The Luck of Roaring Camp

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, and 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 Luck of Roaring Camp" briefly alludes to the California Gold Rush in its mentions of gold. 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 American people often faced violence or were pushed off of their own land. (Interestingly, the one Native American character in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" is Cherokee Sal, a prostitute who dies in childbirth, which seems to gesture toward the difficulties that Native American people faced during this time.)

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like "The Luck of Roaring Camp," Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" features a group of rough-and-tumble characters who are bound together by a common purpose: surviving a winter storm in the mountains. Both stories feature a notorious gambler named Oakhurst and feature terrible tragedies born of natural disasters, highlighting the unforgiving nature of the Old West. 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. ("The Luck of Roaring Camp" is also set in Northern California, given its reference to the Sierra Nevada mountains and redwood trees, which are native only to California.) In addition, many of Robinson Jeffers's poems, such as "November Surf," highlight the wildness and brutality of the Western landscape that appears toward the end of "The Luck of Roaring Camp."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Luck of Roaring Camp
- **When Written:** Late 1860s
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** August 1868
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story; Western; Local Color
- **Setting:** A mining settlement called Roaring Camp in Northern California, 1851
- **Climax:** A massive winter flood rips through Roaring Camp, killing Kentuck and the Luck
- **Antagonist:** Outsiders
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Fan. In the margins of his copy of "The Luck of Roaring Camp," Mark Twain scribbled the words, "good. This is Bret's very best sketch, and most finished—nearly blemishless."

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 publish a handful of stories between 1873 and 1876.

PLOT SUMMARY

It's 1850, and something big is happening in the gold mining settlement of Roaring Camp, deep in the wilderness of the American West. Everyone is buzzing about a woman named

Cherokee Sal—the town prostitute, who happens to be the only woman at Roaring Camp. Sal is going into labor, and this is monumental at the camp. Death is normal here, as is people being banished from the settlement. But birth—the introduction of someone new into the community—is unheard of.

One of the camp's men, Stumpy, is appointed to help deliver the baby. He's fathered two families before, so the other men of Roaring Camp (a collection of 100 criminals, fugitives, gamblers, or otherwise "reckless" men) decide that this makes Stumpy most qualified to help Sal. The landscape of Roaring Camp is as tough and rugged as the men who live there. The camp is nestled in a triangular valley, flanked on all sides by a river or hills; the only way in and out is a steep trail up the summit of one of the hills.

Sal's health quickly declines after she delivers her **baby**, and she soon dies. The men aren't too upset about her death, but they *are* concerned about what they're supposed to do with a newborn baby. In the short term, their only option is to have the camp's female mule nurse the baby.

The men line up to see the baby. One by one, they enter into the cabin in which the baby was born and leave a gift for him. By the time all of the men have had their turn, the baby has amassed a pile of gold nuggets, boot spurs, jewels, and coins. One of the gruffest and most hypermasculine of the men, Kentuck, has a particularly tender moment when it's his time to see the baby: the baby reaches out and clings to Kentuck's finger, which delights (and consequently embarrasses) Kentuck. He talks about this moment all night with anyone who will listen.

The next day, the men hold a formal meeting to figure out what to do with the baby. All but one of the men believe that they should adopt him; only Tipton thinks they should send the baby to Red Dog (the next town over, which is 40 miles away), where he could be properly nursed by a woman. This idea is promptly squashed, as is the idea of sending for a woman from another settlement to stay at Roaring Camp to tend to the baby—the men don't want women here. This, the narrator interjects, may seem harsh, but it's actually "the first spasm of propriety" at the camp. Eventually, they decide to raise the baby themselves, with Stumpy and the female mule acting as his primary caregivers.

As time goes on, the baby thrives, perhaps because of all the fresh air. Around this time, the men begin to find more and more gold, so they deem the baby their good luck charm and name him Tommy Luck—or "the Luck"—in honor of this. Wanting to make the settlement a better environment for the Luck, the men begin cleaning up the cabins and even themselves—bathing before they hold the baby, for instance, and cutting expletives out of their language. They even begin bringing the Luck wildflowers and other treasures they find, as the Luck has opened their eyes to the beauty surrounding them.

After the Luck has been with the men for several months, they discuss the idea of building a hotel in the camp and inviting a couple "decent families" to live at Roaring Camp and give the Luck some company. The men are still highly skeptical of women, but they want the best for the Luck and think he'd benefit from "female companionship," so most of them agree to this plan.

Before the plan can be put into action, a powerful winter **flood** sweeps through the settlement in the night. Chaos ensues, as Stumpy's entire cabin is swept away into the river and massive trees are uprooted. Roaring Camp is reduced to debris, and Stumpy is killed. Kentuck is found barely clinging to life, with the Luck's dead body in his arms. He's contented that he's following the Luck into death, though, and quickly dies, floating into the dark river and drifting to an "unknown sea."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kentuck – A main character in the story, Kentuck is one of Roaring Camp's gruffest, most unrefined residents—but he's also fiercely devoted to and enamored with little baby **Luck**. He's known for never washing his clothes, his language is marked by a heavy Western twang, and he puts up a front of hypermasculinity—in other words, he's the quintessential Western outlaw. While all the men help take care of the Luck and dote on him to some extent, Kentuck especially falls in love with the baby and willingly cleans up his act (he literally changes into a clean shirt and cuts expletives out of his language) for the sake of the baby. Kentuck's character arc shows most clearly how baby Luck gives the Roaring Camp men permission to engage with a softer, more sensitive side of themselves and drop their hypermasculine masks. Given Kentuck's particularly strong affection for baby Luck, it's fitting that he and the Luck die in an embrace. This moment implies that Kentuck was trying to protect the Luck during **the flood** and seemingly sacrificed his own life in the attempt to do so—but on a deeper level, it speaks to how the two were practically inseparable. When Kentuck dies in the final lines of the story, he seems contented that he is following the Luck into death, which again emphasizes the pair's strong bond and Kentuck's deep, enduring, and perhaps unexpected love for the baby.

Stumpy – One of the main characters in the story, Stumpy is something of a leader at the Roaring Camp settlement; he's also **the Luck**'s father figure. Unlike the other men of Roaring Camp, Stumpy has fathered two families in the past at other settlements, and this experience with family life and children is what qualifies him, in the other men's eyes, to deliver Cherokee Sal's baby. When Stumpy takes on the Luck as his own son after

Sal's death, no one in the community balks, as they seem to believe that he's best equipped for this kind of responsible, fatherly role. But even though Stumpy is the Luck's primary caregiver—the two share a cabin—Stumpy welcomes the other men's participation in rearing the baby, heeding to the age-old adage that it takes a village to raise a child. And by letting the other men participate in raising the Luck, Stumpy helps spread the Luck's positive influence throughout the camp, encouraging the men (most notably Kentuck) to get in touch with a more tender, maternal side of themselves. Both Stumpy and the Luck die in **the flood** at the end of the story, though their bodies are found separately (the Luck is found in Kentuck's arms). Stumpy's cabin is also entirely washed away.

Oakhurst – Oakhurst, a resident of Roaring Camp, is a philosophical man who has a reputation as a gambler. He's often the voice of calm and reason throughout the story, like when he thoughtfully suggests that the men name the baby "**the Luck**" rather than using Cherokee Sal's name or the father's name (which, of course, would be impossible given that the father is unknown, and the story implies that all the Roaring Camp men have had sex with Cherokee Sal). In doing so, Oakhurst intends to give the baby a clean slate in life rather than being immediately weighed down by his mother's poor reputation as a prostitute. Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," which also features Oakhurst but is set in a different settlement, notes that Roaring Camp is Oakhurst's hometown.

Sandy Tipton – One of the men of Roaring Camp, Sandy Tipton is the one who suggests sending **the Luck** to the next town over (Red Dog), where he could be properly nursed and raised by a woman. This suggestion is met with vehement opposition from the rest of the men, emphasizing how they're already extremely attached to the Luck and are deeply suspicious of outsiders.

Man-o'-War Jack – Man-o'-War Jack, a resident of Roaring Camp, is an English sailor from England's Australian colonies. He often rocks **the Luck** and sings him long, drawn-out naval songs a lullaby, which is a prime example of how the Luck's presence encourages the hypermasculine men to engage with a more tender side of themselves.

Cherokee Sal – Cherokee Sal, a Native American woman and the sole woman at Roaring Camp, is **the Luck**'s mother. She dies in childbirth, but in life she was a prostitute, and all the men at Roaring Camp were "familiar" with her—the implication being that they've all had sex with her. Because of this, it's unclear to everyone who the father of the baby is, though all of Roaring Camp (and especially Stumpy) steps up to raise the infant after Sal passes away. Her death is a lonely, painful one.

Tom Ryder – Tom Ryder is one of the men of Roaring Camp. He's one of the most vocal opponents to Sandy Tipton's idea that **the Luck** be sent to the next town over (Red Dog), where he can be nursed and raised by a woman. Like most of the Roaring Camp men, Ryder is incredibly suspicious of outsiders and doesn't trust the Red Dog residents to care for baby Luck.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Expressman – The expressman is a mail carrier who rides on horseback, delivering mail from one settlement to another. He's the only outsider allowed in and out of Roaring Camp (its residents being ultra-suspicious of outsiders and newcomers), so he tells grand stories about Roaring Camp when he visits other towns.

Simmons – Simmons is one of the residents of Roaring Camp. He has a distinctive Cockney accent and reminisces about Greenwich, a borough in London, England.

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.

SIN, REDEMPTION, AND CHILDREN

"The Luck of Roaring Camp" is a satirical rehashing of the biblical birth and death of Christ. In the story, a prostitute dies while giving birth in a small settlement in the American West (where she was the only woman), leaving the all-male community in charge of a newborn. But the **baby**, whom the men name "the Luck," quickly changes Roaring Camp for the better, spurring the men to clean up their foul language and even their appearances. In Christianity, it's believed that Christ's life and death absolved his followers of their sins, thus giving them access to eternal life in Heaven. The story's point about redemption, though, isn't religious in nature—after all, baby Luck's christening is the first time the word "God" is uttered seriously at the camp. Instead, Luck's birth and his impact on the community show that even the most seemingly hardened and criminal people are still capable of positive transformation, or "redemption," and that children are uniquely equipped to bring about this kind of radical, positive change.

Roaring Camp is full of immoral, unpleasant, or even outright criminal characters—from a biblical perspective, they can be read as sinners in need of redemption. Roaring Camp is described as a "city of refuge," a biblical allusion to ancient settlements where outcasts could find safety and community. This allusion suggests that the men of Roaring Camp are immoral enough to have been cast out from other towns, but it also implies that there's hope for them. Many Bible verses suggest that God himself created those cities of refuge—that God seeks to love and protect even the outcast and immoral by giving them a sanctuary or safe space to live. And indeed, the

men are all "reckless"—some are criminals, and others are fugitives. But this reference to a "city of refuge" seems to suggest that the characters in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" are redeemable, too. Furthermore, the one woman in the settlement, Sal, is a prostitute, and she is "Dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable." When she dies, she's described as leaving behind the "sin and shame" of Roaring Camp, again underscoring that the camp is riddled with sin—and desperately in need of redemption.

Baby Luck's birth mirrors Christ's in several ways, suggesting that the Luck will bring about this redemption or positive change in Roaring Camp—just as Jesus is believed to redeem believers of their sins. The Christian story of Christ's birth recounts that he was born in a manger—a feeding trough for farm animals—in a modest stable, and that the Magi (wisemen) visited him here and brought him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Luck's birth is similarly unglamorous, as he's born in a crude cabin in the middle of the wilderness. The men of the camp, like Magi of the frontier, bring the baby precious gifts (like a gold boot spur, a diamond pin, a silver teaspoon, and an embroidered handkerchief), further likening him to Christ.

The Luck's presence spurs the men of Roaring Camp to better themselves and their town in various ways. This emphasizes Luck's status as a Christ figure but also children's power more generally to effect positive change. After Sal dies, someone raises the idea of recruiting a woman from another town to nurse Luck. But the men decide against this, declaring "that 'they didn't want any more of the other kind.' This unkindly allusion to the defunct mother [...] was the first spasm of propriety,—the first symptom of the camp's regeneration." While the men are making some "unkindly" generalizations about women here, their underlying intention is to protect the camp from further sin now that they have a baby to raise. Soon after the Luck's birth, positive outward change sweeps over the camp, beginning with the cabin where the Luck stays with an esteemed citizen named Stumpy. The Luck's presence catalyzes this outward regeneration—for instance, his new cradle is so nice that it makes the rest of the furniture look bad, so Stumpy goes to work trying to spruce up the rest of the cabin to make it fit for the baby. This regeneration spreads all over Roaring Camp and "produce[s] stricter habits of personal cleanliness." Even Kentuck, who "had begun to regard all garments as a second cuticle, which, like a snake's, only sloughed off through decay" begins wearing clean shirts and washing his face so that he'll be clean whenever he holds the baby. The image of Kentuck sloughing off his dirty clothes like a snake sheds its skin also speaks to the more general renewal and rebirth happening in Roaring Camp.

Indeed, the Luck begins to positively change the men on a deeper, more personal level. The men's usual rambunctious yelling, which is what gave Roaring Camp its name, is tempered when they're in close proximity to the Luck, and they even cut out profanity. Again, that the men go from cursing and roaring—and being known for this behavior—to respectfully tiptoeing and whispering, which indicates that caring deeply for the Luck is influencing them to change their ways. Even though the Luck is just an infant, he's redeeming and renewing the men inside and out, which speaks to his status as a redeeming Christ figure in the story. But this also underscores the story's more general point that children are uniquely capable of bringing about this kind of dramatic positive transformation in the world.

Luck's death at the end of the story is tragic and seemingly meaningless—he wasn't a religious martyr who died for his people but was instead the victim of a random act of nature, a massive winter **flood**. But the story implies that the men have been so thoroughly changed and redeemed by Luck's presence that Luck's death *was*, in its own way, redemptive like Christ's. In Christian thought, Christ's death isn't the end of his influence on Earth or his connection with his followers; likewise, Luck may have died, but the story suggests that he has so radically changed and renewed the community of sinners that his influence will perhaps live on in the town.

THE FLEETING NATURE OF LUCK

Despite his name, **baby Luck** seems far from lucky. His mother, Cherokee Sal is the town prostitute, and she dies in childbirth, orphaning baby Luck and leaving him under the care of 100 gruff, unpleasant, and even criminal men in the wilderness of the American West. And to the men, who are now suddenly in charge of a newborn, the Luck's birth doesn't seem all that lucky at first, either. But over the course of the story, the Luck positively transforms these men so dramatically that they do indeed come to believe that the baby's birth was a stroke of luck—hence why they name him "the Luck." And baby Luck *does* seem to be something of a good luck charm for the community, as he brings the men a newfound sense of joy, warmth, closeness, and purpose. But when the Luck dies tragically in a **flood** at the end of the story, readers are left wondering how lucky the Luck—or Roaring Camp itself—really was after all. Through Luck's life and death, the story suggests that luck is fragile and fleeting; it can disappear as quickly as it arrived.

The concept of luck is central to how the men of Roaring Camp understand the world around them. When Sal is in labor, "Bets were freely offered and taken regarding the result"—that is, whether the baby will be a boy or a girl, whether Sal will survive, and whether the baby will survive. The camp is made up of "Gamblers and adventurers," so it's natural to the men to see life as a gamble. When the men decide on the baby's name—Tom Luck, or "the Luck" for short—Oakhurst explains, "It's better [...] to take a fresh deal all round. Call him Luck, and start him fair." Oakhurst is alluding to the fact that the Luck's name has no trace of his parentage—his mother, Cherokee Sal,

was a prostitute with a dishonorable reputation, and no one knows who the father is, as the story implies that most of the settlement's men had sex with Sal. The men give the Luck a name that's all his own rather than forcing him to be defined by his parents' pasts—this is a "fresh deal all round," like a freshly shuffled deck and a new set of cards delt out to the players of a card game. In other words, the men try to set up the Luck to be luckier than he perhaps would be if he'd been saddled with his mother's reputation. Once again, the concept of luck is integral to the men's worldviews.

Baby Luck's birth happens quickly—as does the positive change that sweeps over the men of Roaring Camp—suggesting that luck itself comes out of nowhere. The story doesn't follow Cherokee Sal's pregnancy but instead skips right to her giving birth (to a baby later named "the Luck"), which is the story's first indication that luck can crop up seemingly out of nowhere. After the Luck's birth, "almost imperceptibly a change came over the settlement." The men clean up their foul language, dirty appearances, and rundown homes and businesses—and they begin to find more and more gold. Oakhurst proclaims that "the baby had brought 'the luck' to Roaring Camp. It was certain that of late they had been successful." As a gambler, Oakhurst conflates success not necessarily with hard work or reaping the benefits of one's labor, but with luck. Because the men have been successful recently (they're financially thriving, and the men's cleaned-up appearances and language suggests that they're thriving on more personal levels as well), Oakhurst immediately thinks that luck has something to do with it.

But baby Luck's life ends nearly as quickly as it began, suggesting that luck is fleeting and short-lived. After the men spend so much time sprucing up the camp, a winter flood rushes in, turning the settlement into a pile of debris. That the men can't do anything to reverse or remedy the situation speaks to the idea that luck comes and goes quickly, and people have no control over this ebb and flow. Much to their dismay, the men discover that "the pride, the hope, the joy, the Luck, of Roaring Camp had disappeared" in the flood—baby Luck has been swept away, and with him, the camp's luck more generally. The word "disappeared" suggests that the men's luck suddenly dissolved into thin air—another indication that luck is incredibly fleeting. The flood takes Kentuck's life, too. Holding baby Luck's body in his arms, the dying Kentuck tells his fellow men, "'he's a taking me with him,—tell the boys I've got the Luck with me now'; and the strong man, clinging to the frail babe as a drowning man is said to cling to a straw, drifted away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea." Here, Kentuck is explaining that the dead baby Luck is "taking [Kentuck] with him" into death, but the story is also making a commentary about luck. Like the word "disappeared," the phrase "drifted away" speaks to the fleeting nature of luck; no amount of Kentuck's "clinging" can keep luck from fading away. And even though Kentuck is a "strong man," he's still reduced to "drift[ing] away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea"—another indication that luck comes and goes of its own accord, and that people are powerless to change it. Furthermore, baby Luck (and, by extension, the men's luck) is described as fading away into a natural scene—dying is described as a river, while death itself is described as a sea—which suggests that it is *natural* for luck to fade away like this. This ebb and flow of luck, the story suggests, is part of the natural order of things, and it's something people must accept, just as Kentuck does.

CHILDREN, CAREGIVING, AND MASCULINITY

"The Luck of Roaring Camp," plays into the age-old idea that it takes a village to raise a child. It follows a gold-mining community in the American West, populated by gruff men who are in charge of rearing a **baby** after his mother, Cherokee Sal, dies in childbirth. Over the course of the story, these hypermasculine, hardened men take on more maternal, traditionally feminine qualities as they learn how to raise baby Luck and be his chosen family. The men's transformation from rough-and-tumble criminals to more selfless and sensitive (if imperfect) caregivers highlights that raising a child is indeed a group effort. But it also suggests that caring for children can give men permission to engage with this more tender, gentle side of themselves in a way that society often doesn't allow.

Kentuck's character shows how the men of Roaring Camp are the very picture of hypermasculinity. After Luck is born, all of the men of the camp approach the baby one by one to give him gifts. When Kentuck, a particularly unruly character at the camp, meets Luck, the baby latches on to Kentuck's finger, which delights Kentuck. After this tender interaction, "[Kentuck] drank quite freely, and related with great gusto his experience, invariably ending with his characteristic condemnation of the new-comer. It seemed to relieve him of any unjust implication of sentiment, and Kentuck had the weaknesses of the nobler sex." Here, Kentuck fights to keep his hypermasculine façade by drinking to excess and generally being loud and scornful—but nevertheless, he can't help but excitedly tell everyone about how baby Luck "rastled with [Kentuck's] finger." That Kentuck is described as having "the weakness of the nobler sex"—that is, sentimentality and sensitivity—suggests that he always stuffs down these qualities, but that baby Luck is making it particularly difficult to continue to do so. One night, Kentuck resolves to visit Stumpy's cabin to see Luck, but he tries to make the visit look casual and unplanned. He pretends that he's on an aimless nighttime walk, "whistling with demonstrative unconcern," but it's clear that he is eager to visit the baby. Just like Kentuck did after first meeting Luck, here he displays a performative brand of masculinity, carefully concealing any sensitive feelings or emotions that go against the grain of his reputation. But once

again, Kentuck struggles to keep this tenderness (his concern and affection for the infant) under wraps. This moment suggests that baby Luck—and children in general—spur hypermasculine men like Kentuck to engage with a more softhearted side of themselves.

Because it takes a village to raise a child, all of the men—not just Kentuck—find themselves softened by baby Luck. When the men decide to keep Luck, "Certain articles were sent for to Sacramento. 'Mind,' said the treasurer, as he pressed a bag of gold-dust into the expressman's hand, 'the best that can be got,—lace, you know, and filigree-work and frills,—d—m the cost!" In this instance, the settlement's treasurer emphasizes the men's commitment to baby Luck (they're willing to pay any price to get the best clothing or furniture for the baby), as well as how they're beginning to show softer, more feminine sides of themselves as a result. Wanting "the best that can be got" for the baby, the treasurer asks for "lace, you know, and filigree-work and frills"—all delicate and stereotypically feminine fabrics and patterns. Similarly, when the men are working in the wilderness, they settle baby Luck in a shady place that they try to make pleasant for him: "there was a rude attempt to decorate this bower with flowers and sweet-smelling shrubs [...]. The men had suddenly awakened to the fact that there were beauty and significance in these trifles, which they had so long trodden carelessly beneath their feet. A flake of glittering mica, a fragment of variegated quartz, a bright pebble from the bed of the creek, became beautiful to eyes thus cleared and strengthened, and were invariably put aside for 'The Luck.'" The "rude attempt" underscores that the men still are gruff, but that baby Luck's influence is helping them to shed their hardened exteriors and be "suddenly awakened" to beauty. The only outsider allowed in and out of the camp is the expressman (a mailman on horseback), and he tells people from other settlements about Roaring Camp: "They've got vines and flowers round their houses, and they wash themselves twice a day. But they're mighty rough on strangers, and they worship an Ingin [sic] baby." Here, too, the expressmen stresses that the men of Roaring Camp still are these rough-and-tumble outlaws, but they've specifically softened toward baby Luck given their deep love for him. (In this passage, the expressman calls Luck an "Ingin," or American Indian, baby, which is a reference to baby Luck's mother, Cherokee Sal, being an American Indian woman.) Tough as the men may still be on the outside, it seems that baby Luck has given them permission to engage with the more tender, sensitive parts of themselves that are attuned to beauty.

ISOLATION, COMMUNITY, AND HARDSHIP

Roaring Camp is a small gold-mining settlement in the American West—Northern California specifically, given the story's reference to the Sierra Nevada mountain range and redwood trees. The settlement is incredibly insular: it's tucked away in the wildness, far away from other towns, and is populated by 100 gruff men who are suspicious of outsiders. But rather than focusing on the negative effects of isolation—of which there certainly are many—the story focuses on how insular communities like Roaring Camp are often made stronger in being so set apart from the outside world. This dynamic is especially true in trying times, like when the men of Roaring Camp are suddenly faced with how to raise a **baby** without his mother—or *any* female presence at the camp, save for the mule. Overall, Roaring Camp's isolation isn't a cause for loneliness or despair in the midst of these circumstances—instead, it leads the men to band together in a powerful way and makes the community more tightly knit than before.

Roaring Camp is physically and socially isolated from the outside world. The next town over, Red Dog, is 40 miles away, which is roughly one or two full days of travel on horseback. Roaring Camp's "only connecting link with the surrounding world" is the expressman, a kind of mailman on horseback. But the men of Roaring Camp seem to prefer being set apart like this, as they often "looked suspiciously on strangers. No encouragement was given to immigration [...] This, and a reputation for singular proficiency with the revolver, kept the reserve of Roaring Camp inviolate." It's implied that this skepticism toward outsiders is integral to the Gold-Rush era West, noting that "A disbelief in the honesty of other camps prevailed at Roaring Camp as in other places." Roaring Camp is also isolated from the outside world because it's so deep in the wilderness: the camp is in a valley surrounded on all sides by either hills or a river. The only way in and out of the valley is a steep path that winds up the highest part of one of the hills.

In addition, the men in the camp are emotionally and socially separated from outsiders, which only intensifies after they become responsible for baby Luck. Roaring Camp is referred to as a "city of refuge," which is an allusion to settlements for outcasts in biblical times. With this in mind, the story implies that the men have been kicked out of other communities and even cast out from their families—Stumpy, for instance, "had been the putative head of two families." The phrase "had been," in the past tense, emphasizes that Stumpy's connection to those families has since been severed. When baby Luck is born and his mother, Cherokee Sal, dies in labor, the men in Roaring Camp are left to raise him. From this point on, the men's suspicion toward outsiders deepens, a reaction that seems to be a combination of believing that the Luck is their personal good luck charm and also just wanting to keep him safe. The men thus decide to isolate themselves even further: "to make their seclusion more perfect, the land on either side of the mountain wall that surrounded the camp they duly preempted."

And although it initially seems that Luck's birth might put too much strain on such an isolated community—possibly even

making it collapse—it actually makes the men band together even more than before. When a baby's cry suddenly rings out while Sal is in labor, nature itself goes completely silent: "The pines stopped moaning, the river ceased to rush, and the fire to crackle." This dead silence reinforces that the men are isolated from other people and towns—there's no doctor here to help facilitate the birth, nor are there other women in the camp to nurse the Luck when Sal dies in childbirth. But instead of crumbling under this pressure and isolation, "The camp rose to its feet as one man!" From the Luck's very first cry, it's clear that the men of Roaring Camp intend to stick together and deal with what comes as a unit. The next day, the men hold a meeting to figure out what to do with the baby, and "A resolution to adopt it was unanimous and enthusiastic." But when one man, Tipton, suggests they send Luck to the next town over because the women there could raise him, "the unlucky suggestion [was] met with fierce and unanimous opposition." Here, Tipton is portrayed as the exception rather than the rule; besides him, all of the other men are on the same page about raising the Luck themselves. Of course, this again underscores Roaring Camp's insularity, as the men are wholly unwilling to bring in an outsider or to cast out one of their own. But their "unanimous and enthusiastic" decision to raise the Luck shows that their isolation and insularity is continuing to bring them closer and encouraging them to act as a strong, cohesive unit.

When Cherokee Sal goes into labor and her health quickly fades, her isolation is a deep and painful burden. She's the only woman in the camp, and she's further set apart from the other Roaring Camp residents because of her status as a prostitute, which is implied to make her more of a commodity than a valued member of the community. She's incredibly lonely, and the pain of childbirth is made so much worse without other women around her. What's different about the men of Roaring Camp, though, is that they have one another. So, while isolation isn't *always* a positive force—it's certainly painful for Sal—the story does emphasize how it can bring tight-knit communities even closer together.

THE BRUTALITY OF THE OLD WEST

Like many of Harte's stories, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" takes place in a settlement in the American West during the Gold Rush era. But it's not all campfire songs and panning for gold at Roaring Camp—the men of Roaring Camp have led difficult lives, and simply surviving in the wilderness is a feat in itself. This is the brutal environment that the titular **baby Luck** is born into; when his mother, the town prostitute, dies in childbirth, the Luck is suddenly at the mercy of 100 husky men in an isolated settlement in the wilderness. Indeed, from Harte's perspective, the Wild West is a rough, unforgiving place, both in terms of the people who settle there and the natural landscape itself. The characters' shady pasts, coupled with the tragic natural disaster at the end of the story, dismantle the myth of the Old West as being an idyllic place full of opportunity and adventure.

All of the characters have shady backstories, which paints the Western population as a whole as tough, unforgiving, and even outright dangerous. Roaring Camp is referred to as a "city of refuge," which is a biblical allusion to settlements on the outskirts of society that housed outcasts and criminals in biblical times. This allusion reveals the moral makeup of Roaring Camp: the men are outcasts and outlaws who are implied to have been kicked out of other cities. Indeed, of the hundred men living at Roaring Camp, some are criminals; some, like Oakhurst, are gamblers; and a couple of them are "actual fugitives from justice." They're often described as "roughs" (people who are disreputable and violent), "scamp[s]" (mischief-makers), and all-around "reckless" men. That *all* the men have some sort of shady past paints a picture of the Wild West as a whole—it's a place for rough-and-tumble outlaws and outcasts. The one woman at the settlement, Cherokee Sal, is heavily implied to be a prostitute. Her name is "familiar enough in the camp," suggesting that the majority of the men are "familiar" with her in the euphemistic form of the word—that is, they've had sex with her. In describing her, the narrator admits, "Perhaps the less said of her the better. She was a coarse, and, it is to be feared, a very sinful woman." When Sal dies in childbirth, she's described as "climb[ing] [...] that rugged road that led to the stars" and passing out of Roaring Camp's "sin and shame." This passage again underscores that Roaring Camp is a brutal, unforgiving place, riddled with immorality and scandal. But the metaphor of dying as a "rugged road" also begins to point to another layer of why the Wild West is so brutal.

While the people who populate the West are ruthless, the story suggests that the Western landscape itself is far more brutal, further undermining the widely held belief that the West is a place of good-natured adventure and excitement. Roaring Camp, like many Western settlements during the Gold Rush era, is incredibly isolated—the closest town is 40 miles away. Roaring Camp is also isolated in that it's tucked away in the wilderness: "The camp lay in a triangular valley, between two hills and a river. The only outlet was a steep trail over the summit of a hill [...]." The "steep trail" one must climb to get out of the valley is reminiscent of the metaphorical "rugged road" that Sal climbs as she dies; both paint the West as a place of physical exertion, untamed landscapes, and extremes. And while this isolation might protect Roaring Camp from outsiders, nature has no trouble infiltrating and destroying the camp in one fell swoop, which is a testament to nature's brutality and power. One night, "the North Fork suddenly leaped over its banks, and swept up the triangular valley of Roaring Camp." As the storm continues, "Each gorge and gulch was transformed into a tumultuous watercourse that descended the hillsides, tearing down giant trees and scattering its drift and debris

along the plain." The **flood** rips trees out of the earth, making it clear that nature is powerful enough to destroy even itself. The men in the settlement, as tough and reckless as they may be, are powerless in the face of nature's might, and "little could be done to collect the scattered camp." Three of Roaring Camp's residents die in the flood: Stumpy, Kentuck, and baby Luck. Kentuck's death underscores his power (a reminder that residents of the Wild West *are* a force to be reckoned with) but simultaneously highlights his powerlessness in the face of the powerful natural world: "the strong man, clinging to the frail babe as a drowning man is said to cling to a straw, drifted away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea." Strong as Kentuck may be, he is reduced to "clinging," "drowning," and "drift[ing] away," entirely unable to fight back against the brutal Western landscape.

Initially, it seems that nature is beautiful, peaceful, and even nurturing toward baby Luck: "Nature was his nurse and playfellow. For him she would let slip between the leaves golden shafts of sunlight that fell just within his grasp; she would send wandering breezes to visit him […] to him the tall red-woods nodded familiarly and sleepily […]." But no matter how beautiful and tender this moment is, nature is precisely what kills the Luck in the end. While "The Luck of Roaring Camp" certainly affirms that Western folks are a force to be reckoned with, closing the story with a massive, fatal flood makes it clear that the Old West's natural landscape is what's really the most brutal and unforgiving. Life in the Old West isn't all adventures on horseback in the majestic wilderness. Instead, life in a place like Roaring Camp is rough, isolated, and terribly dangerous.

SYMBOLS

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

TOMMY LUCK ("THE LUCK")

More of a symbol than a character in his own right, baby Luck represents the idea that luck comes and goes quickly, often without warning. The story opens with Cherokee Sal giving birth to the Luck in a gold-mining settlement called Roaring Camp. One of the men, Stumpy, goes into a cabin to assist with the birth, but readers aren't privy to the details of Sal's labor, as the narration shifts to giving backstories and descriptions for the other men in the camp. And then the Luck appears into the world quite suddenly: "Above the swaying and moaning of the pines, the swift rush of the river, and the crackling of the fire, rose a sharp, querulous cry,—a cry unlike anything heard before in the camp." This description of the Luck's first cry, which suddenly pierces the normal sounds of the camp, indicates that the baby comes into the world seemingly in an instant. And the story implies that good fortune is much the same way: luck appears suddenly and without warning. After the Luck's birth, the men of Roaring Camp begin finding more and more gold, and they decide that baby Luck was what brought them this unexpected windfall—and that baby Luck *was* an unexpected windfall too, hence why they name him Tom Luck, or "the Luck" for short.

But the Luck's life is brief, and his death happens as unexpectedly and swiftly as his birth. In the winter of 1851, the rivers overflow, and a massive **flood** rushes through Roaring Camp. Much of the settlement is reduced to debris; Stumpy's cabin is swept away entirely; and Stumpy, Kentuck, and the Luck all die. But readers aren't given any details surrounding *how* the Luck gets swept away. The story narrates the confusing rush of water that suddenly overtakes the camp in the middle of the night and the sound of cracking timer as trees snap—and the next thing readers know, "the pride, the hope, the joy, the Luck, of Roaring Camp had disappeared." Just like his birth, the Luck's death isn't detailed and drawn out but happens swiftly. Of course, baby Luck's sudden disappearance and death coincides with the sudden disappearance of Roaring Camp's luck more broadly: in an instant, the flood has robbed them of their beloved good luck charm, two important members of their community, and many of their structures.

THE FLOOD

The massive winter flood that sweeps through Roaring Camp at the end of the story has two levels of symbolic significance. On the surface, it symbolizes the unique brutality and power of the American West's landscape. Roaring Camp is nestled deep in the rugged terrain of Northern California in a triangular valley surrounded on two sides by steep hillsides and on one side by a river. But when the snow and rains arrive in the winter of 1851, the terrain becomes even more dangerous: "every mountain creek became a river, and every river a lake. Every gorge and gulch was transformed into a tumultuous watercourse that descended the hillsides, tearing down giant trees and scattering its drift and debris along the plain." Here, the already rugged natural landscape transforms into a violent battleground with "the confusion of rushing water, crushing trees, crackling timber, and the darkness which seemed to flow with the water and blot out the fair valley […]." The men's confusion and the deafening noise of cracking wood is reminiscent of confused soldiers hearing the crack of gunshots in the darkness. The men of Roaring Camp are tough as they come—but even they are rendered powerless against the Western landscape. In the end, "little could be done to collect the scattered camp."

However, the flood also symbolizes the idea that luck is an ebb and flow—that good fortune comes and goes in waves just like waters in the river that sometimes spill out into the valley. After

the nearby settlement of Red Dog is flooded twice—and Roaring Camp is warned that they're next—Stumpy declares, "Water put the gold into them gulches [...] It's been here once and will be here again." With this, Stumpy speaks to the idea that the floods—bad luck—has happened before and will happen again. He also highlights how this flooding, or bad luck, is precisely what "put the gold into them gulches" (the story is set during the California Gold Rush), or led to good luck. In other words, life is a constant push and pull of good and bad fortune, and all people can do is surrender and ride the wave.

QUOTES

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

The Luck of Roaring Camp Quotes

[...] [T]he name of a woman was frequently repeated. It was a name familiar enough in the camp,—"Cherokee Sal."

Perhaps the less said of her the better. She was a coarse, and, it is to be feared, a very sinful woman. [...] Dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable, she was yet suffering a martyrdom hard enough to bear even when veiled by sympathizing womanhood, but now terrible in her loneliness. The primal curse had come to her in that original isolation which must have made the punishment of the first transgression so dreadful.

Related Characters: Cherokee Sal

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces Cherokee Sal, a Native American woman who is the only woman at Roaring Camp and is heavily implied to be a prostitute. Harte makes Sal's profession clear by underscoring her sinfulness (she's "Dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable") and also by pointing out that her name is "familiar enough in the camp." Here, Harte is using the word "familiar" euphemistically: the men are familiar with Sal, meaning that most of the men have had sex with her.

At this point in the story, it's unclear what Sal's "martyrdom" is, but what is clear is that she's suffering and alone. She's specifically been "abandoned" by other women, which implies that her status as a prostitute set her apart from other women and made her disgraceful to them. The story soon reveals that what Sal is going through here is childbirth, so it also seems that Sal is "abandoned" in another way, too: it's unclear who the father of her baby is, and certainly none of the men of Roaring Camp are (or perhaps even *can*) take responsibility for her pregnancy and the baby. Thus, Sal is forced to bear this burden without "sympathizing womanhood" or the baby's father to support her.

"The primal curse" that the story refers to here is painful childbirth—in Genesis 3:16, God punishes Eve for her original sin, or "first transgression" (disobeying Him when He told her not to eat from a certain tree in the Garden of Eden), by ensuring that childbirth will be severely painful for all women. This passage suggests that this "primal curse" of painful labor is made even more excruciating in loneliness. Throughout the story, isolation is usually presented in the context of Roaring Camp's insularity from the outside world and from other settlements. This kind of isolation tends to bring the Roaring Camp men closer together and intensify their solidarity—their isolation isn't terribly painful like it is here for Sal. But this is because the men have each other: Roaring Camp itself is a community of 100 men, while Sal is very much set apart because of her sex and profession. With this, Harte seems to imply that the Western frontier can indeed be a brutal place, especially for a woman.

Within an hour she had climbed, as it were, that rugged road that led to the stars, and so passed out of Roaring Camp, its sin and shame forever. I do not think that the announcement disturbed them much, except in speculation as to the fate of the child. "Can he live now?" was asked of Stumpy. The answer was doubtful. The only other being of Cherokee Sal's sex and maternal condition in the settlement was an ass. There was some conjecture as to fitness, but the experiment was tried. It was less problematical than the ancient treatment of Romulus and Remus, and apparently as successful.

Related Characters: Stumpy, Cherokee Sal

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Cherokee Sal has just given birth to her baby, but her health

declines over the course of an hour, and she dies in this passage. Death is figured as a "rugged road that [leads] to the stars," recalling an earlier description of the sole footpath in and out of Roaring Camp that winds up a steep hillside and seems to dissolve into the sky. There are a couple of reasons why this comparison between death and the trail is important: first, it emphasizes the vastness of both nature and of death. Death stretches as far as the night sky, and vice versa, and humans seem small and insignificant by comparison. (Later, the story also compares death to a river that leads to a sea, which has the same effect.) In line with this, the comparison also illustrates the unique and rugged beauty of the landscape in the American West. However, conflating the trail with death also suggests that the Western landscape can be brutal and even deadly—which certainly proves true at the end of the story, when a massive flood sweeps through Roaring Camp.

It's significant that, when Sal dies, she is described as leaving behind Roaring Camp's "sin and shame." Up until this point, she's the only one who's been described as actually immoral and disgraceful—the men, even those who are criminals, are described more as troublemaking rascals than sinful. But this passage makes clear that Roaring Camp *is* a sinful place, setting its residents up for redemption later in the story.

This passage also references the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus, demigod twins who, according to legend, were nursed by a she-wolf in infancy. The twins were then adopted by a shepherd and lived much of their lives unaware of their demigod status. Of course, this isn't all that different from baby Luck being nursed by a female mule and adopted by a slew of gruff gold miners in the wilderness, blissfully unaware that he was the son of a prostitute. However, the story of Romulus and Remus ends in tragedy: although the twins go on to found Rome, conflict ensues, and Romulus eventually kills Remus. So even though the twins overcame the odds in infancy and seemed successful or lucky throughout their lives, their story ended in death and tragedy. This backstory bleakly foreshadows baby Luck's own tragic death at the end of the story.

> The introduction of a female nurse in the camp also met with objection. It was argued that no decent woman could be prevailed to accept Roaring Camp as her home, and the speaker urged that "they didn't want any more of the other kind." This unkind allusion to the defunct mother, harsh as it may seem, was the first spasm of propriety,—the first symptom of the camp's regeneration. [...] But when questioned, [Stumpy] averred stoutly that he and "Jinny"—the mammal before alluded to—could manage to rear the child. There was something original, independent, and heroic about the plan that pleased the camp.

Related Characters: Cherokee Sal, Stumpy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Right after baby Luck is born and his mother, Cherokee Sal, dies in childbirth, the men hold a meeting to figure out what to do with the newborn, and this argument about sending for a female nurse from another settlement ensues. At this point, the most pressing problem for the men is the logistical question of how baby Luck will be nursed: the only female presence at the entire camp is a mule, and the nearest town where women reside is 40 miles away. Getting the Luck proper nourishment is certainly an urgent and practical concern, but it's perhaps surprising that this community of 100 rough-and-tumble outlaws aren't concerned about much else here—such as their capacity to emotionally care for and effectively raise a child.

The men's near-unanimous enthusiasm and determination to raise Luck themselves (only two men raise doubts) makes a larger point about how Roaring Camp's isolation is actually advantageous, because it forces the men to band together and rely only on themselves to solve problems. And without relying on outsiders (something the men are reticent to do, as they distrust people from other settlements), the men are indeed required to come up with creative ways to care for the Luck—like the "original, independent, and heroic" plan of having the camp's female mule nurse the baby.

Part of the men's skepticism toward outsiders is specifically a skepticism toward (and even contempt for) women as a whole. In this passage, they conflate all women with Sal, a prostitute, suggesting that any female presence in the camp would lead the men into further immorality. The narrator acknowledges that this is "harsh"—both toward Sal and

toward women as a whole—but that the men are nevertheless well-intentioned in saying this. It seems that they're beginning to pay closer attention to the moral makeup of the camp now that they have a child to care for, and to them, "any more of the other kind" would only lead them astray.

Gamblers and adventurers are generally superstitious, and Oakhurst one day declared that the baby had brought "the luck" to Roaring Camp. It was certain that of late they had been successful. "Luck" was the name agreed upon, with the prefix of Tommy for greater convenience. No allusion was made to the mother, and the father was unknown. "It's better," said the philosophical Oakhurst, "to take a fresh deal all round. Call him Luck, and start him fair.

Related Characters: Oakhurst (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

After the men of Roaring Camp have been caring for Sal's baby for about a month, they decide to give him a proper name. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" is largely concerned with the nature of luck, and this shows through clearly in this passage. Many of the men at the camp, like Oakhurst in this quote, are gamblers, so they naturally see the world through the lens of luck, odds, fairness, chance, and similar concepts that come up in their gambling. Here, Oakhurst implies that it'd be unfair to saddle the baby with his mother's unsavory reputation as a prostitute and fallen woman—and giving him a name that somehow alludes to his mother would be doing just that.

Instead, the men need to dole out a "fresh deal" to Luck, suggesting that a new name is like a hand of thoroughly and freshly shuffled cards, making for a fair game. For baby Luck, a new name is precisely what will "start him fair" in life. This is particularly interesting coming from a community of men who also have unsavory reputations: many of them are criminals and/or are running from the law. Furthermore, the story previously noted that Roaring Camp is a "city of refuge," which is a biblical allusion to settlements where people in exile could find safety and community. So, in other words, Roaring Camp is implied to be filled with outcasts, too. It seems, then, that the men are keenly aware of how burdensome it can be to be assigned a certain reputation, and that's why the Luck's name is so important to them.

Oakhurst, who appears in this passage, is the protagonist of Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," which he published a year after "The Luck of Roaring Camp." In "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," Oakhurst is still a notorious gambler, and he's still thoughtful, reasonable, and "philosophical," as he's described in this passage. Both this story and the one that follows Oakhurst more closely speak to the idea that there is more to people than meets the eye. Oakhurst may be an outlaw, and he may be a gambler, but he's also rational, introspective, and intellectual. With this characterization, the story is beginning to highlight that the camp's men have more sensitive and thoughtful sides, and that the Luck is the one who is uniquely able to unearth these qualities in them.

Stumpy imposed a kind of quarantine upon those who aspired to the honor and privilege of holding "The Luck." It was a cruel mortification to Kentuck—who, in the carelessness of a large nature and the habits of frontier life, had begun to regard all garments as a second cuticle, which, like a snake's, only sloughed off through decay—to be debarred this privilege from certain prudential reasons. Yet such was the subtle influence of innovation that he thereafter appeared regularly every afternoon in a clean shirt, and face still shining from his ablutions.

Related Characters: Kentuck, Stumpy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

The regeneration of Roaring Camp has already begun, starting with Stumpy's cabin, where the Luck stays—and now, this regeneration begins to seep into members of the community. This passage paints Kentuck as almost a caricature of the Western outlaw: he's so unrefined and coated with dust and grime that his clothes are more like a "cuticle" or top layer of skin. Snakes shed their skin once its old and worn, so Kentuck only "slough[s] off" his clothes and dons a new set once they've thoroughly "decay[ed]."

But this isn't the only reason snakes shed—they also slough off their skin once they've outgrown it. So, when Kentuck agrees, out of nothing but love for the baby, to shed his

clothes for a clean shirt (and to even wash his face), the story is suggesting that he's outgrowing his old, hypermasculine identity. Kentuck changing his habits like this and cleaning up physically is one of the clearest examples in the story of baby Luck's transformative, renewing, even redeeming influence on Roaring Camp.

This passage also hints at the idea that luck isn't constant—it comes and goes. Here, the story suggests that "holding 'the Luck'" is an "honor and privilege" that the men "aspire[] to." While on the surface, this is simply about holding baby Luck, it seems to also be about holding or possessing luck as in good fortune. With this, the story suggests that having good fortune isn't something people can always count on—it's something they "aspire[] to" have, and it's an "honor and privilege" when it does arrive.

❝ Nature was his nurse and playfellow. For him she would let slip between the leaves golden shafts of sunlight that fell just within his grasp; she would send wandering breezes to visit him with the balm of bay and resinous gums; to him the tall redwoods nodded familiarly and sleepily, the bumble-bees buzzed, and the rooks cawed a slumbrous accompaniment.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

When the men of Roaring Camp go out in the wilderness to mine for gold each day, they take baby Luck with them and settle him in a nearby alcove. And since the Luck spends so much time in nature, he develops a sense of closeness with it. Here, nature is personified as Luck's "nurse and playfellow." The reference to his nurse is a reference to the mule that literally nurses the Luck, but it also suggests that nature nourishes and cares for the Luck in all manner of ways. At this point in the story, nature is depicted as maternal, gentle, and playful, underscoring the unique beauty of the landscape in the American West. But this characterization will shift dramatically as the story goes on to highlight both nature's sheer beauty and its ruthless brutality.

This passage also helps to more clearly place Roaring Camp within the landscape of the American West. The story references redwood trees here, which are native to Northern California, and it later mentions the Sierra Nevada mountain range, so it's clear that Roaring Camp is nestled in the wilderness of Northern California. And since the story is set between 1850–1851, the men of Roaring Camp are part of the California Gold Rush, which took place between 1848–1855.

❝ They were "flush times,"—and the Luck was with them. The claims had yielded enormously. The camp was jealous of its privileges and looked suspiciously on strangers. No encouragement was given to immigration, and, to make their seclusion more perfect, the land on either side of the mountain wall that surrounded the camp they duly preempted. This, and a reputation for singular proficiency with the revolver, kept the reserve of Roaring Camp inviolate. The expressman—their only connecting link with the surrounding world—sometimes told wonderful stories of the camp. He would say, "They've a street up there in 'Roaring,' that would lay over any street in Red Dog. They've got vines and flowers round their houses, and they wash themselves twice a day. But they're mighty rough on strangers, and they worship an Ingin baby."

Related Characters: The Expressman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24-25

Explanation and Analysis

By this point, baby Luck has been at Roaring Camp for several months, and Roaring Camp is better than ever before—the men have cleaned up their acts (like literally wearing clean clothes but also cleaning up their language), and they're finding more and more gold. This passage centers around Roaring Camp's isolation and insularity; though the men have been suspicious of strangers throughout the entirety of the story, they seem even more wary of them now. This, of course, is because of the "flush times" they're experiencing—they're possessive of the gold they're finding and don't want outsiders to encroach on this windfall. However, they also seem to be protective and possessive of *baby* Luck, given that the sentence immediately transitions from "They were 'flush times'" to "—and the Luck was with them," with the capital "L." Luck, as in good fortune, is certainly with the men as they find gold, but baby Luck is also now fully integrated into the community and even physically with the men while they mine.

The only outsider who's allowed to come and go freely at Roaring Camp is the expressman, or mail carrier, which again underscores the camp's insularity. Roaring Camp's isolation—and their unexpected love for and devotion to a baby—makes them something of legend, and the expressman plays into this by telling exaggerated stories about the camp, like how they "worship" a Native American baby. But what the expressman does hit upon here is how baby Luck has softened the men of Roaring Camp. No longer just a group of hypermasculine outlaws, the men now have the sensitivity to appreciate beauty (hence why they decorate with flowers) while also being "rough on strangers." In other words, baby Luck has helped the men engage with more feminine sides of themselves and balance out their performance of gender roles.

> The winter of 1851 will long be remembered in the foothills. The snow lay deep on the Sierras, and every mountain creek became a river, and every river a lake. Each gorge and gulch was transformed into a tumultuous watercourse that descended the hillsides, tearing down giant trees and scattering its drift and debris along the plain. Red Dog had been twice under water, and Roaring Camp had been forewarned. "Water put the gold into them gulches," said Stumpy. "It's been here once and will be here again!" And that night the North Fork suddenly leaped over its banks, and swept up the triangular valley of Roaring Camp.

Related Characters: Stumpy (speaker), Kentuck

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks the begging of the flood in Roaring Camp—and the end of Stumpy, Kentuck, and the Luck's lives. This event emphasizes the sheer power of the Western landscape. Prior to this moment, the story has stressed several times that the men live in a triangular valley that keeps them isolated and safe from outsiders, and that the only path in and out of the camp is a steep trail over the summit of a towering hillside. So, while it would take a lot of effort for a person to venture in and out of the camp, nature does so effortlessly, as the river "suddenly leaped over its banks, and swept up the triangular valley of Roaring Camp."

Right before the flood rushes in, though, Stumpy makes an important comment about the nature of luck, suggesting that it comes and goes and that there's little people can do about it. In other words, he fully accepts the ebb and flow of good and bad fortune—although the floods (bad luck) will come and likely cause destruction, this kind of flooding is precisely what put gold in places where the men can mine for it and profit from it (good luck).

> In the confusion of rushing water, crushing trees, and crackling timber, and the darkness which seemed to flow with the water and blot out the fair valley, but little could be done to collect the scattered camp. When the morning broke, the cabin of Stumpy nearest the river-bank was gone. Higher up the gulch they found the body of its unlucky owner; but the pride, the hope, the joy, the Luck, of Roaring Camp had disappeared.

Related Characters: Stumpy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the climax of the story, as the flood rushes into Roaring Camp, killing Stumpy and carrying away baby Luck. Most notable about this passage is the men's sheer helplessness in the face of nature's power and brutality. Nature is so mighty that it turns Roaring Camp into a pile of debris, "but little could be done to collect the scattered camp." As strong and tough as the men of Roaring Camp may be, they can't stop the flood, let alone even collect the debris that the flood has left. Roaring Camp is likened to a tiny speck that the flood easily "blot[s] out," again emphasizing humankind's smallness and insignificance in the face of nature. This stresses the idea that while the landscape of the American West may be beautiful (hence all of the charming descriptions of nature being tender and gentle with the Luck), it's also brutal and untamed. Life on the Western frontier, then, doesn't just consist of campfires and panning for gold—it also involves contending with ravaging floods, tragedy, and death.

Kentuck opened his eyes. "Dead?" he repeated feebly. "Yes, my man, and you are dying too." A smile lit the eyes of the expiring Kentuck. "Dying," he repeated, "he's a taking me with him,—tell the boys I've got the Luck with me now"; and the strong man, clinging to the frail babe as a drowning man is said to cling to a straw, drifted away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea.

Related Characters: Kentuck (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

The flood has just ravaged through Roaring Camp, and here, in the final lines of the story, Kentuck slowly dies with baby Luck's dead body in his arms. Kentuck and the Luck's physical closeness in this passage speaks to how important the Luck has been in Kentuck's life (particularly how the Luck has transformed Kentuck's habits and behavior) over the past several months. Given their close bond, it seems fitting that the two die in an embrace.

This passage also speaks to the idea that luck is fleeting and can be extremely short-lived—just like baby Luck's own life. Interestingly, though, Kentuck doesn't seem too see his death as a stroke of bad luck. Since he's dying with the baby, he's adamant that he has "the Luck with [him] now." While he is, of course, talking about baby Luck, he also seems to be saying that it's lucky that he gets to follow baby Luck into death, down "the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea." Perhaps this is because he sees it as an honor to care for the baby after death, or his love for the baby is so strong that he wouldn't have wanted to live without baby Luck. The story portrays Kentuck's death as a radical acceptance of the ebb and flow of luck and of humankind's helplessness—helplessness against death, the ever-changing tides of luck, and nature itself.

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 LUCK OF ROARING CAMP

It's 1850, and something is amiss in the settlement called Roaring Camp. The "ditches and claims" are empty, and there are no gamblers inside of Tuttle's Grocery. Instead, everyone has congregated on the edge of the camp outside of a cabin. They all converse about a woman whose name is "familiar enough" at Roaring Camp: Cherokee Sal.

This passage begins to orient readers as to the time and place the story is set. The phrase "ditches and claims" grounds the story in the Gold Rush era in the U.S. (a claim is the parcel of land that a person has the legal rights to mine, and the ditches are the narrow channels of land where miners work). The mention of gamblers further indicates that the story is set during the Gold Rush—a time when gambling abounded—and it's also the first hint, besides the story's title, that luck will play a key role in the story. On another note, Cherokee Sal's name clearly paints her as a Native American woman, while the mention that her name is "familiar enough" begins to suggest that she's a prostitute. The men of Roaring Camp are "familiar" with her in the euphemistic form of the word, meaning that they've all had sex with her.

Cherokee Sal is an irredeemably sinful woman, and she also happens to be the only woman at Roaring Camp. Right now, though, is when she most needs other women around her—she's enduring a "martyrdom" without the empathy and sensitivity of other women. Instead, she's surrounded by the gruff, almost disdainful faces of her "masculine associates." Some of the men do feel compassion for her, though—like Sandy Tipton, who knows that this situation is "rough on Sal."

The description of Sal being sinful beyond repair is more evidence that she's a prostitute. It's significant, too, that she's the only woman at the camp, and that the men are described as her "associates"—a word that usually refers to partners or colleagues in business. This further suggests that Sal works as the settlement's resident prostitute, and the men are her clientele. Her status as the sole woman at the settlement also implies that Roaring Camp is generally unfriendly to women—it's a community of hardened, rough-and-tumble men. It's unclear in this passage what hardship Sal is going through, though the fact that it's described as a "martyrdom," suggests that it is something honorable, despite her poor reputation. Most of the men seem unmoved by her situation (again depicting them as gruff and hardened), and the most sympathy she gets is the comment that things must be "rough" for her right now.

Death is commonplace in Roaring Camp, as are people being banished from the camp. But birth—that is, someone *new* being introduced into the community—is far from normal here, and that's why the settlement is practically buzzing. The men volunteer an esteemed citizen named Stumpy to assist with the birth, given that he has experience with such things—after all, Stumpy fathered two families in the past. The other men of Roaring Camp, which is a "city of refuge," urge Stumpy to help Sal, and he complies.

Here, the story clarifies Sal's "martyrdom": she's giving birth. Given that Roaring Camp is a community entirely made up of men, this might be why they're so insensitive to her plight—they don't seem to have the experience or knowledge of what childbirth entails. Stumpy's track record of fathering two families—which itself implies that he's dealt with children, if not actually being involved in assisting labor—thus makes him most equipped to navigate this situation. The description of Roaring Camp as a "city of refuge" is a biblical allusion to a few spots in the Bible that mention a city or settlement that God created for outcasts and outsiders. This allusion speaks to the moral makeup of Roaring Camp: the men are all outsiders, cast out from other communities.

There are about 100 men at Roaring Camp. Some are fugitives, some are criminals, many are gamblers, but all of them are "reckless." They don't necessarily look gruff on the outside—for instance, a gambler named Oakhurst is thoughtful and melancholic with the "intellectual abstraction of a Hamlet." But regardless of the men's physical appearances, they are still extremely tough.

Building off of the reference to the "city of refuge," which implies that Roaring Camp is made up of outcasts, this passage notes exactly what kind of outcasts call Roaring Camp home. Not all of the men are dangerous criminals (though certainly some are), nor do they all look the part of the rugged outlaw, but they are all "reckless." This collective description begins to depict Roaring Camp as extremely insular and likeminded, and it also raises the question of if this community is a suitable environment for a baby. But the mention of Oakhurst's philosophical leanings suggests there is more to these men than meets the eye—at least some of them are capable of being thoughtful and intellectual (hence the reference to Shakespeare's protagonist in Hamlet).

The landscape of Roaring Camp is rugged, too. The settlement is nestled in a triangular valley: there are towering hills on two sides and a river on the third side. The only way in and out of the camp is a steep trail that climbs up the summit of one of the hills. Tonight, in the moonlight, the trail is "winding like a silver thread until it gets lost in the stars."

Roaring Camp's physical attributes underscore the idea that the community is an insular one: the settlement is literally insulated on all sides by the natural world, making it difficult for outsiders to venture into the camp. This again speaks to why the baby's birth is so profound—Roaring Camp is not accustomed to new people joining their community. The poetic description of the trail also emphasizes nature's sheer beauty and vastness, as the trail seems to melt into the stars.

Over the crackling fire, the men place bets about if Sal will survive childbirth, if the **baby** will survive, and what the sex and skin color of "the coming stranger" will be. In the midst of these bets, the pine trees brush and sway in the wind, the fire cracks, and the river rushes. But suddenly, a "sharp, querulous cry,—a cry unlike anything heard before in the camp" rings out, and both nature and the men go silent.

The baby is described as a "stranger," which is another indication that Roaring Camp isn't used to new people joining their fold and that they're suspicious of outsiders. (Furthermore, that the baby's cry is "unlike anything heard before in the camp" stresses that this situation is doubly unheard of in Roaring Camp—this is not a place where women and children abound.) The fact that the men bet about something as serious as Sal's odds of surviving childbirth speaks to their hardened, insensitive dispositions, but it also suggests that they see life itself as a gamble, which is a thread that will run throughout the entirety of the story.

In an instant, "The camp rose to its feet as one man," and some of the men fire their guns in celebration. But Cherokee Sal is dying, and fast: within an hour of giving birth, "she had climbed [...] that rugged road that led to the stars." As she dies, she leaves behind Roaring Camp's "sin and shame." Sal's death doesn't affect the men much, but they *are* concerned about what they're supposed to do with a newborn **baby**. The men ask Stumpy if the baby will live, but Stumpy is unsure. The men successfully get the camp's female mule to nurse the baby, which is "less problematic than the ancient treatment of Romulus and Remus."

The men of the camp act as a single unit in this passage, suggesting that their insularity and suspicion toward outsiders leads to solidarity; they function "as one man" rather than as individuals. Here, the story returns to the imagery of the moonlight trail dissolving into the sky. This suggests that Sal is dissolving into nature itself, which again underscores nature's vastness and power and humankind's smallness. Thus far, the men have been described as rugged outlaws but not necessarily deeply sinful; it's Sal who's been painted as such. But the mention of Sal leaving behind the "sin and shame" of Roaring Camp suggests that the men are morally depraved—setting up for their redemption later on in the story. This passage draws on Roman mythology with the direct reference to Romulus and Remus: twin brothers who were nursed by a she-wolf, just as Sal's baby is nursed by a mule. But the story of Romulus and Remus doesn't end happily—one twin eventually kills the other—foreshadowing the baby's death at the end of the story.

After sorting out these details, the men line up to see the **baby**, who is "swathed" in red flannel fabric and lying in a candle-box. Stumpy directs the men to walk through the cabin, see the baby, and leave any contributions to the baby in the hat on the table. The first man enters and takes his hat off in a sign of respect for the baby, which spurs all the men to do the same when it's their turn—after all, "good and bad actions are catching" in communities like Roaring Camp.

This scene is a secular, Wild West rehashing of the biblical story of the Magi, or wisemen, bringing gifts to baby Jesus after he's born in a manger in a stable. Here, the stable is a crudely built cabin, the manger is a candle-box, and the Magi are gold miners. The word "swathed" often appears in the New Testament as a description of how baby Jesus was "swathed in swaddling clothes"; Sal's baby is "swathed" in red flannel, which is fitting for the story's Old West setting. The idea that actions, whether good or bad, are "catching" in places like Roaring Camp also foreshadows the snowball effect of regeneration, or redemption, that will sweep over the camp.

The men mutter all manner of things to Stumpy when they see the **baby**—often criticisms, like "mighty small specimen." They contribute all manner of small gifts too, including a "gold specimen," a woman's handkerchief (from Oakhurst), a diamond ring, and a golden spur. Stumpy watches on in silence, flanked on each side by the newborn baby and the dead Cherokee Sal.

The biblical Magi brought baby Jesus precious gifts: gold, myrrh (embalming oil), and frankincense (incense). These are all fitting gifts for their time and place, as both myrrh and frankincense are resins found from trees in Asia and Africa, and the Bible notes that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (though some scholars say Nazareth), which sits at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The Roaring Camp residents' gifts are just as fitting and just as precious, given their time and place. Meanwhile, the repetition of the word "specimen" here—first used to describe the baby, and then used to describe a gold nugget—begin to draw an association between the baby and luck, or good fortune (in a mining settlement like this, good fortune means finding lots of gold).

When it's Kentuck's turn to see the **baby**, he reaches out and grabs the Kentuck's finger. Blushing and a little embarrassed, Kentuck mutters, "The d—d little cuss!" He very tenderly tries to loosen his finger from the baby's grip, using more gentleness than perhaps seems possible from a rough-and-tumble outlaw like him. As Kentuck exits the cabin, he examines his finger closely in fascination, repeating to Tipton, "He rastled with my finger [...] the d—d little cuss!"

Kentuck is the story's clearest embodiment of hypermasculinity—here, his crass language and embarrassment over something tender like a baby holding onto his finger shows that he's accustomed to acting macho and manly. But the blush that spreads across his cheeks is a lot like the earlier mention that Oakhurst, the notorious gambler, is actually quite thoughtful and intellectual—there is clearly a more sensitive side to Kentuck that he keeps under wraps. Kentuck's fascination with this interaction shows that the baby is beginning to unlock this side of him.

The men stay up almost all night, and Kentuck repeatedly recounts how the **baby** had held onto his finger. But he ends each enthusiastic retelling "with his characteristic condemnation of the newcomer" so as to not seem too soft or emotional—especially because "Kentuck had the weaknesses of the nobler sex."

Kentuck's continued fascination with the baby grabbing ahold of his finger again emphasizes that the baby has begun to unearth a more tender and sensitive side of Kentuck, but that the man is fearful of appearing effeminate and thus "weak." He couches his affection for the baby in "condemnation of the newcomer," suggesting that his hypermasculinity is a front, or an identity that he performs. The description of the baby as a "newcomer" also revisits the idea that Roaring Camp is incredibly small and insular, and new members are uncommon.

After everyone goes to bed, Kentuck takes a walk along the river and makes his way to Stumpy's cabin, "whistling with demonstrative unconcern." At the redwood tree next to the cabin, Kentuck pauses and takes another lap around the area, past the river, and back to the cabin. He finally knocks on the door; when Stumpy answers, Kentuck asks how things are going, his eyes locked on the **baby**. After an "embarrassing" pause, Kentuck holds his finger up and repeats, "Rastled with it,—the d—d little cuss."

Kentuck's hypermasculinity continues to seem performative, as he "whistle[s] with demonstrative unconcern" to make it look like he's casually, almost indifferently, visiting the baby. Really, though, he is clearly interested in the baby and wants to see him again. His repetition of the phrase "Rastled with it,—the d—d little cuss" also points to his growing affection for the baby, and the "embarrassing" pause before he says this suggests that Kentuck is struggling to stuff down these tender feelings of love and care, as such feelings aren't usually welcome in Roaring Camp.

Cherokee Sal's body is buried in the hillside the next day, and the men hold a formal meeting to discuss what they should do with her **baby**. The men decide, "unanimous[ly] and enthusiastic[ally]," to adopt the baby as their own. However, Tipton floats the idea of sending the baby to the town of Red Dog, 40 miles away, where the baby could be nursed and raised by a woman. The rest of the men vehemently, "unanimous[ly]" oppose this idea. Tom Ryder adds that the people of Red Dog would probably "swap" the baby. This kind of skepticism of outsiders and their integrity abounds at Roaring Camp, as well as other places.

The detail that Sal's body is buried in the hillside is a small one, but it connects back to the idea that she's been absorbed into nature or the universe in death. Once again, nature is portrayed as extremely vast, and humans are just a small part of the universe. As before, the men show profound solidarity here, seen with the repetition of the word "unanimous." Tipton is the outlier here, but the camp turns against him because his idea goes against the grain of the camp's core value of skepticism toward outsiders. That's what Ryder is speaking to when he says that the people of Red Dog would "swap" the baby either for a different baby or for goods; people at other camps, in other words, are not to be trusted.

And when someone else raises the idea of sending a woman to Roaring Camp to care for the **baby**, that idea is immediately shot down, too. For one thing, no "decent woman" would want to come to Roaring Camp—and for another, the men don't want a woman at Roaring Camp. (The narrator notes that this reference to Cherokee Sal may seem harsh, but it is actually "the first spasm of propriety" and "regeneration" in the camp.)

That no "decent woman" would agree to come to Roaring Camp is an underhanded criticism of Sal—of course, she lived in Roaring Camp, so it's implied that she was indecent. The narrator interjects here to guide the reader in interpreting this statement; while this comment about Sal is a harsh one, it's also possible to see it in a more positive light, in that the men only want "decent" people in their community now. This moment is described as a "spasm" of respectability or morality because it happens suddenly and unexpectedly, like a muscle twitch that comes out of nowhere.

Not wanting to say the wrong thing and threaten his position as a leader at the camp, Stumpy mostly stays quiet. But when asked, he affirms that he and the mule, Jinny, can raise the **baby**. To the men, this plan seems "original, independent, and heroic"; they all agree, and they send for some baby things from Sacramento. When the expressman comes through town, Roaring Camp's treasurer stresses that the expressman should purchase only the highest-quality goods for the baby—lace and filigree, no matter the cost.

This passage speaks to what the men of Roaring Camp value: originality, independence, and heroism. These can all be seen as stereotypically masculine traits, so it makes sense that the men are on board with this idea about how they're going to raise the baby. But the treasurer's emphatic declaration that the baby deserves only the best—and his listing of stereotypically feminine fabrics and patterns—is a hint that the baby is softening these hypermasculine men.

As time goes on, the **baby** not only survives but thrives, possibly because of "that rare atmosphere of the Sierra foothills." From Stumpy's point of view, the baby's good health is due to the mule's nutritious milk. After a month, the men resolve to give the baby a proper name rather than just calling him "Stumpy's boy," or a slew of other nicknames. Oakhurst suggests the name "Luck," because the camp has certainly been very successful ever since the baby arrived; the men agree to this and settle on the first name of "Tommy." Oakhurst adds that they should give the baby a new name rather than naming him after Cherokee Sal: "It's better [...] to take a fresh deal all around. Call him Luck, and start him fair."

The unique landscape of the American West (specifically Northern California, given the reference to the Sierra Nevada mountain range and a later reference to redwood trees) is part of what helps the baby grow to be so healthy and strong. But the story will soon subvert this idea that nature is completely gentle and nurturing, underscoring that the Western landscape is *beautiful, but it's also powerful and even brutal. Harte circles back to the concept of luck here with Oakhurst's recommendation of naming the baby "Luck" to "start him fair." As a notorious gambler, it makes sense that Oakhurst understands the world through this lens of odds and luck. In giving the baby a new name—rather than linking him to Cherokee Sal—the men would be setting the baby up to carve out his own path in life rather than being weighed down by his mother's sin and shame. From Oakhurst's perspective, then, the most loving thing they can do for the baby is to give him this fresh start. Naming him Luck would be a nod to this, of course, but it would also be a way to honor the idea that the baby is their good luck charm, as they've been successful (that is, they've found a lot of gold) since the baby was born. It may seem like just a coincidence that the men begin finding more gold now that the baby is part of their community, but the story notes several times that, as gamblers, the men are very superstitious. This is why they would naturally draw a causal relationship between the two seemingly unrelated events.*

The men decide to hold a "facetious[]" christening for the **baby**. A satirist among the men leads the ceremony, and Tipton is to be baby Luck's godfather. But when the service begins, Stumpy stands and says that it doesn't seem right to hold this kind of satirical christening that the baby won't even understand—plus, he thinks that he's best suited to be the baby's godfather. Taking over the service, Stumpy announces, "I proclaim you Thomas Luck, according to the laws of the United States and the State of California, so help me God." This is the first time the word "God" has ever been uttered seriously (that is, non-profanely) at the camp.

This scene shows the men grappling with the two sides of themselves: the irreverent, hypermasculine side that they usually display and the more tender side that the baby is slowly bringing out of them. In the Christian tradition, a christening is a ceremony in which a baby is baptized and given a Christian name. The men hold a "facetious" christening in this scene, meaning that they act out this serious religious ritual with inappropriate humor. But Stumpy—who's usually portrayed as meeker than the other men—refuses to stand for this kind of treatment, as he clearly already loves and respects baby Luck deeply and wants him to have a proper ceremony. Of course, Stumpy unknowingly botches the christening—it's not a baptism at all but is instead more of a legal statement—but his good intentions nevertheless show that the baby is beginning to transform the men of Roaring Camp.

Roaring Camp begins to transform, starting with Stumpy's cabin, where **"the Luck"** lives. His cradle, which traveled 80 miles by mule, is so beautiful that it makes the rest of the cabin look rundown, so the space is cleaned and refurbished. Many men hang around at Stumpy's to see The Luck's accommodations, and they appreciate the improvement. Tuttle's Grocery also gets a facelift, even importing mirrors, which encourage the men to maintain better personal hygiene.

The detail about the beautiful cradle points back to the moment when the settlement's treasurer stressed to the expressman (a messenger or mail carrier, often on horseback) that they only want the highest-quality goods for the baby. In this way, the cradle—and, by extension, baby Luck—catalyzes even more beautification at the camp. Indirectly, the baby encourages the men to take better care of their surroundings and of their physical appearances, which begins to flesh out the idea that children can have a uniquely transformative impact on their communities.

Stumpy also establishes rules surrounding personal hygiene for "those who aspired to the honor and privilege of holding '**The Luck**.'" This is particularly difficult for Kentuck, whose grimy clothes are more of a second skin that he sheds, much like a snake, only when they've all but disintegrated. But nevertheless, he shows up at Stumpy's cabin every day in a clean shirt and freshly washed face.

On the surface, this passage is about having "the honor and privilege" of rocking and holding the baby, but it also implies that having luck or good fortune is an "honor and privilege" rather than a right. In other words, a person can't necessarily count on having good luck. Here, Kentuck's deep affection for baby Luck gets him to change a fundamental aspect of himself—his griminess—which is yet another indication that the Luck is renewing or transforming the camp.

The settlement cleans up its act in other ways, too. Roaring Camp is known for being loud and rambunctious—which is what gave the camp its name in the first place—but the men even go so far as to speak in whispers when they're within earshot of Stumpy's cabin, so as to not disturb **the Luck**. They also clean up their language, cutting out phrases like "'D—n the luck!' and 'Curse the luck!'" from their vocabulary.

Just as Kentuck changes something fundamental about himself for the sake of the baby, so too does the entire community, as the men soften their volume and the words and phrases they use out of respect for the baby. Baby Luck, this passage shows, is bringing out thoughtfulness and conscientiousness in the men.

The men don't give up music, though, since it has a calming effect on **baby Luck**. An English sailor, Man-o'-War Jack, often rocks the Luck while singing him long-winded songs from the Navy. In the summer, the other men often lounge in the grass to listen, filled with an idyllic happiness. It reminds Simmons, who has a Cockney accent, of Greenwich.

The image of a tough sailor like Man-o'-War Jack rocking and singing to baby Luck shows the men balancing their hypermasculine identities and their burgeoning maternal instincts and sensitivity. The small detail about Simmons being nostalgic for Greenwich (a neighborhood in London, England) and having a Cockney accent suggests that while he may have simply come to the American West in search of gold, he also might have been kicked out of his old community, given that he ended up in a circle of outlaws and outcasts. If that's the case, this detail encourages readers to remember that these men are "reckless" and to see how the Luck is softening them.

When the Roaring Camp residents set out to mine for gold each day, they always spread out a blanket in a shady alcove for **the Luck**. The men attempt to beautify this nook with wildflowers, having been recently "awakened to the fact that there were beauty and significance in these trifles, which they had so long trodden carelessly beneath their feet." Nature is like a friend and a mother figure to the Luck, and she sends him gentle breezes and warm, golden rays of sunlight.

Decorating the Luck's little alcove with wildflowers in the hopes of delighting him is another way that the men begin engaging with softer, more sensitive, and more maternal sides of themselves thanks to the Luck's influence. The men are described as being "awakened" to the beauty of the natural world, which they used to be entirely blind to. In other words, the Luck is positively transforming the way that the men behave and how they see the world around them, which underscores the power that children have to positively impact their communities.

It's the "golden summer" at Roaring Camp, "and **the Luck** was with them." The men have been finding more and more gold, which makes them extra suspicious of outsiders. Luckily, though, their isolated location—plus the men's proficiency with the revolver—keeps outsiders away. The only person who freely travels in and out of the camp is the expressman, and he spreads stories in other towns about Roaring Camp. He explains that the men "worship an Ingin baby," decorate their houses with flowers and bathe twice a day—but that they're also incredibly tough.

The word "golden" often refers to an idyllic, positive time—the "golden age" of an empire, for instance, is a time of prosperity and happiness. With this in mind, this passage suggests that the men of Roaring Camp are prospering financially but are also experiencing new levels of happiness. The phrase "the Luck was with them" of course means that the baby is with the men (i.e., the baby is part of their community and physically with the men while they mine for gold). But it also suggests that luck, as in good fortune, has graced the camp. Once again, the baby's presence is directly linked to the men's prosperity and happiness, which speaks to the baby's positive influence on his surroundings. This passage also reminds readers of Roaring Camp's insularity: people from other settlements only hear about the happenings at Roaring Camp through the expressman, which gives the camp and its residents an almost mythical, legendary quality. The expressman tells others about how the men of roaring camp "worship" an "Ingin" (Native American) baby, which is a reflection of the men's deep love for and commitment to the Luck.

Since the men have been finding so much gold, they consider building a hotel in the spring and inviting a couple of "decent families" to live there, so that **the Luck** can grow up with women around him. Even though the men are contemptuous of women, most are willing to overlook this out of love for the Luck; only a few of them oppose the plan outright.

When Luck first entered into the world, the men were adamant that no "decent woman" would ever set foot in Roaring Camp; now, the majority of them think it's entirely plausible that "decent families" might be convinced to move to Roaring Camp. This speaks to the moral and even physical regeneration that the community has been going through, thanks to the Luck.

But the plan never gets put into action. In the winter of 1851, the Sierras are thick with snow and the rivers run over, spilling into the gorges and gulches that run down the hillsides surrounding Roaring Camp. The men had been warned of this, given that the next town over, Red Dog, has just been flooded twice. When Stumpy first heard this warning of potential **flooding**, though, he said, "Water put the gold into them gulches [...] It's been here once and will be here again!" And indeed, the water rushes into the settlement, ripping out trees in its path.

The story's Western frontier setting quickly shifts from being one of "pastoral happiness" to danger and brutality, underscoring nature's sheer power. But Stumpy highlights that this ebb and flow of one's fortunes, like the changing of the seasons, is entirely normal. Just like a bad winter storm that rolls in and then dissipates, luck comes and goes in unexpected waves.

The flood begins, and Roaring Camp descends into chaos: it's pitch-black, and the camp is filled with the sounds of trees snapping and water rushing. Stumpy's cabin (the building closest to the riverbank) has been carried away entirely; the men are helpless to stop the destruction. In the morning, they find Stumpy's dead body and discover with heavy hearts that "the pride, the hope, the joy, **the Luck**, of Roaring Camp had disappeared."

The story doesn't give many details about what, exactly, is going on during the flood (it's unclear, for instance, how or when Stumpy dies). As such, readers are immersed in the chaos and confusion that the Roaring Camp men themselves are feeling as the water rushes around them in the darkness. The sound of cracking wood—from trees snapping against the flood's pressure—highlights that nature is powerful and brutal enough to destroy even itself.

A relief boat arrives, and the captain explains that they found the body of a man and an infant—it's Kentuck and **the Luck**. Kentuck is barely alive, and the Luck's dead body is in his arms. The men of Roaring Camp tell Kentuck that he's dying, but Kentuck softly smiles and says that he's going with baby Luck. With the Luck still wrapped in his arms, Kentuck drifts into the murky river, floating away to an "unknown sea."

The Luck Roaring Camp—and life itself—as quickly as he arrived. With this, the story is commenting on the nature of luck: it comes and goes without warning too, and sometimes, good fortune only stays around for a short amount of time. Just like the raging winter storm that the Western landscape stirred up, the men are powerless to control luck. Kentuck seems to accept this, given his contentedness with dying—and he also seems to be contended to be reuniting with the Luck in death, emphasizing his deep love for the baby. Just like with Cherokee Sal, death is again described with natural language (first it was a trail that leads to the stars; now it's a river that leads to an "unknown sea"). This again underlines nature's power and vastness and humans' insignificance by comparison.

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