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Historical Narration and Reconstruction -- *The Luck of Roaring Camp* from the Perspective of New Historicism

Zhixuan Ren

School of English, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province 710128

Abstract: *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, a story written by Bret Harte, begins with Cherokee Sal giving birth in a California Gold Rush town, where the men raise the baby themselves. The child's influence leads them to reform, but tragedy ensues when a flood claims their lives. New Historicism, a new type or a new way of literary criticism, emphasizes the interaction between literary texts and non-literary texts assisting with some other knowledge in culture, politics etc, so that literary texts can show some historical truth and historical texts also can be fully understood without any boundary and limitation. By recounting the "small history" of characters like Stumpy, Kentuck and others, Bret Harte effectively reconstructed the "big history" of the Gold Rush-era California during the American Westward Movement. This paper will employ the perspective of New Historicism and its two key concepts of "the text is historical" and "the history is textual" to analyze *The Luck of Roaring Camp* within the context of the Gold Rush-era, thereby illustrating the spirit of Gold Rush-era California reflected in the story's portrayal of virtuous characters: independence, morality and rebirth.

Keywords: *The Luck of Roaring Camp*; New Historicism; Gold Rush-era California; Rebirth

1. Introduction

The Westward Expansion at the dawn of the United States was crucial for its economic growth and national unity. Western literature emerging from this period laid the groundwork for American literary identity. Different authors, drawing from their unique perspectives and keen observations, documented phenomena often overlooked in conventional histories, revealing valuable truths.

Bret Harte's influential literature captures the local culture and has shaped American literature. His stories of the American West ushered in a new era of regional writing, offering a distinct perspective. Despite initially appearing repetitive, Harte's portrayal of ordinary characters from disadvantaged backgrounds reveals profound depth and resilience, giving his Western Novels vital spiritual significance.

New Historicism breaks down the boundary between history and text, integrates text and history, and explores the field of culture from the perspective of history, which means the redefinition of history. It believes that history and literature cannot be viewed separately. New historians believe that history is a story adapted and narrated by historians, rather than a set of facts. History is regarded not only as a series of events that occurred in the past but also as a kind of imaginative reconstruction based on various historical realities. Therefore, history and literature can not be viewed separately, literary text and history should be analyzed together. Based on New Historicism's ideas, this paper will analyze *The Luck of Roaring Camp* with the help of historical texts and some other relevant information within the context of the the Gold Rush-era under the background of Westward Movement.

2. Theoretical Framework

By the historicity of the text, this concept refers to all forms of reading and all forms of written history, including not only the historical documents studied by scholars, the textual environment of literary works, but also the large social texts in which people live, with specific historical meanings and social, material content. That is to say, once produced, all texts become the product of history. Text is no longer the simple integration of language symbols, but also plays a role in the construction of history. The creation of literary works is limited by the social environment and historical background of the authors, and is the product of specific economy, class, politics, gender, etc., so it can reflect popular ideology to a certain extent. Through text, we can understand the real traces of the past. Therefore, interpreters should combine the study of text with the study of context to delve into the social existence in the world of literary works and the social existence reflected in literary works.

Historicity means that if we do not base ourselves on the textual traces of the societies we study, there is no other way to approach a complete, true past and physical existence. Since people can't go back to the complete and true past by their own strength, we have to rely on

existing historical documents to understand history, so historical texts are a bridge for us to understand past. All history is a kind of discourse, written by the chronicler. These discourse are marked by the chronicler. History is extended text and text is condensed history. The textuality of history makes history widely disseminated in the form of text, which helps to build a bridge between the past and the present. The historicity of the text gives the text a specific social and historical context. The text is branded with history and has a specific historical vision. Therefore, the interpretation of the text must be social and historical. Through the text, people can get close to the history and understand the history. However, texts will not passively or casually reflect history, instead, they will be limited by history or popular ideology. The process of constructing history with text is the process of explaining history.

3. Textual Analysis

During the Gold Rush, wealth was primarily accessible to those of higher social status, while those at the lowest level experienced arduous work, harsh conditions, and a miserable existence. Zhang Youlun, citing Marx and Engels, noted that the discovery of gold mines in the far western parts of the United States would bring greater prosperity than the discovery of America itself. This event of finding gold mines in the west was a significant aspect of the Westward Expansion. Gold miners flocked to these mines, viewing the Gold Rush as an opportunity to change their fortunes, particularly for those who had unfulfilled ambitions. Consequently, the small inns became overcrowded, and crimes such as theft, fraud, robbery, and even murder for money, became prevalent in the camps. In a word, the camps were filled with immoral activities. In *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, the physical environment of the camp was described as “the most maledominated inveterately sinful and unchristian”. (Powell 52) Specifically, “...for in 1805 that was not novel enough to have called together the entire settlement” and “...its gamblers...calmly continued their game the day that French Pete and Kanaka Joe shot each other to death over the bar...”. (Harte, ch. 1) Therefore, *The Luck of Roaring Camp* reflected miners and lower-class’s tough and harsh life. However, “There was something original, independent, and heroic about the plan that pleased the camp”. (Harte, ch. 13) The decision to raise an imperial baby not on wolf’s but on donkey’s milk and the determination to raise child collectively demonstrate their originality and independence.

Undoubtedly, better comprehension of literary works cannot be achieved without the support of some relevant and appropriate historical context. As the New Historicism pointed out, social and historical backgrounds are necessary for us to understand literary works. However, since “literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulated inseparably”, (Wofreys 173) grasping history will require utilizing literary texts to uncover the culture and history concealed within historical texts. For Bret Harte, “his aim was to capture the spirit rather than the facts of Gold Rush-era California, and if doing so entailed spotlighting contemporary ills, so much the better”. (Powell 52) Harte’s major works exhibit similarities in both narrative style and theme: many of his protagonists are individuals who are scorned by society’s conventional moral standards. However, Harte aims to convey to readers that these individuals possess hidden virtues that are often overlooked or dismissed by the general public. The setting of “Roaring Camp” is a mining area where so-called “bad guys” congregate. Yet, when an Indian prostitute dies after giving birth, these “bad guys” willingly step forward to assume responsibility for caring for the baby without hesitation. These rough individuals showed the infant with love and care, leading to a rebirth of morality and responsibility among them.

The allure of gold in California drew people from all corners of America, especially those facing difficulties and hardships. Many of these individuals, as depicted by Harte in *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, belonged to the lower class and were considered to be immoral, such as convicts, gamblers, or prostitutes. Harte’s portrayal showed that these people lacked discipline and often engaged in fights, quarrels, and gambling, setting them apart from the upper class. Despite their desire to change their circumstances, they often resorted to their previous behaviors. As Stevens said in “*She War a Woman*”: *Family Roles, Gender, and Sexuality in Bret Harte’s Western Fiction*: “what he [Luck] offers them [the miners] is an alternative worldview, the possibility of family in a more than physical sense, and of nonviolent intercourse even in the consummately violent realm of Roaring Camp”. (J. 575) In essence, Luck brought a sense of “rebirth” to the camp. In *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, for example, with the aim of providing a favorable environment for Luck, there was this process of regeneration commenced in Roaring Camp, gradually and almost unnoticeably. To be more specific, the cabin, initially designated for “Tommy Luck” or simply “The Luck”, witnessed visible signs of progress. It also underwent meticulous cleaning and whitewashing, followed by the addition of boards, furnishings, and wallpaper. “Tommy Luck, the son of a mining camp prostitute and a father who could have come from virtually any point on the globe, domesticates and civilizes the camp; the child, born the same year California was ‘born,’ embodies the calming of the Gold Rush.” (Powell 54) Therefore, we realize how insistently Harte stresses the idea of an absolutely new beginning, at first in terms of physical events and later in terms of consequent moral improvements in society.

4. Conclusion

Harte’s portrayal of the physical aspects of the camp allows a broader audience to witness the independence and morality of people during the Gold-Rush era, highlighting the “historicity of the text”. By incorporating the spirit of rebirth into his literary creation, the author

paints a historical panorama of Gold-Rush memory against the backdrop of the Westward Expansion. Through the exploration of the “little history” of ordinary individuals in his literary works, Harte weaves together the “big history” that reconstructs the images of the Gold-Rush era: independence, morality and rebirth. By consistently portraying the authentic realities of ordinary miners’ life to the world, demonstrating his contemplation and quest for reassessing the morality of Gold-Rush era California and its journey towards a new beginning.

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