The Californian's Tale

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain is an icon of American literature who used his acerbic wit and wry humor to create some of the most celebrated works of fiction in the American literary canon. Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, he grew up in Missouri along the Mississippi River, and his experiences with river life and the institution of slavery influenced his writing throughout his career. As a young man, Clemens worked as a printer on several newspapers while also writing short stories and tall tales about American life. In 1857 he became a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River until the outbreak of the Civil War sent him out west, where he adopted the pen-name "Mark Twain," a play on the phrase "marking the twain" for measuring river depth. In 1865, Twain published his first story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." This humorous tale brought him national recognition and led to a multi-year job as a travel writer, which inspired his first best-selling book, 1869's *The Innocents Abroad*. Twain married Olivia Langdon in 1870 and moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he wrote his most famous novels, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Scholars consider the latter work to be the quintessential Great American Novel. Twain spent the last years of his life on the European lecture circuit, and his writing during this period critiqued human greed, cruelty, and hypocrisy. He died in 1910 at the age of 74, his literary legacy long sealed.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The promise of gold led an estimated 300,000 American settlers to California in the mid-nineteenth century. "Boomtowns" quickly grew around gold deposits and were just as quickly abandoned after the gold ran in an area out, leading to "ghost towns" throughout the state. Gold-rush fever drove much of Twain's journalistic writing during his time in Nevada and California, but privately, the harsh reality of the mining life often tempered his enthusiasm for the West. Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Twain had traveled to Nevada and tried silver prospecting, but failed to strike it rich. Twain then moved to California and worked the gold country, where he bunked in miners' cabins and immersed himself in the rough and tumble culture of their camps. In his work, Twain, even more so than other naturalistic writers, leaned towards cynicism and pessimism, conditions fueled by his observations as a traveler as well as a lifetime spent pursuing (failed) get-rich-quick schemes. During his travels abroad in the 1890s, Twain also witnessed the exploitation of European imperialism, further deepening his pessimism about humanity. In "The Californian's Tale," which he wrote during this period, Twain combined his growing skepticism of global imperialism with his past experiences in the mining camps to tell a story about how America's own westward imperialism destroyed the bodies and minds of doomed prospectors.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Twain was one of the strongest voices in the new literary naturalist movement. Literary Naturalism (1865-1900) grew out of Realism, which depicted the everyday experiences of common people. Naturalism similarly embraced this common focus, but added a greater emphasis on fate. Naturalistic writers depicted humans as products of their surroundings, including their environment, social conditions, and heredity. Naturalist writers therefore eschewed the notion of free will and instead depicted humans as subject to forces beyond their control. "The Californian's Tale" shares its pessimistic and deterministic themes with Jack London's short story, "All Gold Canyon" (1906). In the latter, a grizzled prospector arrives in a pristine California valley. There, he discovers gold, but a claim-jumper shoots him. Not mortally wounded, the prospector eventually kills the claim-jumper and buries him in the gold dig. London's naturalistic story further echoes "The Californian's Tale" by highlighting how the lure of the Gold Rush unleashed destructive, tragic, and unconquerable human passions. The naturalistic novelist Frank Norris likewise explored such themes in his 1901 novel *The Octopus: A Story of California*, which pits doomed wheat farmers against the unstoppable greed of the railroad monopolies that usurp the farmers' land. Norris, like Twain and London, depicts how the promise of wealth drew Americans westward, only to see them torn apart by their own primal urges.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Californian's Tale
- **When Written:** 1891-93
- **Where Written:** Europe
- **When Published:** 1893
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism, Realism
- **Genre:** Short story, Western
- **Setting:** The Stanislaus River region, California
- **Climax:** The narrator learns that Henry went mad following the disappearance of his wife and believes she will still return.
- **Antagonist:** The desolate American West, fate
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Twain and Tesla. Mark Twain was close friends with the celebrated futurist Nikola Tesla, as the two men shared a mutual interest in science and literature. In the 1890s, Twain frequently visited Tesla in his New York laboratory and took part in the scientist's electrical experiments.

Cat Lover. Twain loved cats so much that, at one point, he owned nineteen felines of his own. When he traveled the world, he would "rent" cats from acquaintances to keep himself company. He also gave his cats majestic names, such as "Blatherskite," "Sour Mash," and "Zoroaster," just to name a few.

PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator, recounts his experiences thirty-five years earlier mining for gold in the Stanislaus River region of California. The Stanislaus region was once lush and temperate, with balmy woodlands and a thriving populace sustained by the riches of the Gold Rush. The local town once boomed with a bank, a courthouse, newspapers, and a firehouse—all of the trappings of civilization. The town also sustained several charming country communities on its outskirts, characterized by cozy cottages whose owners tended to with great care. However, when the Gold Rush went bust, and the ground ceased to yield its valuable metals, the civilization that it sustained withered and died.

Now the region around the Stanislaus is a hollowed-out shell of its former glory. The once-thriving town is now deserted, and the charming cottages that dot the country neighborhoods where families lived are now in complete disrepair: covered in cobwebs and vines, they stand in silent testament to the lives they once sheltered. Now the only occupied dwellings on the Stanislaus are dank log cabins, the homes of grizzled, beaten-down gold miners, whose failure to strike it rich on the Gold Rush has left them financially destitute and cost them their families. They are tortured by the regret of broken dreams and economic failure.

As the narrator describes the isolated state of the Stanislaus, he comes across a man in his mid-forties who, in contrast to the other depressed residents, appears joyful and lively. The man's name is Henry, and he cheerfully tends to a country **cottage** that appears lived-in and cared-for, with a lovely garden full of flowers. Henry's cabin is a stark contrast to the other dilapidated cottages the narrator has observed. Seeing the narrator approach, Henry invites him in.

The narrator is overcome with delight over the furnished decoration inside Henry's home. In contrast to the cold, masculine functionality of miners' cabins—all dirt floors, bean cans, ruffled beds, and drab ornamentation—Henry's cabin is decorated by the careful grace of a woman's touch. The myriad comforting bits of decor that fill Henry's cottage soothe the narrator's soul. Henry explains that his nineteen-year-old wife decorated the cabin with a loving precision that lies beyond a man's capabilities. Women, Henry explains, intuitively know how to turn a mere dwelling into a welcoming home. Henry beams with delight as the narrator discovers a picture of Henry's wife in the washroom. He tells the narrator that she is visiting friends some forty miles away and will return in three days. It is Wednesday, and although the narrator plans to leave the Stanislaus before she is set to arrive at nine o'clock on Saturday evening, Henry implores him to stay. The narrator senses that there is something peculiar about Henry, but he spends the night talking with him, and ultimately decides to wait there to meet Henry's wife upon her return.

After a few days pass, another miner named Tom arrives and asks about Henry's wife. Henry retrieves a letter she wrote and offers to read it to Tom, who responds enthusiastically. The letter contains warm salutations that bring Tom to the brink of tears. He tells Henry he will be there on Saturday to welcome his wife home. As Friday afternoon sets in, another miner, Joe, arrives at Henry's cottage and offers to throw a welcoming party for the young woman, provided she is not too weary from her journey. Finally, Saturday arrives, and the hours pass with no sign of Henry's wife. The narrator becomes noticeably impatient, and Henry becomes increasingly uneasy. The narrator chides Henry for his excessive worrying, causing Henry to back away in shame.

As Henry and the narrator continue to wait, a miner named Charley arrives. He assuages Henry's nerves by reassuring him that his wife is merely running late, and then he commences decorating for her welcoming party by adorning Henry's cottage with flowers. As nine o'clock approaches, Tom and Joe return. The men play music while Henry stands in his cottage doorway, staring at the road. They then start drinking to the safe return of Henry's wife. One of the miners tells a now-drunk Henry that his wife's horse is lame and that she will be there in another half-hour. The men then tuck Henry into bed and prepare to leave. The narrator asks them to stay so that the young woman will not meet a stranger upon her arrival. Joe tells the narrator that Henry's wife went missing in an Indian raid nineteen years ago. Henry lost his mind over her disappearance, and each year since, the other miners have come to Henry's cottage three days before her expected return to keep Henry from descending into total insanity.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator of "The Californian's Tale" is a gold prospector who recounts his experiences thirty-five years prior, when he searched for gold in the region near

California's Stanislaus River. The narrator's background is a mystery: the reader learns nothing about his own personal history beyond his status as a former gold prospector. His observational skills are his most prominent trait. He acts as a guide for readers, who, through the narrator's descriptions, learn about the people and environment around the Stanislaus. Unlike the other characters in the story, the narrator is keenly aware that he must leave the desolate region, lest the destruction wrought by the boom and bust economy drive him to depression and madness. Throughout the story, the narrator describes in vivid detail the scarred landscape and the hopeless existence of the broken men who still call it home. The narrator is a stark voice of reason in contrast to the delusional Henry. Although Henry's **cottage** appears idyllic and his marriage downright blissful, the narrator's penchant for observation tells him that all is not right in Henry's world. Thus, the narrator becomes the window through which the reader gradually views Henry's unfolding madness. By the end of the story, the narrator is the only character who escapes the tragic pull of Manifest Destiny.

Henry — The narrator first meets Henry when he comes across his well-maintained **cottage**. Henry is jovial and overflowing with love for his wife, who delicately decorated their cozy cottage retreat, over which he has immense pride. Henry initially appears—to both the narrator and readers—as a lone symbol of human joyfulness in an otherwise grim and depressed environment. However, Twain soon reveals that Henry's joy is actually a delusion, for he has retreated into his own memories in order to cope with the loss of his beloved wife to an Indian attack nineteen years earlier. Not only is Henry held captive by his own madness, he also represents the helplessness that takes hold of men left to tend to a woman's sphere without a woman's actual presence. Although he is a character in the story, Henry functions also as a symbol of madness, as well as of the isolating nature of the male sphere when devoid of feminine influence. Henry is a classically tragic figure in his descent into madness, as well as an archetypical symbol in Naturalistic fiction who is beholden to circumstances beyond his control. Through no real fault of his own, Henry cannot withstand the harshness of his scarred environment, the cutthroat nature of capitalist individualism, and the loss of his wife at the whims of the latter two forces.

Henry's Wife – Though she never appears in the story, the presence of Henry's wife is reflected in the feminine touches that have transformed his **cottage** into a lovely and inviting space. Henry insists his wife is soon to return and that the narrator stick around to meet her, though Joe reveals at the end of the story that the young woman had in fact disappeared in an Indian raid nineteen years prior.

Tom – One of the grizzled miners still living on the Stanislaus. Alongside Charley and Joe, Tom plays along with Henry's delusion that his wife will soon return in order to spare their friend from going "wild." Following the narrator, who stays with Henry expecting to meet his returning wife, Tom arrives at Henry's **cottage** and acts thrilled to hear the letter she penned, in which she gives Tom warm greetings.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Joe – Another miner who helps perpetuate Henry's madness. Like Tom, Joe acts overjoyed to hear the letter from Henry's wife, and he helps ease Henry's uneasiness by entertaining him with alcohol and music. Joe is the one who discloses to the narrator the truth about the disappearance of Henry's wife.

Charley – The third of Henry's miner friends. While preparing for the "return" of Henry's wife, Charley gives many a "hearty speech" to ease Henry's apprehensions that she may be delayed.

THEMES

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

MANIFEST DESTINY VS. REALITY

Mark Twain's "The Californian's Tale" is a story about the harsh realities that too often befell Americans who, lured by the nineteenth-century notion of Manifest Destiny, headed West to seek uncertain fortune. The journalist John O'Sullivan coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" in 1845. As the philosophical justification for westward expansion, Manifest Destiny held that the Christian God sanctioned Americans to expand their dominion—with its twin attributes of capitalism and individualism—all the way across the frontier to the Pacific. In his story, Twain uses the California Gold Rush, which began in 1848, as the frontier setting where Manifest Destiny's greed and individualism created not great riches, but great suffering. The story's unnamed narrator is a gold prospector on the Stanislaus River, who recounts how the men who failed to make it rich on the Stanislaus—embodied in the story's miners, especially Henry—degenerated into isolated, hollowed-out human beings. Manifest Destiny touted a culture of rugged individualism, which emphasized self-reliance over interdependence and prioritized self-interest over communal concerns. For those who braved the frontier, however, this romanticized notion of the individual neglected the importance of familial and social connections and offered no sympathy for those who did not get rich. Thus, when Henry fails to strike it rich and loses his wife in an attack by Native Americans, Manifest Destiny has left him (and others like him) with only

the harsh realities of suffering and madness.

At the beginning of the story, Twain juxtaposes imagery from the early days of the Gold Rush with imagery from the narrator's perspective thirty-five years later. Whereas the idea of Manifest Destiny lured people to California with the promise of finding gold, and therefore, living out the American dream, the reality for most was desolation and loneliness. Decay and solitude now mark the former "charming paradise" on the Stanislaus. A vast expanse of green turf is all that remains of a once-bustling town, and the vine-choked remains of formerly "snug and cozy" family cottages dot the surrounding countryside neighborhood. The "defeated and disappointed families" have all left the area, while those pioneers who came to California alone and built "solitary" log cabins are among the few that remain.

In stark contrast to Manifest Destiny's promise of a wealthy American empire that stretched from East to West, the Stanislaus region is now a monument to capitalism's destructive tendencies. Beyond the landscape itself, even the remaining pioneers exist as living reminders of Manifest Destiny's failed promise of endless riches. A lonely pioneer still lives on the Stanislaus because "he had lost his wealth," and, unable to bear the humiliation of failing at the American Dream, "chose to sever all communication" with his friends and relatives. Many other prospectors headed Manifest Destiny's call, enchanted by its myth of the fearless, rugged pioneer individual who hacked through the western wilderness to pave the way for American civilization. The miners who remain, however, exist as cruel parodies of rugged individualism: beset by failure and regret, their bodies and minds grizzled, rugged individualism has relegated them to "living dead men" haunted by their "wasted lives."

Manifest Destiny also claims the American family among its casualties. Twain often highlighted the endangered family in his writing. His own brother, Henry, was burned to death in a boiler explosion aboard a steamship in 1858, and the loss haunted Twain for the rest of his life. His writings abound with orphan children, families torn apart by internal and external conflict, and deadbeat relatives of all sorts. In "The Californian's Tale," Twain emphasizes early how the siren call of Manifest Destiny destroyed families on the Stanislaus. When the Gold Rush dried up, the loss of wealth created "defeated and disappointed families" who deserted their homes. As a result, the men who remain—Tom, Joe, Charley, the narrator, and especially Henry—live isolated lives without traditional family connections. They therefore compensate by acting as a surrogate family for Henry by perpetuating his delusion that his long-vanished wife will return in order to spare him from confronting the unbearable truth of her loss. Despite the men's best efforts to find community in their shared circumstances, Twain makes clear that the men have been severely damaged by the loss of community and family that came with the area's descent into a mining ghost town.

"The Californian's Tale" is almost entirely devoid of the wry, cutting humor that accompanies so much of Twain's writing. Instead, a somber feeling of loss and regret hangs over the scarred land and men who follow Manifest Destiny's call to California but end up broke and isolated. In the 1845 editorial in which he coined the phrase, John O'Sullivan claimed that Manifest Destiny allotted for "the free development of [America's] multiplying millions." He predicted that rugged individuals would soon take California from Mexico and dot it with new homes "conquered from the wilderness by their own labors and genders." As a renowned satirist and Naturalist writer who delighted in skewering cherished mythologies, Twain uses this short story to explore the potentially devastating aftermath of an American destiny that, for many prospectors, never manifested into reality. Instead of a new American civilization, the miners in "The Californian's Tale" came to dig their own graves.

MASCULINE VS. FEMININE SPACE

Throughout the story, Twain emphasizes the dichotomy between masculine and feminine space. Importantly, he wrote in the nineteenth century, when the notion of gendered space for men and women created an ideology of "separate spheres." Men dominated outside the home in the harsh, competitive public sphere of work, politics, and violence. Women, by contrast, tended to the domestic sphere of household management, child-rearing, and moral guidance. Under the control of a nurturing female presence, the home served as a refuge from the harsh male realm. In "The Californian's Tale," Twain characterizes the public sphere—that of gold prospecting and community—as decayed, abandoned, isolated, depressed, and poverty-ridden. The people who remain on the Stanislaus are men, and, not coincidentally, the same grim characteristics that define their space define their minds and bodies. In contrast to the male-dominated outside world, the story's only female space (Henry's **cottage**, once tended by his wife) is one of beauty, elegance, color, happiness, softness, and nurturement. The male-dominated space of territorial conquest and capitalist expansion has brought utter ruin. The female space of the home offers the only reprieve from life on the Stanislaus. Twain, however, is too adroit a thinker that the female realm is superior to that of men. Instead, he indicates the contributions both spaces make to create healthy environments for men and women.

Twain begins the story by comparing the cabins built by men to cottages tended to by women. Thought the latter are now abandoned, they are nonetheless the "prettiest little cottage homes" that are "snug and cozy." In contrast to the pretty cottages, the miners' log cabins are "solitary" spaces that lack a welcoming female touch. Henry's cottage, for example, looks

"lived in and petted for and cared for" on the outside, while the inside is "a nest which had aspects to rest the tired eye" and find "nourishment." A miner's cabin, by comparison, is a space of "hard cheerless, materialistic desolation" that implies "a dirt floor, never-made beds, tin plates and cups, bacon and beans, and black coffee." Cottages under women's control are ornate, welcoming retreats from the outside sphere of male activity, whereas miners' cabins are mere *extensions* of that very sphere. As functional spaces to get food and shelter, miners' cabins exist to further the work of prospecting and wealth accumulation, not as spaces to escape from that work.

The ornate decoration inside of Henry's cottage further attests to the clear separation between male and female space in the story. Twain emphasizes that a woman's touch alone can transform a dwelling into a comforting retreat. It is not that men are unwilling to create attender home environment, rather, they are in *incapable* of doing so. The narrator attest to this fact shortly after he enters Henry's cottage. He marvels at the ornamentation—colorful wallpapers, tidies and lamp mats, framed pictures, seashells, etc. These constitute "the score of little unclassifiable tricks and touches that a woman's hand distributes about a home," and which a man can "see without knowing he sees them," but "would miss in a moment if they were taken away." Henry tells the narrator that the beautiful decoration in his home is "All her work." Men are lucky enough to appreciate these hallmarks of feminine space, if not create them for themselves. "You can't tell just what it lacks," Henry says, "you can see it yourself after it's done, but that is all you know; you can't find out the law of it." The "law" to which Henry refers is the power a woman holds over her domestic space. This feeling of comfort in a home is what the men on the Stanislaus miss, but cannot hope to replicate themselves. As Henry quips, "she knows the why and the how," but "men only know the how."

The sharp contrast between male and female spaces in "The Californian's Tale" underscores how the two environments complement each other. The removal of the feminine space from the male prospectors' lives has profoundly negative implications for the way they experience their daily lives. Left without women in a world of work and business, the miners have no retreat from the harshness of their own existence. The closest thing that he prospectors have to a feminine space is Henry's cottage, a home decorated by a woman who has been absent for nineteen years. Henry can only upkeep, not improve upon, this space. The combination of Manifest Destiny's carnage and the loss of reciprocal balance between male and female spheres creates the conditions by which the story's third theme, madness, flourishes.

MADNESS

Twain's story is ultimately a tale about how desolation and loneliness can lead to madness. Despite its promise to bring vast wealth to Americans who conquered the West, Manifest Destiny instead unleashes the depravity of greed and ruin both on the land surrounding the Stanislaus and on the men who came to mine that land. Their land scarred, their fortunes lost, their wives and families gone, and their futures bleak, the miners retreat into a state of living death. Any sense of "hope" has been replaced by a grim desire "to be out of the struggle and done with it all." In introducing Henry, Twain initially seems to hint that one small ray of hope—Henry's home-decorating wife—remains to soothe the prospectors' mental anguish. This is, however, a false hope, as Twain eventfully reveals that Henry went mad following his wife's disappearance nearly twenty years earlier. Twain also suggest that madness is a social contagion. Tom, Charley, and Joe mean well by helping to perpetuate Henry's delusion that his wife will return. In doing so, however, they themselves come under the sway of Henry's madness, as they find comfort in a woman who has not only vanished, but also is likely deceased. The latter development suggests that the miners truly are dead inside, even if they give the appearance of clinging to life.

Twain depicts madness through Henry as an especially sinister malaise, because it masks Henry's profound suffering with a cheery outward façade that rubs off on the narrator. When the narrator first meets Henry, he appears a beacon of happiness thanks to his apparently loving relationship with his wife, who decorated his beautiful **cottage**. Henry's apparent happiness seduces the narrator, so much so that he intends to delay his departure from the area just to meet Henry's wife. Yet, while the narrator feels "a strong longing to see her," he also suspects that something is not right with Henry's situation, and he vows "to go straight away from this place, for my piece of mind's sake." Here, Twain insinuates that not all is what it seems, and that Henry's happiness may be too unbelievable in the context of such a desolate place. Nonetheless, the narrator ultimately decides to "stay and take the risk," foreshadowing a potential revelation that is anything but happy.

Just as Henry's happiness seduces the narrator, the idea of his wife's presence similarly entrances the other miners. The grizzled old miner, Tom, for example, sheds tears of bittersweet joy when Henry reads him a letter from his wife that includes "affectionate regards" to the other miners. The letter's "loving messages also make Joe and Charley tearfully happy. As the miners gather in wait for Henry's wife to return, they begin to play music and offer Henry drinks to calm "the torture of his mental distress." When Joe rebukes the narrator for trying to drink a glass poured specifically for Henry, the stage is set for a reveal about the nature of madness. After Henry gets drunk and falls asleep, the miners tell the narrator that Henry's wife vanished nineteen years ago, which caused him to go mad.

Although Henry is the most obvious victim of madness, all of the men have been sucked into Henry's delusion by helping to perpetuate it. The story's twist ending speaks to the contagious

nature of madness: it does not affect the other men in the same way it affects Henry, but it nonetheless binds them to his whims. Like Henry, Joe, Tom, and Charley have attached their last semblance of happiness to a woman who no longer exists. Here, Twain also demonstrates the malleability of madness: rather than move on from the desolated Stanislaus, the men choose to stay for Henry's sake. Henry's madness has become their annual ritual and thus, their own sad, isolating fate.

"The Californian's Tale" begins and ends in bleakness, as Twain presents a desolated former gold-mining community full of broken men who are waiting to die. Madness, however, also stalks the prospectors, and it directly contributes to their status as "living dead men." Henry's descent into madness following news of his wife's disappearance is the core of the story, but his fate is not an isolated event. Twain implies that madness is one of many responses to the human experience: it is a function of the miners' depraved environment, and, therefore, becomes their new reality. Without any remaining family or community connections, Joe, Tom, and Charley become caretakers for Henry's delusion. Thus, madness becomes the last tie that binds together the broken men who remain on the Stanislaus.

SYMBOLS

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

HENRY'S COTTAGE

The decorated cottage where Henry lives is a symbol of feminine nurturement and beauty in an otherwise desolate and depressing male-dominated environment. Manifest Destiny promised vast riches for those individuals willing to carve their own destinies out of the wilds of the American west, but Twain suggests that such an overemphasis on the "masculine" spheres of labor and wealth acquisition neglects the important role that women play in creating domestic spaces for families and tenderness to flourish. When the narrator first sees Henry's cottage, he immediately notices that it appears "petted and cared for and looked after," a striking contrast to the "hard, cheerless, materialistic desolation" of miners' cabins. Inside the cottage are the hallmarks of a female presence that the outside environment lacks, including the beautiful decorations and soft furnishings that transform the cottage from a mere shelter into a nurturing home. Despite Henry's delusions about his wife's disappearance, the cottage provides the only comfort remaining in his life. The cottage is a symbol of the female space and presence that Manifest Destiny's boom and bust capitalism has stripped away, to the detriment of the men who remain on the Stanislaus. Twain therefore suggests that a blending of masculine *and* feminine influence is essential to human well-being.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain* published in 2005.

The Californian's Tale Quotes

It was a lovely region, woodsy, balmy, delicious, and had once been populous, long years before, but now the people had vanished and the charming paradise was a solitude. They went away when the surface diggings gave out.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

In the passage that begins the story, the Narrator describes the environmental degradation of the Stanislaus mining area. The environment is crucial to Twain's tale, as the state of the natural surroundings directly influences the fate of the people who live and work around the Stanislaus River. Here, Twain establishes the "before" and "after" effect that Manifest Destiny had on the California landscape. Manifest Destiny called for Americans to move west to California and transform its wilderness into a civilization founded on profit-making enterprises, particularly metal extraction.

The lure of fast wealth fueled the nineteenth-century Gold Rush, and in Twain's story, the resulting human impact on the land has devastated not only the landscape, but human mental and physical health as well. Mining turned what was once a "charming paradise" that supported a large, vibrant human population into a land of pure "solitude." When the "surface diggings" stopped yielding gold, the entire economic support structure of the community collapsed. Those who did not find enough gold to become rich and live out the American Dream that Manifest Destiny so boldly promised remained stuck in an impoverished, miserable state. This passage therefore establishes one of the core themes of Twain's story: the cause-and-effect relationship between the promises of Manifest Destiny and the harsh reality that it brought to both the environment and the people whose fates are inextricably linked to forces that they cannot control.

> In the country neighborhood thereabouts, along the dusty roads, one found at intervals the prettiest little cottage homes, snug and cozy, and so cobwebbed with vines snowed thick with roses that the doors and windows were wholly hidden from sight.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Twain foreshadows the important role the cottage plays as a symbol of feminine space in the story. After he describes the desolation of the landscape and the solitude of the abandoned little city, the Narrator shifts his attention to the countryside. He emphasizes how the feminine sphere of the home offers a warm retreat from the male-centric world of mining and work. The language he uses to describe the cottages suggests feminine beauty ("prettiness"), and a motherly, nurturing, homey atmosphere ("snug and cozy"). The feminine sphere, as embodied by the cottage, plays a central role in the story: it is essential to the health and well-being of the people who live on the Stanislaus. The fact that women and families have literally abandoned the snug little cottages mirrors how the few remaining miners have abandoned all joy and sanity following the women's exit from the area. Thus, the abandoned cottages are more than mere empty homes; they also foreshadow the emptiness that the loss of a feminine presence entails, as well as the desperate measures the men in the story take to preserve some semblance of loving female influence in their otherwise dreary lives.

> Round about California in that day were scattered a host of these living dead men—pride-smitten poor fellows, grizzled and old at forty, whose secret thoughts were made all of regrets and longings.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry, Tom, Charley, Joe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows the Narrator's description of the isolated nature of the Stanislaus mining region. While most of the people fled following the bust of the Gold Rush, the few who remain bear the burdens of loneliness and depression, as well as physical weariness. This quote marks the point where Twain foreshadows the theme of madness that is central to the story's narrative thrust and tragic ending. The miners who still live on the Stanislaus exist in a zombie-like state: they are alive, but they live only to die, for they have nothing else to live for—no wealth, no families, no future, and no hope. Like the land they pillaged, Manifest Destiny's ideal of "rugged individualism" has left the men scarred: they are grizzled and old at the otherwise young age of forty and exist as little more than hollow shells of their former selves. The madness that clouds the miners' minds manifests in the form of thoughts of constant "regrets and longings." Later in the story, Charley, Joe, and Tom try to keep the regrets and longings at bay by participating in the upkeep of Henry's delusion that his wife will someday return.

> That was all hard, cheerless, materialistic desolation, but here was a nest which had aspects to rest the tired eye.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife, Henry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

The Narrator walks into Henry's cottage and is taken aback by the beautiful decorations that make the cottage a home. Henry's wife has lovingly decorated the cabin with all manner of feminine touches, from fine china and pillows, to wallpaper, towels, and aromatic soaps. The Narrator immediately contrasts the warm and welcoming cottage interior with the desolate insides of miners' cabins, which are "hard" and "cheerless." With this quote, Twain makes a clear distinction between masculine and feminine spheres: the former is a cold extension of the sphere of hard work, pain, and failure, the latter is a warm "nest" where men can find "rest" for their "tired eye." The significance of Henry's cottage is its role as the sole respite from the relentless misery of life on the deserted Stanislaus; it is a lone symbol of hope amidst the desolation.

Yet, if the cottage is a symbol of feminine warmth and hope, it is also a symbol of ironic tragedy. The same forces that destroyed the local economy and caused most of the population to abandon the mining town also brought about the disappearance of Henry's wife, the woman responsible for creating and tending to the only retreat for the remaining miners. Manifest Destiny drew men into the western wilderness with their wives and families, but this process was fraught with danger. That Indians captured and presumably murdered Henry's wife is an event that robs Henry, as well as the other miners, of the one source of light and warmth in their otherwise dark world. The death of Henry's wife ensures that Henry, Joe, Tom, and Charley continue to seek solace in the cottage of a ghost, a process that fittingly, if tragically, corresponds to their doomed status as "living dead men."

> "I've seen her fix all these things so much that I can do them all just her way, though I don't know the law of any of them. But she knows the law. She knows the why and the how both; but I don't know the why; I only know the how."

Related Characters: Henry (speaker), Henry's Wife, Charley, Tom, Joe , The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Henry explains to the Narrator how his wife was able to decorate the inside of his cottage to such a perfect degree that no man could possibly hope to replicate. Through this quote, Twain further explores the dichotomy between the male and female spheres through the ability women have to alter their environment in a feminine way that pleases men, even as men lack this skill themselves. Twain uses Henry as a symbol of how male existence becomes barren and isolated when deprived of female influence. In the quote, Henry embodies this barrenness by explaining to the Narrator that his wife's absence has reduced him to mimicking her actions, because he is unable to perform those actions on his own. "I've seen her fix all these things so much that I can do them all just her way," Henry explains. He can mimic his wife's decorating patterns by fixing items that fall off a table and correcting a crooked picture frame, but he cannot discern on his own *why* his wife put those items in specific places. "I don't know the law of any of them," he tells the Narrator, "she knows the why and the how," he continues, "I only now the how."

Twain uses this quote to further revel in Naturalistic themes. In losing his wife, Henry has lost not only a partner, but also a force that exerted an overpowering influence over his life. Through her loss, Henry is left an incomplete man who can read "the law" (i.e. femininity) but cannot hope to fully comprehend the law. Much like a person who can put paint on a brush but cannot replicate the work of a true artist, Henry is therefore reduced to an incomplete individual who is beholden to the forces of the female perspective that now exist only in his memories. Just as the other "living dead" miners plod through a ghost-like existence, Henry's tragic fate is that of a ghost fated to haunt his cottage by mimicking the actions of a woman who, even more tragically, has entered the literal ghostly realm.

> I was feeling a deep, strong longing to see her—a longing so supplicating, so insistent, that it made me afraid.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife, Henry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, the Narrator learns that Henry's wife will be returning in three days, and Henry insists that the Narrator postpone his departure from the Stanislaus area in order to greet the young woman upon her return. This quote represents one of the key moments of foreshadowing in a story that is heavy with such moments. As he observes the beautiful and inviting atmosphere of Henry's home and views the picture of the woman who is responsible for that welcoming atmosphere, a powerful sense of longing overcomes the Narrator. He recognizes that the wife's power over Henry is contagious, and he feels her enticing spirit begin to influence his own conscious thoughts. Twain foreshadows Henry's soon-to-be revealed madness through the Narrator's uneasiness with the seductive nature of the wife's influence. The beauty and charm of the cottage, and the almost unnatural happiness Henry evokes when describing his wife, suggests that this happiness might be too good to be real. Despite having only

met Henry that day, the Narrator feels frightened by the deep longing he feels towards Henry's wife, a longing that very nearly causes him to leave Henry's cottage for good. Despite his reservations about staying, however, the Narrator ultimately gives in to Henry's plea that he stay—a decision that will soon cause the Narrator to confront madness itself.

> [A] loving, sedate, and altogether charming and gracious piece of handiwork, with a postscript full of affectionate regards and messages to Tom, and Joe, and Charley.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife, Henry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

After the Narrator decides to stay at Henry's cottage until Henry's wife returns, another old miner named Tom arrives and asks about the woman's status. Henry asks Tom if he would like to hear a letter from her, and Tom enthusiastically listens as Henry reads the letter aloud. The letter provides further evidence of the powerful hold Henry's wife maintains on not just Henry, but also on Tom, Joe, Charley, and even the Narrator. As the lone female presence in a desolate environment characterized by depressed and grizzled masculinity, Henry's wife casts a deep spell on the men in the story. Her letter, which brings Tom to melancholic tears, attests to the power the woman exudes even in the absence of her physical self. Like Henry's cottage, her letter functions as a kind of talisman, an object imbued with power from another source (in this case, the wife herself). The Narrator attests to the letter's power by describing it in descriptive terms that liken it to Henry's wife. He calls the letter "loving," "charming," "affectionate," and "gracious"—all terms commonly associated with idealized middle and upper-class femininity in the nineteenth century. There is, however, a dark undercurrent to the wife's influence over Henry and the other miners, as it eventually reveals the contagious nature of madness among men who have lost any semblance of hope in reality.

> Charley fetched out one hearty speech after another, and did his best to drive away his friend's bodings and apprehensions.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife, Henry, Charley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 323

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the miner named Charley arrives at Henry's cottage on the Saturday evening when Henry's wife is expected to return. As the evening draws near, Charley attempts to soothe Henry, who worries that something tragic has happened to his wife. He delivers a series of speeches before joining the other miners in a boisterous music performance, but none of it seems to alleviate Henry's anxieties. This passage further demonstrates the powerful influence that Henry's wife holds over all of the miners, not just Henry alone. Charley repeatedly insists to Henry that his wife is merely delayed, and that nothing in her gracious and selfless nature would allow for any purposeful delay on her part. Charley's dedication to keeping the delusion of Henry's wife's return (he also helps decorate Henry's cottage with welcoming flowers) demonstrates how Henry's dependency on his wife for happiness infects the whole group of miners. Here, Twain emphasizes the investment the miners make in her return, and suggests the potentially crushing disappointment they will feel if she does indeed fail to come back to Henry.

> Joe brought the glasses on a waiter, and served the party. I reached for one of the two remaining glasses, but Joe growled, under his breath: "Drop that! Take the other." Which I did. Henry was served last.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife, Henry, Charley, Tom, Joe

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 323

Explanation and Analysis

This quote marks the last major foreshadowing moment in the story before Twain reveals the tragic truth about Henry's wife. As Saturday evening continues with no sign of his wife, Henry's anxiety escalates. Having tried speeches, decorating, and music to occupy Henry's attention, his friends resort to getting him drunk. His earlier suspicions about Henry notwithstanding, the Narrator still has not figured out the true nature of Henry's madness, so he continues to take part in the celebration by reaching for a drink, unaware that Joe prepared the glass specifically for Henry. When he rebukes the Narrator for taking Henry's (likely drugged) glass, Joe validates the Narrator's initial worries about staying to meet Henry's wife. A man awaiting the imminent return of his wife would presumably not need to be lulled into a drunken stupor, thus, Twain shifts the reader's expectations for the story's outcome, and the mood shifts from one of celebration and anticipation to one of impending disappointment.

❝ Never has been sane an hour since. But he only gets bad when that time of the year comes round. Then we begin to drop in here, three days before she's due, to encourage him up.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Henry's Wife, Henry, Charley, Tom, Joe

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis

With this quote, Twain reveals the true status of Henry's wife, cementing the story's tragic arc. After they ply Henry with drink, Joe, Tom, and Charley lead him to his bed, where they assure him that his wife is safe as he drifts off to sleep. The Narrator then wonders why the other men appear ready to leave and implores them to stay, lest the young woman meet a stranger when she arrives. In response, Joe reveals that Henry's wife disappeared in an Indian raid nineteen years earlier. Her disappearance and presumed death drove Henry mad, and to keep him from total insanity, the other miners participated in a near twenty-year ongoing annual charade to convince Henry that she will still return. The story's final revelation demonstrates Twain's Naturalistic angle. A host of powerful forces determine the sad fate of the men on the Stanislaus: Manifest Destiny, economic collapse, family abandonment and the loss of feminine influence on their lives.

Beset by forces they cannot hope to control, the miners have no option but to embrace their doomed fate, a fate embodied in the tragic symbol of Henry. Yet if Henry's fate is madness due to the loss of his wife, this fate also defines the lives of Tom, Joe, and Charley. Left without hope or happiness, they try their best to ease Henry's suffering. In the process, however, they tacitly embrace Henry's delusion by hitching their hopes and activity to a dead woman. Even as they try to "encourage him up," Tom, Joe, and Charley are equally as beholden to the ghost of Henry's wife because they have little else to live for.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

THE CALIFORNIAN'S TALE

An unnamed man, the Narrator, recalls the time thirty-five years ago when he prospected for gold on California's Stanislaus River. The fevered call of the Gold Rush and its inevitable crash has transformed the Stanislaus from a "lovely region" that was "woodsy, balmy, delicious" and "prosperous" into a devastated land scarred by metal extraction and the draining of its once-large population. The once bustling town is now deserted, and "defeated and disappointed families" have abandoned the serene countryside where they lived in "snug and cozy" cottage homes. The Narrator occasionally comes across the odd lonesome cabin occupied by one of the area's poor remaining miners. These "living dead men," who have lost their families, money, and purpose, now live with "regrets and longings."

With the opening passage, Twain establishes two of the story's primary themes. He uses contrasting imagery of life and death to emphasize how the promises of Manifest Destiny gave way to a harsh reality. The lure of wealth turns the Stanislaus River region from a paradise replete with lush greenery into a wasteland that most people have abandoned. The people who stayed behind are men, and their grim fate exemplifies how the departure of women turned masculine spaces into metaphorical tombs. Absent feminine influence and trapped in poverty, the masculine sphere contains only the "living dead."

As the Narrator travels through this "lonesome land," he observes the lifelessness around him: the region no longer has the sounds of insects and animals, and there are few humans around to interrupt the desolate atmosphere. Finally, however, the Narrator comes across a lone man standing at the gates of his **cottage** home. The man is in his mid-forties, and his cottage appears "lived in and petted and cared for and looked after." Colorful flowers adorn the cottage's front yard, and as the Narrator observes the pleasing sight, the owner of the cottage invites him inside and tells the Narrator to make himself at home.

Weary from traveling through such a lonesome and desolate landscape, the Narrator interprets Henry's well-kept cottage as a lone symbol of hope and life. The story's opening, however, in which beauty lures people to the Stanislaus and then becomes desolate, sets readers up to intuit that the cottage's beauty and Henry's happiness are false hopes that will eventually succumb to something darker. Henry's happiness is very literally too good to be true.

When the Narrator enters the **cottage**, he becomes overwhelmed with delight at its lovingly decorated interior. In contrast to the "hard, cheerless, materialistic desolation" of miners' log cabins, this cottage is a wonderful "nest" that brings "solace to the soul." Inside the cottage, the Narrator observes beautiful rugs and wallpaper, seashells, fine china, books, framed lithographs, and other such things—all of which are "touches that a woman's hand distributes about a home." The owner of the cottage, whose name is Henry, finds great joy in seeing the Narrator so pleased with the décor. Henry tells the Narrator that his wife is responsible for all of the decorations, and that while men can gaze in rapt appreciation at her work, they are incapable of replicating it themselves. "She knows the why and the how," Henry says, "I only know the how."

The interior of Henry's cottage embodies the love and warmth of the female sphere, which plays an essential role in alleviating the harshness of the male sphere. Whereas miners' cabins are cold and uninviting, Henry's wife has created a welcoming environment by decorating the cottage with all manner of feminine trinkets. In keeping with the story's naturalistic underpinnings, however, men can appreciate a woman's touch, but are unable to replicate it. Henry and the Narrator are therefore beholden to Henry's wife's ability to create a retreat from the outside world of harsh labor. In the wife's absence, the men's limitations become even more limiting.

Henry brings the Narrator into a bedroom to wash his hands at a sink. Like the rest of the **cottage**, the bedroom is ornately decorated. "All her work," Henry states, as the Narrator gazes at the white pillows, soft carpet, wallpaper, mirror, cushions, "dainty toilet things," and a "china dish filled with soap." The Narrator gets the feeling that Henry is waiting for his visitor to discover something, and soon enough, the Narrator finds a small, framed picture of a beautiful young woman. The woman in the picture is Henry's nineteen-year-old wife, and as the Narrator holds the frame, he looks at Henry and notices pleasure "issuing from invisible waves from him."

As the Narrator enters the bedroom, the wife's influence takes on a ghostly quality: the pillows, towels, soap, cushions, and other items provide evidence of her presence, but this presence seems frozen in time, as the Narrator must learn about her through her items alone. That her only physical manifestation is an old, framed photograph further emphasizes the disembodied nature of her influence. She silently observes the men's dependence on her, indicating that Henry cannot truly "live" without her.

Henry tells the Narrator that his wife is visiting friends about forty miles away, but she will return in three days on Saturday evening. Although the Narrator is planning to leave the area before her return, Henry begs him to stay a bit longer so that he can meet the young woman. The Narrator admits to feeling "a deep, strong longing to see her," but he finds the intensity of this longing worrisome, and decides he will "go straight away from this place." Henry still insists that the narrator stay to meet his wife, telling him she would be disappointed because she loves having visitors to the **cottage**. He shows the Narrator her picture once again, and her image convinces the Narrator to "take the risk" and stay to meet the woman. The Narrator and Henry smoke a pipe and talk throughout the night.

As Henry begs the Narrator to stay and meet his wife, Twain foreshadows Henry's tragic state. Henry's wife's memory has an entrancing hold over Henry, and the Narrator becomes uneasy when he finds himself similarly entranced. The Narrator's unease over the nature of Henry's devotion to his wife is the first explicit hint to readers that not all is right in Henry's seemingly happy world. The Narrator's sense of dread briefly reconnects the narrative to the somber beginning of the story before relocating it back in the warm confines of the cottage.

On Thursday evening, another grizzled old miner named Tom arrives at Henry's **cottage** and asks about the status of Henry's wife. Henry pulls out a letter she wrote and reads to Tom the parts of the letter where she offers salutations to him and some of the other miners. These kind words bring tears to Tom's eyes, as he mistakenly believed the woman would be home herself. Henry tells Tom that she is expected on Saturday, and Tom vows to come back to greet her upon her return. On Friday another grizzled miner, Joe, arrives and tells Henry that some of the "boys" want to throw a party on Saturday night as long as his wife is not too tired from her long trip home. Henry assures Joe that she will be overjoyed to see the men. He reads Joe the letter from his wife, and like Tom, the letter makes Joe weep.

The arrival of Tom and Joe into the story demonstrates how the influence of Henry's wife extends far beyond just Henry. The tearful reactions that her letter evokes from Tom and Joe reveal the important role that she plays as an anchor of hope amidst the misery of life on the Stanislaus. Since Henry's wife herself is absent, Henry's cottage is a focal point where the grizzled miners gather to absorb her feminine influence vicariously. Henry has drawn the other men irreversibly into his world.

Finally, Saturday arrives and the Narrator and Henry wait for the first sign of Henry's wife. The Narrator becomes increasingly impatient, staring repeatedly at his watch. Henry and the Narrator walk four separate times up to the point in the long road where they expect the woman to appear on the horizon, but do not see her coming. Henry grows more and more anxious, to the point where the Narrator scolds him for his "childishness," and the scolding makes Henry "shrivel up" in fear. The Narrator regrets his short temper, but an old miner named Charley breaks the tension when he arrives toward the evening. After Henry reads Charley the letter from his wife, Charley delivers several "hearty" speeches. He assures Henry that his wife is merely delayed. The men then proceed to decorate Henry's **cottage** for the party.

As more time passes and Henry's wife still does not arrive, the feeling of tension becomes more palpable. Here, Twain begins to ratchet up the levels of anxiety in the narrative, first between Henry and his absent wife, then between Henry and the Narrator, and finally between Henry, the Narrator, and the other three miners, who try to assure Henry that his wife will arrive soon. Through this steadily rising anxiety, Twain further foreshadows a potential revelation about the true nature of Henry and his wife.

Soon Tom and Joe show up and help the other men decorate the **cottage** with flowers before they begin playing boisterous music. Henry stands at his door looking at the road until the other men convince him to come and drink with them. Joe passes along several glasses and rebukes the Narrator for taking a drink reserved for Henry. Soon, Henry is drunk and the miners put him to bed in his cottage while assuring him that his wife will be there in a half-an-hour. Henry falls asleep and Tom, Joe, and Charley prepare to leave, but the Narrator asks them to stay so that Henry's wife will come home to familiar faces. Joe then tells the Narrator that she disappeared nineteen years ago in an Indian raid and is presumed dead. Henry lost his mind over her loss, so each year around the season that she vanished, the miners come to Henry's cottage and encourage his delusion that she will return, lest he "go wild" with grief. "Lord she was a darling!" Joe states.

Twain drops the story's final moment of foreshadowing when Joe denies the Narrator a drink made for Henry, implying that Joe is purposefully diverting Henry's attention from his wife's absence. When Joe reveals that Henry's wife vanished and that Henry went mad, Twain weaves together the story's interrelated themes to show how they have combined to create a tragic fate from which Henry and the other miners cannot escape. Manifest Destiny drew the miners to California, only to strip them of their dreams, turn their masculinity into a curse, and leave them beholden to Henry's delusions.

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