Outcasts of Poker Flat Study Guide

Outcasts of Poker Flat by Bret Harte

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Introduction

"The Outcasts of Poker Flat" was first published in January, 1869, issue of the *Overland Monthly* magazine, which Bret Harte edited. At the time, Harte was on the threshold of national fame The success of his short story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" the year before had elevated the twenty-nine-year-old writer to a position of literary prominence. Critics praised "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" as a suitable follow-up that confirmed Harte's stature as one of the most promising new authors In the United States By 1871 Harte was not only the highest paid writer in the country, but also one of the most popular. He was a regular contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly,* one of the most popular magazines of the day.

Although both Harte's popularity and critical admiration for his work have declined In subsequent years, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" remains an important piece of American literature and one of the best tales of the rough-and-tumble days of the California Gold Rush In his use of the Western setting and local color, Harte proved to be a model for other authors, Including Mark Twain, whose career he helped launch. Indeed, the familiarity of many of Harte's characterizations-the quick-witted gambler or the prostitute With a heart of gold attest to the durability of his Impact on popular culture. Harte first journeyed to the American West in 1854 and was advantageously positioned to observe one of the key events of the nineteenth century, the California Gold Rush. This setting in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is used as a forum to explore themes of tolerance and forgiveness, appearance and reality, and the ominous power of nature.

Author Biography

Best remembered as the author of a handful of short stories depicting the rigors of life during the California Gold Rush, Bret Harte enjoyed a lengthy literary career working variously as a journalist, poet, and playwright. Although at one time he was the highest paid author in the United States and a popular lecturer, his work receives relatively less attention today. The sentimental nature of his style, coupled with the conspicuous repetition of his plots, has resulted in Harte being dismissed or overlooked by many modern readers.

The son of an academic, Francis Brett Harte was born August 25, 1836, in Albany, New York. He developed an interest in literature early in life, reading the classics and composing poetry while still a child. In 1854, Harte moved to San Francisco. During the next four years, he was primarily employed as a teacher and tutor but also worked a series of jobs that placed him in contact with the rugged world of the Gold Rush prospector. Although biographers generally regard him as more of an observer than a participant in the rough-and-tumble culture of Gold Rush California, these experiences provided Harte with a valuable glimpse of frontier life and eventually inspired his most successful writings.

Harte began his professional literary career in 1857 when his essays and poems were published in *Golden Era,* a San Francisco weekly. During the next nine years, Harte worked for several local newspapers and magazines as a typesetter, editor, reporter, and contributor of essays and poetry In addition, his service as correspondent for two papers published in Boston brought his name to the attention of readers in the East.

Early in 1868, Harte became the editor of the *Overland Monthly,* a new publication designed to showcase the literary talent of California. In the magazine's second issue, Harte included an unsigned story of his own composition, "The Luck of Roaring Camp." By September the story had been reprinted in the East and Harte had been identified as the author. Due to its bawdy characters and overtones of religious parody, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" elicited considerable controversy at the time of its publication. Despite its critics, the story elevated Harte to a position of national prominence. During the next two years, he continued to edit the *Overland Monthly* and contribute more short stories to it. His writings from this period, such as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and "Tennessee's Partner," are widely judged to be his most enduring achievements. He also fostered the talents of a young unknown writer named Mark Twain and published some of his first stones Twain publicly declared his gratitude to Harte, but in later years he was also known to have derided his mentor's stones as unoriginal.

By 1871 Harte was at the height of his career. He had returned to the East to work as a contributor for a national magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly.* Among other distinctions, Harte was a key speaker at the commencement ceremonies at Harvard University in June. However, his success proved to be fleeting. His new writings failed to achieve the acclaim of his earlier stories, and he was no longer able to command premium prices for his work. To compensate for the decline in income, Harte began a career as a public

speaker, giving lectures to Eastern audiences about life in California during the Gold Rush.

Throughout the l870s, Harte continued to write short stories and also authored two plays, one in collaboration with Twain, titled *Ah Sin.* However, much of his work from this period was produced quickly and carelessly. At times he simply recycled old plots and provided new titles. With his literary reputation foundering, Harte left the United States for a new career in foreign service. From 1880 to 1885 he served as the American Consul to Scotland. Despite this move, Harte did not abandon writing. Throughout the 1890s, he remained prolific and authored critical essays, stones, and an additional play, *Sue,* in 1896. He died in England of throat cancer on May 5, 1902.

Plot Summary

"The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is set near a California mining community during November of 1850. Experimenting with the effectiveness of vigilante justice, the residents of Poker Flat hope to improve the town by expelling a group of undesirables. Among these objectionable characters are professional gambler John Oakhurst; a prostitute known as Duchess; her madam, Mother Shipton; and Uncle Billy, the town drunkard and a suspected thief. The foursome is escorted to the edge of Poker Flat and "forbidden to return at the peril of their lives." With no apparent alternative, the group heads toward the next settlement, Sandy Bar. However, the journey requires passage over a difficult mountain trail. Less than midway to their destination, the group becomes exhausted and decides to camp for the night. Oakhurst argues that they should continue on because they lack the provisions to stop safely. The party is unconcerned, ignores him, and opts to consume its supply of liquor.

Later, a horseman from Sandy Bar arrives at the camp. His name is Tom Simson, and he is also referred to as the Innocent. He is traveling with his fifteen-year-old fiancé, Piney Woods. The two have eloped and are on their way to Poker Flat to be married. Simson is an acquaintance of Oakhurst, having once lost forty dollars to him in a poker game. However, Oakhurst had taken pity on the Innocent and returned his money, advising him never to gamble again. As a result, Simson perceives Oakhurst as a genuine friend and quickly offers to share his provisions with the foursome. Simson directs the party to an abandoned cabin nearby, and they take shelter there for the night.

The next morning Oakhurst is the first to rise and discovers that Uncle Billy has stolen their mules during the night. Furthermore, the winter snows have begun and left the party trapped in the valley. To avoid frightening Simson and Piney, Oakhurst persuades the Duchess and Mother Shipton to keep Billy's theft a secret. Simson has enough food to last the party ten days and enthusiastically offers to share. Unaware of the gravity of the situation, he envisions the group enjoying a happy camp until the snow melts. During the next week, the party remains trapped in the valley. Simson and Piney not only remain naive about their chances of survival, but also about the reputations of the outcasts. They view the other women with respect and admiration. Unaccustomed to such kindness, the prostitutes become motherly toward Piney and are moved by the sincerity of the couple's love. After ten days in the cabin, Mother Shipton dies of starvation. She had been saving her rations and makes a final request for Oakhurst to give them to Piney.

Realizing they are probably doomed, Oakhurst instructs Simson to attempt a hike to Poker Flat to get help. The gambler then gathers a supply of firewood for Duchess and Piney and disappears. Several days later a rescue party arrives, only to discover the frozen bodies of the women huddled together inside the cabin. Oakhurst is found nearby with a pistol by his side and a bullet through his heart, and with a suicide note written on a playing card pinned to a tree above his body.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This story takes place in November of 1850 in the town of Poker Flat, California. John Oakhurst, a gambler, is met with the suspicious glances of some of the residents as he walks onto the town's Main Street. Assuming the people of the town are "after somebody," Oakhurst continues on his way. Apparently, Oakhurst's assumption is correct; recently stricken by a series of thefts, the townspeople appointed a secret committee in order to rid the town of those believed to be responsible.

Two suspects were hanged while others were banished from town. John Oakhurst was supposed to be hanged; however, his life was spared by a small contingent that was fortunate to win some of his money.

The day of Oakhurst's banishment from Poker Flat arrives, and he is joined by three other people: a prostitute known as The Duchess, her madam, Mother Shipton, and Uncle Billy, a suspected thief and notorious drunk. The four people are escorted to the edge of town and are given orders never to return.

Left alone, the group contemplates their fate. The Duchess is clearly upset; Mother Shipton is angry and Uncle Billy curses in anger. However, John Oakhurst remains silent. Oakhurst, in a gesture characteristic of his gentile qualities, insists that The Duchess ride his horse while he travels on her old mule.

The group begins their journey to Sandy Bar, a new settlement that has not yet been exposed to the negative influences the group represents. Sandy Bar, which lies on the other side of a steep mountain range, is at least a day's travel away. As they leave the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, the relatively mild weather gives way to harsher temperatures and the trail upon which they are traveling becomes narrow, increasingly difficult to navigate.

They travel until mid-day, at which point, The Duchess gets off her horse and declares she does not intend to travel any farther. John Oakhurst quickly surveys their surroundings and while he believes the spot is suitable for a camp, he also knows that they are less than halfway to their destination and they do not have the provisions for a trip longer than one day's duration, a fact that he points out to his traveling companions.

Oakhurst's protests are nonetheless overruled and the group settles in with only a bottle of liquor to sustain them. Oakhurst does not drink; his profession as a gambler requires that he be able to maintain his composure. As he watches the others, he begins to regret the actions that have brought his life to this point. In an effort to rid his mind of these thoughts, he cleans himself up and looks at his surroundings.

As he looks around, John Oakhurst hears a voice calling his name and instantly recognizes Tom Simson, a young man from Sandy Bar. As the result of an earlier

incident, Oakhurst refers to Simson as "the Innocent." Oakhurst had once engaged the young man in a gambling session and won his entire fortune of forty dollars. Feeling sorry for the young man, Oakhurst returned the money and warned Simson that he should never gamble again. Consequently, Simson feels a sense of indebtedness toward Oakhurst.

Simson reports that he and his fifteen-year-old fiancé, Piney Woods, are on their way to Poker Flat to be married. They were both tired, but they were elated that they had met up with Oakhurst and his party so that they could camp. Oakhurst attempts to discourage Simson and Piney from staying, telling them that they have no provisions. Simson tells him that he has a mule loaded with provisions and that he had spotted an abandoned cabin near the trail where they can stay. Incorrectly assuming that The Duchess is Oakhurst's wife, Simson suggests that Piney stay with her. That evening, the group has a conversation around a campfire. As night falls, the women retire to the cabin and the men sleep around the fire.

John Oakhurst is awakened in the morning by a numbing cold, soon discovering that it is snowing. Suddenly, Oakhurst realizes that Uncle Billy is gone and the mules are missing. Fortunately, they had previously removed the provisions from the mules and stored them within the cabin.

When the others awake, Oakhurst tells them that they are snowed in. With the provisions they have, they can likely last ten days. He chooses not to tell Simson about Uncle Billy's theft of the mules. Rather, he concocts a story in which Uncle Billy had wandered from the camp and accidentally stampeded the mules.

Simson is eager to stay and is more than willing to share his provisions. The group spends the day preparing the cabin for their stay. Oakhurst goes searching for the trail, and when he returns, he finds the group happily laughing around the fire. As the evening wears on, they sing songs accompanied by Simson's accordion and bone castanets.

As the days wear on and their supply of food dwindles, the festive atmosphere gives way to a more somber mood. A week passes, and on the tenth day, Mother Shipton summons Oakhurst. Having grown noticeably weaker over the preceding days, she tells Oakhurst that she is dying. She instructs him to take the bundle from under her head and when he opens it, he is surprised to find her entire allotment of food. She instructs Oakhurst to give the food to Piney as she dies.

After Mother Shipton is buried in the snow, Oakhurst takes Simson aside and instructs him to go to Poker Flat for help. Oakhurst says he will accompany Simson to the canyon. Before leaving, he grabs The Duchess and kisses her, taking her by surprise.

Night falls and it begins to snow again. Oakhurst has not returned. The Duchess looks outside and sees that someone – most likely Oakhurst – has piled enough wood to last a few more days outside the cabin.

Alone in the cabin, Piney and The Duchess begin to realize that they will not leave alive. As night passes to morning, they find they can no longer feed the fire and it dies out. The two women huddle together and fall asleep.

Two days later, when officials from Poker Flat finally reach the camp, the two women are dead. Leaving the camp, they find a playing card – the two of clubs – pinned to a pine tree with a suicide note from John Oakhurst.

Analysis

Bret Harte's short story *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* takes place in the midst of the California Gold Rush. In Poker Flat, as was similar to many of the settlements established during that period, law and order were primarily maintained by the town's residents. In fact, the banishment of John Oakhurst, The Duchess, Mother Shipton and Uncle Billy from Poker Flat was orchestrated by a "secret committee" appointed by the townspeople.

One of the central themes of this story is how our perceptions of people often dictate how we respond to them. Intertwined with this is the reality that many people are not as they originally appear. We see the development of this theme from the onset of the story when John Oakhurst correctly assumes that the townspeople are after him. Recall that when he enters the street, the men who were having a conversation, stop talking as he passes. When Oakhurst meets the rest of his traveling party – a prostitute, her madam and a drunken suspected thief – each person remains guarded and suspicious of the others. Indeed, the town's decision to rid itself of all "improper persons" tells us that these four are well aware of how they are perceived by others. As a result, they each act in a manner that would be expected of people in their position; they are suspicious, guarded and not the least bit pleasant to each other. Rather than finding some sort of kinship with each other, each member of the group regards the others as being beneath him or her. Mother Shipton and Uncle Billy see even Oakhurst's polite gesture of giving his horse to The Duchess as a calculating move.

When Tom Simson and his fiancé happen upon the group, they have no idea that the foursome has been banished from Poker Flat. Because Simson's only other interaction with John Oakhurst had been positive, he immediately assumes that The Duchess is Oakhurst's wife and that the party is on their way back to Poker Flat. Because of the kindnesses The Duchess and Mother Shipton extend to Piney, she assumes the two are fine women of means.

It is interesting to watch the development of The Duchess and Mother Shipton as the story progresses. When we first meet them, they are angry and hostile. Even when Simson and Piney first join the group, the two dismiss the pair as a couple of kids who are naïve to the realities of the world. However, as they observe Simson and Piney openly display their love for each other, the two women soften and become much more compassionate. This transformation culminates with Mother Shipton's decision to starve herself to death so that Piney might have a better chance of surviving.

As the self-appointed leader of the group, John Oakhurst makes the decision not to tell Simson and Piney the truth about their circumstances. Oakhurst is keenly aware of their reputations and knows that if they knew the truth, Simson would likely leave, taking his ample supply of rations with him. While it can be argued that Oakhurst's decision to withhold this information is made out of compassion, it is more likely that it is made for reasons of self-preservation.

Oakhurst's decision to kill himself at the end of the story is an example of the effects of the self-fulfilling prophecy. With words such as "improper persons," "fellow-exiles," and "outcasts" used to describe the group, it is apparent that they know that they are considered inferior to the more law-abiding citizens. Despite the fact that he is the self-appointed leader of the group and appears to be well in control of their situation, we realize that Oakhurst is just as vulnerable as Mother Shipton is. Recognizing the hopelessness of their situation, Oakhurst decides that rather than return to the camp, he will take his own life. This tells us that despite his outward strength, he believes that his life is meaningless and that he is indeed an outcast. This thought is conveyed in the last line of the story: "…beneath the snow lay he who was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat."

Finally, the role of fate cannot be overlooked. Fate plays a role in the beginning when Oakhurst decides not to contest his exile: "He was too much a gambler not to accept Fate."

Fate also plays a large part in the eventual outcome of the story. If the group did not stop when they did, chances are, they would have escaped the storm and lived. Likewise, if Simson and Piney did not happen upon the outcasts, they would have most likely continued on their way to Poker Flat and arrived safely before the storm.

Characters

Duchess

Duchess, a prostitute, is one of four individuals expelled from Poker Flat when the townspeople there decided to evict the "undesirables." As the group of outcasts are making their way to Sandy Bar, she complains constantly, causing the group to stop short of their destination. When Piney Woods and Tom Simson join the group and they become trapped by the snow, Duchess becomes more cheerful and nurturing toward Piney. When the rescuers finally reach the group, they find Duchess and Piney huddled together, dead, and by then it is impossible to determine "which was she that had sinned."

Innocent, The

See Tom Simson

John Oakhurst

John Oakhurst is one of four individuals who were expelled from Poker Flat when its townspeople decided to run out the "undesirables." Oakhurst is a professional gambler noted for his "coolness, impassiveness, and presence of mind." When young Tom Simson and Piney Woods join the outcasts, the reader learns that Oakhurst once returned to Simson forty dollars that he won from the youth in a poker game, advising him to stay away from cards. When the outcasts are trapped by a snowstorm, Oakhurst assumes leadership of the group. After putting together a makeshift pair of snowshoes, he gives them to Simson, instructing him to go to Poker Flat and bring help. When the rescue party finally arrives, Oakhurst has killed himself, revealing himself to be "the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat."

Mother Shipton

Mother Shipton, presumably the madam of the prostitute Duchess, is one of four individuals expelled from Poker Flat when the townspeople decided to rid the community of "undesirables." Although she is accused of immorality, Mother Shipton displays her true qualities when the outcasts are trapped in the snowstorm. Hoping to save Piney Woods, Mother Shipton hoards her own share of the food instead of eating it. Shortly before she dies of starvation, she tells Oakhurst to give her rations to the bride-to-be so that she will have a better chance of surviving.

Tom Simson

Tom Simson is a "guileless youth" who is traveling to Poker Flat with his bride-to-be, Piney Woods, when they encounter the outcasts. On the basis of an earlier encounter With Oakhurst, Simson decides to assist the outcasts, whom he treats with respect, ignorant of their undesirable status. Simson is the lone survivor of the ordeal that ensues.

Uncle Billy

Uncle Billy, a suspected thief and confirmed drunkard, is one of the "undesirables" cast out of Poker Flat. Unlike the others, Uncle Billy scoffs at the innocence of Tom Simson and Piney Woods. During the night he makes off with the group's horses and mules, stranding them as it begins to snow.

Piney Woods

Piney Woods, "a stout, comely damsel of fifteen," is Tom Simson's bride-to-be. Piney has no understanding of the outcasts' unsavory reputations and treats them With courtesy and respect. In response to this kindness, they develop an affection for her that intensifies as they observe her love for Simson. She and Duchess freeze to death before rescuers can reach them

Themes

Appearances and Reality

At the beginning of the story, the four outcasts are described as "improper persons," and their initial actions suggest that, except for Oakhurst, they are foul-mouthed, lazy, and prone to drunkenness. However, because they come from another settlement, Tom and Piney know little about these strangers, and their perceptions are not clouded by the prejudices of the people in Poker Flat. In a previous brief encounter with Oakhurst, Tom had found him to be kind and gentlemanly, so Tom treats him as a gentleman rather than as a stuffy card shark. The young couple assumes that the prostitute Duchess is "Mrs. Oakhurst," and Piney imagines that the women from Poker Flat must be ladies of a high social standing who are "used to fine things."

The discrepancy between appearance and reality becomes most apparent when the party is trapped in the snowstorm. Mother Shipton may indeed be a madam, but she also shows herself to be compassionate and heroic when she sacrifices her life in an effort to save Piney. Likewise Duchess, the "soiled sister," evolves into a companion and protector for Piney. By the end of the story, observers cannot determine "which was she that had sinned." Oakhurst, the member of the party who appeared the most calm during the ordeal, eventually cannot play against unfavorable odds any longer and commits suicide. Throughout the story, Harte demonstrates that where human nature is concerned, reality is often more complex than appearances indicate.

Change and Transformation

Related to the themes of appearance and reality are the issues of change and transformation. During their period of confinement, the outcasts, particularly the two prostitutes, experience a type of metamorphosis. At first the women appear self-centered and dismissive of Tom and Piney and contemptuous of their naiveté. But as the group grows closer, these feelings shift to motherly affection, particularly toward Piney One suspects the sincerity of the young lovers allows Duchess and Mother Slupton openly to display aspects of their personalities they had previously chosen to conceal.

Oakhurst also undergoes a transformation, though a less uplifting one. Until the end of the story, Oakhurst is portrayed as others see him and as he sees himself, as a person noted for "coolness, impassiveness, and presence of mind." He is the first to grasp the group's predicament and quickly assumes command in the emergency. Tom's earlier experience with him shows that he has always had a streak of kindness and protectiveness toward those younger and weaker than himself, and in the isolated community of outcasts this quickly develops into a thoughtful solicitude for his companions. When It is revealed that he killed himself, it is hard to say whether this

represents a change in him or simply reveals a weakness that has always been hidden beneath his apparent strength.

Fate and Chance

Chance plays a critical role in the demise of the stranded travelers. Many developments within the narrative rely on random occurrences. Among the many examples, one can argue that if the outcasts did not stop for the night or had begun their Journey one day earlier, they would have missed the snow and reached Sandy Bar. Similarly, if Torn and Piney had continued on their way rather than staying with the outcasts, they could have avoided the storm. However, one could also argue that if Oakhurst had sent Torn for help earlier, or had struggled to keep the fire lit rather than killing himself, most of the group might have survived.

Harte uses the character of Oakhurst to develop the theme of fate. As "too much of a gambler not to accept fate," Oakhurst explains that with luck" all you know for certain is that it's bound to change."

Once the party is stranded, Oakhurst's gambling philosophy creates a dilemma for him. Having experienced "a streak of bad luck" since the group left Poker Flat, the gambler's experiences suggest that eventually this misfortune should pass. However, it is also the gambler's prerogative to opt out of the game if he does not like the odds, and Oakhurst estimates their odds of surviving as one in a hundred. His suicide note, declaring that he "struck a streak of bad luck" and "handed in his checks," attests to his inability to resist despair when the odds on their fate seem stacked against him.

Heroism

To many readers, an important message of the story is that society often fails to recognize the true heroes and heroines in its midst. One can certainly argue this is the case with the sacrifice of Mother Shipton as well as the selfless devotion of Duchess. In both cases, women condemned by society prove themselves to be morally superior to their Judges. The suicide of Oakhurst provides further comment on the nature of heroism. Throughout the story, he appears to be the leader of the party and the individual most likely to devise their escape, but ultimately he gives up the struggle and fails to save either the group or himself.

Style

Setting

The setting of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is of major importance. The story occurs in November, 1850, during the heyday of the California Gold Rush. At that time, law and order on the mining frontier was often synonymous with vigilante justice, in which townspeople took matters into their own hands. Communities such as Poker Flat generally operated outside the reach of established Judicial systems, and the type of vigilante activity Harte depicts was an accepted part of everyday life.

The story is set in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, a remote area in eastern California where the sudden occurrence of a winter storm could easily result in death for travelers. The most famous example of such a misfortune is the ill-fated Donner Party of 1846, in which twelve travelers starved to death and the remaining members resorted to cannibalism. This tragedy was highly publicized for years afterwards and was undoubtedly familiar to the original readers of this story. In an era before automobiles, or extensive railways, the fear of being stranded while traveling was real and vivid.

Genre

Genre is the term used to denote a category of literature. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is above all, a Western story. Other types of genre literature are science fiction, horror, and romance. Genre works can be identified by their conventions; some of the conventions of Westerns are that they take place on the frontier, they contain "good" guys and "bad" guys, female characters are either virtuous or "fallen," and conflicts that result in showdowns or gunfights often end in death. All of these elements are prominent in Harte's story; one might say that the "showdown" is the battle between the travelers and Mother Nature.

Comic Relief

Although Harte's story is essentially a tragedy, the narrative contains moments of humor. Rather than the story containing a humorous character per se, the story's levity arises from the narrator's understatement and sometimes condescending tone towards the characters. As an example, the narrator comments that "notwithstanding some difficulties attending the manipulation of this instrument, Piney Woods managed to pluck several reluctant melodies from its keys." Elsewhere, the narrator evaluates Tom's recitation skills by stating he had "thoroughly mastered the argument and fairly forgotten the words." Critics often cited Harte's ability to balance the tragic and the comic as one of his strongest skills as a writer.

Historical Context

Gold Fever and the Manifest Destiny

During the late 1860s, Harte's tales of the California Gold Rush elevated him to a position of national fame. For the remainder of his career, he utilized the West as the setting for his stones and the inspiration for his lectures on life in the gold mines. Americans throughout the country were fascinated by the expansion of the country and tales of the Wild West became part of the national consciousness. At the time of their publication, Harte's stones were primarily an idealized vision of an era that had recently passed. By the 1870s, the West was becoming more and more settled, and the vigilante justice of the frontier days was fast fading. While the settlement of the West remained an important topic for books and magazines, it is important to note that "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" appeared less than four years after the end of the Civil War. For a nation exhausted by war, Harte's story of heroics and tolerance recalled a happier period of innocence and opportunity.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the Gold Rush as a historical event; within two years, the sparsely settled territory of California had become the fastest growing state in the union. As aspiring miners arrived from Europe, Asia, South America, and virtually every American state, the population of San Francisco leaped from approximately 800 people in 1848 to over 40,000 in 1850. Although the frenzy for prospecting subsided by the late 1 850s, California was left with an infrastructure for industry, transportation, and agriculture that would have taken decades to develop under normal circumstances. For Americans of the day, the rapid settlement of California validated the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: the belief that it was God's will for the nation to expand across the continent.

However, romanticized depictions of the Gold Rush often overlook the unhappy outcome of the event for many prospectors. Relatively few of the '4gers managed to accumulate genuine wealth. Although most prospectors were successful in locating gold, the high cost of living in California prevented miners from pocketing much of their newfound riches. An additional consequence of the Gold Rush was the near-destruction of California's Native American population. The area contained dozens of autonomous Inman tribes, most of which resided in the regions which were the primary centers for mining activity. As a result, these cultures were the victims of both disease and military attacks and were nearing extinction by the 1870s.

Country Longs for a More Simple Time

Harte's fiction was not only a depiction of the past, but it was also a reaction to contemporary events. The American Civil War had halted westward migration from 1861 to 1865. Once the hostilities had ended, though, the nation was anxious to resume its expansion. Although the Pacific shore had been transformed into a center for industry

and commerce, the vast area of the Great Plains remained largely unsettled by whites. Like 1849, the late 1860s was an era of movement into new lands.

Even though the post-bellum years were perceived to be a time of imminent opportunity, much of the nation was suffering from the effects of the war. The South was in ruins and resentful of the policies of Reconstruction. The country as a whole experienced a series of financial depressions as the economy readjusted to peacetime conditions. Ulysses S. Grant's 1868 election to the presidency marked the beginning of an era of widespread and highly publicized governmental corruption. Therefore it is not surprising that Harte's vision of a Western society populated with shrewd but valorous individuals such as John Oakhurst would resonate with readers of the day. Anxious to overlook their own shortcomings and to escape the troubles of the present, audiences looked to authors such as Harte to evoke a noble past to which they could hope to return in the future.

Critical Overview

When "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" first appeared in the January 1869 issue of the *Overland Monthly,* the story was an Immediate critical and popular success. Critics such as Emily S. Forman, writing for *Old and New,* praised Harte's use of "novel vernacular" and "vivid portraiture" to "thrill the very depths of the heart and soul." Harte's critical stature declined in subsequent years as people's tastes in literature changed. Despite this shift in tastes, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is continually recognized as one of Harte's best stories and is widely anthologized and read today.

As late as 1936, Arthur Hobson Quinn argued in *American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey* that the tale was "a masterpiece." But within seven years, Harte's reputation was seriously challenged by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's seminal text *Understanding Fiction,* which was published in 1943. In their analysis of Harte's "Tennessee's Partner," Brooks and Warren cited what later became standard criticisms of the author's work in general: inconclusive plots, lack of realism, and a reliance on melodrama and sentiment.

Such charges are interesting for they are essentially denouncing the traits that were responsible for Harte's initial success. In his heyday, Harte was celebrated for providing a realistic picture of the West. However, later generations possessing the advantage of historical hindsight were quick to label the author as a fraud. In 1973 Kevin Starr categorized Harte's work as "pseudo-history" complete with "comforting memories of finite human comedy and civilizing human sentiment." Given such attitudes it is not surprising that literary critics often take the position that Harte's stories lack artistic merit but are significant because of their influence on others. As an example, James K. Folsom cautioned, "In any discussion of Bret Harte one must begin by making a clear distinction between *importance* and *quality.* "

Other critics argue that is important to understand Harte in the context of nineteenth-century literature. In an article for *American Literary Realism,* Patrick Morrow suggested an alternate approach that sidesteps the issue of whether or not Harte's writing qualifies as great literature and focuses on its importance as a product of the culture in which it was written. Morrow points out that although Harte quickly fell from favor with critics, his work remained immensely popular with the public well into the twentieth century. Rather than denouncing him as a "hack" or "servant of the masses," scholars should recognize his stories as a major component of nineteenth-century popular culture and utilize them as a tool to help understand the past. This idea is closely related to the observations of Donald E. Glover, who argued in *Western American Literature* that Harte' s later fiction, a body of work traditionally dismissed by literary scholars, is qualitatively similar to his early stories. Glover believed the calibre of Harte's writing did not decline; rather, the audience for his work changed and his style shifted accordingly.

In his interpretation of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," Harold H. Kolb, Jr. suggested another explanation for the author's declining appeal. Kolb claimed that critical misunderstanding has long undermined an appreciation of Harte's work and that too

much emphasis has been placed on the notion of Harte as a realist. Arguing that "Harte is not concerned with an impression of actuality, his interests lie elsewhere," Kolb pointed to Harte's reliance on juxtaposition, such as the contrast between the crudeness of his characters and the sophistication of the narrator, as a form of humor. Despite its somber ending, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" was designed to be read as a comedy. But as Kolb explained, "the irony of his ironic style is that. for a century, he has had to be content with the enjoyment of his own fun."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Barksdale is a Ph.D. candidate in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University and teaches at Owens Community College. In the following essay, he argues that Harte satirizes conventional ideas about frontier life in *"The Outcasts of Poker Flat. ..*

During the late 1860s, Bret Harte was widely regarded as one of America's most promising authors. Such tales of life during the California Gold Rush as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," "The Luck of Roaring Camp," and "Tennessee's Partner" were applauded for exploring the romance and adventure of recent American history. Harte's greatest gift was considered to be a masterful ability to create setting by employing local color and regional dialects. Although his detractors complain that the author's depictions of life in the mining camps and gold fields are riddled with inaccuracies, one cannot deny that Harte's style was a powerful influence on subsequent fiction dealing with the American West

While the majority of Harte's work has been forgotten, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" has retained a place within the literary canon. Such scholars as James K Folsom suggest that Harte's lingering presence is due to importance rather than quality, arguing that his writing remains of interest because of its impact upon others rather than from any intrinsic merit. While this is not entirely false, it does not explain why readers return to this tale as opposed to "Found at Blazing Star," "A Waif of the Plains," or any other of the dozens of Harte's works that have faded into obscurity. Perhaps the saga of the doomed outcasts contains some special quality that allows us to appreciate its subtleties more than a century after it was written.

One possible approach in examining "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is to place the story within the context of writing about the American frontier experience. In Harte's narrative, four individuals are ejected from the relative security of a Gold Rush boom town. Marooned in the wilderness of the California mountains, they experience a confrontation with nature. Although this event is ultimately destructive, the encounter also allows some of the party to be morally rejuvenated by the escape from civilization.

This literary theme of insight through isolation was well established by Harte's time. One can look to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," in which a man's walk through the woods alerts him to the hypocrisy present in Puritan New England, to find a possible precursor to Harte. Indeed, Harte is clearly locating duplicity within Poker Flat; the members of the "secret committee" that banishes the outcasts have gambled with Oakhurst and have been "familiar" with Duchess.

For American writers, before and after Harte, the frontier setting has played the part of an ethical testing ground, providing a space in which individuals have no choice but to reveal their true moral caliber. An early example of this motif is Mary Rowlandson's 1682 account of her captivity by Indians in colonial America. Widely read in Its day, Rowlandson's account describes her ordeal as a reaction by an angry God to her earlier

sins. Her captivity functions as a divine test that eventually restores her to grace with her Creator. Central to this experience is her isolation from peers and society, an event that fosters a degree of introspection that would have been otherwise Impossible.

Similarly, the ejection of the outcasts from Poker Flat provides them with an opportunity for self-reflection. Clearly this is the case with Oakhurst. "As he gazed at his recumbent fellow-exiles," the reader is told, "the loneliness begotten of his pariah-trade, his habits of life, his very vices, for the first time seriously oppressed him." This self-examination eventually leads the gambler to conclude that his luck has finally run out. From this perspective, his suicide merely hastens an end that he considers inevitable.

"The Outcasts of Poker Flat" also contains the appealing message that given the opportunity, anyone might prove a hero Although Oakhurst rejects his chance, Duchess and Mother Shipton clearly rise above their disreputable social positions in their efforts to care for Piney. The Innocent bravely confronts the snowstorm trying to save the party. Likewise, through her attempts to distract the outcasts from their misfortune as well as in her final comforting of Duchess, Piney can also be considered heroic.

The popularity of heroic figures in American fiction was well established by the time Harte began to publish. A generation earlier, James Fenimore Cooper's tales of frontier hero Natty Bumppo, including *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans,* were among the best-selling works of the day. Harte's familiarity with Cooper's work is easily verified by a look at his *Condensed Novels,* a collection of parodies of popular books that was published two years prior to "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." In one of the selections, *Muck-a-Muck: A Modern Indian Novel,* Cooper is the target of Harte's satire. In recalling this work from his journeyman years, one cannot help but wonder if Harte's melodramatic tale of the snowbound outcasts is also a humorous take on the American fascination with the frontier as site of heroism and moral regeneration.

At least one Harte scholar, Harold H. Kolb, argues that an inordinate amount of attention has been given to the author's talents as a regional writer and local colorist. Kolb suggests that Harte's greatest gift is that of humor. "The irony of his ironic style," Kolb comments, "is that, for half a century, he has had to be content with the enjoyment of his own fun." There are numerous asides and comments within "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" that are designed to elicit a grin from the reader. Piney Woods, the character who is often interpreted as a symbol for the purity of love, is described as "a stout, comely damsel" Even the dire circumstances of the outcasts' confinement are diluted by the presence of an accordion's "fitful spasms" and the recitation of Homer "in the current vernacular of Sandy Bar."

In his argument that Harte is a frequently misunderstood humorist, Kolb bases his argument on the relation between author and audience. Another way of looking at this story is to view the proceedings as a sabre on the near-sacred status bestowed on the relationship between Americans and the frontier in popular culture. A major difference between this story and most other sagas of the West is that despite some powerful transformations among the outcasts, none of these heroes survive unscathed. While the reader may conclude, since a rescue party does eventually reach the camp, that The

Innocent safely reached Poker Flat, his reward is the corpse of his bride-to-be. Of the four outcasts from Poker Flat, the only apparent survivor is the unregenerate Uncle Billy, who steals the groups' mounts. Such an outcome leads one to suspect that Harte was at least somewhat cynical about the possibilities of renewal on the frontier.

The narrative structure of the story, a balance between authenticity and improbability, further alerts the reader that Harte's intentions may stretch beyond a warning against the perils of vigilante justice. When not labeling him a purveyor of melodrama, critics wishing to dismiss Harte are quick to point out major breaches of realism in the story. People rarely starve to death in a matter of days as does Mother Shipton, and Oakhurst's ability to produce a pair of snowshoes from a pack saddle seems at least unusual in a professional gambler. However, such lapses into the unlikely do not equal flaws if one reads "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" as a satire, rather than a realistic account, of frontier conditions

If one looks at the author's career, It is easy to envision him ridiculing popular beliefs about the glorious West. While Harte's initial rise to fame was a direct result of his presence within California's emerging literary community of the l860s and his ability to commodify his experiences in the West, he left this cultural outpost at the earliest opportunity and never returned. If one reads his tale as a travesty not just of the West, but of the entire national vision of regeneration through confrontation with nature, there is additional significance in Harte's decision to reject the simplicity of the New World and spend the last twenty years of ills life in Europe.

While "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" is justifiably credited with influencing generations of subsequent writing about the West, one should also consider the work as a variation on themes that were firmly embedded in the American consciousness by the second half of the nineteenth century. Although on the surface Harte delivers a clear message on the dangers of judging others, he also suggests the reader should think twice before accepting certain parts of our cultural consciousness.

Source: Allen Barksdale, "An Overview of 'The Outcasts of Poker Flat'," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Pierce is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of South Carolina. In the following essay, he examines Harte's treatment of questions of morality and corruption in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat. "

When "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" appeared in the January 1869 issue of the California journal *Overland Monthly,* it was widely praised as yet another example of Bret Harte's literary genius. The periodical *Fun* considered it "worthy of Hawthorne," while the *New Eclectic* magazine thought it "droll and humorous, and at the same time deeply pathetic." When it appeared in a collection entitled *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches,* William Dean Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and one of the most influential American critics of the time, singled out "The Outcasts" for particular praise, noting Harte's "very fine and genuine" style of representing life in the American West, particularly California. However, not all the reviews were completely complimentary. The *New York Times,* while praising its "picturesque style," upbraided Harte for portraying the marginal members of society in a positive light. Similarly, the *Spectator* applauded Harte's "originality of style" but thought his characters "improper." This was the sort of criticism that would dog Harte's fiction well into the twentieth century, though his work was original and demonstrated admirable style, ItS characters were not compatible with contemporary morals.

When considered, such a reaction is hardly surprising, but the modern reader has grown accustomed to the conventions of the Western genre. We have come to expect that stories set in the "wild West" of the mid-nineteenth century will be peopled With gamblers, drunkards, cattle rustlers, whores, and all manner of dissolute individuals. Such characters appear to us as the norm rather than the exception, but Harte's contemporaries saw things very differently. To them, the John Oakhursts and Mother Shiptons of the world were immoral characters who had placed themselves at the margins of society and should be obliged to stay there. Indeed, this is exactly what happens to Oakhurst and the three others when Poker Flat's "secret committee" decides "to rid the town of all improper persons." For that matter, such moral exclusion continues today; even in a society burdened by crime and accustomed to vice, modern gamblers, hookers, and thieves are hardly considered socially acceptable. Rather, they are on the outskirts of society, pushed to our equivalent of "the gulch which marked the uttermost limit of Poker Flat."

Why, then, are we so willing to accept-and even applaud-such figures in works of fiction? How is It that we can look past the characters' vices and find their virtues when our forebears often could not? Part of the answer is that Western fiction has desensitized us to Western fact. Raised on a steady diet of John Wayne, *Gunsmoke,* and *Doctor Quinn,* we are no longer in touch with what really happened in the nineteenth-century American West.

We have been brought up to consider such character types as the town drunk, the self-sacrificing madam, and the generous gambler to be somehow representative of life in

the West during that time period. While I surely do not mean to imply that such people did not exist in the "Old West," we can hardly consider them representative. Indeed, though we often skip over it, the title of Harte's story reminds us that most of its characters are indeed *outcasts,* persons in whom society cannot abide.

That said, what little we see of the characters paints most of them in a positive light. For that matter, there seem to be two types of outcasts: those who encourage vice, and those who are themselves vicious. Only one character, Uncle Billy, truly fits into the latter category. A "suspected sluice-robber" -that is, a thief who steals from gold miners-"and a confirmed drunkard," Uncle Billy is the only character who is truly without morals. He is forced out of Poker Flat because he is a leech upon society, an individual who takes without giving in return. Though we may not approve of the professions of John Oakhurst, the Duchess, or Mother Shipton, they assuredly contribute to the society of Poker Flat: Oakhurst by putting up his money in poker, the women by offering their bodies to paying customers. Though criminals, they participate in victimless crimes, the poker-players and solicitors with whom they associate are fully as criminal as these characters. Uncle Billy, though, is truly profligate. His crimes-assuming, that is, that the town's suspicions are not unfounded-have victims Whereas the other characters might be considered immoral, Uncle Billy is actively antisocial; his Crimes threaten the foundations of society It should come as no surprise, then, that he steals the mules and horses while the others sleep. It is this act that ultimately leads to the destruction of the "society" of the camp. It is he, if anyone, who is the "villain" of Harte's story.

The other outcasts, despite being socially unacceptable (unacceptable, that is, in Poker Flat, but acceptable in Sandy Bar, a settlement that "not having as yet experienced the regenerating influences of Poker Flat, consequently seemed to offer some invitation") are actually quite admirable in ways not normally associated with gamblers and hookers. Indeed, It was this method of characterization for which Harte drew the greatest criticism. So common were his positive portraits of "fallen" individuals that one anonymous reviewer for the *Spectator* suggested that the author had suffered from "an attack of Dickens-on-the-brain," a reference to the English novelist's propensity to depict such characters in a similar sentimental light. Here, then, is the source of our modern tendency to look at the nineteenth-century American West and see a land of harmless and even noble immorality, a time and place where vice was common but viciousness was rare. Before Harte, there really were no stories that attempted to paint what life was like in California. Other writers had written about the "frontier," but the frontier kept moving west, and Writers had a hard time keeping up. Harte's writings filled a void, and, as there was nothing to dispute what he wrote, the character types with which he peopled his stories established themselves 'as the stock-in-trade of future writers of stories in the Western genre. Towards the end of his life, by which time his writings were generally considered outdated and clichéd, he was disparagingly remembered as the writer who had created "the hooker with a heart of gold."

Such reproachful remarks, however, ignore the implicit social commentary of Harte's fiction. Though hardly a treatise on society's problems, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" undoubtedly makes certain critiques of life in early California. The outcasts are set in opposition to the town of Poker Flat, "a settlement unused to Sabbath influences" that,

nonetheless, has recently undergone "a change in its moral atmosphere." That change, though, has not come about through any newfound interest in public ethics; rather, the townspeople who cast out "all improper persons" are themselves guilty of similar improprieties. Jim Wheeler, the most vocal member of the "secret committee," wishes to get rid of Oakhurst not because he is a gambler but because he is a *successful* gambler. Wheeler's sense of morality is based on his being a poor loser rather than on any spiritual awakening. He, like the rest of the self-righteous secret committee members, is a hypocrite, and his self-proclaimed morality is in truth nothing more than greed.

In contrast, most of the outcasts-Uncle Billy being the lone exception-have admirable qualities. Oakhurst is the first to show his true colors when he gives the Duchess his horse, Five Spot, in exchange for her" sorry mule." He stays with the other outcasts when the Duchess insists on stopping, and, even though he seems capable of continuing alone, the "thought of deserting his weaker and more pitiable companions never perhaps occurred to him." Later we learn that, in an earlier encounter with Tom Simson, Oakhurst returned poker Winnings of forty dollars to "the Innocent" with a warning to avoid cards in the future. Mother Shipton, despite her occasional uses of "bad language," is in fact a good and caring person who sets aside her portion of the rations to give Piney Woods a greater chance at survival. The Duchess, a fallen woman and yet an ingénue, tries to comfort Piney in their last hours. Though their professions make them socially unacceptable, all three are good people.

Indeed, this assessment is supported when the Innocent and Piney-the two most wholesome, honest, forthright characters the story offers-arrive and perceive the outcasts as anything but the sinners they supposedly are. Only the reprobate Uncle Billy finds any humor in Tom's mistaking of the Duchess for Oakhurst's wife, his own wickedness having warped him into a sneering, cynical cur. The others are quite willing to let Tom and Piney persist in their mistaken beliefs, to let them remain innocents as regards the outcasts' true natures. When they become snowed in and death seems imminent, the remaining outcasts still do not reveal their "true" selves as "there's no good frightening them [Tom and Piney] now." These, though, *are* their true selves. Oakhurst, the Duchess, and Mother Shipton are not the degenerate miscreants that the secret committee of Poker Flat deemed them; rather, they are honest, caring people whose professions conflict with Poker Flat's recent spate of false morality.

This conflict between a corrupt society and its virtuous outcasts is the central theme of Harte's story. By developing characters like the "hooker with a heart of gold" that would become Western stereotypes, Harte was not advocating prostitution, gambling, or thievery as modes of moral living; rather, he was arguing that morality is a matter of individual behavior and conscience rather than a societal construct. Though the secret Committee of Poker Flat can exile the characters from the town, they have no right to pass judgment on them-the characters' actions, save those of Uncle Billy, show them to be as moral as, if not more moral than, the committee members. Ultimately, in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," society destroys rather than enforces morality.

Source: Jason Pierce, "Overview of 'The Outcasts of Poker Flat'," *in Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #3

A former professional football player with the Kansas City Chiefs (1970-74), Oriard is *an English professor who has focused much of his study upon the relationship between sports and American culture. He has gone so far as to say, "To understand America, understand American games and play. " In the following excerpt from a recent book on that relationship, Oriard explores the character of John Oakhurst as an emblem of "sporting fatalism" and discusses the effect on Harte's narrative strategy.*

The major sporting figure in Harte's fiction, the frontier gambler, juxtaposed nobility and moral outrage in a similar way. In Harte's three most famous tales-"The Luck of Roaring Camp" *(Overland Monthly,* August 1868), "Tennessee's Partner" *(Overland Monthly,* October 1869), and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" *(Overland Monthly,* January 1869)-the professional gambler emerges as a gamesman by trade but a transcendent sportsman by instinct and action. He is a fatalist in a world dominated by chance, but his absolute commitment to honor and fair play lead to an ambiguous sentimental salvation. . . .

The quintessential emblem of sporting fatalism in these stories is the death of John Oakhurst, which concludes "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." Having been banished from Poker Flat, together with two prostitutes and a thief, Oakhurst "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." When the four exiles and an innocent young couple that joins them are trapped in a snowstorm, Oakhurst coolly surveys "the losing game before him" then slips away to play out his hand his own way. On a deuce of clubs pinned to a tree with a bowie knife, the rescuers who arrive too late discover his scrawled epitaph:

BENEATH THIS TREE LIES THE BODY OF JOHN OAKHURST WHO STRUCK A STREAK OF BAD LUCK ON THE 23D OF NOVEMBER, 1850, AND HANDED IN HIS CHECKS ON THE 7TH DECEMBER,1850

In the story's final bile the narrator calls Oakhurst "at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat." This self-conscious ambivalence-the gambler as self-sacrificing hero, the gambler as blind fatalist-both typifies Harte's narrative strategy and signals the uneasiness with which genteel culture came to terms with this figure. Readers could be charmed or shocked by Bret Harte's stories, assured of the capacity for goodness in even the least likely souls, left uncertain whether proper values had in fact been affirmed after all, or convulsed with laughter at the moralist his fiction might have seemed to puncture. . . .

Source: Michael Oriard, "Play, Sport, and Western Mythmaking," in *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture,* Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp 40-81.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Fiske provides a short, synoptic overview of the plot and characters of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat. "

A unique and striking figure among the "Outcasts of Poker Flat" is Mr. John Oakhurst, type of the imperturbable, smooth, daring and irresistible Western gambler, who, under unexpected conditions, develops unexpected qualities,-the qualities of practical sympathy and heroic self-sacrifice. He had been included among those who were destined to leave Poker Flat, for the community had recently lost several thousand dollars, two valuable horses, and a prominent citizen. Two of those destined for exile were already hanging to the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch; a secret committee had even considered the hanging of Mr. Oakhurst, one of the minority contending that "it's a injustice to let this yer young man from Roaring Camp--an entire stranger-carry away our money." The minority of the committee, however, was overruled, and Mr. Oakhurst was included in the "deported wickedness" that was escorted to the outskirts of Poker Flat by a body of armed men. In this expatriated company were a young woman familiarly known as the "Duchess," another called "Mother Shipton," and a third person, "Uncle Billy," a suspected sluice-robber and confirmed drunkard. At the outermost edge of Poker Flat this company was set adrift, with the implicit injunction not to return, at the peril of their lives.

The "outcasts" decided on Sandy Bar for their destination, a camp that layover a steep mountain range, a hard day's travel distant. At noon the Duchess refused to go farther, and the party halted, although scarcely half the journey to Sandy Bar was accomplished and provisions for delay were lacking. Mr. Oakhurst, the gambler, called it "throwing up their hand before the game was played out." But they were provided with Whisky, if not with any adequate supply of provisions, and they were all soon in a helpless state of stupor-all except the gambler, who never drank,-it interfered, he said, with ills profession and he "couldn't afford It." His thought seemed never to be that of deserting his feebler and more pitiable companions, as they lay in a drunken stupor amid the encircling pines,-precipitous cliffs of naked granite rising above them on three sides, and the crest of a precipice in front overlooking the valley. They were suddenly reinforced by an eloping couple going to Poker Flat to be married, and as the prospective bridegroom had once lost money to Mr. Oakhurst and had it considerately returned, he greeted the gambler as a genuine friend and was insistent on camping with his party, assuring Mr. Oakhurst that he had an extra mule loaded With provisions, and that there was a rude attempt at a log house near the trail. That night the women spent in the log house and the men lay before the door. Waking benumbed with cold, the gambler stirred the dying fire and felt on his cheek the touch of snow! Turning to where the thieving Uncle Billy slept he found him gone, and the tethered mules with him. At dawn the gambler recognized that they were "snowed in," with all that implied in the loss of the trail and the cutting off of provisions and rescue.

In his unsuspected kindliness of heart Mr. Oakhurst, the gambler, was unwilling that Tom Simson and Piney, the eloping couple, should know the real rascality of Uncle Billy,

and implied that the latter had wandered off from the camp and stampeded the animals by accident. And through the gambler's request the Duchess and Mother Shipton also gave out the same impression as to Uncle Billy's whereabouts. But Tom seemed rather to look forward to a week's camping with his sweetheart, and his gayety and Mr. Oakhurst's professional calm "infected" the others. From some unaccountable motive Mr. Oakhurst *cached* the whisky, and concealed his cards. And Tom somewhat ostentatiously produced an accordion from his pack, from which his sweetheart, Piney, succeeded in plucking a few reluctant tunes to the accompaniment of Tom's bone castanets. The lovers sang, too, a rude camp meeting hymn, joining hands as they did so, and the defiant covenanters' swing of the chorus finally led the others to join in the somewhat prophetic refrain:

"I'm proud to live in the service of the Lord, And I'm bound to die in His army "
And above these doomed singers the pines rocked and the storm eddied.

In dividing the watch that night With Tom Simson, Mr. Oakhurst somehow managed to take upon himself the greater share of the duty, explaining that he had "often been a week without sleep" when luck at poker ran high. "When a man gets a streak of luck . . . he don't get tired. The luck gives in first. Luck," continued the gambler meditatively, "is a mighty queer thing. All you know is that it's bound to change. And it's finding out when it's going to change that makes you."

The nights were filled with the reedy notes of the accordion, but music failed to fill the aching void of insufficient food, and story-telling was suggested by Piney. However, Mr. Oakhurst and his female companions were hardly willing to relate their personal experiences in the presence of the Innocent, as they called Tom, or of "the child," as the Duchess and Mother Shipton called Piney; and this plan of diversion would have fallen through had the Innocent not been able to recall some of Mr. Pope's translation of the "Iliad," which he had chanced upon a few months before. He told the exciting incidents of the epic in the current vernacular of Sandy Bar. And he got an enthusiastic hearing, while the great pines in the canyon seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus. Mr. Oakhurst was especially interested in the fate of "Ash-heels," as the Innocent insisted on calling the "swift footed Achilles."

A week passed over the heads of the outcasts, the sun again abandoned them, and the leaden skies sifted swiftly down upon them great banks of snow, till they stood more than twenty feet above the cabin. It became increasingly difficult to replenish the fires, and yet no one complained. The lovers looked into each other's eyes and were happy, but Mother Shipton seemed to sicken and fade. At midnight of the tenth day she called the gambler to her side, and said, in a querulous weakness of voice: "I'm going, but don't say anything about it. Don't waken the kids. Take the bundle from under my head and open it." It contained the rations she had saved for a week. "Give' em to the child," she said, pointing *to* Piney. Starvation through self-sacrifice was the unexpected ending *of* this abandoned woman's life.

With another unselfish motive coming to the surface, Mr. Oakhurst took the Innocent aside and showed him a pair of snow-shoes he had fashioned from the old pack-

saddles. The gambler announced that if by the aid of these Tom could reach Poker Flat in two days, his sweetheart could be saved. Oakhurst pretended to accompany Tom as far as the canon, unexpectedly kissing the Duchess good-by before he went It stirred her with emotion and amazement; but the gambler never came back. The Duchess, feeding the fire during the fierce storm of wind and snow on the following night, found that some one had quietly piled beside the hut enough fuel to last a few days longer; and It was not difficult to surmise that it was due to the thoughtfulness of Oakhurst. The second night the two women were frozen to death in each other's arms-the soiled Duchess and the virgin Piney. "And when pitying fingers brushed the snow away from their wan faces, you could scarcely have told, from the equal peace that dwelt upon them, which was she that had sinned."

At the head of the gulch the searchers found on one of the largest pine trees the deuce of clubs pinned to the bark with a bowie knife, and on It was written in pencil, with a firm hand, "Beneath this tree lies the body of John Oakhurst, who struck a streak of bad luck on the 23d November, 1850, and handed in his checks on the 7th of December, 1850." And underneath the snow, with a bullet through his heart and a derringer by his side, lay the calm-faced gambler, whose hard life was softened and ennobled at its close by thoughtful sympathy and sublime self-sacrifice. . . .

Source: Horace Spencer Fiske, "'The Luck *of* Roaring Camp' and Other Stories," in *Provincial Types in American Fiction,* by Bret Harte, 1903 Reprint by Kennikat Press, Inc , 1968, pp. 241-64.

Adaptations

Several film versions of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" have been made. The earliest adaptation was a 1919 silent film produced by Universal Studios. In 1937, RKO-Radio Pictures remade the picture with Van Heflin portraying John Oakhurst. In 1952, Twentieth Century-Fox produced a version starring Dale Robertson, Anne Baxter, and Cameron Mitchell.

"The Outcasts of Poker Flat" became an opera in 1959, with music by Jonathan Elkus and libretto by Robert Gene Bander. Perry Edwards created a one-act play based on the story published by Dramatic Publishing in 1968.

A one-act play written by Perry Edwards and based on "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" was published by Dramatic Publishing in 1968,

Several filmstrip versions of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" are available. A 1973 version by Brunswick Productions utilizes captions, while a 1977 filmstrip from Listening Library includes a cassette recording.

Listening Library released an audiocassette ill 1973, *The Best of Bret Harte: "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," "The Luck of Roaring Camp,* " in which the stories are read by Ralph Bell.

Topics for Further Study

Harte explains that the outcasts are expelled from Poker Flat by a "secret committee." Research the prevalence of vigilante justice in the American West and attempt to determine the extent to which such activities were viewed as a necessary element of the settlement process.

Although Harte is often described as a "frontier humorist," this story reads as a tragedy. Discuss how a writer may appeal to conflicting emotions, and Identify other authors who embrace a similar contradiction in style.

Considering the historical events of the 1860s, what messages in Harte's story would have been considered controversial to readers in that era?

Read "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" by Harte's protégé, Mark Twain. Discuss possible influences of Harte's writing on Twain's. Which story do you like better, and why?

Think of some recent Western movies, television shows, or books. Do any of the characters in them remind you of the characters in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"? Write an essay comparing and contrasting characters in contemporary Western stories to those in stories from the nineteenth century.

Compare and Contrast

1850s: The United States embraces the concept of "Manifest Destiny," a phrase coined in an article in the July-August, 1845, issue of *United States Magazine and Democratic Review.* The phrase imparts the view that It is God's will that the young nation expand across the continent. In the resulting expansion, settlers race west to California in search of gold in 1849.

1997: Although no longer claiming that expansionism is God's will, the United States continues to explore new frontiers. U.S. astronauts work side-by-side with their Russian counterparts aboard the Russian space station *Mir* in an effort to investigate the prospects of long-term cooperation in space.

1850s: American society at large perceives gambling at cards and other games of chance, in which money changes hands, as the domain of drifters, con-men, and prostitutes.

1997: Casino gambling is no longer confined to Las Vegas or Atlantic City, having come to be seen as a route to financial reinvigoration in large American cities. Candidates for municipal office often stake their political prospects on their success in bringing casino "gaming" to town, while political figures who oppose casinos are publicly vilified as out-of-touch prigs and Puritans.

What Do I Read Next?

The Best of Bret Harte, edited by Wilhelmina Harper in 1947, contains the author's most famous short stories, including "The Luck of Roaring Camp."

Franklin Walker's 1939 study *San Francisco's Literary Frontier* details the development of American writers in the West and evaluates Harte within the context of his peers.

Roughing It, Mark Twain's 1872 memoir, is an account of life in Virginia City, Nevada, during the silver mining boom of the l860s. At one time Twain and Harte were close friends and both men worked as Journalists on the milling frontier. Stylistically, they shared an ability to utilize local color and vernacular to create works of enduring fiction based on fact.

Kevin Starr's 1973 history, *Americans and the California Dream 1850-1915,* is an excellent study of nineteenth-century California and the role it has played in defining the American dream.

The Shirley Letters From the California Mines 1851 - I 852 is a collection of writings by Louise Clappe. Using the pseudonym Dame Shirley, Clappe authored a series of letters to her sister in the East about life during the Gold Rush. An important book as a historical source and an interesting companion to the fiction of Bret Harte.

Further Study

Gardner, Joseph H "Bret Harte and the Dickensian Mode in America," in *Canadian Journal of American Studies,* Vol. 2, Fall, 1971, pp. 89-101.

Primarily a comparison between Bret Harte and Charles Dickens which also summarizes many reviews *of* Harte's writing from 1870 to 1902.

May, Ernest R "Bret Harte and the *Overland Monthly,"* in *American Literature,* Vol 22, November, 1950, pp. 260-71.

A valuable account *of* Harte's early career and the important magazine he helped to found.

Scharnhorst, Gary *Bret Harte,* Twayne, 1992.

A brief but comprehensIve volume on the author's life and career. Includes a bibliography.

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Glover, Donald E. "A Reconsideration *of* Bret Harte's Later Works," in *Western American Literature,* Vol. 8, Fall, 1973, pp 143-51.

Kolb, Harold H, Jr. "The Outcasts *of* Literary Flat. Bret Harte as Humorist," in *American Literary Realism,* Vol. 23, Winter, 1991, pp. 52- 63.

Morrow, Patrick. "The Predicament *of* Bret Harte," in *American Literary Realism,* Vol. 5, Summer, 1972, pp. 181-88.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson. In *American Fiction'* An *Historical and Critical Survey,* New York. D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936.

Starr, Kevin. *Americans and the California Dream: 1850* 1915, New York. Oxford University Press, 1973.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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