The Ransom of Red Chief

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF O. HENRY

Born in the American South during the Civil War, William Sydney Porter worked variously on a ranch, in a land office, and as a bank teller. He married in 1887, began writing stories, and in 1894 he started a short-lived humorous weekly, *The Rolling Stone*. Porter joined the *Houston Post* as reporter, columnist, and cartoonist. In 1896 he was indicted in court for misappropriation of bank funds. Many believed he was innocent, and he fled to Honduras to mount a defense. Unfortunately, his wife fell gravely ill, and he returned to Austin before arranging a full accounting. He was convicted and sentenced shortly after his wife passed away. He served three years and three months in prison and wrote stories of adventure based on his experiences in Texas and Honduras under the *nom de plume* O. Henry. Upon his release, he went to New York City and continued writing for magazines and newspapers. Despite his popularity as a writer, he suffered from financial struggles and alcoholism. He married a second time in 1907 and died in 1910. His posthumous stories, translations, and adaptations for film and television attest to the enduring appeal of his work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Theodore Roosevelt Jr. was the President of the United States from 1901 to 1909, and he was famous for his "cowboy" image, embracing a strenuous lifestyle of robust masculinity. In addition, the scouting movement, as it was called, including the founding of the Boy Scouts in England in 1909 and the Boy Scouts of America in 1910. This is particularly relevant to the simple outdoor living and camping featured in this story. "Teddy" Roosevelt was also known for championing a progressive vision of fairness for the average citizen, including conservation of national parks and breaking up trusts, and these concerns are all consistent with the cave-living rough men of this story who do battle with the prominent money lender in town.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O. Henry was a prolific writer, both as a journalist and as the author of hundreds of short stories. "The Gift of the Magi" is one of his most famous tales, and it is frequently anthologized as a classic part of American literature. Despite this, many literary critics dismiss O. Henry for his well-known "trick" endings, and his work continues to be excluded from some major literary anthologies, notably Harold Bloom's 2014 *The Western Canon*. Despite this controversy, O. Henry's reputation grows year by year, in part due to the prestigious and highly coveted O. Henry Award, first funded in 1918 by the Society of Arts and Sciences. His talent, humor, and interest in working class people in rural and small-town America has often led to apt comparisons with Mark Twain. His work is also comparable in style to the French writer Guy de Maupassant, who used plot twists (though with a darker, less humorous tone). O. Henry, like de Maupassant, often uses irony and satire in his stories, while criticizing wealth inequality and the suffering of lower classes of society.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Ransom of Red Chief
- **When Written:** 1910
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1910
- **Literary Period:** American Literature, early 20th century
- **Genre:** short story/humor
- **Setting:** Rural small-town America
- **Climax:** Ebenezer responds to the ransom demand with his own demand for payment.
- **Point of View:** First person from Sam's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Historic Preservation. The Austin courthouse in which O. Henry was convicted is now O. Henry Hall, which houses the administrative offices of the University of Texas system.

Devouring Books. William Sidney Porter reported he was a voracious reader as a teenager. "I did more reading between my thirteenth and nineteenth years," he wrote, "than I have ever done in all the years since, and my taste at the time was much better than it is now, for I read nothing but the classics."

PLOT SUMMARY

Bill and Sam, two petty criminals looking for an easy two thousand dollars, hatch a plot to kidnap and hold for ransom Johnny, the 10-year-old son of Ebenezer Dorset, a wealthy pillar of the community. They pick up the boy and take him to a cave hideout, but there the tables are turned. Calling himself "Red Chief" in a fantasy game of cowboys and Indians, the boy drives both men crazy—but particularly Bill. With nonsensical prattle, childish demands and mild physical abuse, the boy demands they entertain him, refusing to return to his home

even when they release him from his captivity out of desperation to be rid of his antics. Nonplussed by this unexpected reaction to their crime, the outlaws write a ransom letter to the boy's father, lowering the requested ransom from two thousand dollars to fifteen hundred. Unfortunately, old man Dorset, who knows that his boy is a terror, rejects their demand and instead offers to take the boy off their hands if they pay him $250. Bruised, disheartened, and their hopes reduced by the trials of parenting, Bill and Sam hand over the cash and trick the unhappy boy into returning to his wealthy father. The elder Dorset restrains his son long enough for the chastened duo to flee town, never to return.

CHARACTERS

Sam – Sam, the story's narrator, is a con-man and a hustler who works with his partner-in-crime Bill to hatch harebrained criminal plots. He is always looking for a "good thing" and a scheme to make a little easy money, but his ideas are terrible—he has no realistic understanding of what criminals do or what plans might succeed—and therefore his plots tend to blow up in his face. When he and Bill conspire to kidnap Johnny, the son of a wealthy man, and hold him for ransom, they do not anticipate the child's difficulty, the canniness of his father, nor the logistical hurdles of holding a child hostage and demanding and collecting ransom. For their oversights, Sam and Bill wind up paying Johnny's father Ebenezer to take troublesome Johnny back, rather than making money from their scheme. Despite Sam's criminality, O. Henry portrays him as hapless and sympathetic, a benign and delusional man with pathetic criminal aspirations. Sam seems to be the leader of his and Bill's duo, as he leaves Bill with undesirable tasks, such as wrangling Johnny. He is resilient, and he patiently persists in their plan, even while Bill panics.

Johnny – Johnny Dorset is the ten-year-old boy whom Sam and Bill kidnap for ransom money. He is the son of Ebenezer Dorset, a prominent townsperson who, it is implied, has been a cold and negligent father to Johnny. Ebenezer's cruelty has perhaps influenced Johnny's behavior, as Johnny does things like throw rocks at kittens, physically abuse his captors, and humiliate them. Indeed, upon being kidnapped, Johnny takes charge of the situation, directing Sam and Bill in various avenues of play and terrorizing them with threats real and imagined. While Johnny at first seems troubled and unsympathetic, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that he is imaginative and starved for attention amidst a difficult childhood. Johnny has a powerful imaginative streak, and he roleplays cowboys and Indians with Bill and Sam, taking on the alter ego of Red Chief (a trope now considered racist but which was common and widely-accepted when the story was written). Bill, in particular, bears the burden of Johnny's care, and he becomes a constant playmate for Johnny, taking Johnny's abuse with few complaints and delighting Johnny with their games. Playing and camping with Bill and Sam bring a joy to Johnny that seems to have been absent in his family life with his father—Johnny even says of his captivity that "I like this fine. I never camped out before." After a few days in the cave, the men finally bring Johnny back to his father, paying Ebenezer to take his rambunctious son back rather than receiving ransom money themselves. Reunited, Johnny clings not to his father, but to Bill's legs, unhappy that his abduction is at an end.

Bill Driscoll – Bill Driscoll is Sam's partner in crime—together, the two men have committed a string of petty crimes "in poker games, dynamite outrages, police raids, train robberies and cyclones." In a scheme to collect ransom money, Bill and Sam kidnap Johnny, a troubled local boy. Up in a cave in the woods, Bill is often left as Johnny's only caretaker while Sam attends to other aspects of the plan. Johnny plays rough and Bill takes plenty of bruising and humiliation. Bill participates in Johnny's cowboy and Indian fantasies, playing the role of Old Hank, a trapper that Johnny holds captive. As the fantasies evolve, Bill plays Johnny's horse, Black Scout, which requires allowing Johnny to physically ride Bill while Bill is on his hands and knees—this proves to be a breaking point for Bill. After unsuccessfully trying to send Johnny home himself, Bill is the one who suggests lowering the ransom, and he finally begs Sam to pay the $250 fee that Ebenezer has requested to take his son back. Despite that Bill wants to send Johnny away, he proves himself sympathetic to Johnny—participating in his games and downplaying his difficulties—and he even seems to become a father figure to Johnny. His relationship with Johnny is ultimately touching, even redemptive, as Johnny clings to Bill's legs at the end, refusing to be returned to his own father.

Ebenezer Dorset – Ebenezer Dorset is Johnny's father, a wealthy businessman in the town of Summit. Sam describes him as a rich but stingy person who takes advantage of people in distress: "Respectable and tight, a mortgage fancier and a stern, upright collection-plate passer and forecloser." Ebenezer's coldness and cruelty are also evident in the seeming hunger his son Johnny has for fatherly attention and affection. When Sam and Bill kidnap Johnny and hold him for ransom, Ebenezer displays both his humorous and his calculating sides by refusing to worry about his son's safety and pay the ransom, but instead cleverly negotiating with Johnny's captors so that they would pay him money to return his troublesome son. The unusual name Ebenezer evokes the namesake character Ebenezer Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, and that is reinforced by the polite but calculating missives from him "written with a pen in a crabbed hand." He evokes little sympathy in the reader, perhaps because he is the only one who profits from this sad episode.

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.

CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND EMPATHY

In "The Ransom of Red Chief," two small-time crooks named Sam and Bill conspire to kidnap young Johnny Dorset and hold him until his wealthy father pays a ransom. However, as soon as Sam and Bill lay eyes on Johnny, his violence towards them—both physical and verbal—eclipses the violence of the kidnapping, which actually seems haphazard and comedic rather than cruel. Despite Johnny's violence, O. Henry depicts him as a sympathetic character—his behavior stems from his loneliness and, in particular, his father's cruelty towards him, so he (much like Sam and Bill) seems more pathetic than evil. In this way, the story's real crime isn't kidnapping or Johnny's violence towards his captors—it's the characters' inability to empathize with and care for one another, which is what leads to violence in the first place.

From the beginning, O. Henry is clear that the kidnapping is not the story's defining act of violence. In fact, it's not even the story's first act of violence. When Sam and Bill first meet Johnny, he is "throwing rocks at a kitten," which primes readers not to feel too sorry for him as he is kidnapped. Furthermore, the kidnapping unfolds from the perspective of the kidnappers, so the reader is invited to identify with the "wrong" side of the kidnapping. O. Henry also carefully paints the kidnapping as comedic, as Johnny struggles "like a welter-weight cinnamon bear," and the effects aren't devastating—Johnny says, "I don't have any fun at home" and "I never had such fun in all my life." Once he is free to return home, Johnny even chooses to stay with Bill and Sam, which shows definitively that the kidnapping is not, in the traditional sense, cruel.

Just as O. Henry softens the violence of the kidnapping, he complicates Johnny's violent behavior. While Johnny throws bricks, beats up Bill, and credibly threatens to scalp his captors, his behavior appears to stem from a difficult home life. In fact, his childhood has been so rotten that being kidnapped is perhaps the most fun he has ever had—"I never camped out before," he says while being held in the woods. He even begins to treat his captors as father figures and playmates. This reveals his heartbreaking desire for companionship and, by implication, the unhappiness of his home life. In this way, O. Henry gives context to Johnny's bad behavior, showing that he perhaps doesn't know how to treat others kindly because he has not been treated well himself. By depicting the kidnapping as relatively nonviolent, and Johnny as sympathetic despite his bad behavior, O. Henry moves the reader's focus to a less obvious but more insidious form of violence: lack of empathy for others.

The story's least empathetic character is Johnny's father, Ebenezer Dorset, a cold and manipulative man whose treatment of Johnny has made Johnny violent. O. Henry writes, "The father was respectable and tight, a mortgage fancier and a stern, upright collection-plate passer and forecloser." In a single sentence, O. Henry makes clear that Ebenezer takes advantage of the misfortunes of others ("forecloser"), he is ungenerous ("collection-plate passer"), yet rigid ("stern, upright"), and even hypocritical. It also seems clear that Ebenezer has been a bad father. Johnny has more fun being kidnapped than he did during his whole life beforehand, and he also seems openly afraid of his father. When Bill and Sam finally return Johnny to his house, for example, he doesn't cling to his father, but instead "fastened himself as tight as a leech to Bill's leg." Furthermore, this father isn't eager to have his kidnapped child back. Instead of paying the ransom to protect Johnny, Ebenezer negotiates with Bill and Sam, ultimately extorting them so that they pay him for the privilege of taking his difficult child back. All of this suggests that Ebenezer has made Johnny mean and ornery through his cruelty and indifference—the story's only unambiguous violence.

While O. Henry shows that Sam and Bill's tight finances lead them to crime, and Johnny's bad childhood leads him to violence, he does offer hope for redemption through Bill and Johnny's evolving relationship. At first, Johnny seems crueler to Bill than he is to Sam—he harms Bill physically, humiliates him, and threatens him—but Bill never retaliates, and he even seems to empathize with Johnny. For instance, after Johnny beats Bill up, Bill examines his own bruises and explains to Sam simply that, "We're playing Indian. I'm Old Hank, the trapper, Red Chief's captive." Eventually, Johnny seems to understand and appreciate Bill's patience, empathy, and willingness to play—after knocking Bill into the fire, Johnny says, "I didn't mean to hurt Old Hank....I'll behave if you don't send me home." Bill and Johnny's mutual sympathy seems to show that, just as treating someone cruelly can make them violent, treating someone kindly can quell that violence, drawing out empathy and understanding instead.

IMAGINATION AND PLAY

"The Ransom of Red Chief" is a story full of fantasy and delusion. From the very beginning, even the setting itself suggests the deluded nature of the world of the story: the town is "as flat as a flannel-cake," but its name—Summit—ironically evokes mountain summits, of which there are obviously none. Fittingly, most of the characters in Summit live in a fantasy world. Johnny constructs a child's dreamland of cowboys and Indians, a fantasy that gives him

some control over the bumbling criminals who kidnap him. The kidnappers, Sam and Bill, are also in a fantasy world: they believe that their harebrained schemes won't blow up in their faces. Because Sam and Bill are poor and small-time crooks, and Johnny is just a child, fantasy and role playing emerge as key tools of survival for these relatively powerless characters.

Johnny's various role-playing fantasies give him real power over people and circumstances, showing the power of imagination. For example, Johnny's fantasies give him control over Bill. In reality Johnny is Bill's captor, but Johnny conscripts Bill into a fantasy world in which Johnny is Red Chief and Bill is "Old Hank, the Trapper, Red Chief's captive." Bill's acquiescence to this fantasy makes him lose power—it leads him to all manner of demeaning and ridiculous actions, such as walking through the woods on all fours while Johnny rides him like a horse, and these difficulties ultimately make him give up on their ransom plan altogether.

Furthermore, Johnny's imagination transforms his circumstances. While another child might be frightened or at least uncomfortable sleeping in a cave with the strangers who have kidnapped him, Johnny immediately reconfigures his kidnapping as a camping adventure. Sam observes, "The fun of camping out in a cave had made him forget that he was a captive himself," and Johnny declares, "I never had such fun in all my life." This fearless refusal to acknowledge reality unnerves the men, giving Johnny the upper-hand. And Sam and Bill are terrified of Johnny's role-playing for good reason: they are often the victims in his fantasies. Though these fantasies might start as games ("I'm to be scalped at daybreak" or "I was to be broiled at the stake at the rising of the sun"), it's never clear where fantasy ends and reality begins for Johnny—for instance, Bill awakes screaming to find Johnny "industriously and realistically trying to take Bill's scalp." Their genuine fear of Johnny's fantasies reflects that fantasy and imagination grant Johnny real power over them.

While Johnny unambiguously gains power through fantasy, Sam and Bill's delusions are a little more complicated. Imagination and fantasy often give them hope for a better future (the kidnapping idea itself occurred to them in "a moment of temporary mental apparition"), but their delusions also bring trouble. Their elaborate fantasy plans for the kidnapping are unrealistic and delusional, illustrated by Sam's description of how "this kidnapping idea struck us…during a moment of temporary mental apparition." Detailing an elaborate message drop in a wheat field, near a creek, "at the bottom of the fence-post, opposite the third tree," Sam believes his scheme would "commend itself to professional kidnappers." However, even though Sam thinks that the plan is what professional kidnappers would do, the plan is unprofessional and ridiculous. Sam's schemes—since he's the brains of the team—give him a certain sense of superiority, evident when he assesses the townspeople of Summit "as undeleterious and self-satisfied a class of peasantry as ever clustered around a Maypole." He's certain the "constables and, maybe, some lackadaisical bloodhounds" will be no match for him. His delusions of grandeur lead him to underestimate Ebenezer, however, who easily outfoxes him.

Despite falling prey to delusion, Sam and Bill do prove that they understand the power of fantasy when, at the end of the story, they use imagination to manipulate Johnny into returning to his father. Sam explains, "We got him to go by telling him that his father had bought a silver-mounted rifle and a pair of moccasins for him, and we were going to hunt bears the next day." In other words, they gain power over him by getting him to go along with a fantasy, just as Johnny had done to Bill. Overall, O. Henry shows that illusions are a double-edged sword: some fantasize, as Johnny does, in order to make life more bearable and fun, while some suffer under delusions, as Sam and Bill do, imagining they are making a go of it when they are really just making a mess. Regardless, none of the characters who live in make-believe come out on top, which suggests that fantasy—while it may make life more bearable or result in minor shifts in power—is not the currency of real power. After all, Ebenezer Dorset, who has no illusions at all, is the only winner in the story's final accounting.

JUSTICE

In "The Ransom of Red Chief," Sam and Bill kidnap ten year-old Johnny for ransom. Once he is their captive, however, Johnny treats them more cruelly than they do him, and getting rid of him ends up costing them money. One might expect a story about a failed ransom scheme to have a clear moral lesson, but "crime doesn't pay" is not exactly the point of this tale. As a writer who spent three years in prison, O. Henry was not a stranger to the complexities of justice, and how fairness and balance (rather than virtue) are the measures of just results. O. Henry shows that while Sam and Bill are criminals, and Ebenezer and his son Johnny are nasty in their own ways, everyone is at least partly forgivable, if not redeemable, and everyone gets a little of what they want and what they deserve in the end.

Every character in this story is flawed by a range of vices, from callous cruelty and selfishness to dishonesty and criminality. Sam and Bill, for instance, are bad actors. They have plans "to pull off a fraudulent town-lot scheme," which is the reason they need money and decide to kidnap a child for ransom. But the child they kidnap, Johnny, is also not nice. He throws **rocks** and bricks at animals and people, and he tries to scalp Bill with a knife. His treatment of Bill is sometimes truly alarming, as when he hits him with a rock and Bill "loosened himself all over and fell in the fire across the frying pan of hot water." Furthermore, Johnny's father, Ebenezer, may be the meanest and most selfish of them all. He takes homes from people who can't afford their payments (he is "a forecloser"), doesn't give to the church he

attends ("a collection plate-passer"), and he extorts $250 from Sam and Bill, effectively profiting from the misfortune of his only child. His cool negotiation of a reverse-ransom for the return of his kidnapped child indicates the low value he places on Johnny's wellbeing.

Despite the fact that these characters are morally flawed, O. Henry doesn't judge them too harshly for their sins—instead, he contextualizes their behavior, which engenders sympathy. Bill, whose intention is to kidnap a child, is immediately hit with a brick. His reaction ("That will cost the old man an extra five hundred dollars"), shows what a mild-mannered character he is, and he remains so through many injuries and humiliations perpetrated by his young captive. While Bill is sweet and patient, Sam, the narrator, is shown to be not so much evil as deluded in his contrivance of ridiculous schemes. He shows his lack of realistic self-assessment, for example, when relating his laughably-convoluted plans for the ransom. Without irony, he says that his ludicrous scheme "ought to commend itself to professional kidnappers." Furthermore, his inauspicious use of fancy language to put on airs ("Philoprogenitiveness, says we, is strong in semi-rural communities") makes him a silly and blundering character rather than a heartless crook.

For Johnny's part, though he's a pest and a troublemaker, his misdeeds seem forgivable, given that he is a 10 year-old child who longs for parental attention and friendship. Johnny's loneliness is illustrated by his attachment to Bill, his powerful play imagination, and his excited chattering at mealtimes, saying to his kidnappers, "I like this fine. I never camped out before." Even Ebenezer, who is perhaps the least sympathetic character, is softened somewhat in context. It's certainly a character flaw to be more interested in turning the kidnapping to his financial advantage than concerned about his child's welfare, but he is also not the one who came looking for this trouble, and he doesn't call the constables to arrest Bill and Sam. His **letter** in reply to the ransom demand seems humanely calculated to seek redress and restoration of the status quo, rather than to ruin the lives of the bumbling Bill and Sam, and it also shows his sense of humor about his rambunctious child's behavior.

While each of the characters is, in his own way, sympathetic, this does not absolve them of justice, and nor do their flaws guarantee their destruction. In the end, these characters pretty much get what they deserve, while also gaining something they need. Sam and Bill, for instance, get their comeuppance for kidnapping someone else's child when they have to pay a fee to Johnny's father to return him, rather than receiving a ransom. However, their fate isn't all bad—Ebenezer doesn't turn them over to the cops, so they live to scheme another day, "legging it trippingly for the Canadian border." This is a hopeful outcome for them—considering they could have paid a serious legal price for their crimes, they get away cheap. For his part, Johnny is returned to his father, which is the logical and inevitable outcome of this ill-conceived kidnapping scheme. While this is something of a punishment for him, he also benefits from the experiences he has had by getting from Sam and Bill something akin to the parental attention he lacked at home. And Ebenezer, of course, gets his troubled son back, which is both punishment and reward.

O. Henry portrays these characters with a balance of flaws and redeeming qualities. Johnny is mean and violent, but sympathetic as an attention-deprived child. Ebenezer is stingy and uncaring, yet not violent, angry, or vengeful when wronged. Sam is arrogant, and both he and Bill are criminals, yet the poor fellows take quite a bit of physical and mental abuse at the hands of their captive, can hardly achieve any of the grandiose schemes they intend, and barely get away with the shirts on their backs. With a few twists, reversals, and a gentle touch of humor, O. Henry shows what justice might look like through sympathetic portrayals of these flawed characters, each of whom finds a little grace or compensation rather than meeting with destruction.

OUTSIDERS

Bill and Sam arrive in small town Summit, Alabama, determined to take advantage of the backwards country folk and make fast money by kidnapping Johnny, the child of a wealthy local businessman. However, their lack of knowledge of or respect for local power structures and people complicates and derails these outsiders' elaborate plans. By underestimating Ebenezer Dorset (who outwits them) and his son (whose antics torment them), their ransom plan falls apart and they instead have to pay Ebenezer to take his son back, marking their defeat by the town and its inhabitants. They leave town tamed and compliant, chastened if not transformed by their encounter, having learned that the town's norms and social power apply to everyone who would do business there, locals and strangers alike.

The kidnapping fails because Sam and Bill, as outsiders, do not understand or respect the people of Summit. Sam is sure that the people of Summit are weak, which makes it an ideal place for the kidnapping. They "couldn't get after us with anything stronger than constables," he says, or maybe "a diatribe or two in the Weekly Farmers' Budget" newspaper. He calls the locals "undeleterious," "self-satisfied," and "peasantry," none of which are intended as terms of respect. With this attitude, they develop their plan based on the assumption that Ebenezer Dorset, a prominent citizen in town, would put up little resistance and "melt down" for $2000 ransom. However, Ebenezer is clever and seems impervious to their threats.

Just as they underestimate Ebenezer, Sam and Bill underestimate the challenges of managing Johnny, who is violent towards them. This quickly erodes their morale, undermining their plan. Despite Johnny's antics, the plan might have worked if Ebenezer and the locals had been as panicked

by Johnny's disappearance as Sam and Bill expected. However, after the kidnapping Sam goes about the countryside, trying to "reconnoiter" the area, but he doesn't understand why nothing is happening: "I expected to see the sturdy yeomanry of the village armed with scythes and pitchforks," he says, perplexed. He consistently fails to predict the behavior of those around him, despite his disdain for them as simple. Ultimately, their plan fails because he and Bill are outsiders—they miscalculate how the locals will react to them, and the locals turn out to be full of surprises.

Of course, the most surprising thing that a townsperson does is Ebenezer's bold reply to Sam's ransom **letter**. Instead of agreeing to Sam's terms (or even negotiating the ransom), Ebenezer has a different idea entirely: Sam and Bill will pay *him* to return his troublesome son. Finding themselves on the brink of agreeing to Ebenezer's proposition, Sam and Bill must now comply with terms that would have been unimaginable to them before this moment, which shows them adapting to the norms and logic of the town. They're becoming, in other words, more familiar—they are now less the outsiders they once were. This is also apparent in their warming up to both Johnny and Ebenezer. While they once condescended to Ebenezer, assuming that he would be easily cowed, Bill now shows respect for the man by saying, "Besides being a thorough gentleman, I think Mr. Dorset is a spendthrift for making us such a liberal offer." With Johnny, too, the men seem to have grown affectionate even if it is somewhat calculated, as when "Bill braced up enough to give the kid a weak sort of a smile." Seeing both Johnny and Ebenezer as complex, respectable people with redeeming qualities shows that Bill and Sam are becoming familiar with the town in a way an insider would be, which further erodes their ability to resist Ebenezer's plan.

In the end, Sam and Bill do something surprising: instead of leaving Johnny and fleeing Summit without paying Ebenezer the reverse-ransom, they comply with Ebenezer's demands, submitting to this "prominent citizen" as though they themselves lived in town and respected its social order. O. Henry never specifies why they do this, and it's possible that they are simply too foolish to avoid the demanded charge, or that that they want to see Johnny off safely (as they've grown somewhat attached). However, it's also possible that, as defiant outsiders, they would be subject to pursuit and capture as renegade criminals (Ebenezer does warn them, after all, to come at night because he cannot be responsible for what his angry neigborhs might do). By contrast, agreeing to Ebenezer's "counter-proposition" provides a safer (if not more dignified) way to exit, since paying Ebenezer puts the men back on good terms with a powerful man in town. Regardless of why they do it, this final act of capitulation shows the men fully renouncing their sense of superiority as outsiders and succumbing to the town's norms.

Sam and Bill enter town as renegade outsiders, with an elaborate plan to profit by wielding power over the weak resistance of the local "peasantry," including Johnny and Ebenezer Dorset. Instead, they find that Johnny has a powerful (even dangerous) imagination, the local populace is not cowed or concerned at Johnny's disappearance, and old Dorset proves a powerful negotiator. In short, Bill and Sam are brought to heel, ultimately giving in to the social norms of the town. To be sure, they remain outsiders in the end, but through cooperation (first with Johnny in his fantasies and then with his father financially), they adjust to the surprising characters and circumstances they find in Summit. After all, "legging it" out of town, as Sam and Bill do, is possibly only because they have been given leave to withdraw and a ten-minute head start.

SYMBOLS

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

LETTERS

Letters—the medium through which Sam communicates his ransom demands to Ebenezer—represent the power conferred on people by class and education. Letters are associated with educated people (people who are well-educated are even called "lettered" sometimes), and Sam uses letters to try to assert power over Johnny's father. The first letter Sam sends to old man Dorset is intended to be "peremptory," meaning final and not open to challenge or appeal, but it's anything but that—the letter is not persuasive, as Ebenezer writes back refusing their demands and making a monetary demand of his own. The letter's failure can be seen as a result of Sam's failure to impersonate someone with power and class. For one, his ransom plan is overly-complex and betrays his lack of criminal experience. Moreover, his self-conscious attempts to appear educated often seem stilted—for example, his use of the word "philoprogenitiveness" earlier in the story (an arcane way to refer to the love of one's children) seems to betray his desire to *seem* educated and high-class, inadvertently revealing his low status. By contrast, Ebenezer speaks and writes with simple confidence, telling Sam and Bill that he thinks they are "a little high" in their ransom demand. His letter includes no big words or unconventional usages—he speaks in plain English, since his money and status speak for themselves. Ultimately, Ebenezer emerges victorious, collecting a fee from Sam and Bill to take his son back rather than paying them ransom. But O. Henry does not depict this victory as morally righteous—on the contrary, the conniving, upper-class Ebenezer has outfoxed two desperate men with big hearts. Sam and Bill's letters, therefore, show that their low class and homespun education put them at a disadvantage when trying to advance their own position in the world—a

reality that is unfortunate and undeserved.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *Best Short Stories of O. Henry* published in 1994.

The Ransom of Red Chief Quotes

There was a town down there, as flat as a flannel-cake, and called Summit, of course. It contained inhabitants of as undeleterious and self-satisfied a class of peasantry as ever clustered around a Maypole.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Bill Driscoll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Sam and Bill are outsiders to the town, and Sam's description of Summit and its people reflects both his arrogance and his ignorance of the local population. His reference to the locals as "inhabitants" makes clear that's he's not fully seeing them as human—instead, he's looking at them as pawns to be easily manipulated in service of his plans. In addition, he suggests they are irrational (a flat town called Summit), unthreatening (undeleterious), and unsophisticated (peasantry). However, this passage reveals more about Sam himself than about the townspeople (who, after all, he knows nothing about). First, Sam is arrogant to look down on these strangers as he does, and second, Sam seems himself to be a little silly and pretentious (the word "undeleterious" is not at home in ordinary usage, and it would be much clearer to use a word like "harmless" or "benign"). Finally, Sam's reference to the Maypole, an ancient pagan tradition which is found primarily in fairy tales and story books, makes clear that Sam's ridicule of the townspeople's primitive pastimes is based more on his fantasies of rural people than on fact, suggesting that his confidence in his own assessment of the world around him may be foolish.

The father was respectable and tight, a mortgage fancier and a stern, upright collection-plate passer and forecloser.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Johnny , Bill Driscoll , Ebenezer Dorset

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

This brief and insightful description of Ebenezer Dorset foreshadows a great deal of Sam's subsequent trouble with him. From this description, readers learn that Ebenezer is powerful (respectable, stern, upright) but also greedy (tight), ungenerous (collection-plate passer), and a predator (mortgage fancier and forecloser). That Ebenezer is so powerful, unlikeable, and even cruel sets readers up to sympathize with the kidnapping plot against him—a man like that might deserve to be victimized, since he victimizes others. However, for Sam's ransom plan to work, Ebenezer must be vulnerable and empathetic towards his son. As it turns out, Ebenezer's bad qualities run even deeper than Sam and Bill anticipate: he has no sympathy for his son's plight and is therefore not easily manipulated, and he is also a clever and brutal negotiator, which has surely contributed to his wealth.

"He's all right now...We're playing Indian."

Related Characters: Bill Driscoll (speaker), Sam , Johnny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Bill says this to Sam when Sam comes back to the cave to find Bill tending to his cuts and bruises, the result of Johnny's abuse and rough play. While one might expect Bill to be furious that he has been physically injured by their captive child, Bill actually seems calm. This paints Bill as being tolerant, patient, and oddly noble in his care of this ten year-old child whom he has kidnapped. Bill becomes Johnny's primary caretaker throughout the story, and many of his interactions are just as filled with pathos as this one. This statement also shows that Bill is actively participating in Johnny's fantasy world in which Johnny is Red Chief and Bill is his captive. Bill's resigned patience about his injuries seems in part due to the fact that they happened "in character"—Johnny isn't beating up his captor, but rather playing a game whose narrative requires violence. Of course, the reality of the situation is that Johnny has taken

charge of the kidnapping, but the fantasy element seems to conceal this reality from both of the men. In this way, Johnny has gained power over them through fantasy, putting them in the position to accept their injuries and obey his orders rather than fighting back or telling him what to do.

"I like this fine. I never camped out before."

Related Characters: Johnny (speaker), Bill Driscoll , Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Johnny makes a speech during his first night in the cave with the men who kidnapped him. While previously his fantasy of being an Indian chief seemed to account for his ability to accept his abduction, this moment affirms that Johnny is not fully living in fantasy: he understands what is happening to him, and he nonetheless appreciates the present company of Bill and Sam. In other words, his happiness is not just due to his being in a fantasy world—he is actually enjoying the reality of his new situation. His enjoyment of being kidnapped also takes on a tragic element here, as he is framing his abduction as "camping out"—something he claims never to have done before. This emphasizes how attention-starved the boy is and how unhappy his childhood has been. Fully aware that he has been kidnapped by criminals, Johnny still relishes the moment because it at least approximates normal boyhood recreation.

[T]hey were simply indecent, terrifying, humiliating screams, such as women emit when they see ghosts or caterpillars. It's an awful thing to hear a strong, desperate, fat man scream incontinently in a cave at daybreak.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Johnny , Bill Driscoll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sam speaks of Bill's suffering at Johnny's hands after the attempted scalping and, although he describes Bill's spirit as broken, he distances himself from this reality with humor. He calls the screams terrifying and humiliating, which is accurate enough, but his term "indecent" has a hint of reproach, making fun of Bill's fear as unmanly. The phrase "such as women emit" is also a distancing criticism, as is the idea that Bill might be screaming for imaginary reasons ("ghosts") or trifles ("caterpillars"). The adjectives "strong, desperate, fat" make fun of Bill in a way that indicates that Sam has sympathy for his friend despite some friendly ribbing. After all, Sam had his own desperate bad dream where he was held captive by a red-haired pirate, and subsequently Sam will sign the letter to Ebenezer from both of them as "Two Desperate Men." In light of Sam's own growing concerns, his reference to Bill's "incontinently" screaming is again a bit of ridicule that, by its very extremity, hints they may both be in deeper trouble than they bargained for.

I expected to see the sturdy yeomanry of the village armed with scythes and pitchforks beating the countryside for the dastardly kidnappers... There was a sylvan attitude of somnolent sleepiness pervading that section of the external outward surface of Alabama that lay exposed to my view.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Bill Driscoll , Johnny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

With these words, Sam shows a dawning awareness that his abduction of Johnny has not had the effect on the community that he and Bill predicted. The characterization of the locals as "yeomanry" echoes his earlier depiction of them as peasantry, as does the demeaning suggestion that they should be armed with "scythes and pitchforks." Even though the locals are defying Sam's expectations, the fact that his plan is going awry has not left him sufficiently chastened to stop condescending to the locals. Furthermore, his characterization of himself and Bill as "dastardly" is wry and, in a way, aspirational. By using this old-fashioned word, he seems to be saying they are not evil, but ought to appear so. Indeed, they have abducted a child, which is dastardly in itself, but they are unwilling to hurt anyone, so they are, in a sense, pretending to be evil. Sam's frustration with his own ineffectiveness is communicated effectively by his alliterative description of the region's "sylvan, somnolent sleepiness." One can imagine his jealousy at being able to sleep peacefully, given the night he just had,

sitting up until dawn so as not to be burned at the stake. He admits he might be wrong in his perceptions when he only can see the "external outward surface" of this place, so perhaps this is a moment of dawning self-awareness that he doesn't understand what's really going on in Summit.

> I never lost my nerve yet till we kidnapped that two-legged skyrocket of a kid... it ain't human for anybody to give up two thousand dollars for that forty-pound chunk of freckled wildcat.

Related Characters: Bill Driscoll (speaker), Ebenezer Dorset , Sam , Johnny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

With the phrase "lost my nerve," Bill admits he is defeated by the challenge of caring for Johnny. His admission is made with a persuasive purpose: he needs to make sure that the ransom transaction is concluded successfully and soon, so he wants to drop the asking price in the ransom letter he and Sam are writing to Ebenezer. His two characterizations of Johnny are calibrated for this effect: a skyrocket is powerful and uncontrollable, but not evil; so too, a freckled wildcat is a dangerous creature, but not wicked, and the fact that Johnny is merely a forty-pound sized chunk suggests he might not be worth all this trouble, either. As always, despite Bill's attention paid to Johnny, Bill also keeps the distance of a stranger, calling him "kid." Johnny is never mentioned by name in the story by either Sam or Bill—he is always referred to as the "boy" or "kid." The only way readers know his name is when his own father uses it in his letter of response; whether boy, kid, skyrocket, or wildcat, this fact puts a limit on the degree of intimacy readers sense in Bill and Sam's care for Johnny.

> "You are the hoss," says Black Scout. "Get down on your hands and knees. How can I ride to the stockade without a hoss?"
>
> "You'd better keep him interested," said I, "till we get the scheme going. Loosen up."

Related Characters: Sam , Johnny (speaker), Bill Driscoll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Johnny (as Black Scout) orders Bill to get on his knees to pretend to be a horse so that Johnny can physically ride him. Sam, rather than defending Bill, suggests that Bill's job is to comply with Johnny's orders to keep the boy occupied while Sam attends to the kidnapping scheme. This exchange speaks volumes about the dynamic between Sam and Bill, whose response to this is a wordless look like a rabbit in a trap. Johnny has been the leader of the Red Chief fantasy, and now he introduces another level of the game, so to speak, which involves a new humiliating and active level of participation by Bill: "down on your hands and knees." Pathetically, it seems to be Bill's lot to suffer any indignity, taking care of Johnny, while Sam's job is to spy and reconnoiter afield. The saddest part, however, is the sense Sam expresses that Bill is really making a big deal over nothing, whether it was being scalped earlier or now being ridden and kicked like a horse. Instead of sympathizing with Bill's physical pain and humiliation, Sam reprimands Bill for being too rigid ("loosen up"). The fact is that, despite the humor in his delivery, Sam is both deluded about his own abilities and unkind to his cohort Bill, two factors that, as the story unfolds, make him somewhat unsympathetic, if not unreliable, as a narrator.

> "The boy is gone. I have sent him home. All is off. There was martyrs in old times...that suffered death rather than give up the particular graft they enjoyed. None of 'em ever was subjugated to such supernatural tortures as I have been."

Related Characters: Bill Driscoll (speaker), Sam , Johnny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Having decided he can no longer take Johnny's abuse, Bill finally finds the strength of will to resist the powerful combination of Johnny's bullying imagination and Sam's conniving scheming and he sends Johnny back home while Sam is gone. When he says "All is off," he is letting go of their ransom plan and perhaps the scheme in Illinois that the ransom money was supposed to fund. It's a complete capitulation, and to support his decision he makes a

comparison to Biblical stories of martyrs suffering terrible torture. However, while martyrs suffered for a greater cause, Bill reduces this to "graft" and says that even they had it easier than Bill with Johnny. Further heresy is Bill's declaration that he "tried to be faithful to our articles of depredation," which shows the pair's depraved faith. His lack of confidence in Sam's schemes and his self-pitying indicate both strength and weakness—standing up to abuse, while making the heretical argument that what he has suffered should be measured on an epic, religious scale.

❝ Bill turns and sees the boy, and loses his complexion and sits down plump on the ground and begins to pluck aimlessly at grass and little sticks. For an hour I was afraid for his mind. And then I told him that my scheme was to put the whole job through immediately…

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Johnny , Bill Driscoll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

When Bill believes Johnny has gone back home (thereby freeing him finally from the abuse and tyranny of Johnny's fantasies and games), Bill has a shock: Johnny has only pretended to go home, turning this into yet another scouting game by creeping quietly behind Bill and following him all the way back to the cave camp without his knowing. In response to this surprise, Bill sits "plump" on the ground, a word that is perhaps a way of Sam indicating his weight and large size, as well as the sound of his collapse. Seemingly, Bill has lost his mind along with any color in his face, and he goes into a kind of trance, plucking little sticks and grasses on the ground. Sam reports that this continues for quite a long time (not minutes but a full hour), during which he is concerned Bill has broken with reality. A wise person who knows how to cut their losses might be looking for an exit at this point, but Sam is not that character. He is as out of touch with reality as Johnny or Bill in his own way. Thus his reaction to Bill's complete physical and mental collapse in the face of punishing treatment, with no success in sight, is to brace up his partner by declaring victory is imminent, and they will "put the whole job through immediately."

❝ I think you are a little high in your demands, and I hereby make you a counter-proposition, which I am inclined to believe you will accept. You bring Johnny home and pay me two hundred and fifty dollars in cash, and I agree to take him off your hands.

Related Characters: Ebenezer Dorset (speaker), Bill Driscoll , Johnny , Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from Ebenezer's letter to Sam and Bill in response to Sam's ransom demand. Sam's prior letter spelled out intricate requirements regarding the location, time, and manner of communication. Unfortunately for Sam, by focusing on logistics he has overlooked the greater issue: he has not yet won the power struggle with Ebenezer. What leads to success in negotiation, as Ebenezer demonstrates here, is steely nerves and a narrow focus on the goal. His measured response to the kidnapping ("a little high in your demands"), coupled with his calm tone ("I am inclined to believe"), give a chilly power to his counter-proposal for the desperate men to pay him instead of the other way around. His offer has the legalistic tone of a businessman familiar with legal contracts when he uses diction such as "hereby" and, to drive the point home that he is negotiating from a position of strength, he frames the return of his son as a concession for which he needs to be paid (he writes, "and I agree to take him"). Presumably, without payment he would not agree to the return of his son, which turns the ransom plan on its head.

❝ We took him home that night. We got him to go by telling him that his father had bought a silver-mounted rifle and a pair of moccasins for him, and we were going to hunt bears the next day.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Bill Driscoll , Ebenezer Dorset , Johnny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

After all their suffering, it seems so easy when Sam says it: "we took him home that night." But it's anything but easy.

What started out as a sure-fire scheme to make $2000 finally ends when Sam and Bill bring Johnny back to his father and agree to old Dorset's demands for them to pay him $250 to take back his own child. This bizarre arrangement would not even be possible were it not for one additional element added to the mixture of confusion, delusion, and torture which characterizes their time with Johnny: they have to trick the boy into returning to his father with a fantasy as compelling as the fantasies he has used to control his captors. By concocting an imaginary bear hunt and the pretend gifts from Johnny's father of a silver-mounted rifle and moccasins, they entice the pitiable child to return home to a father who, though rich, would never contemplate gifts so generous or plans so thoughtful for his son. The fantasy, though false, is a testament to the fact that Bill and Sam have, at least, an idea of what would make Johnny happy, which, one suspects, is more than can be said of his father.

❝ When the kid found out we were going to leave him at home he started up a howl like a calliope and fastened himself as tight as a leech to Bill's leg. His father peeled him away gradually, like a porous plaster.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Johnny , Ebenezer Dorset , Bill Driscoll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Sam and Bill never call Johnny by his given name. Here, when they are leaving him at home, reunited with his father, he is once again "the kid" and this underlines the fact that, however softhearted (and soft-headed) they may be, they are not his true guardians. This duality is evident in Johnny's "howl" at being left there. This is a howl of sadness, one presumes, since Johnny is clinging to the leg of his abductor rather than his father. Yet Sam compares Johnny's howl to that of a calliope (an organ-like instrument found often at fairs), which is a sound more evocative of a fun circus than a tragic moment. It's no compliment for Sam to say he's clinging like "a leech" either, but Sam is not much for sentimentality—the softer touch was always Bill's, and by this point, having suffered a great deal of abuse, Bill also just wants to get away as fast as possible. The reference to "porous plaster" which one uses on broken bones reminds readers that this story, though weird and funny at times, has not been without injury to its protagonists. Ebenezer says, "I'm not as strong as I used to be," and it's arguable that this might indicate some hope for the old man's heart softening. Alternatively, the porous plaster may suggest some persistent disorders in remain in Summit, at least in Johnny's life, long after the dust clears from Sam and Bill's escape from town.

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 RANSOM OF RED CHIEF

The narrator, Sam, and his friend Bill are down in Summit, Alabama (a town as "flat as a flannel-cake") when they are struck with the idea for the kidnapping. The two men need two thousand dollars to pull off a real estate scheme in Illinois. They've noted that "philoprogenitiveness" is "strong" in these semi-rural areas, so a "kidnapping project" ought to be a success—especially in a town small enough to lack interfering local journalists or a well-trained police force.

From the very beginning, the story invokes delusion and irony, as the setting is a flat town whose name is "Summit" (evoking mountain peaks). The crooks at the story's center condescend to the townspeople, assuming that they are backwards and incapable of thwarting the kidnapping scheme—reasoning that proves just as delusional as the town's name. Furthermore, Sam's use of the word "philoprogenitiveness" (meaning the love of one's children) shows his silliness and pretentiousness. Sam wants to appear serious and intelligent, but he just comes across as ridiculous.

Sam and Bill select as their victim Johnny Dorset, the ten year old red-haired only child of "prominent citizen" Ebenezer Dorset. Ebenezer is a "collection-plate passer and forecloser" who Sam and Bill believe can easily afford a $2000 ransom. The men store supplies in a nearby cave two miles from town and, after sundown, they drive a rented buggy past Ebenezer's house and try to entice Johnny, who is playing outside, into the buggy with an offer of candy. Johnny, who is "throwing rocks at a kitten," responds to their offer by hitting Bill in the eye with a piece of brick.

The logic of the kidnapping at first seems rational. For maximum impact, it seems effective to take the only child of a rich and important local citizen. However, the plan immediately goes awry when Johnny is not the well-mannered upper-class child they anticipated. The first aspect of their plan (bribing him with candy) immediately earns them physical violence, which is what they deserve for their abhorrent actions, but it is also a surprising act of violence from someone who was meant to be their victim. This shows that their plan cannot account for the complexity of reality, and that the locals are unpredictable.

Bill vows that the brick will cost Johnny's father an extra $500 ransom as they wrestle Johnny into the buggy. The boy struggles "like a welter-weight cinnamon bear" but they take him to the cave where Bill is left to watch him while Sam returns the buggy to town and then walks back to the remote cave.

When Johnny hits Bill with the brick, Bill isn't violent to Johnny in turn—instead, he grouses about how the trouble will cost his father extra money (a threat he doesn't even follow up on). This begins to suggest Bill's patience, even under duress. Furthermore, the description of Johnny struggling like a "welter-weight cinnamon bear" cues readers to see the kidnapping as comical and bungled, rather than sinister and frightening. Neither the kidnappers nor the kidnapped seems particularly frightened or cruel.

When Sam returns, he discovers Bill tending to scratches and bruises, but the scene is calm with a fire and a pot of coffee. Johnny has "two buzzard tailfeathers stuck in his red hair." Bill explains, "We're playing Indian," and that he is Red Chief's captive, "to be scalped at daybreak." Sam observes that the boy is happy camping in the cave and playing with Bill. Johnny also names Sam "Snake-eye, the Spy" and tells him he will be broiled at the stake at sunrise. The three eat supper together.

Instead of being afraid, upset, or even sullen, kidnapped Johnny seems to be having a wonderful time. This is another example of the townspeople not behaving as Bill and Sam anticipated. Furthermore, Bill's patience is on display again here. Johnny clearly injured him, but Bill's generous explanation is that they are role playing. Not only does this show that incorporating Bill into his fantasy life has given Johnny real power over this man, but it also literally reverses the terms of the kidnapping, foreshadowing further reversals to come.

Johnny says he's never camped before, he had a possum, he hates school, and a rat ate his friend's aunt's hen's eggs. He asks if there are real Indians in the woods and whether trees make the wind blow, and he states that his father has "lots of money." He asks are the stars hot, says he doesn't like girls, wonders if oxen make noise, why oranges are round, and if there are beds in the cave. He states a parrot can talk, but not a monkey or fish, and asks "how many does it take to make twelve?" From time to time, he goes to the mouth of the cave scanning the woods for imaginary paleface scouts, and making a warwhoop that scares Bill. Sam asks if Johnny would like to go home, but Johnny pleads not to be taken back. Sam assures him they will stay in the cave a while, and Johnny says, "That'll be fine. I never had such fun in all my life."

These purportedly dangerous criminals and kidnappers have taken on the role of camp counselors or even surrogate parents, which shows the extent to which this kidnapping is off the rails. Furthermore, Johnny's soliloquy is funny and touching, softening Johnny's previous violence. Clearly, Johnny is simply a young boy who is naïve but curious about the world and is starved for somebody to listen to him. This passage, particularly the moment in which Johnny begs not to go home, hints that his home life is so troubled that he would rather be kidnapped and living in a rustic cave than at home with his rich but cruel father, which intensifies the reader's sympathy for Johnny's plight and contextualizes his prior violent behavior.

Sam and Bill go to sleep with Johnny between them, not afraid he will run away. He continues to play his fantasy for hours, jumping up at sounds outside the cave, and trying to rouse his new friends with shouts of "Hist! pard." Sam has a bad dream where he is kidnapped by a pirate with red hair and, at daybreak, awakes to Bill's "indecent, terrifying, humiliating screams" as Johnny, playing Red Chief, acts as though he is trying to scalp Bill.

Bill and Sam making Johnny sleep between them is an ambiguous gesture: while it seems restrictive at first, they claim that they are not afraid he would escape, so this seems to have an aspect of protective tenderness, as well. In any case, Johnny's refusal to be tamed continues with fantasy play late into the night, leading Sam to have a bad dream about a red-headed pirate, which is clearly a stand-in for the red-headed Johnny who has already gained tremendous power over his captors in real life. When Bill awakens to being scalped in the morning, Sam describes Bill's screams as unmanly, thus reserving his harshest criticism for his friend, rather than his young attacker.

Sam takes the knife from Johnny and makes him lay down, but Bill is shaken and doesn't sleep. Sam dozes for a while but wakes early, remembering Johnny's fantasy threat to burn him at the stake. Bill asks why he's up so early and Sam claims he has a pain in his shoulder, but Bill accuses him of being afraid of the boy, and asks whether anyone would pay money to get "a little imp like that" back. Sam reassures him that parents dote on rowdy kids and tells him to cook breakfast for Johnny while he goes up to the mountain top to observe any activity around them.

As Johnny's primary playmate, Bill has taken the brunt of his abuse while Sam has been the executive of their ransom enterprise. Now, with dawn of the first day following the kidnapping, Sam is also a bit nervous about what Johnny might do to him in his sleep, and Bill jumps at the chance to call Sam out when he shows he is not immune to Johnny's terrors. In this way, the two continue to bicker, rather than focusing on the job at hand, which makes it difficult to address the unexpected question of who in their right mind would pay for the return of such a terrible child? Sam asserts (without any personal knowledge of course) that parents dote on rowdy kids. He has not yet grasped the depth of their problems, as he goes off to try to familiarize himself with the unfamiliar area.

Sam goes up on the peak of a nearby mountain and sees nothing to indicate that anyone is concerned about a missing child. He expected to see the local population armed with pitchforks, searching for kidnappers, but instead all is peaceful across the landscape. He likens his capture of Johnny to wolves taking a lamb, but doubt creeps into his mind as he thinks, "Heaven help the wolves!" Sam returns to the camp for breakfast only to find that Johnny is once again threatening Bill with bodily harm, this time with a rock half the size of a coconut. Bill complains that the boy burned him with a red-hot potato and asks sheepishly if Sam has a gun.

Sam's expectation that he would see peasants with pitchforks looking for Johnny contrasts with the reality: nobody seems to care. This is an indication that Sam does not understand the locals as well as he believes he does, casting doubt on the efficacy of their plan. Back in the cave, Bill asks if Sam has a gun. No further mention of a weapon occurs in the story and the fact that weapons have been absent from the story is important: bumbling ineffectiveness is key to maintaining the reader's sympathy for these crooks since being unarmed signals that they aren't a threat and gives evidence for how poorly prepared for mayhem these criminals truly are.

After breakfast, Johnny takes a leather slingshot and goes out of the cave. Bill is worried, wondering what he's up to and if he's trying to run away. Sam tells Bill not to worry, and says that he's headed to town that night to deliver the ransom **message**, having seen little evidence in the surrounding area of any concern for the lost boy. Suddenly, with a war-whoop, Johnny attacks Bill with a large black rock, hurled with a sling like David slaying Goliath. The impact sends Bill sprawling into the campfire, and Sam tends to his friend for half an hour, pouring cold water on his head.

The idea that Johnny is Bill and Sam's captive continues to erode as they realize they are the ones who need an exit plan, not Johnny. It's telling that Sam is uttering a sentence about the ransom letter, the key to their plans, just when Johnny knocks Bill over the fire with a slingshot in the style of little David overcoming the giant Goliath. The implication is clear that the tables have turned, and their plans continue to be eclipsed by Johnny's agenda.

Bill mentions that his favorite Bible character is King Herod, the King who doubts Jesus and turns him over to the Romans for execution. Sam grabs Johnny and shakes him, reprimands him, and then threatens to take the boy home if he doesn't behave. Sam makes Johnny apologize and tasks Bill with being Johnny's playmate while he goes into a neighboring town, Poplar Cove, to see if anyone has heard of a missing child yet.

Since King Herod gave up Jesus for execution in the Bible, Bill's tongue-in-cheek comment underscores a struggle for authority in the story: Bill is suggesting that Johnny, a child who is being treated as special, really is dangerous and needs to be punished, an understandable perspective for one just clobbered with a rock. On the other hand, Johnny promises to behave, and in doing so, makes clear he is not a rebel but a member of their crew who didn't mean to hurt "Old Hank." Sam then encourages Johnny to apologize directly to his partner, calling him "Mr. Bill" as a term of respect, as one might refer to a teacher. Bill and Sam may be newcomers to Summit, but Johnny shows his allegiance to them by apologizing. Being part of their crew is important to him, and he doesn't want to go home.

After Bill and Johnny shake hands, Sam tells Bill they should send the "peremptory" ransom note to Ebenezer. Bill reminds Sam that he's stood by him through many hardships and difficult situations, but he urges him to be quick, since he's concerned about his own safety around Johnny, whom he calls "that two-legged skyrocket of a kid" and "that forty-pound chunk of freckled wildcat." Sam agrees to return quickly, and he and Bill work on the ransom **letter** while Johnny plays Indian Chief, strutting around like he's the one guarding captives. In tears, Bill convinces Sam to reduce the ransom demand to $1500 from $2000 to increase the likelihood that they will be able to return the troublesome child soon.

It becomes clear that Bill and Sam are in over their heads with the ransom scheme, as they have yet to agree upon—let alone issue—a demand. Sam calls the prospective ransom letter "peremptory" (demanding attention or obedience), which will turn out to be another case of wishful thinking, since the matter of payment is anything but settled. Meanwhile, Bill is not happy in his role as primary caretaker. The difficulties with Johnny that lead to the discounting of the ransom are evident in the two colorful words Bill uses to describe Johnny ("skyrocket" and a "wildcat"). Both are not so much insults as grudgingly respectful of Johnny's energy and power, important factors here foreshadowing the ultimate reversal of fortunes.

Sam writes the **letter** to Ebenezer asking for $1500 in large bills in exchange for his son. The answer is to be sent by a solitary messenger to a remote location outside town, and Sam details the exact time and location (at the bottom of a fence-post bordering a wheat field opposite the third of three trees past Owl Creek on the road to Poplar Cove). The threat is "you will never see your boy again" and he states the terms are final and, when agreed to, Johnny will be returned within 3 hours. With the letter in his pocket, Sam encounters Johnny, who asks if he and Bill can play the Black Scout game while he's gone, since he's tired of being an Indian chief. Sam assures him, "Of course… Mr. Bill will play with you."

Although Bill and Sam's letter to Ebenezer conveys a reduced ransom demand, it still illuminates their lack of situational awareness. For instance, it claims that it is useless for "skillful detectives to attempt to find him," yet Sam has already observed that no one is looking for him. His elaborate investigation of the roads, crossings, wheat fields, and large trees doesn't make him a native of the area, just more deluded in thinking he is in control when dealing with Old Dorset. The threat "you'll never see your boy again" rings hollowest: these men clearly would never hurt Johnny, and it's not even clear that Johnny is missed. The assertion that "these terms are final" is simply untrue, as well, and signing off as "desperate men" is ironic, since it's not their aggression but their weakness that is making them desperate. This is amply illustrated when Johnny, tired of playing Indian, calls for a game of Black Scout, a move that will prove particularly ominous and painful for Bill.

Sam tells Johnny that Bill will play his new game, warning Bill that he should keep the child occupied until he returns from delivering the ransom **note**. As Sam leaves the two, Bill gets down on all fours to play the part of Black Scout's horse, with Johnny on his back. Sam admonishes Bill to keep the boy interested, saying "Loosen up." Bill discovers it's 90 miles to the stockade in Johnny's fantasy, as Johnny digs his heels into Bill's side. Bill asks Sam to hurry back and wishes aloud they had made the ransom only $1000.

Sam says the Black Scout game "sounds harmless" when clearly this is the most humiliating and potentially damaging game Bill has yet suffered. If Sam seems to be the more deluded of the two, Bill is the primary care-giver to Johnny, and the most abused. Yet Bill's patience is again in evidence: after being kicked repeatedly as a play horse, he merely threatens to "warm you good" and continues the game. This is the kind of moment that builds sympathy for Bill, but there might be a limit reached for the reader: at what point does a person, particularly a grown man dealing with a child, just seem idiotic rather than sympathetic for putting up with abuse?

Sam walks to the neighboring town of Poplar Cove and overhears someone saying all Summit is upset because Johnny has gone missing. Satisfied that the plan is finally working, Sam posts his ransom **note** to Ebenezer in Summit and leaves to return to the cave and await a response. When Sam returns to the cave, he can't find Bill or Johnny anywhere, so he waits. After half an hour, Bill returns to camp, wiping his face with a red handkerchief, while Johnny creeps along like a scout behind him.

In the first indication that things are actually going as planned for a change, Sam discovers that the local people have at least noticed and are concerned about Johnny's absence, so some increased confidence in the plan is warranted. Sam's pride is contrasted by Bill's situation as Johnny's "horse," however, which he finds untenable and humiliating. Sam's inability to anticipate the seriousness of Bill's growing objections to their criminal endeavor could now be a big issue for their plan.

Bill apologizes to Sam for having sent Johnny home, but declares he could no longer endure the hardship of caring for him as a captive. Bill details how he was ridden as a horse in the game of Black Scout, and Johnny attempted to feed him sand as if it were oats. He compares his experience with "martyrs in old times" and says he was subjected to "supernatural tortures." He also details the childish questions Johnny asks, such as "why there was nothin' in holes" as proof that caring for him was beyond what any person could endure. Bill concludes by telling Sam he took Johnny down the mountain and sent him home, and with him their hopes of a ransom. It was either that or "Bill Driscoll to the madhouse."

Abused by Johnny, ridden like a horse, bitten, kicked black-and-blue, and forced to eat sand as if it were oats, Bill finally has snapped and, he believes, sent Johnny home because he can no longer tolerate "supernatural tortures." Pathetically, he describes in detail his reasons for sending this young boy home—something that did not, in fact, happen. So far, Bill has been more aware of the acute reality of their challenges with Johnny than Sam has been, but here he takes a turn towards fantasy, believing that Johnny is gone when the boy is, in fact, right behind him.

Sam asks Bill to turn around and see that Johnny has been following behind him all along. Bill sees him and sits down in resignation, plucking at grass and sticks in a hopeless state. Sam encourages him with the thought that the kidnapping scheme might soon come to a conclusion, and Bill recovers enough to promise Johnny yet another fantasy game with him, playing a Russian in a Japanese war.

When Sam tells Bill to turn around to see Johnny is still there with them, it causes Bill to flop down on the ground and pluck at grass and sticks. This slapstick moment has significance in that usually Sam is deluded while Bill sees their situation all too clearly, but here Sam is literally telling Bill to open his eyes and look at what's in front of him. The result of pulling the wool from his eyes is shock, apparently, and a full hour of withdrawal from the world. When he comes around, Sam is once again the deluded one, insisting that the scheme will go forward.

Sam climbs the tree above the arranged drop off location to await Ebenezer's answer. At the appointed time, a young messenger rides up on a bicycle, slips a folder paper into the box at the foot of the fencepost, and rides back toward Summit. Sam waits an hour to avoid "being caught by counterplots" and then, believing no one is watching, comes down to get the **note** and returns to the cave. Once there, he observes the note was written in a "crabbed hand," and he reads it to Bill by the light of a lantern.

Sam believes things are going well because he has sent a threatening letter and is receiving a reply. However, despite his assertion that his behavior resembles that of professional kidnappers, Sam actually seems to be participating in fantasy play similar to Johnny's—after all, he is climbing trees and playing hide and seek with a "half-grown boy" who brings the response from Ebenezer. The "crabbed hand" with which the letter of response is written shows the age of the respondent, which might indicate that Ebenezer is weak—the substance of the letter will upend that implication.

Ebenezer's **letter** declares that Sam's ransom demand is too high, and he makes a counter-proposition: they are to return the boy and pay Ebenezer $250 to take Johnny back. Ebenezer recommends that they come at night, since he can't be responsible for the actions of his neighbors (who believe Johnny is lost) should Sam and Bill be seen during the day bringing back his troublesome boy.

In his letter of response, Ebenezer turns the tables and suggests that it's Bill and Sam who should pay to end this debacle, not he. This reversal is a climax of the plot, establishing Ebenezer as the dominant actor, credibly threatening them in order to get what he wants. Amusingly, it is somewhat unclear if the neighbors would be angry with Sam and Bill for taking Johnny or for bringing him back. In any case, his signature ("very respectfully") is the sort of business-like formality that is a recognizable feature of otherwise cut-throat business communications.

Sam is shocked at the audacity of Ebenezer's response, but Bill is relieved to think their ordeal may finally be at an end. Bill argues that $250 is a low price for freedom from Johnny, and he urges Sam to agree to the counter offer. Sam agrees Johnny is too much trouble and that they should cut their losses. They lie to Johnny that his father bought him a silver-mounted rifle and moccasins, and they say that they will take him bear-hunting if he will agree to go home.

Sam's reaction to Ebenezer's letter is shock, of course, since to this point he has deluded himself that the kidnapping has a chance of succeeding. Sam and Bill's inability to make good on their threats to hurt Johnny is key to their coming acquiescence to Ebenezer's powerful response. In complying with Johnny's father's demands, they see the only way out of an improbably difficult situation—namely, that they haven't the heart to hurt anyone, and they are terrified of both Johnny and his father. In fact, Johnny's father is such a strong figure in their minds that they use a lie about him buying Johnny a silver rifle and moccasins for a bear-hunting trip as bait to lure Johnny home. It's heartbreaking, highlighting as it does how sad and disappointing the child's life has been with his father.

At midnight, Sam and Bill bring Johnny to Ebenezer's house in Summit and pay him $250. Johnny, upset when realizing his friends are leaving, clings to Bill's leg and has to be peeled away by his father. Old Dorset restrains his son, saying, "I'm not as strong as I used to be… but I think I can promise you ten minutes." Bill outruns Sam, as the two of them leg it out of town, headed perhaps to the Canadian border.

In the final action, Johnny clings to Bill, rather than to his father, and the father restrains his son while Bill and Sam make their getaway. It's a denouement that is both strangely sad and funny, illustrating that Johnny's home is no home, and that the strangers who came to town without a clue are leaving it considerably more knowledgeable about who runs things.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Houghton, David. "*The Ransom of Red Chief*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Oct 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Houghton, David. "*The Ransom of Red Chief*." LitCharts LLC, October 8, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-ransom-of-red-chief.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Ransom of Red Chief* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Henry, O.. The Ransom of Red Chief. Modern Library. 1994.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Henry, O.. The Ransom of Red Chief. New York: Modern Library. 1994.