

Appearance vs Reality in Bret Harte's *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*

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Abstract: Hypocrisy is the state of play-acting to have an opinion, idea, belief, behavior, or virtue that one does not have in his/her real life. This study sheds light on the theme of appearance and reality in one of the works of Bret Harte, *the outcasts of poker flat*, which is one of his famous short stories. Harte is an American writer and he is best known for his short stories. The work is an example of local color and regionalism fiction in which the writer depicts California during the first half of the nineteenth century. He is renowned for his similar writings on the life of the miners and gamblers of the California Gold Rush. In this paper, we would like to argue that if someone is considered wrong might not necessarily be so. The protagonist of the story is being accused of immorality by his surroundings. Therefore, we argue that the accusation very much fits those who accuse him rather than him.

Keywords: Hypocrisy, Immortality, Regionalism, Miners

1. Introduction

Have we ever estimated ourselves whether we are the person who really thinks we are? Do we show our real faces under any circumstances? When dealing with appearance and reality, we have to ask ourselves some significant questions “What does really cause hypocrisy? Why do people tend to be hypocritical? What do people get from being hypocritical? Certainly, there are some factors that cause hypocrisy, such as social atmosphere, lack of will-power, fear, and self-interest.

The main and foremost factor that pushes human beings to be hypocrites is the social environment. Society does not accept our real face and our real behavior, since what we do or what we believe to be right is considered to be something wrong according to the social norms. It makes us hide our real faces behind the mask to avoid social criticism and judgment. The second reason is the lack of will power. For example, when we do not have willpower, we always boast about ourselves, and this makes us a hypocrite. Sometimes, circumstances force individuals into hypocrisy, like the fear of losing something important in our lives, such as losing our jobs.

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We pretend we do our jobs properly and sincerely so that our employer has a good impression of us. The last reason that causes hypocrisy is self-interest, human beings are often opportunists. We use various means to achieve things that we are interested in. Sometimes our desire of obtaining our goals and objectives leads us into the circle of hypocrisy. For instance, you support two opposing political parties in order to keep the financial income that you get from both. You act hypocritically and pretend to side with one of them and act against the other and vice versa. The answer to the second question can be found in the above statements. The answer to the third and the last question is that those who hypocrites are might get what they want, but in the end, they most probably might lose their faces.

2. *The Outcast of Poker Flat*

The outcast of poker flat was published in 1869. The story is about a group of people who are banished from their town because of their immorality. They go to a near town and on the way, they get trapped in a snowstorm and eventually most of them die including the protagonist of the story. There are wide ranges of themes in the story to shed light upon, but we intend to touch on the theme of appearance and reality which we truly believe is the most important one amongst them. We try to support our argument by giving shreds of evidence and quotations from the book. The current study consists of four sections, the first section is a biography of the author, the second section is about local color realism, and the third and the last section of the paper intends to explain the theme of appearance and reality followed by the conclusion (Harte, 1964; Gale, 2015; Jun-xia, 2010).

3. Bret Harte

He was an American short story writer, poet, novelist, editor, critic, and playwright. He was born on 25 August 1836 in Albany, New York 1836. He was sick when he was eight. He was a keen reader and was influenced by the writings of Charles Dickens. His father died when he was nine years. After the death of his father, the family moved to different places, therefore he did not continue his education. Harte went to California in 1854 because his mother got married there. He tried different jobs such as miner, schoolteacher, and an express messenger for the Wells Fargo. In 1860, he returned to San Francisco and started working as a printer for the Golden Era. He published some of his stories in that magazine. He helped to establish Californian, and then he became an editor. In 1868, Bret Harte published several of his most well-known short stories in '*The overland monthly*' (Scharnhorst, 2000). His 1868 collection of Western stories, *The luck of roaring camp*, made him instantly famous; he was even awarded by critics with the label of the new prophet of American letters. These stories were a great success and elevated him to be a famous literary figure and a great voice of America. He left California and moved to Boston in order to work for the Atlantic Monthly in 1871. After his contract wasn't renewed in the following year, he started lecturing and writing plays with Mark Twain, but they did not become successful. He moved to London and spent the rest of his life there until his death in 1902 (Penry, 2001). Godwin, (1917) praised Bret Harte's works claiming that "His expressions are so honest, so free from can't, so exactly corresponding with its subject, so unsqueamish and hearty, so manly, that it is to be accepted as a bit of nature."

4. Regionalism and Local Colour

It emerged between the end of the Civil War in the late 1860s and the end of the nineteenth century. Local color literature was under the impact of Southwestern and Down East humor, and this style of writing

became central in American literature (Campbell, 2007). Oxford Companion to American Literature defined local color literature as "In local-color literature, one finds the dual influence of romanticism and realism, since the author frequently looks away from ordinary life to distant lands, strange customs, or exotic scenes, but retains through minute detail a sense of fidelity and accuracy of description" (Hart & Leininger 1995, p.439). Some of the famous local color writers were Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Mary Austin, Zona Gale, and Hamlin Garland (Hart & Leininger, 1995).

Some critics see local color fiction as a subtype of regionalism, on the other hand, some consider the two terms interchangeable. The setting is the most important element in the movement, it usually focuses on nature and the limitations it imposes, and it is frequently isolated. Even it sometimes functions as a character itself. The characters of the stories are from a specific region or district, they do not belong to multiple places. The narrator of the stories is normally an educated observer from the outside world who learns or benefits from the characters. The narrator plays a neutral role between the urban audience and the rural folk of the tale (Campbell, 2007; Quirk, Scharnhorst & Gale, 2006).

Some techniques are used in regional and local color fictions, like vernacular language to create sincerity and truth of regional characters, detailed description to fully understand the region, and frame story in which the narrator learns several aspects about the region. (Campbell, 2007). Local color and depiction of the California Gold Rush are presented in Bret Harte's short stories, created disapproving characters who were evil-doer outwardly and virtuous internally. Mostly the protagonists of the stories are alienated from their own people, like the gambler in *the outcasts of poker flat*. According to Celik and Yildiz (2019) "People are living in different places in the world and the way of life and the customs of these groups of people directly affect the communication between them". This can apparently be seen among the characters of Harte's *the outcast of poker flat* after they were banished from the town.

Bret Harte was one of the major writers of originating local color movement, as Joseph Harrison claimed in his book *'Bret Harte: Representative selections'* that Harte was "a major initiator of the local-color movement in American Literature", he also stated that *the luck of roaring camp* which is Harte's another short story is the father of all Western local color stories (Harrison, 1941). Patrick Morrow defined Harte as "a major initiator of the local color or regional movement in American literature" (Morrow, 1970).

5. Appearance and Reality

Yildiz (2017) indicates that purpose and motivation have an intrinsic and parallel correlation. Someone with purpose and motivation can plan very good or bad things while walking towards the goal. In this book, appearance and reality are the main themes throughout the story. Bret Harte describes the brutal and lawless life of people in the town of Goldrush near California. Harte shows the readers that those characters who apparently seem to be authentic and good are not necessarily like that. And some of those who are believed to be improper and immoral by the townspeople are having many good behaviors that cannot be found in the first group. It is said that it's not the people who change, it's the mask that falls off. Likewise, the characters' true faces are shown in the story. One example of the townspeople's mask is revealed when they want to Banish Mr. Oakhurst: "A few of the committee had urged hanging him as a possible example and a sure method of reimbursing themselves from his pockets of the sums he had won from them" (Harte, 1899, p.13). The committee and the people from the town state that Mr. Oakhurst is banished because of his ill habits. The banishment of Mr. Oakhurst is not because of his immortality, but it is rather to get rid of him. If Mr. Oakhurst is immoral because of his gambling habit, certainly most of the members of the

committee are immoral too, because they were once on the same table with him and they were gamblers as well. But after losing a lot of money to him, they exiled him to take their money back. Those members who lost money to him were even supporting the idea of hanging him, while those who won money from him were against it, and this is called self-interest hypocrisy.

Mr. Oakhurst was a gambler, but he wasn't immoral. Another sign of his good deed is his first encounter with Innocent Tom: After the game was finished, Mr. Oakhurst drew the youthful speculator behind the door and thus addressed him: "Tommy, you're a good little man, but you can't gamble worth a cent. Don't try it over again" (Harte, 1899, p.14)". This is an instant of Mr. Oakhurst's good behavior when he has a parental attitude towards the Innocent Tom. After he won from him a sum of money which was forty dollars, he handed his money back to him. Then he advised him not to gamble again because he was bad at it. We assure you that if one of the members of the secret committee won money from the young boy, he wouldn't have given it back to him.

Another selfless behavior of Mr. Oakhurst was giving a pair of snowshoes to Tom. He could have used them to return to civilization and save his life. He thought that saving Piney was the most important thing, "Mr. Oakhurst took the Innocent aside, and showed him a pair of snow-shoes, which he had fashioned from the old pack-saddle (Harte, 1899, p.17)".

Mother Shipton was banished from Poker Flat and considered to be a bad person because she was a prostitute, yet there is goodness in her heart. She treated the young couples with the greatest kindness. The quote shows that she starved herself to death only to save the pure girl, Piney Woods, and not everybody is willing to do this self-sacrificing act for the sake of a foreigner, 'Give 'em to the child,' she said, pointing to the sleeping Piney. "You've starved yourself," said the gambler (Harte, 1899, p.17).

The Duchess was like a surrogate mother to Piney Woods. She treated her kindly and generously. And when the townspeople came to the cabin and found them dead, they were embracing each other, and it was hard to recognize which one was the sinner and which was the pure one.

He started to his feet with the intention of awakening the sleepers, for there was no time to lose. But turning to where Uncle Billy had been lying, he found him gone. A suspicion leaped to his brain and a curse to his lips. He ran to the spot where the mules had been tethered--they were no longer there. The tracks were already rapidly disappearing in the snow (Harte, 1899, p.15).

The quote is an evidence that Uncle Billy stole the mules. Among the outcasts, only Uncle Billy really deserved the punishment. Stealing is an immoral act, but all the thieves are not necessarily immoral. Some steal because they need a piece of bread to survive, we cannot call them immoral while the fault is primarily ours, the surrounding, that we don't give a hand, and we only see our own needs. But, for Uncle Billy, that he was a suspected thief and he stole the mules and provisions of the outcasts, he was not only a thief, he was also a murderer. He was the main reason for the outcast's deaths.

6. Conclusion

Yildiz, (2019) argues that 'we are born as a guest on the earth, get into a relationship with our natural environment, and our social life perception produces a consciousness in our personal life' and we get influenced by each other easily. Based on this fact, Bret Harte, as a local color story or novel writer who deals with the characters, customs, and landscape of a certain region, and in his great piece *'the outcast of*

poker flat', refers to events of a specific town. In this paper, the theme of appearance and reality is explained. Mr. Oakhurst, the protagonist of the story is exiled from his town because of being a gambler, while the people from the committee who banished him are gamblers too. Therefore, it shows their hypocrisy. Certainly, most human beings don't show their real faces in society. People usually wear different masks to obtain what they mean to get. Sometimes one deep inside believes a custom, behavior, or an opinion to be right, but s/he does not express it publicly or even pretends that s/he does not like it in order to get society's acceptance. Therefore, Tosun and Yildiz, (2015) believe that the educators' job is holy and sacrificing, so they have to be spiritually rich in heart and mind to educate and lead people around them who are mostly aimless and in the gap, and in order for building a golden society they have to work harder than ever.

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