

The Outcasts of Poker Flat



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BRET HARTE

Bret Harte was born in Albany, New York in 1836. By age 13, he was working full-time to support his family and was no longer attending school. He eventually moved to California, where he worked his way through a series of unrelated and odd jobs, including a gold prospector, drugstore clerk, schoolteacher, and stagecoach guard. After working in the printing business for a time, he turned to writing. In 1868, he was appointed editor of a new regional magazine called *The Overland Monthly*. It was in this magazine that Harte published “The Luck of Roaring Camp” and “The Outcasts of Poker Flat,” two of his best-known short stories. After landing a lucrative contract with *The Atlantic Monthly*, Harte moved to the East Coast and was immediately welcomed into the literary scenes of Boston and New York. However, Harte’s fame soon became debilitating, and he found it extremely difficult to come up with new content. After losing his writing contract because of his poor output, Harte worked as a U.S. commercial agent in Germany and then as a U.S. consul in Scotland. In 1885, he moved to London, where he spent the remainder of his life. He died of throat cancer in 1902.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The core story of “The Outcasts of Poker Flat”—a group of travelers get stranded in the snowy mountains, rations run low, and nearly everyone dies—feels reminiscent of the story of the Donner Party, a group of American pioneers who made the long trek to California from the Midwest via a wagon train. Unfortunately, the group found themselves trapped in the Sierra Nevada mountains—where Harte’s outcasts also set up camp—in the winter of 1846–1847. With their food supplies waning, some of the members of the group took off on foot to find help. Meanwhile, many remaining members of the group resorted to cannibalism, eating the bodies of those who had died from starvation or sickness in a desperate attempt to survive. Rescuers arrived in February of 1847, but by then, only 48 of the 87 members of the party were still alive. Writing 20 years later, Harte was likely familiar with the Donner Party’s plight, as it was—and still is—one of the greatest tragedies in California history. The story also briefly alludes to the California Gold Rush in its mention of Uncle Billy as a potential sluice-robber. A sluice is a kind of sliding gate that controls the flow of water and filters out gold and from dirt and other debris. The California Gold Rush began in 1848 when a man named James W. Marshall found gold at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, California. When news of Marshall’s windfall spread,

over 300,000 people flocked to California to try their hand at finding gold. This influx of people allowed California to enter into statehood in 1850. Population growth was enormous, as San Francisco transformed to a modest settlement of several hundred residents to a town of 36,000 people in less than 10 years. However, the Gold Rush negatively impacted indigenous populations, as Native Americans often found themselves faced with violence or pushed off of their own lands.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like “The Outcasts of Poker Flat,” Harte’s “The Luck of Roaring Camp” features a group of rough-and-tumble characters who are bound together by a common purpose—though rather than being exiled from the town for bad behavior, the characters of “The Luck of Roaring Camp” try to collectively clean up their act. “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” directly mentions Roaring Camp, too, in referencing it as Oakhurst’s hometown. Both stories also feature terrible tragedies born of natural disasters, highlighting the unforgiving nature of the Old West. Through the character of Piney Woods, “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” alludes to a book called *Piney Woods Tavern; or Sam Slick in Texas* (1858), written by a well-known humorist named Samuel Adams Hammett. Hammett was known for his tall tales, many of which were set in Texas. Other notable writers who brought the American West to life include Willa Cather, whose novel [My Antonia](#) is set in the fictional town of Black Hawk, Nebraska, based on Cather’s own hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska, as well as John Steinbeck, whose novel [Cannery Row](#) illustrates life on the coast of Northern California. As for poetry, many of Robinson Jeffers’s poems, such as “November Surf,” highlight the wildness and brutality of the Western landscape that appears throughout the pages of “The Outcasts of Poker Flat.”

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Outcasts of Poker Flat
- **When Written:** 1868-1869
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** January 1869
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Western, Local Color
- **Setting:** The Old West settlement of Poker Flat and the Sierra Nevada mountain range
- **Climax:** After Mother Shipton dies, Oakhurst urges Tom to try to get to Poker Flat and get help, even though the odds of saving Piney and the others are slim.
- **Antagonist:** Uncle Billy and Poker Flat’s moralizing secret committee

- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Bucks. Harte was one of the highest-paid American writers of his time. In 1871, he signed a \$10,000 contract with *The Atlantic Monthly*, agreeing to produce 12 stories a year for them. In 2019's currency, this is close to \$210,000.

Fame is a Fickle Friend. When Harte moved east for his job with *The Atlantic Monthly*, the Eastern literary scene welcomed him warmly—perhaps too warmly. Harte was so idolized that he began to feel pressured and paralyzed by his newfound status as a celebrity. His writing suffered greatly, and he only managed to eke out a handful of stories between 1873 and 1876.



PLOT SUMMARY

On the morning of November 23, 1850, a gambler named John Oakhurst walks through Poker Flat, a small mining town in the American West. The town's "moral atmosphere" has changed, and Oakhurst knows that the town is "after somebody." He reflects calmly that he's probably the one the town is after—a suspicion that soon proves correct.

Poker Flat has suffered a major blow to its reputation and sense of stability. It has recently lost an important resident, a large fortune, and two horses, catalyzing a "spasm of virtuous reaction." In an effort to salvage the town's reputation and reinstate a sense of normalcy, a group of powerful Poker Flat residents form a secret committee that decides who stays and who goes, whether by hanging (a fate to which two men have already been sentenced) or by exile. Oakhurst is faced with the latter punishment. Several men on the committee have lost money to Oakhurst, and they are irate. In order to reimburse themselves, they call for Oakhurst to be hanged, but the committee members who have managed to win money from Oakhurst suggest that he merely be banished.

On the day of his exile, Oakhurst finds himself in the company of three other "improper persons": two prostitutes who go by the names Mother Shipton and the Duchess, as well as a drunkard and suspected thief called Uncle Billy. Though his companions cry and curse, Oakhurst is remarkably calm and unruffled as the outcasts are marched out of the settlement and sent towards the mountains.

Although Sandy Bar is the next closest settlement, it's on the other side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, making it one long, intense travel day away. Soon, the Duchess declares that she will go no further and insists they set up camp. Oakhurst knows that camping is a bad idea—they don't have food or supplies to sustain their journey. Even though he tries to make this clear, his companions don't listen and immediately take to drinking. As he doesn't drink (it clashes with his profession as a

gambler, which requires him to always have clear senses and sharp decision-making skills) Oakhurst remains on the fringes, watching the group quietly.

Soon, a young man named Tom "The Innocent" Simson, a resident of Sandy Bar, rides down the trail. He and Oakhurst are well acquainted, as Oakhurst won a large fortune from Tom a few months ago but sympathetically returned it to the young man with a stern warning to never gamble again. Tom is thrilled to see Oakhurst and excitedly introduces his fiancée, Piney Woods, to the group. The pair are headed to Poker Flat to elope. Oakhurst tries to convince the newcomers not to linger, but Tom cheerfully offers to share his rations and mentions that they can camp at a crudely constructed log cabin that he saw down the path. The group takes Tom up on his offer and makes camp.

In the morning, Oakhurst awakens to freshly fallen snow and hurriedly prepares to wake the group so that they can beat the impending storm. However, he quickly realizes that Uncle Billy is missing, and that the group's mules have disappeared. Oakhurst lies to Piney and Tom that Uncle Billy left to find more food, and the animals accidentally stampeded, though Mother Shipton and the Duchess sense what really happened. Tom is still cheerful as ever, and over the next few days he leads the group in camp songs and storytelling.

Soon, the snowfall accumulates to 20 feet, and the group struggles to find wood to keep up their fires. Mother Shipton begins to fade rapidly, and on the 10th day, she pulls Oakhurst aside and privately tells him that she's been starving herself, saving her rations so that Piney can live a little longer. She dies quietly, and the group turns somber.

Oakhurst gives Tom a pair of homemade snowshoes, urging him to make it to Poker Flat, though his chances of saving Piney are slim. Although Oakhurst says he'll accompany Tom only as far as the canyon, he doesn't return to camp. The Duchess and Piney cling to one another for warmth, but eventually fall asleep and die of exposure. Days later, "pitying fingers" dust the snow off of their faces. In death, it's impossible to tell the women apart, as they both carry a look of "equal peace." Even the residents of Poker Flat recognize this, so they leave the women locked in a tender embrace.

Deeper into the woods, the rescuers stumble upon Oakhurst's body. Pinned to a tree with a knife is a playing card, **the deuce of clubs**, upon which Oakhurst has scribbled his epitaph, claiming to have "struck a streak of bad luck." Oakhurst, who shot himself in the heart, appears just as stoic in death as he did in life. He is, the narrator affirms, "at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Oakhurst – The protagonist of the story, John Oakhurst is a serial gambler who is exiled from the Old West settlement of Poker Flat along with three other people whom the town has deemed “improper”: the Duchess, Mother Shipton, and Uncle Billy. While the other members of the group are exiled for their immorality, Oakhurst’s sentence is a little more complicated. The committee that decides who stays and who goes is far from impartial, as many men on it have lost money to Oakhurst. These men, including Jim Wheeler, go so far as to suggest Oakhurst be hanged (knowing that they will be able to reclaim their money this way), while those who have managed to *win* money playing against Oakhurst suggest he just be banished instead. John Oakhurst is the strong, silent type, always unruffled in times of trouble. So when he is exiled to the next town over—forced to make the dangerous journey through the mountains to get there—he barely even blinks. And when things continue to go wrong (like when Uncle Billy runs off with the group’s mules, and a snowstorm prevents the group from making the rest of the journey on foot), Oakhurst continues to carry himself with “philosophic calmness.” Although “He [is] too much of a gambler not to accept Fate,” he does show some care for his own well-being as well as that of his companions. When two innocent people fall in with the group—Tom and his fiancée, Piney—Oakhurst urges them not to linger with the outcasts, who have unwisely decided to make camp despite having very little rations. Later, when everyone is close to death, Oakhurst fashions a pair of snowshoes and sends Tom into town to get help. However, at the end of the story, Oakhurst commits suicide, raising the question of whether his unwavering calm stemmed from near-total apathy or quiet strength, and if he should have tried harder to survive. Oakhurst is originally from a settlement called Roaring Camp—which comes from one of Harte’s best-known short stories, “The Luck of Roaring Camp.”

Uncle Billy – The chief antagonist of the story, Uncle Billy is a drunk and a suspected thief (he is believed to steal gold while other people are panning for it) who is exiled from Poker Flat along with Oakhurst, the Duchess, and Mother Shipton. Although he’s only suspected of being a thief, his actions in the story prove that he’s deserving of this reputation. On their first night in the mountains, while the group is still treating their journey like a merry camping trip, Uncle Billy drinks heavily with the others. However, an idea “of a jocular nature” comes to him, and he’s so delighted by it that he slaps his leg merrily and bites his fist in excitement: he is going to steal the group’s mules, who are tied up near where the group has stopped to camp. By morning, Uncle Billy is gone and the mules are nowhere to be found. The story never reveals what happened to Uncle Billy—whether he made it to the next town over or died in the pursuit—but he is nonetheless spared the long, agonizing death that the rest of the outcasts (plus Tom and Piney) are forced to endure. Uncle Billy’s theft is significant not just because it confirms his status as a thief, but also because it goes beyond his reputation as a suspected petty thief—in

stealing the group’s mules, he has stranded his companions and effectively sentenced them to death. What’s worse, in the hours leading up to his escape, Uncle Billy seems positively giddy about his plan, as if stealing the group’s sole source of transportation is an impish, playful trick rather than a malevolent and fatal one. Thus, while all of the other outcasts prove themselves more morally complex than first meets the eye—thus suggesting they weren’t necessarily deserving of being demonized in Poker Flat—Uncle Billy remains nothing more than a villain.

The Duchess – The Duchess, whose real name is never revealed, is a prostitute in the Old West settlement of Poker Flat and is exiled for her immorality. She is forced to make the difficult journey through the mountains to the next town over with a few other unsavory characters: John Oakhurst, Mother Shipton, and Uncle Billy. Despite her tarnished reputation, the Duchess shows herself to be extraordinarily kind and compassionate, qualities that begin to surface when she meets the sweet and innocent Piney, who in many ways seems like the Duchess’s foil. While the Duchess’s job revolves around sex, earning her a stained reputation, Piney is the very picture of sexual purity and girlish innocence. When the group gets snowed in and are nearing death, the Duchess spends her last days holding Piney close. Days later, rescuers find the two dead woman still clutched in an embrace. In death and covered with snow, they now resemble one another so strongly that it’s impossible to tell who is who—or “which was she that had sinned.” While the Duchess is branded a sinner in life for her prostitution, in death, she no longer shoulders that burden. Her friendship with Piney seems to have a redemptive quality, freeing the Duchess from the reputation that exiled her in the first place.

Mother Shipton – Like the Duchess, Mother Shipton is a prostitute who is exiled from Poker Flat along with Oakhurst and Uncle Billy. She is a crude woman with a vocabulary to match, and she often laments her circumstances with long strings of curse words. Also like the Duchess, her real name is never revealed in the story, though the narrator mentions that she “won the title of ‘Mother Shipton,’” who was a famous 15th-century prophetess. Although the historical Mother Shipton’s predictions were regional and small-scale ones, she soon became a figure of legend, rumored to have made grand, sweeping predictions like the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. In time, Mother Shipton’s name became closely associated with mysterious and tragic events that cropped up in North America, the UK, and Australia up until the 19th century. That Harte’s Mother Shipton “won” this nickname suggests that she, too, has the penchant for foreseeing future tragedies. In the story, when she sees a curl of smoke in the sky coming from the direction of Poker Flat, she screams bitter curses in its direction, seemingly more aware than some of her companions that they are going to die in the

mountains. Despite her sharp tongue, Mother Shipton is tender and loving toward Piney, whom she calls “the child,” and does everything she can to entertain the young woman. As the group’s circumstances grow increasingly bleak, Mother Shipton begins starving herself, secretly tucking away her rations. On the 10th day in the mountains, moments away from death, she quietly tells Oakhurst to give her rations to Piney so that the girl can live a little bit longer. Despite her stained reputation as a prostitute and her abrasive vocabulary, Mother Shipton is also compassionate, generous, and self-sacrificial, suggesting that she wasn’t so immoral after all.

Tom Simson – Nicknamed “The Innocent,” Tom is Piney’s fiancé and an acquaintance of Oakhurst’s. He is a young man from the next town over—Sandy Bar, where the outcasts are headed—and is making the journey to Poker Flat to elope with Piney and begin a new life. Months ago, he played a “little game” with Oakhurst and lost a fortune (about \$40 in 1850, which would be over \$1,200 in 2019’s currency) to the man. After, Oakhurst kindly advised Tom to never gamble again and gave him back his money. Because of this incident, Tom is delighted to run into Oakhurst in the mountains. While Oakhurst is strong and silent, Tom is boyish, giggly, and naïve. He excitedly tells the group that he and Piney are eloping because her father, Jake Woods, doesn’t approve of their engagement, framing their situation as one big, exiting adventure. Likewise, Tom is enthusiastic about spending the night with the group and treats their situation like a camping trip among friends rather than a fight for survival among strangers. Thus, when Oakhurst tries to persuade him to not delay his journey as the group doesn’t have food or shelter, Tom won’t listen, exclaiming that he and Piney have plenty of rations to share and that he saw a clumsily built log cabin nearby where they can stay. However, Tom’s blind optimism quickly leads to his downfall, as the next morning the group finds themselves stranded and snowed in. On the group’s 10th day in the mountains, Oakhurst fashions a pair of homemade snowshoes from a saddle, urging Tom to try to make it to Poker Flat, even though there’s only “one chance in a hundred” that he’ll be able to make it there and return with help to save Piney. The story implies that Tom is successful in reaching Poker Flat—even though the rest of the group dies, they are found days when “voices and footsteps” enter the camp, presumably a search party. After his experience in the mountains and the death of his beloved fiancée, it seems that Tom is no longer innocent.

Piney Woods – Tom’s fiancée and Jake Woods’s daughter. She and Tom fall in with the group of outcasts while on their way to Poker Flat to elope and begin a new life. At 15 years old, Piney is on the cusp of womanhood, though her timidity and gentleness make her seem much younger, which is perhaps why Mother Shipton takes to affectionately calling her “the child.” Tom and Piney’s love is “so honest and sincere” that it has a deep impact on Mother Shipton and the Duchess—both

prostitutes—and the women become maternal figures that comfort and protect her. Piney maintains her innocence and goodness throughout the story, and even seems to bring out those qualities in Mother Shipton and the Duchess. Within days of meeting Piney, Mother Shipton quietly begins to starve herself—ultimately to death—so that “the child” can have more to eat. And later, when they appear to be only hours away from death, the Duchess and Piney cling to one another tenderly. At this point, Piney “accept[s] the position of the stronger” of the two women and wraps her arms around the Duchess, as if the Duchess is the young, innocent one in need of comfort and protection. Indeed, when the two women die, the rescuers are unable to tell who is who; they both assume a look of “equal peace” and it’s impossible to tell “which was she that had sinned.” It thus seems that Piney, the embodiment of purity and goodness, has a redemptive quality to her, as her friendship ensures that both the Duchess and Mother Shipton can shed their tarnished reputations. Because of Piney, Mother Shipton leaves the world in an astounding act of self-sacrifice, while the Duchess is imbued with a “peace” that seems to overwrite her reputation as a sinner. Piney Woods’s name, which seems all too fitting for an Old West story that takes place in the mountains, is a reference to *Piney Woods Tavern; or, Sam Slick in Texas*, an 1858 book by Samuel Adams Hammett (“Philip Paxton”), a southwestern humorist known for his distinctively Western tall tales.

Jim Wheeler – A member of Poker Flat’s powerful secret committee that decides who gets to remain at the settlement and who is banished to Sandy Bar, the next town over. Wheeler, like many others on the committee, lost money to Oakhurst and is outraged about it. He thinks that Oakhurst should be hanged, though this is more of a way for Wheeler to get his precious money back than it is a moral punishment for Oakhurst—after all, many men on the committee gamble, Wheeler included, and they aren’t hanged or exiled for it. Jim Wheeler’s name is possibly a nod to main characters Jim Smiley and Simon Wheeler in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” a gambling-themed story by Harte’s friend and fellow writer, Mark Twain.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jake Woods – Piney’s father. He objects to Piney and Tom’s engagement, which spurs the couple to elope in Poker Flat.



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.



MORALITY VS. IMMORALITY

In Bret Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," a committee of citizens from a struggling mining town in Gold Rush-era California banishes a group of undesirable residents: John Oakhurst (a gambler), Mother Shipton and the Duchess (prostitutes), and Uncle Billy (a drunk). Society firmly brands these four outcasts as immoral and thus deserving of whatever fate may befall them as they make the dangerous journey through the mountains to the next town over. And indeed, tragedy does strike: at least three of the four outcasts die in the mountains, as does an innocent couple that falls in with the group. While it may seem like justice has been served, the deaths of these two thoroughly innocent people (one of which, Tom, is literally nicknamed "The Innocent") complicate notions of morality and punishment, as they clearly didn't deserve to die. Likewise, although Harte doesn't exactly portray the outcasts as heroes, he also doesn't show them to have done anything to deserve their deaths, either. Thus, through the tragic end that befalls the outcasts and the innocents alike, the story suggests that people can't easily be pinned down as moral or immoral, and that punishment is not always deserved.

Throughout the story, it's clear that the four outcasts are not saints, suggesting that perhaps the town was right to brand the four as immoral. John Oakhurst, the protagonist of the story, is a serial gambler whose addiction is so strong that he even gives up sleep days at a time to gamble. The other man in the group, Uncle Billy, is a drunk suspected of being a petty thief. True to form, he steals from the outcasts while they're trekking through the mountains and then abandons the group. While this confirms that Uncle Billy is immoral in terms of his penchant for thievery, this act also deepens the scope of his immorality—by stealing the group's mode of transportation, the mules, he callously sentences his other three comrades to starvation and death. Mother Shipton and the Duchess also have unsavory reputations in town. The narrator explains: "It is but due to the sex, however, to state that their impropriety was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards of evil that Poker Flat ventured to sit in judgment." With this, the story implies that both women are prostitutes and are therefore seen as sexually promiscuous and sinful. To add to this, Mother Shipton and the Duchess are also crude and curse frequently, which was a sure sign of poor character in the nineteenth century, especially for a lady.

However, Harte also casts doubt on whether or not the four outcasts are quite as immoral as they're made out to be, and whether or not they truly deserve to be exiled for their perceived crimes. Though Mother Shipton and the Duchess have committed an offense against Christian values by practicing prostitution, Harte is quick to point out that they themselves are not evil, but merely easy targets for banishment. As the story unfolds, both women prove to be

deeply compassionate and caring: Mother Shipton starves herself to death so that Piney (Tom's fiancée) can have her rations and thus live a little longer, while the Duchess tenderly takes care of Piney in their final days. Several days after Piney and the Duchess die, they are found clinging to one another in an embrace: "And when pitying fingers brushed the snow from their wan faces, you could scarcely have told from the equal peace that dwelt upon them, which was she that had sinned." In death, Piney and the Duchess resemble one another so strongly that it is no longer clear who is the virgin and who is the prostitute—who is moral and who is immoral—which speaks to the idea that people can't be neatly shelved as one or the other.

The narrator also suggests that there is more to John Oakhurst than meets the eye. At the beginning of the story, the narrator reveals that Oakhurst was almost hanged rather than banished—but that this didn't necessarily have to do with the man's morality. What happened was that several men on the committee who had lost money to him at cards proposed that he be hanged so that they could recover some of their losses. Only some men who had managed to win money from Oakhurst at cards argued that he should be allowed to be exiled. Rather than prove that Oakhurst's gambling is morally wrong, his punishment simply speaks to the fact that he's made some enemies while gambling. Surely, the men on this committee gamble too—after all, many of them have lost or won money from him—yet *they* aren't banished for it. In addition, the committee has already hung two other "improper persons" before the outcasts are banished. Presumably, these victims also got on the committee's bad side somehow, or were even more socially marginal than a gambler or prostitutes. In showing Oakhurst, Mother Shipton, and the Duchess as being less immoral than they first appeared, Harte implies that the real reason for these hangings was the town's distress, not the deeds of the hanging victims.

In the end, it seems that only Uncle Billy truly deserved his stained reputation and punishment—but whether he managed to escape the mountains or succumbed to death like the others is left ambiguous. The other three outcasts, though, prove themselves to be morally complex and not at all deserving of exile and death. Through his characters' tragic ends, Harte spins a cautionary tale, warning readers to avoid simplistically categorizing others as good or bad, moral or immoral. As Oakhurst, Mother Shipton, and the Duchess clearly prove, there is more to most people than meets the eye.



FATE

Like a template for countless strong, silent Western heroes in old movies, protagonist John Oakhurst is a stoic. He perfectly embodies the word, which means someone who accepts hardship without complaining or showing emotion. Initially, this seems admirable—when he

receives the sentence of banishment from his town, Oakhurst reacts “with philosophic calmness,” making him appear strong and unflappable. However, stoicism was also linked in Harte’s time not just to acting calm but to accepting one’s fate, which seems to be exactly what Oakhurst does. Following Oakhurst from the moment of his sentence to his suicide in the mountains, the story asks whether it is noble to calmly accept one’s fate without protest, or whether this is foolish. Ultimately, the story resists easy answers: while Harte clearly admires some of Oakhurst’s traits, he also finds weakness in the gambler’s passive world view.

John Oakhurst is not like the rest of the outcasts. He faces hardship and death without complaining or backing down from the hard truth of their situation, making him seem admirable, and even heroic. The Duchess wilts after the group is exiled from Poker Flat, but John Oakhurst stays strong. He even gives up his superior riding horse to the Duchess, and takes her broken-down mule. Like the Duchess, Mother Shipton doesn’t take the news of their exile lightly. She curses the townspeople and curses Fate. Meanwhile, “the philosophic Oakhurst alone remained silent,” even though he arguably has more reason than any of the group to complain. He never challenges the committee for banishing him just because townspeople lost money to him at gambling, and never even complains later to the rest of the group. Uncle Billy is also far from accepting of the group’s fate and, like Mother Shipton, delivers “a Parthian volley of expletives.” In first-century Asia, the Parthians would routinely pretend to flee before suddenly turning back to shoot their enemies, which is effectively what Uncle Billy does when he goes on to steal the group’s mules, leaving his companions to die. In contrast, despite his clear understanding that stopping to camp is not “advisable,” Oakhurst neither returns to Poker Flat nor carries on to the next town on his own. The narrator suggests that “The thought of deserting his weaker and more pitiable companions never perhaps occurred to [Oakhurst],” emphasizing the value of his fierce loyalty and quiet heroism.

However, Harte does not make John Oakhurst a faultless hero, as he suggests that Oakhurst’s calm demeanor may come from a place of apathy and weakness, not strength and heroism. Throughout the story, Oakhurst doesn’t do anything to remedy his problems, and he barely tries to avoid death. He knows that the group shouldn’t stop to camp because they don’t have enough rations, a “fact [that] he pointed out to his companions curtly, with a philosophic commentary on the folly of ‘throwing up their hand before the game was played out.’” However, “In spite of his remonstrances,” or forceful protests, Oakhurst’s companions choose not to listen to him and begin drinking instead. Oakhurst, for his part, refrains from drinking and stands off to the side, “calmly surveying” his companions. Though Oakhurst *does* speak out in an effort to save his own life as well as his companions’ lives, he quickly shifts from making impassioned “remonstrances” to calmly accepting what

he knows to be a dangerous situation. Later, Oakhurst also tries to discourage Tom and Piney from sticking around. He is clear about “the fact that there was no provision, nor means of making a camp,” but once again Oakhurst’s efforts are “in vain.” It’s curious that Oakhurst tries to save Tom and Piney’s lives, but doesn’t take his own advice, raising the question of whether his inaction is nobly self-sacrificial or a death wish.

When he wakes up the following morning to a snowstorm, Oakhurst finally jumps into action: “He started to his feet with the intention of awakening the sleepers, for there was no time to lose.” However, when he finds that Uncle Billy has escaped with the mules, Oakhurst immediately reverts back to “his usual calm” and chooses not to wake up the rest of the group, stoically accepting his fate. And as time goes on, the group’s chances of escaping to safety get slimmer and slimmer: when they wake up the next morning, the snow is piled so thickly around the cabin that it’s like “a hopeless, uncharted, trackless sea,” and within a week, the snow “towered twenty feet above their heads.” As time goes on and Oakhurst continues to choose passivity over action, he “settled himself coolly to the losing game before him.” At the end of the story, Oakhurst takes his stoicism to the extreme of suicide. Stoicism was associated in popular imagination with some famous ancient Romans who killed themselves when placed in difficult situations, not unlike this instance of being exiled from town and stranded in the mountains. After encouraging Tom to hurry into town on a pair of homemade snowshoes and declining to go with him, Oakhurst wanders deeper into the woods and shoots himself. Harte writes that the dead Oakhurst, lying dead below his final words written on a playing card, is “still calm as in life.” This might at first be read as only a compliment, but Harte is also criticizing Oakhurst. He’s suggesting that in a way, the gambler was like a dead body even when he was alive. In other words, his “calm” wasn’t just coolness under fire, but a deadness in life that kept him from fighting to stay alive.

Harte ends the story calling John Oakhurst “at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat.” The strength refers to the gambler’s bravery and composure in the face of death, but Harte also suggests that there are limits to this uncomplaining acceptance of hardship. In deeming Oakhurst “the weakest of the outcasts,” Harte suggests that in committing suicide, Oakhurst simply gave up and succumbed to the situation he was dealt, when he should have tried harder to fight back against life.



THE BRUTALITY OF THE OLD WEST

While many Western stories have the protagonists battling outlaws, Harte introduces his characters battling the law itself. It is a “change in moral atmosphere” of the townspeople, not bad guys in black hats, that sentence the titular outcasts to death. Even more deadly than the townspeople, nature is the force that actually kills the

outcasts—there is no dramatic shootout or rough-and-tumble fight. Through his depiction of how unforgiving life can be in Old West towns, and the even more unforgiving natural landscape, Harte punctures the romanticized myth of the Old West as idyllic and full of opportunity and adventure.

Far from being a stable, supportive community, the Old West settlement of Poker Flat is immediately revealed to be a dangerous place, governed by the whims of a powerful few. From the outset, Poker Flat is in a precarious state: the town has recently “suffered the loss of several thousand dollars, two valuable horses, and a prominent citizen.” In the wake of this emotional and financial loss—which perhaps came as a blow to the town’s ego as well—a “secret committee” decides to cleanse the town of all of its residents that it deems “improper.” The town is “after somebody,” and they don’t seem too particular about who they get. In their desperation to regain a sense of stability and normalcy, the townspeople find themselves whipped up in a “spasm of virtuous reaction.” In this frenzied state, the townspeople are “lawless and ungovernable”—perhaps, the story implies, even more so than the “improper” outcasts that they plan to exile. The sinister secret committee has already hung two people before the outcasts are banished, making it clear that the townspeople are ruthless and a genuine threat. It’s not just a matter of being run out of town—the outcasts risk being killed by the townspeople if they stay.

Furthermore, it’s not clear that secret committee is really concerned about morality. Several members of the committee want to take back money they have lost to Oakhurst gambling and are willing to hang him (though are talked into merely exiling him) in retaliation. This paints Poker Flat, and Old West towns more broadly, as corrupt and fueled by petty grudges and revenge. Poker Flat’s isolation also makes it a dangerous place. The closest town is through the treacherous mountain pass, and this isolation and insularity seems to give the town an added level of power over its residents, as they must either comply with the town’s rules and whims or face a dangerous journey that could end in death.

Exiled from their homes, the outcasts are forced to make the deadly trip through the mountains to the next town over. However, nature proves itself more severe than the unfeeling townspeople, as at least three out the outcasts die in a snowstorm. At first, most of the outcasts seem to act as if they are on a camping trip. Ignoring Oakhurst’s advice that they carry on for their own safety, the group drinks too much and stops to make camp in a beautiful spot by a cliff, playing into the myth of the Old West as being one big adventure in a stunning “wooded amphitheater surrounded on three sides by precipitous cliffs of naked granite.” Later, Tom and Piney are even more heedless of the danger, as they can’t conceive that the beautiful natural surroundings are far more dangerous than a picnic ground. Failing to internalize the gravity of the

situation, Tom is delighted when the group is snowed in, suggesting happily that they’ll “have a good camp for a week, and then the snow’ll melt, and we’ll all go back together.” Like several of the other outcasts, they, too, underestimate the power of the West’s natural landscape.

Throughout the story, nature *does* seem beautiful. Near the end of the story, Harte writes, “the wind lulled as if it feared to waken them. Feathery drifts of snow, shaken from the long pine-boughs, flew like white-winged birds, and settled about them as they slept.” However, nature’s grace and beauty in this moment is hiding an ominous reality. Trapped beneath dozens of feet of snow, the remaining outcasts lie dead, no match for nature’s brutal power. But from the outside, “all human stain, all trace of earthly travail, was hidden beneath the spotless mantle mercifully flung from above.” With this, the myth of the Old West gives way to a deadlier reality for the outcasts of Poker Flat. There is no high-spirited frontier or adventure in a majestic wilderness for them. They are crushed between the dangers of a corrupt town and uncaring nature, a bleak situation that reveals the brutal reality of life in the Old West. Townspeople threaten to kill the outcasts, and nature finishes the job without sentiment or mercy.



SYMBOLS

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



THE DEUCE OF CLUBS

Before committing suicide, John Oakhurst writes his epitaph on a playing card, the deuce of clubs, which symbolizes Oakhurst’s understanding that life is a game of luck. Oakhurst’s epitaph, which he pins on a tree, reads, “Beneath this tree lies the body of John Oakhurst, who struck a streak of bad luck on the 23[r]d of November, 1850, and handed in his checks on the 7th [of] December, 1850.” It’s significant that Oakhurst chooses a deuce of clubs as his makeshift tombstone and the vessel for this message, as the club strongly resembles a three-leaf clover, solidifying its association with luck. As a serial gambler who appears to carry a pack of playing cards around with him everywhere, Oakhurst views the world through the lens of chance. However, this sometimes makes Oakhurst seem weak and submissive, letting events passively happen to him. When he is exiled from Poker Flat, he takes the news stoically, as “He was too much of a gambler not to accept Fate. With him life was at best an uncertain game, and he recognized the usual percentage in favor of the dealer.” In his mind, life depends on the luck of the draw—he can’t control which cards he’ll be dealt, so he accepts everything that comes his way with remarkable calmness.

However, Oakhurst’s worldview, as symbolized by the deuce of

clubs, also suggests that life is a game of choice that requires active participation in addition to calm acceptance. When the other outcasts want to stop and make camp prematurely, Oakhurst does his best to dissuade them: "But Mr. Oakhurst knew that scarcely half the journey to Sandy Bar was accomplished, and the party were not equipped or provisioned for delay. This fact he pointed out to his companions curtly, with a philosophic commentary on the folly of 'throwing up their hand before the game was played out.'" With this, it's clear that Oakhurst isn't entirely passive. He uses his sharp decision-making skills to discern the next best course of action—carrying on rather than stopping to camp—but this time, it's his companions that prevent him from taking action. However, by the end of the story, it seems that Oakhurst *does* "throw[] up [his] hand before the game was played out" by tacking his "hand"—the deuce of clubs—to the tree and committing suicide under it. Rather than trying to make it back to town with Tom, Oakhurst resigns himself to death "before the game [is] played out," raising the question of whether or not he fought hard enough against his unlucky circumstances.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Writings* published in 2001.

The Outcasts of Poker Flat Quotes

●● In point of fact, Poker Flat was "after somebody." It had lately suffered the loss of several thousand dollars, two valuable horses, and a prominent citizen. It was experiencing a spasm of virtuous reaction, quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it. A secret committee had determined to rid the town of all improper persons. This was done permanently in regard of two men who were then hanging from the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch, and temporarily in the banishment of certain other objectionable characters. I regret to say that some of these were ladies. It is but due to the sex, however, to state that their impropriety was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards of evil that Poker Flat ventured to sit judgement.

Related Characters: Uncle Billy, Mother Shipton, The Duchess, John Oakhurst

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27



Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator confirms Oakhurst's suspicion that the Old West settlement of Poker Flat is out to get someone. The town is in a frantic, reactionary state, desperately trying to reinstate some sense of stability and control after a crippling financial and emotional loss (the cause of which is never revealed). While those who decide to cleanse the town of "all improper persons" are supposedly acting with good intentions in trying to create a more moral society, the narrator is quick to point out that these moralizers are just "as lawless and ungovernable" as whoever (or whatever) turned the town on its head. The residents aren't thoughtful and wise when deciding how to salvage their town—they're acting in "a spasm of virtuous reaction." Like an involuntary muscle twitch or a reflex, the residents of Poker Flat are acting impulsively and uncontrollably, with little thought underpinning their actions. The story presents a stark contrast to this frenzied morality with the character of John Oakhurst, who is quiet, levelheaded, meticulous, and, at times, unreasonably calm.

This passage also begins to outline Poker Flat's definition of immorality or "impropriety." In particular, the town strongly condemns prostitution as immoral, hence the Duchess and Mother Shipton's impending exile. Later in the story, the narrator is careful to point out that the Duchess is "familiarily known" by that nickname (her real name is never revealed). This is a subtle reminder that the Duchess is well-known among the settlement's male residents (historically, Old West towns were disproportionately male), and that to be a prostitute, the Duchess must have had *clients*. In other words, the town of Poker flat "venture[s] to sit judgment" about the Duchess's prostitution but is curiously quiet about condemning those members of the community who have paid her for her services. This is one of many instances in which it's clear that Harte implies that the reader should not trust Poker Flat's judgment of the outcasts.

●● Mr. Oakhurst was right in supposing that he was included in this category. A few of the committee had urged hanging him as a possible example, and a sure method of reimbursing themselves from his pockets of the sums he had won from them. "It's agin justice," said Jim Wheeler, "to let this yer young man from Roaring Camp—an entire stranger—carry away our money." But a crude sentiment of equity residing in the breasts of those who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst overruled this narrower local prejudice.

Related Characters: Jim Wheeler (speaker), John Oakhurst

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator gives the reader context as to how and why John Oakhurst received his exile sentence. The committee members are implied to be all men, given the social landscape of the American West in the 1850s and the fact that the committee members hold local power and gamble, two things that likely wouldn't have been available to women. These men are only concerned about one thing when it comes to Oakhurst: that he has won money from some of them. The problem is not that Oakhurst is a gambler—several men on the committee have gambled with and against him—but that he is a *good* gambler, thus getting on the bad side of a few very important people. Incurring a loss to Oakhurst, “an entire stranger,” threatens the men’s reputations, power, and pride, leading them to believe that the best course of action is to hang Oakhurst just so that they can take their money back from him.

Jim Wheeler, one such member of the committee, frames the proposed hanging as an act of justice. He argues that it would be unjust to let Oakhurst “carry away [their] money,” portraying Oakhurst as a thief who has immorally stolen the residents’ money and ran off with it guiltily, rather than a skilled gambler who simply won the money in a run-of-the-mill bet or card game. The rest of the story depicts Oakhurst as an ethical, honest man, suggesting that Oakhurst wins his money honestly and isn’t deserving of such antagonism. Plus, other members of the committee have won money from Oakhurst, suggesting that he is a gambler like any other, with both wins and losses. With this, it’s clear that Oakhurst is being unfairly scapegoated, and that it’s not so simple to pin down who is moral versus immoral.

☞ Mr. Oakhurst received his sentence with philosophic calmness, none the less coolly that he was aware of the hesitation of his judges. He was too much of a gambler not to accept Fate. With him life was at best an uncertain game, and he recognized he usual percentage in favor of the dealer.

Related Characters: John Oakhurst

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Oakhurst learns that he is being banished to the nearest settlement, Sandy Bar, which is a long day’s journey through the Sierra Nevada mountain range. This passage reveals that Oakhurst’s entire worldview rests on the foundation of his profession as a gambler. He conceives of life’s highs and lows as merely lucky and unlucky times, believes that the unlucky times are out of his control, and understands that some people are better positioned than others in the “uncertain game” of life—like “the dealer,” in this case meaning the powerful secret committee that doles out moral judgement and punishment.

While Oakhurst’s worldview may seem reasonable, Harte questions the validity of such an approach throughout the story, particularly when Oakhurst runs into bad luck. During these times—like when Uncle Billy steals the group’s mules in the mountains—Oakhurst seems to passively give up rather than fight his circumstances tenaciously like a rough-and-tumble Old West hero would be expected to do. On the other hand, Harte also implicitly praises Oakhurst throughout the story for his calmness and poise. Oakhurst is consistently the only character who is wise, reasonable, and calm, even in the midst of chaos and tragedy.

☞ [...] Mr. Oakhurst knew that scarcely half the journey to Sandy Bar was accomplished, and the party were not equipped or provisioned for delay. This fact he pointed out to his companions curtly, with a philosophic commentary on the folly of “throwing up their hand before the game was played out.” But they were furnished with liquor [...] In spite of his remonstrances, it was not long before they were more or less under its influence.

Related Characters: John Oakhurst (speaker), Uncle Billy, Mother Shipton, The Duchess

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After the Duchess proclaims that she will go no farther, Oakhurst lists off all the reasons why stopping to set up camp would be unwise. While there are times throughout the story in which Oakhurst seems to weakly accept whatever bad things come his way, this passage serves as a reminder that Oakhurst isn’t an entirely passive man. Here, he makes impassioned protests (“remonstrances”) about

why the group shouldn't linger. He also lays out the facts "curtly," a word that means a rude and abrupt manner of speaking. Clearly, he has no interest in staying in the mountains and does whatever he can to get his point across. He even adds a "philosophic commentary" about gambling, once again demonstrating how gambling informs his broader world view, but also showing that to him, stopping to camp would be as foolish as forfeiting what could be a lucrative game of cards.

●● He started to his feet with the intention of awakening the sleepers, for there was no time to lose. But turning to where Uncle Billy had been lying, he found him gone. A suspicion leaped to his brain and a curse to his lips. He ran to the spot where the mules had been tethered; they were no longer there. The tracks were already rapidly disappearing in the snow.

The momentary excitement brought Mr. Oakhurst back to the fire with his usual calm. He did not waken the sleepers.

Related Characters: Piney Woods, Tom Simson, Mother Shipton, The Duchess, Uncle Billy, John Oakhurst

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Oakhurst awakens after the first night in the mountains to a terrible realization: Uncle Billy has ran off with the group's mules, their sole source of transportation in such rocky terrain. To make matters worse, just before this quote, Oakhurst realized that the ground is now covered with freshly fallen snow—making the mules all the more necessary and adding yet another wrinkle to the group's plight.

This passage showcases Oakhurst at his best and his worst: alert, quick-thinking, and determined, as well as hopeless, resigned, and apathetic. While perhaps there is truly nothing Oakhurst can do about the stolen mules, and alerting the others would possibly cause unproductive chaos, Harte uses this sharp contrast between Oakhurst's two opposing demeanors to question whether being stoical and unmoved by hardship is always a good thing.

●● "Luck," continued the gambler, reflectively, "is a mighty queer thing. All you know about it for certain is that it's bound to change. And it's finding out when it's going to change that makes you. We've had a streak of bad luck since we left Poker Flat,—you come along, and slap you get into it, too. If you can hold your cards right along you're all right."

Related Characters: John Oakhurst (speaker), Tom Simson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

When Oakhurst and Tom discuss their plans to take turns keeping watch over the rest of the group, Oakhurst descends into a tangent about how he's accustomed to missing sleep to play poker, leading him to this reflection on the nature of luck. Oakhurst approaches life with the balanced consideration of an experienced gambler: he weighs his options carefully, takes advantage of good fortune when it comes his way, and accepts that the bad things are out of his control, all the while maintaining a classic poker face, expressionless and unbothered. In other words, Oakhurst reflects the idea that the ups and downs of life (essentially, fate) are out of humankind's control, a sentiment that forms the backbone of his worldview as well as the thematic backbone of the story. However, Harte questions this perspective throughout the narrative, alternatingly making Oakhurst seem like a quiet hero and a passive fool.

In this passage, Oakhurst seems to have already resigned himself to a losing game. He assures Tom that if Tom "can hold [his] cards right," he'll be fine, but Oakhurst doesn't include himself in this prediction. Indeed, it seems that Tom does end up "hold[ing] [his] cards right," as the story implies that he successfully makes it back to Poker Flat. But prior to the trip, when Tom asks Oakhurst if he is going to accompany him to Poker Flat, Oakhurst simply says he will stay in the mountains, a decision that costs him his life. In this moment and others, Oakhurst appears a feeble hero, weakly yielding to what he believes to be his fate—dying in the mountains—rather than putting up a fight.

●● The third day came, and the sun, looking through the white-curtained valley, saw the outcasts divide their slowly decreasing store of provisions for the morning meal. It was one of the peculiarities of that mountain climate that its rays diffused a kindly warmth over the wintry landscape, as if in regretful commiseration of the past. But it revealed drift on drift of snow piled high around the hut,—a hopeless, uncharted, trackless sea of white lying below the rocky shores to which the castaways still clung.

Related Characters: Piney Woods, Tom Simson, Mother Shipton, The Duchess, John Oakhurst

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the outcasts (plus Tom and Piney) find themselves snowed in on the third day of their time in the mountains, which is beginning to seem less like an adventure and more like a death sentence. The language of this passage invokes a fearful reverence for nature's beauty and power. The description of the landscape highlights nature's beauty: the "kindly warmth" of the sun that spreads over "the white-curtained valley" and "sea of white" paints a mental image of a dazzling winter landscape. The pillowy snow and golden light seem harmless and even benevolent, making nature seem like a gentle, loving force.

However, the passage also makes it clear that nature firmly has the upper hand, as the outcasts are like shipwrecked sailors who are "still [clinging]" to the jagged coastline, knowing that certain death awaits them in the watery depths below. The word *still* here suggests that the outcasts are perhaps fighting a losing battle, and that their resolve and strength will weaken as time goes on. With this quote, Harte presents both sides of the landscape—beautiful and horrific, gentle and hostile—to emphasize the brutality of the Old West and subvert the myth that life in the Old West is one big, thrilling adventure.

●● Some months before he had chanced upon a stray copy of Mr. Pope's ingenious translation of the *Iliad*. He now proposed to narrate the principal incidents of that poem—having thoroughly mastered the argument and fairly forgotten the words—in the current vernacular of Sandy Bar. And so for the rest of that night the Homeric demigods again walked the earth. Trojan bully and wily Greek wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the *cañon* seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus. Mr. Oakhurst listened with quiet satisfaction. Most especially he was interested in the fate of "Ash-heels," as the Innocent persisted in denominating the "swift-footed Achilles."

Related Characters: John Oakhurst, Tom Simson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34-35

Explanation and Analysis



As the storm worsens and the group's spirits begin to dim, Piney suggests they tell stories to pass the time, and Tom volunteers to go first. In this passage, Tom's distinctively Western rehashing of Homer's the *Iliad* builds into a story of nature's godlike power rather than a story about the Trojan War. Peppered with references to the rugged Western landscape that surrounds the group, Tom's version of the *Iliad* takes on the natural texture of the Old West. Even the individual words Tom uses, like *cañon*, reveal a Western influence. The word *cañon* is not quite Spanish (in Spanish, the word is spelled *cañón*, with an accent on the -o) but is an archaic spelling for "canyon" that, given the tilde on the -n, speaks to the American West's geographic and cultural proximity to Mexico. After all, the story takes place in 1850, only two years after Mexico ceded California to the United States in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War. In addition, California is a likely setting of the story given that the outcasts are roughing it in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, which stretches mainly across California but also extends into parts of Nevada and Oregon.

Achilles's character arc in the *Iliad* and popular myth loosely parallels Oakhurst's. Both men are strong leaders, are successful at their trades (being a warrior and a gambler, respectively), and are preoccupied with fate. Both men also come to tragic ends: as the *Iliad* draws to a close, the dying Hector predicts that Achilles will die when an arrow punctures his heel, while Harte's story ends with the discovery of Oakhurst's suicide in the mountains, with a bullet puncturing his heart. However, while Achilles is a prideful, volatile man prone to flashes of anger, Oakhurst is silent and seemingly unmoved by the events unfolding

around him. Furthermore, in the *Iliad*, Achilles is fueled by a desire for revenge; in “The Outcasts of Poker Flat,” Oakhurst doesn’t appear to want revenge against the secret committee that banishes him. Ultimately, while Achilles and Oakhurst are by no means mirror images of one another, Harte steeps his story in Greek mythology and draws parallels between the two characters to make Oakhurst seem like every part the tragic hero as the great Achilles. And though Achillean pride and rage aren’t Oakhurst’s fatal flaws, Harte suggests that the opposite—stoicism—perhaps is.

☛ Day by day closer around them drew the snowy circle, until at last they looked from their prison over drifted walls of dazzling white, that towered twenty feet above their heads. [...] The lovers turned from the dreary prospect and looked into each other’s eyes, and were happy. Mr. Oakhurst settled himself coolly to the losing game before him. The Duchess, more cheerful than she had been, assumed the care of Piney. Only Mother Shipton—once the strongest of the party—seemed to sicken and fade.

Related Characters: Mother Shipton, The Duchess, John Oakhurst, Piney Woods, Tom Simson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis


This quote appears when the outcasts are nearing their 10th day in the mountains, and it seems unlikely that the storm will let up. This quote speaks to nature’s beauty and power and the idea of accepting one’s fate, enfolding two of the story’s major themes. Nature’s domination of physical space in this passage—the snow not only surrounds the outcasts on all sides but towers above them, too—highlights the sheer power of the natural world, especially in such rugged terrain as the Old West. In the Sierra Nevada, the outcasts are at the mercy of nature at its most extreme.


Harte also uses the group’s extreme circumstances to make a larger narrative comment about what it means to accept one’s fate. Oakhurst, rooted in his understanding that life is governed by the ever-changing, uncontrollable winds of luck, “settle[s] himself coolly to the losing game before him.” The word “coolly” has cropped up several times in the story, each time as a way to describe Oakhurst’s words or actions. Calm and unruffled, Oakhurst at times seems more like a

passive observer—standing off to the sidelines, watching life unfold—rather than an active participant in his own story. While in this passage, there is perhaps little he *can* do with 20 feet of snow towering above him, he seems to accept his impending death with startling ease, pointing to Harte’s overarching question of whether or not Oakhurst is a noble, quiet hero or a weak man who welcomes death all too eagerly.

☛ But at the head of the gulch, on one of the largest pine-trees, they found the deuce of clubs pinned to the bark with a bowie knife. [...] And pulseless and cold, with a Derringer by his side and a bullet in his heart, though still calm as in life, beneath the snow lay he who was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat.

Related Characters: John Oakhurst

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of the story, the narrator recounts the discovery of Oakhurst’s dead boy and leaves readers with a final assessment: “Oakhurst was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat.” For the bulk of the story, Oakhurst showed himself to be a strong, levelheaded leader of the outcasts, always serving as the voice of reason and the group’s moral compass. Oakhurst also had a quiet, generous spirit, as seen through the flashback about Oakhurst giving Tom back his fortune, as well as the narrative details about Oakhurst crafting a pair of homemade snowshoes for Tom so that he could make it to town safely, quietly stacking up extra firewood for the Duchess and Piney so they could survive a little longer, and so on. However, in life, Oakhurst was also hemmed in by passivity. The story suggests that Oakhurst was “the weakest of the outcasts” because he didn’t fight tooth and nail for his own survival; he was, the story implies, too accepting of his circumstances and his so-called fate. By committing suicide, it seems that Oakhurst was acting in service of his values—accepting both the lucky and unlucky times as being out of his control—but it also seems that Oakhurst perhaps folded his hand too quickly.



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 OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

John Oakhurst, a gambler, walks around Poker Flat on the morning of November 23, 1850. He senses “a change in its moral atmosphere” has taken place since the night before. A group of men speaking excitedly amongst themselves go quiet when Oakhurst walks by, and a “Sabbath lull” hangs in the air—a bad sign, given that the settlement is unaccustomed to “Sabbath influences.”

Oakhurst’s handsome face shows a faint flicker of worry but is mostly calm and unbothered. Dusting off his boots, Oakhurst surmises that “they’re after somebody”—and that somebody is probably him.

Indeed, Poker Flat is “after somebody.” The settlement has recently suffered greatly, somehow losing several thousand dollars, two prized horses, and an important resident. In the wake of this tragedy, the residents of Poker Flat have become whipped up into a “spasm of virtuous reaction,” just as wild and out of control as whatever people or actions brought such chaos to the town in the first place. A secret committee convenes to decide who can remain at Poker Flat and who should go. All “improper persons” must be done away with, whether in the form of hanging or exile. Two men have already been hanged.

From the outset, the story is concerned with morality and immorality, a dichotomy that Harte will complicate as he unveils his main characters. This passage also begins to flesh out the settlement of Poker Flat and the American Old West more broadly. The Sabbath is a day of rest in Judaism and Christianity, celebrated on Saturdays and Sundays, respectively. As it’s “unaccustomed to Sabbath influences”—meaning religion more broadly, and a day of rest specifically—it seems that Poker Flat is perhaps a noisy, unstructured, rowdy place.



Oakhurst is set apart from the masses and antagonized, as he muses that the town’s residents are likely out to get him. However, Oakhurst is characterized as an exceedingly calm man who is accepting of his circumstances—even his sense that the town is “after” him isn’t enough to make him feel panicked.



Poker Flat is in a particularly vulnerable state, nursing the wounds of financial and personal loss. This passage begins to complicate what constitutes as morality versus immorality, as the residents who act virtuously do so with a similar measure of unruliness and savage energy as those who are implied to be immoral. This casts doubt on how Poker Flat measures morality and whether those it deems “improper” are worthy of that title and accompanying punishment. The residents’ hard-edged attitudes toward “improper persons” also further characterize the Old West as a dangerous, unforgiving place.



Of those “objectionable characters” who must be banished, some are women. The narrator is regretful about this but notes that “It is but due to the sex [...] to state that their impropriety was professional.” As for Oakhurst, some of the committee members insist that he be hanged—he recently won money from several of them, and they wish to take their money back from him. One such committee member, Jim Wheeler, is irate that Oakhurst waltzed into Poker Flat and “carr[ied] away [their] money,” since Oakhurst, who hails from a settlement called Roaring Camp, is “an entire stranger.”

However, the members of the committee who have won money from Oakhurst intervene, suggesting that the man be banished rather than hanged. Oakhurst reacts to his sentence with “philosophic calmness.” As a gambler, he knows that he can’t fight against “Fate.” To him, life is a game of chance, and he understands “the usual percentage in favor of the dealer.”

A group of armed men, meant specifically to intimidate Oakhurst, marches the outcasts out of Poker Flat. There are four outcasts in the group: a young lady who is “familiarily known as ‘The Duchess,’” a man called Uncle Billy who is drunkard and “suspected sluice-robber,” and woman who has somehow earned the nickname Mother Shipton. When the group reaches the gulch—which marks the edge of Poker Flat—the guards turn back, warning the outcasts to never return. If they do, they will be killed.

The women who are banished are heavily implied to be prostitutes by their “impropriety,” or indecent behavior, that is also associated with a profession. That the committee members are deeply biased further suggests that the town’s moral compass is not to be trusted. The character of Jim Wheeler is likely a subtle nod to his long-time friend Mark Twain’s “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” whose main characters are Jim Smiley and Simon Wheeler. Twain’s story is also about gambling, as a stranger dishonestly wins a bet and takes off with the money. The stranger is referred to as such throughout the story, making it particularly striking that Harte’s Jim Wheeler vehemently deems Oakhurst “an entire stranger.”



Oakhurst’s profession as a gambler informs his broader worldview. In the context of Oakhurst’s banishment, the secret committee has a similar role to a card dealer who oversees players and makes sure they aren’t cheating—the most powerful men in Poker Flat have the authority and clout to pass harsh moral judgments on their peers. That Oakhurst reacts with “philosophic calmness” begins to align him with Stoicism, a school of philosophy that centers around self-control, acceptance of the present moment, and avoidance and distrust of extreme emotion.



Uncle Billy’s status as a “suspected sluice-robber” orients the story within the Gold Rush era. A sluice is a metal contraption that filters out water and dirt, leaving behind gold, so this passage implies that Uncle Billy may have been prone to stealing the fruits of other people’s labor. That he’s only “suspected” of the theft implies that he’s gotten away with stealing gold in the past, painting the Old West as a lawless free-for-all. The fact that he’s being punished so harshly on the basis of suspicion (plus his drunkenness, which doesn’t seem to be debated) simultaneously suggests that the Old West is harsh, authoritarian, and unforgiving.



Once the guards are gone, the Duchess begins to sob and Mother Shipton swears bitterly. Uncle Billy releases “a Parthian volley of expletives,” but “the philosophic Oakhurst” doesn’t say a word. As the Duchess and Mother Shipton theatrically declare that they want kill someone or be killed themselves, and Uncle Billy makes similarly disturbing proclamations, Oakhurst listens quietly. He offers to switch mules with the Duchess, giving her the better one, but even this act of kindness doesn’t help the group bond or empathize with one another. The Duchess rearranges her skirts with “feeble, faded” flirtatiousness, Mother Shipton glares at the Duchess, and Uncle Billy curses the entire group.

The outcasts make their way to Sandy Bar, the next town over, which isn’t as refined as Poker Flat and is therefore likely to be more welcoming to the outcasts. The journey is difficult, though, as the town is one full day of intense and difficult travel away, the mountain pass is steep and narrow, and the cold air is harsh and unforgiving.

At noon, the Duchess announces that she will go no further. Although the spot does make for a beautiful campsite—it’s a “wooded amphitheater” nestled amongst three towering granite cliffs—Oakhurst knows that stopping to camp isn’t a good idea. They’re only halfway to Sandy Bar and don’t have the food or the supplies necessary to prolong their journey. He makes this clear to his traveling companions and adds “a philosophic commentary on the folly of ‘throwing up their hand before the game was played out,’” but they refuse to listen to his “remonstrances.” Soon, everyone but Oakhurst is drunk.

In ancient Iran, soldiers from the Parthian Empire developed a distinctive and highly effective battle technique: in combat, the Parthians would suddenly run away, as if fleeing in terror. Once the enemy was certain that the Parthians were retreating, the Parthians would suddenly turn around and shoot them in a merciless surprise attack. That Uncle Billy delivers “a Parthian volley of expletives” suggests two things. First, it shows that, like Mother Shipton, Uncle Billy has a crude vocabulary that seems to match his unrefined reputation. Second, it foreshadows a similarly fatal surprise attack, in which Uncle Billy will be at the center.



The Old West is a thoroughly dangerous place, as the outcasts are forced to leave one life-threatening danger (the unforgiving residents of Poker Flat, who have made it clear that the outcasts will be killed if they return) for another, the similarly rugged and hostile natural world.



Even though the landscape of the Old West can be dangerous, it is also beautiful and captivating, seen here with the “wooded amphitheater” where the group stops to rest. However, Oakhurst’s concerns about stopping speak to the tension between nature’s beauty and sheer power that runs throughout the story. Once again, Oakhurst is the clear voice of reason in the group—he is calm but firm, and he draws on his experience as a gambler to make sense of the situation. Even though the story characterized him earlier as someone who is wholly accepting of fate, his objections in this passage suggest that he draws a line between taking action when one can, and accepting one’s circumstances when it’s the only option left. This is also a tension that stretches until the very end of the story, as Harte portrays Oakhurst as alternately heroic and passive, strong and weak.



Under the influence of alcohol, Uncle Billy becomes aggressive and combative, the Duchess grows weepy and sentimental, and Mother Shipton falls asleep. Meanwhile, Oakhurst stands off to the side, silently observing his companions. He doesn't drink, since alcohol hampers his ability to be clear-headed and straight-faced. According to Oakhurst, he simply "[can't] afford it." As he watches his companions sleep, Oakhurst reflects on his "pariah-trade" and the loneliness that accompanies it.

That Oakhurst abstains from alcohol speaks to the complexity of his character. He may have his vices—namely, gambling—but he's also prudent and wise. Even though Poker Flat branded him as immoral by throwing him in with the other outcasts, it seems that Oakhurst is perhaps not so immoral after all. This passage also shows the emotional depth of Oakhurst's character. While he's usually on the fringes of the group, silently looking on with an unreadable expression, this moment reveals that he's actually a deeply lonely man who seems to long for a sense of community and belonging. He notes that his penchant for gambling makes him a "pariah," meaning someone who is rejected from society. However, several members of Poker Flat's secret committee gambled against Oakhurst, yet those people weren't cast out of Poker Flat.



Oakhurst dusts off his clothes and washes his hands and face with characteristic meticulousness. Although "The thought of deserting his weaker and more pitiable companions never perhaps occurred to him," he still feels extremely unsettled. He misses the excitement of gambling, which ironically is what makes him so calm and levelheaded.

Even though Oakhurst is accustomed to social isolation as a gambler, his distance from society—and thus from the prospect of gambling—is beginning to wear on him. The narrator interjects in this passage, guessing that Oakhurst probably isn't considering leaving his fellow outcasts behind. This speculation furthers the idea that Oakhurst isn't some morally reprehensible criminal—he is principled and loyal, even if his fellow outcasts haven't done anything to earn such loyalty from him.



Gazing at the granite cliffs and towering pine trees encircling him, as well as the threateningly cloudy skies above, Oakhurst suddenly hears someone call out his name. Riding down the trail is Tom Simson, a Sandy Bar resident who's known as "The Innocent." Months ago, Oakhurst won about \$40 from Tom in a "little game," but Oakhurst ultimately gave the young man his money back along with a stern talk about never gambling again. With this, Oakhurst "made a devoted slave of Tom Simson."

The money that Oakhurst won from Tom is no small fortune—in the late 1840s, \$40 would have had the same purchasing power as over \$1,200 in 2019's currency. While Oakhurst could have gone on his way with his pockets lined handsomely with Tom's money, he doesn't. Oakhurst not only returns Tom's money but also warns him to never gamble again, saving Tom from getting himself into a similar situation in the future. Once again, Oakhurst is portrayed as a kind and ethical man, emphasizing that he doesn't deserve his exile sentence.



Tom is fresh-faced and cheerful, delighted to have stumbled upon Oakhurst in the woods. He admits that he is headed to Poker Flat to elope with his fiancée, Piney Woods. Piney's father, Jake Woods, had objected to their pair's engagement, so the pair ran away. Meanwhile, 15-year-old Piney rides out from behind a tree, blushing and beautiful.

Tom is the very picture of bubbly, boyish innocence and enthusiasm, making him a foil for the serious, strong, and silent Oakhurst who has weathered many hardships. Similarly, Piney is immediately characterized as childlike, meek, and pure, setting her apart from the two other women—Mother Shipton and the Duchess, both prostitutes—in the group.



Oakhurst implores Tom to continue on his way rather than linger, as Oakhurst and his companions are out of rations and have no way to make camp. However, “The Innocent” enthusiastically offers up his and Piney’s rations and notes that he saw a flimsily built log cabin nearby where they can set up camp. Tom says that Piney can spend the night with “Mrs. Oakhurst”—pointing to the Duchess—which sends Uncle Billy into a fit of laughter so powerful that he has to excuse himself for a while until he can calm down.

When Uncle Billy returns, he finds everyone seated around the fire, chatting animatedly. Uncle Billy looks around at the group in disgust and notices the mules tied up nearby. All of a sudden, an idea “of a jocular nature” creeps into his mind, and he’s so excited that he drunkenly slaps his leg with glee and stuffs his entire fist in his mouth.

The women are to spend the night in the dilapidated cabin, insulated with pine branches, while the men are to sleep outside. Piney and Tom say goodnight, sharing a single kiss that is so simple and pure that it leaves “the frail Duchess” and “the malevolent Mother Shipton” speechless.

In the morning, Oakhurst wakes up with a start, realizing that there is snow on the ground. He jumps up to wake the others, eager to beat the storm, but he suddenly realizes that Uncle Billy is gone—as are all of the group’s mules, their tracks already growing faint in the falling snow. Oakhurst’s burst of excitement gives way to his usual stoicism, and he decides to let the others sleep for a while longer. Tom is smiling in his sleep, while the Duchess and Mother Shipton sleep beside Piney like “celestial guardians” protecting her in her sleep.

The tension between nature’s beauty and power reappears here, as Tom naively positions their time in the mountains as a jaunty camping trip among friends rather than a fight for survival. In mistaking the Duchess for Oakhurst’s wife, Tom further reveals his innocence and naivete; he seems to assume that his hero, Oakhurst, would have a wife rather than be an outcast, and he doesn’t fathom that the Duchess might be a prostitute.



Uncle Billy is thoroughly volatile and increasingly unhinged in this passage. It’s reasonable to assume that, with his stained reputation, crude sense of humor, and abrasive vocabulary, Uncle Billy’s “jocular” idea is probably not as playful as he might think. This passage also makes it clear that the group is beginning to bond, but Uncle Billy wants no part in it.



Harte’s story is brimming with epithets, like “the frail Duchess” and “the malevolent Mother Shipton.” This is fitting, given that Homer’s the Iliad—itsself famously filled with epithets—will appear later in the story. Through the use of these epithets—and the later references to Homer—Harte fleshes out his characters and imbues his story with a kind of mythological quality and sense of impending fate. This passage also brings up the idea of morality, as Piney and Tom’s kiss seems to awe and perhaps inspire the two prostitutes.



Oakhurst quickly springs into action, but in the next moment he becomes calm, accepting, and seemingly passive again, raising the question of whether he is fighting hard enough against his circumstances. Meanwhile, the Old West is once again portrayed as a dangerous place—Uncle Billy’s betrayal suggests that no one can be trusted, and that it is “every man for himself” (as the saying goes), while the freshly fallen snow begins to hint at nature’s power and capacity for destruction. On another note, the description of the Duchess and Mother Shipton as “celestial guardians,” given their proximity to Piney, foreshadows the way that she will have a redemptive, purifying effect on them.



It's not long before the group is snowed in. They take inventory of their remaining rations and decide that they can stretch their supplies for 10 days if they're exceedingly careful. Oakhurst can't bear to tell Piney and Tom that Uncle Billy stole off with the mules, so he instead tells them that Uncle Billy left in search of more provisions, and that he must have accidentally spooked the animals and made them stampede. Mother Shipton and the Duchess are aware of the reality of the situation, but Oakhurst warns them not to say anything to Piney and Tom—"They'll find out the truth about us *all* when they find out anything," he says.

Although Oakhurst does lie and strategically omit information from Piney and Tom, he does so to protect them. Oakhurst's compassionate actions speak to the story's overarching idea that people can't be neatly shelved as moral or immoral—at least for the most part, as Uncle Billy, however, seems even more immoral than before in light of his theft. No longer simply stealing gold from other people's sluices, Uncle Billy commits a far worse crime in stealing the group's mules. With snow on the ground and no mules to travel on, the group is stranded, possibly left to die in the mountains, and Uncle Billy is responsible.



Tom merrily suggests that they'll "have a good camp for a week" and then they will "all go back together" once the snow melts. The group begins to spruce up their dilapidated cabin, while Oakhurst goes out to look for the trailhead. After an unsuccessful search, Oakhurst heads toward the cabin but is startled by the sound of laughter. At first, he thinks the laughter must be fueled by whiskey, but he knows that's impossible, as he hid the group's alcohol. Once the cabin is in sight, he realizes that the laughter is coming from "square fun"—despite the blizzard, the group is gathered around a bonfire. That night, Piney plays the accordion and Tom plays the castanets.

Oakhurst and Tom again appear as one another's foils, as Tom is lighthearted and fails to grasp the gravity of the situation, while Oakhurst is practical and prudent, searching for the trail and hiding the group's alcohol. In hiding the whiskey, Oakhurst seems to be trying to prevent any more mishaps (readers may recall that Uncle Billy's "jocular" idea of stealing the mules came to him when he was drunk) while also encouraging the group to be levelheaded and serious. Nonetheless, the other members of the party seem to treat their situation as a delightful adventure, still unaware of how brutal the landscape of the Old West can be.



As the night wears on, Piney and Tom lead the group in a Christian hymn. Though the two lovers sing the song with enthusiasm and sincerity, the rest of the group take up "a certain defiant tone and Covenanter's swing," singing, "I'm proud to live in the service of the Lord, / And I'm bound to die in His army." Meanwhile, the storm wages on powerfully.

The tension between immorality and morality rises to the forefront of the story here, as there is a stark difference between how Tom and Piney sing the hymn versus how the others do. The Covenanters were a Scottish Presbyterian group who called for separation from the Church of England—they believed that Jesus was the head of the Church, not the king. Although the song the characters sing here is an early American spiritual, not a Covenanter battle cry, the song carries a similar "defiant" sentiment, which is why the story brands it as a "Covenanter's swing." Having already gone against the social and moral grain of Poker Flat in various ways, it's fitting that this "defiant tone" is appealing to the outcasts.



That night, Oakhurst stands guard. He is accustomed to little sleep and takes up his post easily. Earlier that evening, he told Tom that there were times in his life during which he'd gone whole weeks without sleep, all for the sake of playing poker. He explained that "when a man gets a streak of luck,—nigger luck,—he don't get tired. [...] All you know about [luck] for certain is that it's bound to change. And it's finding out when it's going to change that makes you." He went on to tell Tom that the group had been experiencing a "streak of bad luck since [they] left Poker Flat," and that somehow Tom had gotten caught up in it, too. He then cautioned Tom to "hold [his] cards right."

On the third day in the mountains, the sunlight casts a warm, friendly glow over the snowy woods, "as if in regretful commiseration of the past." But the snow piles higher and higher around the hut like a "hopeless, uncharted trackless sea of white lying below the rocky shores to which the castaways still clung." The sky is clear, though, and Mother Shipton spots a plume of smoke curling up in the sky from the direction of Poker Flat. Overcome with anger, she shouts bitter curses toward Poker Flat, which feels cathartic. Later, she and the Duchess take to entertaining Piney, whom they've deemed "the child."

That night, even music is not enough to distract the group from their bleak situation. Piney suggests they tell stories instead. None of the outcasts are willing to share anything from their lives, but luckily Tom has a story he's eager to share. Several months ago, he stumbled across a copy of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, and though he doesn't exactly remember the words, he remembers the core story well enough to tell it to the group.

While Harte was known in his time for being a prominent anti-racist writer, one of his works—the satirical poem "Plain Language from Truthful James," also known as "The Heathen Chinee"—unintentionally perpetuated racism directed at Chinese immigrants in the West rather than effectively criticizing it. While Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" doesn't mention race much, Oakhurst's use of the n-word in this passage feels similarly loaded with confused intent: is Harte using Oakhurst, the story's hero and protagonist, to criticize the glaring racism and race inequality of 1850s America, or is it reflective of Harte's own biases? On another note, Oakhurst's speech shows that he organizes his life and worldview around luck, or fate.



Once again, the landscape of the Old West is both beautiful and hostile, gentle and destructive. The outcasts are described as "still [clinging]" to survival, which implies that the outcome of their journey won't be a good one. The historical Mother Shipton was a 15th-century prophetess who, in time, turned into a legendary figure known for predicting the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. (In actuality, it seems that the real Mother Shipton's predictions were all small-scale, regional ones.) That Harte's Mother Shipton goes by this name associates her with the historical Mother Shipton's foresight. In looking out at Poker Flat and cursing it vehemently, then, it seems that Mother Shipton is aware that her own end will be a tragic one.



Tom is referring to poet Alexander Pope's neo-classical translation of Homer's the Iliad, which Pope released between 1715 and 1720 in four installments. The Iliad recounts the final leg of the Trojan War and how Achilles slayed Hector. This it seems that Tom plans to use a story of tragedy and death—set in a time and place just as brutal and dangerous as the Old West—to distract the other group members from what seems to be their own impending tragic deaths.



In his distinct Sand Bar dialect, Tom launches into Homer's story: "Trojan bully and wily Greek wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the cañon seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus." Oakhurst listens intently as Tom recounts the fate of "Ash-heels," which he calls the "swift-footed Achilles."

Tom's Old West rehashing of Homer's epic seems to mythologize the Old West. Tom mixes Greek myth with elements of the Western landscape, the result of which is an epic that imbues nature with a godlike strength and power. That the character of Achilles resonates with Oakhurst seems fitting—they're both strong, heroic leaders—but readers may be aware that although Homer doesn't recount Achilles' death in the Iliad, Achilles does, in fact, die at the end of the Trojan War. This infuses elements of fate and foreboding in Harte's story, suggesting that Oakhurst's life may also quietly come to an end after all the action has played out.



After a week, another storm rolls in, surrounding the cabin with 20-foot-tall mounds of snow. Because of this, the group struggles to find wood to fuel their fires. Despite the grim circumstances, Piney and Tom spend their days gazing contentedly into one another's eyes. Oakhurst "settle[s] himself coolly to the losing game before him," while the Duchess happily busies herself by taking care of Piney.

Things are looking increasingly bleak for the group. Oakhurst resigns himself "to the losing game before him," suggesting that he believes he's fated to die in the mountains. Though perhaps there's nothing he can do about his situation right now—he's surrounded by towering walls of snow—it still seems striking that he "coolly" accepts his death. Meanwhile, the Duchess finds joy in caring for Piney, which begins to show the transformative effect she has on the women in the group.



Meanwhile, Mother Shipton slowly grows weak. At midnight on the group's 10th day in the mountains, she quietly confides in Oakhurst that she's been voluntarily starving herself, secretly tucking away her rations. She tells Oakhurst to remove a bundle from behind her head—where she's been storing the rations—and urges him to give the extra food to "the child," pointing to Piney, who is asleep. Within moments, Mother Shipton quietly passes away.

Once a coarse, abrasive, sour woman, Mother Shipton reveals herself in this passage to be an extraordinarily kind and loving woman, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Because of Mother Shipton's affection for Piney, the woman dies a martyr rather than a sinner—Piney's friendship allows Mother Shipton to be more than just a prostitute and an outcast. Like many of the other outcasts, there is more to Mother Shipton that meets the eye, and her final good deed ensures that she resists easy categorization as moral or immoral.



That day, no one plays accordion or recites Homer. After the group buries Mother Shipton in the snow, Oakhurst pulls Tom aside and presents him with a pair of homemade snowshoes, which Oakhurst made out of a saddle. Gravely, Oakhurst says that Tom only has "one chance in a hundred to save [Piney]," but if he can make it to Poker Flat in two days, he might be able to save her. Tom asks what Oakhurst plans to do, and Oakhurst tersely replies that he is staying behind.

While the group has thus far been able to pretend that they're merely on a camping trip or an adventure in the woods, Mother Shipton's death seems to snap everyone out of their optimistic delusions. Oakhurst's ability to whip up a pair of homemade snowshoes, coupled with the seriousness and urgency of his plea to Tom, shows that Oakhurst does value action rather than giving up. However, Oakhurst is adamant that he will stay behind, raising the question of whether Oakhurst nobly plans to stay with the women out of loyalty, or if he has merely given up altogether on escaping from the mountains.



After Tom and Piney say their goodbyes, Oakhurst tells the others that he is accompanying Tom to the canyon but no farther. He then suddenly kisses the Duchess and exits the cabin, leaving her body “trembling” and her face “aflame.”

By nightfall, Oakhurst still hasn't returned. The Duchess finds that someone has left a neat stack of firewood next to the cabin, enough the fuel the fire for a few more days. The Duchess's eyes well up, but she hides her tears from Piney. That night, the women barely sleep, and in the morning, they look into one another's eyes, wordlessly acknowledging their fate. “Accepting the position of the stronger,” Piney wraps her arms around the Duchess. That night, the storm reaches its climax and snow spills into the hut.

By morning, neither Piney nor the Duchess are able to feed the fire, so they let it sputter out. The Duchess asks Piney if she can pray, but Piney says no. The Duchess places her head on Piney's shoulder: “And so reclining the younger and purer pillowing the head of her soiled sister upon her virgin breast, they fell asleep.”

The wind quiets down as if not wanting to wake up the Duchess and Piney, while snow flutters down from the trees “like white-winged birds” and nestles itself around the women. The moon gazes down at the cabin, “But all human stain, all trace of earthly travail, was hidden beneath the spotless mantle mercifully flung from above.”

The Duchess and Piney sleep for several days and don't wake up when “footsteps and voices” enter into the camp. Someone dusts the snow off of the two women's faces, but they both wear an expression of “equal peace,” making it impossible to tell which woman was the virgin and “which was she that had sinned.” Unable to discern the women from one another, “the law of Poker Flat” leaves them there, clasped in an embrace.

Readers may recall that Tom earlier mistook the Duchess for Oakhurst's wife—a misunderstanding that no one seemed to clear up, as no one wanted to reveal themselves as outcasts—so Oakhurst's kiss here may be a way for him to continue playing that role so that Tom doesn't get suspicious. It's possible, too, that the kiss is Oakhurst's way of saying a meaningful goodbye to the Duchess, sensing that the end is in sight. Regardless, the kiss has an invigorating effect on the Duchess, who has been repeatedly described as frail and tired up to this point.



Here, the story implies that Oakhurst was the one who left them the firewood, also implying that he had no intentions of returning. In hiding her tears from Piney, the Duchess shows how she's grown into a motherly, protective role for Piney. However, in this passage, Piney also reciprocates that motherly care. The Duchess becomes “the child” in need of protection, hinting at the transformative effect Piney's friendship has.



As they fall asleep, the Duchess and Piney are still placed into tidy categories of moral and immoral, virgin and prostitute, a dichotomy that the story is about to challenge head on.



The landscape of the Old West is once again beautiful and gentle in this passage, “mercifully” cleansing the outcasts of “all human stain” and “all trace of earthly travail,” but this tenderness cloaks a dark reality: nature is precisely what has caused the outcasts to suffer so much.



The “footsteps and voices” in the passage likely belong to rescuers because of the invocation of “the law of Poker Flat,” which would suggest that Tom was successful in making it to Poker Flat to get help. However, by now it's clear that the Duchess and Piney have died. In death, the Duchess is no longer defined by her profession as a prostitute or characterized as frail or tired. As she did for Mother Shipton, Piney drew out the Duchess's goodness, ensuring that she can't be pinned down simply as “she that had sinned.”



Near the head of the gulch, the people who found the Duchess and Piney find a pine tree with a playing card, **the deuce of clubs**, pinned to it with a knife. On the card, scrawled in pencil, is the following message: "Beneath this tree lies the body of John Oakhurst who struck a streak of bad luck on the 23[r]d of November, 1850, and handed in his checks on the 7th [of] December, 1850."

Oakhurst's makeshift tombstone is a playing card, which aligns with his worldview that life is a game of luck—either one has it or one doesn't. Earlier, the story revealed that the gulch marks the boundary of Poker Flat. While it's unclear just how long that gulch stretches, it seems significant that Oakhurst commits suicide at the head of the gulch, implying that he was perhaps not so far from town and could have made it there. This possibility speaks to the way that Oakhurst oscillates between taking action and giving up too quickly.



A gun lies beside Oakhurst's dead body, which has been pierced through the heart with a bullet. In death, he looks just as serene and untroubled as he did in life. Oakhurst "was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat."

The story ends with the declaration that Oakhurst was both exceedingly strong and exceedingly weak, pointing to the guiding question of the story: is Oakhurst a quiet, self-sacrificial hero, or is he a weak man who fails to tenaciously fight against life? Harte leaves this unresolved, forcing readers to form their own interpretation of Oakhurst's life and death.





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