

# The outcasts of poker flat

Literature



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It is essential to remember that Bret Harte is one of the predominant American writers associated with this genre and Harte celebrates this genre in this short story through various means. As Michael J. Cummings (2006) maintains, the local-color writers, also called ‘ local colorists’, presented their narratives in a regional dialect and “ attempted to portray life in the various sections of burgeoning America. Harte, for example, focused many of his stories on the gold-mining camps and towns. However, rather than writing soberly realistic stories, local colorists tended to write stories infused with ‘ eccentrics as characters’ and ‘ whimsical plotting’...” (Cummings) Therefore, it is fundamental to realize that Bret Harte celebrates many of his essential features as a short story writer in “ The Outcasts of Poker Flat”. This paper makes a reflective analysis of the short story by Harte in order to make out the distinguishing features of the short story, its themes, the major action, the characters, etc. As aforementioned, “ The Outcasts of Poker Flat” is a central example of the author’s concern for regionalism and local color. It is through the use of the Western setting and local color that Harte attempts to be a model for his contemporaries and his story is set in the rough and tumble days of the California Gold Rush. As the short story begins, the author introduces his protagonist as well as the setting of the story, which gives an important clue to the major themes of the story. “ As Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the 23d of November 1850, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night.” (Harte, 12) A detailed understanding of the action in the story reveals that four ‘ immoral’ characters are cast out by the townspeople and they include John Oakhurst, who is a professional gambler, two prostitutes, and Uncle Billy, who was a drunkard and alleged

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burglar. The major plot of the story revolves around these outcasts of the town and the author tries to establish that many of society's outcasts have goodness, and even heroism, in their heart, which will be revealed in given contexts. Therefore, the hidden goodness in people, especially society's outcasts, is one of the central themes of the story. As Aileen M. Carroll (1989) maintains, "Bret Harte's favorite theme was that a rough or unlikely exterior often concealed a heart of gold." (Carroll, 175) Another fundamental theme of the short story is hypocrisy, represented through the citizens of Poker Flat's secret committee, who were merely hypocrites in regard to John Oakhurst. A comprehensive analysis of the characterization in the short story confirms that Bret Harte has been highly effective in using the characters of the story to represent his major themes. It is fundamental to realize that Mr. Oakhurst, the protagonist, is the best example of the characterization in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and this professional gambler is the main outcast of Poker Flat. Significantly, the author presents this brave, desperate, solitary man as having all the features of a professional gambler, in his thought, speech, and action. "Mr. Oakhurst received his sentence with philosophic calmness, none the less coolly that he was aware of the hesitation of his judges. He was too much of a gambler not to accept fate. With him, life was at best an uncertain game, and he recognized the usual percentage in favor of the dealer." (Harte, 13) Significantly, it is with him that the story begins and ends. He is the strongest as well as the weakest of all the outcasts of Poker Flat. "