a clear and direct referral to our native galaxy Milky Way. The space continuum holds great mystery for our Romantic Era poet as he envisions the daffodils to be in a constant state of wonder, as are the stars beyond the reach of humans.

The poet makes an allusion to the Milky Way, our galaxy filled with its own planetary solar systems stretched beyond infinity. The lake supposedly has a large area since the daffodils are dispersed along the shoreline. Along the Milky Way's premises lie countless stars, which the poet alludes to daffodils fluttering beside the lake.

By "ten thousand," he meant a collection of daffodils were fluttering in the air, spellbinding the poet at the beauty of the scene. It's just a wild estimation at best as he supposes ten thousand daffodils at a glance. The term "sprightly" comes from sprite, which is primarily dandy little spirits people deemed existed in such times. They are akin to fairies.

Stanza Three

The waves beside them danced; but they

Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:

A poet could not but be gay,

In such a jocund company:

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought

What wealth the show to me had brought:

The speaker liked the "sprightly dance" of the daffodils so much that he, in the third stanza, says that the sparkling waves of a lake beside cannot match their beauty. The waves are sparkling due to the sunlight. This image is contrasted with the dance of daffodils. Besides, the

speaker imagines the tossing of their heads to a wave. So, the contrast presents the resemblance of the lake's water to the daffodils.

Witnessing the scene, the romantic poet became so gay that he was not able to move from the location. The flowers were a "jocund company" to him that he could not find in humans. "Jocund" means cheerful and light-hearted. Their silent presence told more than the words of humans could convey to him. They had a purity that made the poet spellbound.

The repetition of the word "gazed" in the next line points at the poet's state of mind at that moment. His eyes were transfixed at the golden beauty of the daffodils. That's why he kept on gazing until he could drink their serenity to the lees. The second half of the line quickly catches readers' attention. Wordsworth is now asking them what wealth the flowers had brought him on that day. Thus, he quickly comes into reality from his imagination to inform readers about his viewpoint.

Stanza Four

For oft, when on my couch I lie

In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils.

The last stanza describes the inspiration behind writing 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.' According to Wordsworth, whenever he lies on his couch in a vacant or thoughtful mood, the image flashes in his mind's eyes. It is a simultaneous process, not a forced one. Blissful memories are so gripping that they stick with a person throughout their life. So, whenever the poet's mind becomes empty of thoughts, the image supplies him the source of energy to re-think. Not only that, when he feels down, the scene acts similarly.

The "inward eye" is a reference to the mind's eyes. When one shuts his physical eyes, it unleashes those eyes. Wordsworth compares the daffodils to the "bliss" of his solitary moments. He provides the reason why he says so. According to him, the memory associated with the daffodils fills his heart with pleasure, making his heart leap up once again like a child. In this way, the poet highlights the role of nature, especially daffodils, in his life.

Themes

Throughout 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,' Wordsworth engages with themes of nature, memory, and spirituality. These three are tied together as the speaker, Wordsworth himself, moves through a beautiful landscape. He takes pleasure in the sight of the daffodils and revives his spirit in nature. At the same time, Wordsworth explores the theme of memory, as he does in

other works such as ‘Tintern Abbey.’ The flowers are there to comfort him in real-time and as a memory from the past.

Symbolism

The poem begins with a symbolic reference to the cloud. It is wandering and lonely. The poetic persona is the embodiment of such a cloud. Hence, it symbolizes being lonely and thoughtless. This state is achieved when one is free from mundane thoughts.

The most important symbol of this piece is the daffodils. The narcissistic description of the flower seems to be alluding to the Greek myth. Apart from that, the daffodil acts as a symbol of rejuvenation and pure joy. Wordsworth becomes the means through which the flowers express their vibrance. In his pensive mood, they become a means for the poet’s self-reflection.

Tone and Mood

The tone of this poem, ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’, is emotive, hyperbolic, expressive, and thoughtful. In the first stanza, the speaker’s tone helps readers understand how he felt after seeing the daffodils on a specific event. As the poem progresses, Wordsworth intensifies it. Thus it appears hyperbolic. In the last stanza, he chooses a thoughtful tone for describing the impact of the scene on his mind. The tone also follows the mood of the poem. Throughout the text, the poet maintains a calm and joyous mood. It is like the breeze that made the daffodils dance on that day. While going through the poem, readers can feel this relaxing mood.

Historical Context

Hailed as the champion of the Romantic Movement in the early 19th century, William Wordsworth(Bio | Poems) dwelled in the scenic Lake District (United Kingdom), far from the madding crowd. Its roots can be traced back to Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal, in which she reminisces a casual stroll with his brother in 1802, where they came across beautiful daffodils. The poem was composed within the time period of 1804-1807 and subsequently published in 1807, with a revised version published in 1815. The poem is considered a masterpiece of Romantic Era poetry steeped in natural imagery. Walking along Glencoyne Bay, the siblings stumbled across beautiful daffodils along the bay. As the sister’s journal recalls, the daffodils seemed immensely beautiful from a far-off view. It was indeed a magnificent sight.

About William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth(Bio | Poems) (1770-1850) wrote beautiful poetry filled with sweet imagery, usually based around the natural world. Often Wordsworth’s poems contained slight somber undertones, as is the case in this poem, as we will explore shortly. This is possible due to the conflict In Wordsworth’s life and his battle with depression. Some scholars suggest that Wordsworth’s relationship with his sister, Dorothy was far from platonic. But Wordsworth did marry and lived with both his wife and sister.

Wordsworth lived through the French Revolution, which he initially supported and later rebuked. He, along with his close friend and fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was the

pioneer of the romantic era of poetry, and his earlier romantic poems were widely derided as a result of this. He was also the poet laureate for queen Victoria for seven years.

Today, Wordsworth's reputation rests heavily on the collection Lyrical Ballads that he published along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798.

FAQs

Why is 'Daffodils' so famous?

The poem, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' or 'Daffodils,' is famous for its simplicity, sing-song-like rhythm, and thematic beauty. It talks about a simple thing: the dancing of the daffodils in a calm breeze. But, the representation is thought-provoking. Readers from all age groups can understand the poem easily and comprehend it in their way, without any restrictions at all. That's why it is considered one of the best-loved poems of English literature.

What is the main idea of 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'?

The poem's main idea deals with the role of nature in the poet's life. If one has the eyes to see it, one can comprehend the serene beauty of simplicity within seconds. For that, the mind should be as thoughtless as a lonely cloud that floats aimlessly over the valleys and hills.

What is the message of 'Daffodils'?

Through this poem, Wordsworth conveys a vital message that includes how nature can be of the most incredible resort when one is feeling low or pensive. It is a source of great energy that can rejuvenate the soul.

Why is 'Daffodils' a Romantic poem?

'Daffodils' is a thoughtful mediation on those beautiful golden flowers. It contains a calm, soothing, and pleasant representation of mother nature that inspires the poet. The memory associated with the daffodils becomes a source of energy while the poet reflects on something or he is pensive. For such a presentation of nature, it is a beautiful example of a romantic poem.

How does the poet's use of sound influence the poem's mood?

The use of sound adds to the mood of the poem. For example, the last line, "And dances with the daffodils," contains a repetition of the "d" sound that adds to the merry mood of the poem. In the previous line, the repetition of soft "s" sounds creates a soothing sound. It influences the mood as well.

Why did the daffodils make him think of stars?

The poet was amazed by the number of daffodils fluttering and dancing in the breeze. He thought it fit compare them with the stars as they were countless. Besides, he might be looking at them from a distance (like a cloud looks down from the firmament). It made him think of the stars twinkling on the milky way.

What does “a host of golden daffodils” mean?

The phrase “a host of golden daffodils” refers to a group of daffodils the poet saw one day. He personifies the daffodils by using the term “host.” Besides, “golden daffodils” is an example of metonymy. Here, the poet is referring to the effect in place of the cause, the sunlight.

What does “bliss of solitude” mean?

It is a metaphor that contains an implicit reference to the daffodils. According to Wordsworth, the flowers or the memory is a “bliss” in his solitude as it fills him with energy and happiness.