

Regional Cultures and their Effects on Caregiver Decisions in Early American Literature.

“The Luck of Roaring Camp” is about an orphaned baby boy living in a California gold prospecting camp being raised by the men that made up said camp. After one devastating flood from melted winter snow wiped out the camp, Luck’s main caregiver tried to save the boy from drowning but did not get there in time - the boy drowned and his caregiver died with the boy in his arms.

“Desiree’s baby” was about a racially ambiguous mother whose race was only called into question when she gave birth to a light brown skinned baby. After being exiled from her husband and rumors spread she took her baby and walked into the dark bayou water, drawing herself and her child in the process.

“No Name Woman” is about Kingston’s aunt who died tragically after falling pregnant by a man who was not her husband. The circumstances surrounding the baby were unknown, and she succumbed to the pressures of the village and took her new born - presumed baby girl - and jumped down a well killing them both.

Writer and Chinese immigrant Maxine Hong Kingston wrote in her short story “No Name Woman” - “Mothers who love their children take them along” (Kingston 4). The common theme between Kingston’s work, Bret Harte’s “The Luck of Roaring Camp”, and Kate Chopin’s “Desiree’s Baby” is the tragic loss of both caretaker and child. While it can be assumed that the caretakers themselves chose the worst outcome for their child, their actions show more love than keeping them alive. Professor of English at Hostos Community College Dr. Jerilyn Fisher states that, “...women are predisposed by instinct to doing whatever they must do to assure their

children's health and spiritual well-being" (Fisher 18). Both Kingston's aunt and Desiree proved Dr. Fisher's statement. The women were faced with a decision on assuring their child's health and future - and they acted at the best of their ability - given the culture that surrounds them. Desiree was faced with racial prosecution and the threat of separation from herself and her child. Kingston's aunt was faced with exile and a hostile environment with the birth of her daughter.

While Dr. Fisher's statement does not exactly fit with the men in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" due to their gender, they do exhibit mothering qualities. According to Axel Nissen, author and professor of American Literature of the University of Oslo they are as close to mothers as Luck would get in the area. Nissen compares the men of Roaring Camp to the writings of Catharine Beecher's book *The American Woman's Home*. He states, "Bret Harte's miners are such good "mothers" that we might suspect them of reading up on Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* on the sly" (Nissen 382). Nissen also brings up the qualities that make a good mother and the list includes: increasing the care and nursing in critical periods of childhood and sickness, offering the child plenty of fresh air, and cleanliness (Nissen 381-383). Kentuck and the camp fell under the idea of a good homemaker and thus Dr. Fisher's statement can pertain to the men of the gold mining camp. They were stuck with the decision of staying behind and facing a potential flood in order to get the gold left behind, or leave the town. While not having the same demeaning consequence as Desiree and Kingston's aunt, the two men had to choose between making Luck's life better with money or worse with relocation and destitution. Although the outcomes for all of the stories paint a caregiver giving up, due to the cultural differences they all had, they actually showed the most love a caregiver can place on their children.

The American West hit a gold rush in 1849, leading a mass of people into migrating to California and setting up camp. In “The Luck of Roaring Camp”, the men and one woman who made up the camp were “...actual fugitives from justice, some were criminal, and all were reckless” (Harte 1), this created a specific culture within the camp. Cherokee Sal was an indigenous woman who was most likely relocated to California due to Manifest Destiny, known as the mass relocation of many indigenous peoples starting in 1812. Her decision to stay in the camp was perhaps due to wanting permanency. When she became impregnated by an unknown man in the camp, the men felt like it was each of their responsibilities to help raise Luck when Cherokee Sal died during childbirth. Stumpy took Luck into his home creating a safe space for the child to grow up in. Kentuck was immediately wrapped around Luck’s finger and he changed the way he groomed himself just to be able to see Luck on a daily basis. True to the culture of the camp, monetary greed took over in the final decision of Luck’s life. Stumpy stayed at the camp to catch the gold that was assumed to appear after the snow melted, something that can be viewed as suicidal due to the flooding. The gold could’ve provided a solid life for the camp and for Luck. Kentuck’s suicidal bravery to save Luck after the flooding showed he was willing to part with gold in order to keep Luck alive. Kentuck and Luck both died due to the choices made within the culture of the gold mining camp, despite the love Kentuck and the other men showed Luck in the camp.

The American South during the Antebellum period - 1812 to 1861 - shed a very different light. Jim Crow laws and racial violence were extremely prevalent. Slavery and plantations were all over the southern states including Desiree’s home state of Louisiana. African Americans had no rights. Women could be sold, babies ripped from their bosom and sent away, and unjust color laws could even put them to death. Marriage between a white person and an

African American was illegal. In the beginning Armand told Desiree that he "...did not care" (Chopin 1), when Monsieur Valmonde mentioned his adopted daughter's unknown background. It was likely due to her fair appearance. Desiree states, "Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair," when she tried to defend her race towards the end (Chopin 2). When she gave birth to a baby showing light brown skin he assumed it was all because of Desiree, because he didn't know her background. With the racial ambiguity of her background and lack of women's and African American rights she succumbed to the idea that she was at fault. Not wanting to subject herself and her child to the tortures of slavery, mutilation, and death at the hands of white plantation owners, Desiree thought that death by her own hand would save her child from the abuse. This action showed love and care for her child's future and it reflected the culture Desiree was immersed in.

Chinese culture in the 1920s was influenced by the decisions made by patriarchal family members, they are supposed to protect the women in their families, and make the marriage contracts (Liu 16). In Kingston's aunt's situation the patriarchal members let her down. All of the men, including her husband, left for America, forcing all of the women to make do for themselves. This gave them no protection when the village raided their home, attacking Kingston's aunt. The unknown circumstance behind who the father of the baby was and by what circumstance her aunt was impregnated by - whether rape or choice - seemed to fuel the final decision at the end. She would've been faced with the same outcome regardless of the reason she was impregnated due to the decisions of the patriarchal members of the village. They wouldn't have believed her if she was raped and the idea she cheated on her husband with another man would've sent her away and possibly to death. Without someone defending her she was left with no choice. If Kingston's aunt abandoned her child there was still a chance of exile and her child

living a horrible life due to the unshakable consequences surrounding her birth. It was assumed by Kingston that the baby was a girl due to the actions of her aunt because “...there is some hope of forgiveness for boys” (Kingston 4). This feeds into the patriarchal culture that surrounds Kingston’s aunt. She had no choice in her mind that she and her child would survive the impending revenge from the village mob, so she did what a loving mom would do. Her last act of true love and sacrifice was clutching her daughter to her chest and falling down the well so her daughter would die first. If there was a chance of survival, Kingston’s aunt would rather be the one to face the consequences, sparing her own child from being tortured at the hands of those in the village.

Each caregiver proved they loved their child and the decisions on their deaths showed it, due to cultural influences. In “The Luck of Roaring Camp” Stumpy made sure Luck had a home and clean visitors. Kentuck had to shape up and groom himself in order to see Luck, who grabbed his heart upon the first sighting. Kentuck risked his life to save Luck in the flood and abandoned the gold that Stumpy was sure would bring them a better life. In “Desiree’s Baby” Desiree didn’t want her and her child separated or subjected to the unjust Louisiana race laws. She held her child close even at the end of their life. “No Name Woman” highlighted the potential banishment and harsh life Kingston’s aunt would’ve faced if she kept the child alive in a culture that only supported men. “Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it” (Kingston 4). Suicide and infanticide are often shown as cowardly acts by people who think they have no choice. Given the circumstances and the culture surrounding all of the caregivers in the story, the situations at the end proved they really had little to no choice. Each caregiver thought about the well-being of their children and they saw bleak futures. The acts showed love and care, something that Dr. Fisher said went along with their mothering instincts.

Killing themselves and their children was the ultimate act of love they could give to their children.

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