

# Ecological Perspectives on Bret Harte's Short Stories

Zhao Xiunan

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China  
1959467640@qq.com

**Abstract:** Bret Harte, a well-known American realist novelist, is best remembered and highly praised for his short stories depicting the California Gold Rush. The unique quality of the stories, the distinctive style of writing as well as the humanism and ecologism embedded in his works are of great value. Focusing on the development of environmental awareness during the Westward Movement reflected in Harte's works, this paper probes into Harte's attitude towards the environmental and ecological crisis in the West by combining his works and the theories of ecocriticism and then explores the non-anthropocentrism existed in his novels to criticize the destructions made to the nature world.

**Keywords:** Bret Harte, Ecocriticism, Non-anthropocentrism, Ecologism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Bret Harte and his short stories

Bret Harte was a prominent American author and poet, best known for his short stories and verse depicting the life and culture of the American West during the mid-19th century. Born in New York, Harte moved to California in 1854, where he began his literary career amidst the backdrop of the Gold Rush. Harte gained widespread fame with his short story *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, published in 1868 in the *Overland Monthly*, a magazine he also edited. The story's vivid portrayal of frontier life, combined with its emotional depth, captured the attention of readers and established Harte as a leading figure in American literature. His work is characterized by its humor, regional dialects, often highlighting the colorful characters and rough conditions of the mining camps and settlements. Throughout his literary career, Harte published numerous short stories, including *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* and *Tennessee's Partner*, which further cemented his reputation as a master storyteller of the American West. Harte's characters, ranging from rugged miners to social outcasts, are rendered with vivid realism and emotional depth, highlighting the interplay of roughness and compassion in their lives. His ability to blend realism with romanticism allowed him to create enduring works that continue to be studied and appreciated for their literary and historical significance.

Harte, one of the pioneers of American Western literature, significantly influenced later authors such as Mark Twain, with whom he had both a personal and professional connection, and Jack London. His capability to bring the drama and humanity of the frontier to life introduced a new literary focus on ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Although his popularity waned in later years, his short stories remain a cornerstone of American literary history, celebrated for their humor, sensitivity, and insightful depiction of a dynamic and transformative era in the nation's past.

### 1.2 Literature Review

As the founder of frontier fiction, Harte's works have been analyzed in later generations mostly from the perspectives of realism. Besides, the Chinese characters in his novels have also got many attentions, such as Resnick's *Life on the frontier as seen in the early sketches and tales of Bret Harte* introduced the frontier life and different themes of Harte's short stories<sup>[1]</sup>. With the growing prominence of ecological theory, the ecological consciousness embedded in Bret Harte's novels has increasingly drawn scholarly attention. His works reflect a deep awareness of the delicate relationship between humanity and the natural world, as well as the ecological disruptions brought about by the rapid expansion of the American West during the California Gold Rush. Harte's subtle criticisms of environmental degradation and his exploration of the consequences of human exploitation of nature reveal a perspective that resonates with modern ecological concerns. However, despite these rich undercurrents, studies focusing specifically on the ecological themes in Harte's works remain relatively scarce, leaving significant opportunities for

further exploration in this field.

Bret Harte's short stories still offer a rich canvas for ecological analysis, portraying the dynamic and often fraught interactions between humans and the natural environment. By integrating the frontier landscape into his narratives as both a setting and an active force, Harte highlights the profound impact of the natural world on human lives, relationships, and societal values. His works capture the tension between human ambition and environmental constraints, shedding light on the moral and social dilemmas that arise from humanity's attempt to dominate and exploit nature. Through the lens of ecological theory, Harte's narratives can be reexamined to uncover their representation of nature, not merely as a backdrop but as an integral and shaping presence in the stories, offering insights into the ecological challenges of his time and their relevance today.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach to literature that explores the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Emerging in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seeks to analyze how literature reflects, critiques, and influences attitudes toward nature, ecological crises, and environmental ethics. This field examines how cultural narratives contribute to understanding and responding to environmental issues, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. The rise of ecological awareness during the 1960s and 1970s, sparked by works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, inspired academic interest in environmental themes. Glotfelty, the advocator and initiator of ecocriticism in the United States, defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" [2]. By emphasizing the interconnection and mutual influence between literature and nature, she reveals that ecocriticism aims to reexamine the human cultural system through literature and to find the ideological and cultural causes that lead to the concept of ecological crisis.

### 2.1 Non-anthropocentrism

Ecocriticism explores the complex relationship between literature and the natural world, offering a critical lens to examine how cultural narratives shape our understanding of nature and ecological crises. It challenges anthropocentric perspectives by emphasizing ecocentrism, which recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and ecosystems.

Anthropocentrism is a philosophical perspective that positions humans at the center of the universe, prioritizing human needs, values, and experiences above those of other species and the natural world. Badmington pointed out that "In the humanist account, human beings are exceptional, autonomous, and set above the world that lies at their feet. 'Man' is the hegemonic measure of all things" [3]. Rooted in Western philosophical and religious traditions, this worldview perceives nature primarily as a resource to be exploited for human benefit, often neglecting the intrinsic value of non-human entities. The term derives from the Greek words *anthropos* (human) and *kentron* (center), emphasizing humanity's perceived dominance and entitlement over nature. Lynn White Jr. in his influential essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, defined anthropocentrism as the belief system that places humans at the center of the universe and views nature primarily as a resource for human use and benefit [4]. Contemporary environmental philosophers like Bryan Norton and J. Baird Callicott have further explored the implications of anthropocentrism. Norton distinguishes between "weak" anthropocentrism, which considers human values in environmental decision-making, and "strong" anthropocentrism, which prioritizes human interests to the exclusion of other considerations [5].

In reaction to anthropocentrism, eco-centric and biocentric perspectives have emerged, emphasizing the essential value of all living beings and ecosystems. These views argue for ethical frameworks that include the rights and interests of non-human entities [6]. Eco-critics, in particular, identify anthropocentrism as the primary culprit behind the contemporary ecological crisis. They argue that the anthropocentric mindset, which constructs a dichotomy between humans and nature, with humans assuming a position of dominance and control, has led to widespread environmental degradation. This has manifested in various forms, such as deforestation, over-extraction of resources, pollution, and biodiversity loss. To mitigate the ecological crisis, eco-critics contend that a fundamental shift away from anthropocentric thinking is essential. Non-anthropocentrism requires transcending the dualistic view of humans and nature as adversaries, and instead, recognizing humans as an integral part of the natural world. By adopting a more holistic and respectful approach, a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature can be achieved, where human activities are conducted in a manner that safeguards the integrity of ecosystems and the well-being of all living organisms.

To sum up, Bret Harte's works contain certain ecological colors, and these elements add unique charm and depth to his works. At the same time, his creations also offer us new ideas for understanding the connection between human beings and nature, which is of some revelation to the development of the contemporary ecological movement.

### 3. Ecological Analysis

#### 3.1 Historical and Cultural Context

Most of Harte's novels are set in the mid-19th century during the California Gold Rush. It was a period of intense economic activity and demographic change that left an indelible mark on the American landscape. The California Gold Rush, which began in 1848, dramatically transformed the American West economically and environmentally. The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill led to an unprecedented influx of settlers and prospectors, known as "Forty-Niners". To California, it swelled the region's population and accelerated its path to statehood. This rapid development, however, came at a significant ecological cost. The environmental impact of the Gold Rush was profound, driven primarily by the intensive and often destructive mining practices employed. Hydraulic mining, a prevalent technique, used high-pressure water jets to erode hillsides, resulting in massive soil erosion and sedimentation in rivers, which altered waterways and increased flood risks. This method also introduced mercury into water systems, causing long-lasting contamination affecting both wildlife and human health. The demand for timber led to extensive deforestation, destroying habitats and exacerbating erosion. With the influx of people, there is an increased demand for natural resources such as food and land, as well as an increased amount of waste and pollution that were generated by people. Additionally, the Gold Rush displaced Native American communities, leading to cultural and ecological disruptions. This period highlights the significant environmental costs of uncontrolled resource exploitation and underscores the need for sustainable practices.

Under the realistic background of resource depletion, frequent disasters, sharp decrease of species, and climate change, ecology has become more and more an important issue about the survival of human beings. The external pressure of survival and the internal ecological responsibility and concern for nature have forced people to begin to reflect on the activities of conquering and exploiting nature, which has contributed to the rising awareness of ecology and environmental protection, and then a large number of eco-literary works have emerged.

#### 3.2 Human-Nature Relationships

Through a close reading of Harte's works, it can be realized that his works do show a concern for the natural environment and ecology to a certain extent. Most of his stories are set in the western frontier of the United States, where natural environments, wildlife, and human-nature interactions are all integral elements of his work. Based on ecological theory, his novels will be explored from two aspects. Firstly, his works often depict the primitive landscape of the western frontier, such as wilderness, mountains and forests. The depiction of these natural environments not only provides a background for the stories but also shows the close connection between man and nature.

*The Luck of Roaring Camp* by Bret Harte is a fascinating exploration of non-anthropocentrism, which challenges the traditional human-centered perspective. The story, set during the period of California Gold Rush, focuses on a group of miners who discover a baby boy after the death of his mother, a prostitute named Cherokee Sal. This event leads to a transformation within the camp as the men take on paternal roles, showing unexpected tenderness and care. The miners in Roaring Camp initially live in a harsh and exploitative relationship with their environment, focusing solely on the extraction of gold. However, with the arrival of Luck, they begin to notice and appreciate the beauty of their natural surroundings, as the novel describes "men would lie at full length under the trees, in the soft summer twilight, smoking their pipes and drinking in the melodious utterances. A distinct idea that this was pastoral happiness pervaded the camp" [7]. This shift signifies a recognition of nature's intrinsic value, beyond its utilitarian function, highlighting the theme of interconnectedness and suggests that human well-being is linked to the beauty of the natural world. Besides, the presence of Luck catalyzes a moral and ethical transformation among the miners. The birth of the baby brings about a significant change in the camp's social dynamics. The men, initially portrayed as rough and indifferent to traditional norms of society, demonstrate a capacity for nurturing and community-building, highlighting the potential for non-human-centered forms of social organization. They move from a life of reckless abandon to one of responsibility and nurturing. This

change is also mirrored in their interactions with nature, as they begin to see themselves as stewards rather than exploiters. Harte's depiction of this transformation aligns with non-anthropocentric ethics, where humans recognize their role as part of a larger ecological community. The miners' shift from exploiting nature to caring for it reflects a deeper understanding of their relationship with the environment.

Moreover, nature in *The Luck of Roaring Camp* is portrayed not just as a backdrop but as a living entity that responds to and reflects the changes in the camp. For instance, the flood that ultimately takes Luck's life can be seen as nature's indifferent force, underscoring the idea that humans are not the masters of nature but are subject to its power. The flood serves as a reminder of the power and unpredictability of nature, suggesting that human life is deeply embedded in and influenced by natural forces. This reinforces the non-anthropocentric view that nature exists independently of human desires and needs. By highlighting the miners' transformation and their new-found reverence for nature, Harte's narrative aligns with ecological principles of balance and unpredictability, illustrating how humans must adapt to, rather than dominate, their surroundings, advocating for a more respectful and harmonious relationship with the environment.

Bret Harte's stories often emphasize the unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of nature, emphasizing its dual role as both provider and adversary. In another story, *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*, the natural environment becomes more than just for a backdrop. It emerges as a silent yet powerful character that dictates the fate of the exiled group. The harshness of the Sierra Nevada snowstorm is not merely a setting detail but a symbolic force that mirrors the moral and social isolation of the outcasts. It strips away human pretensions, reducing the characters to their most basic instincts and vulnerabilities. The storm acts as both a physical barrier and a metaphor for their moral trials, forcing the group into a confrontation not only with nature's indifference but also with their own fragility and dependence on one another. From an ecological perspective, Harte's portrayal of nature challenges anthropocentric views that prioritize human control over the environment. The snowstorm's destructive power renders human ingenuity ineffective, demonstrating nature's capacity to overpower human efforts at mastery and survival. The outcasts, who are expelled from human society, are further alienated by the unrelenting wilderness, reinforcing ecological themes of interdependence and vulnerability. Their reliance on firewood, shelter, and dwindling provisions shows the precarious balance between human survival and environmental forces, echoing ecological theories about the necessity of living in harmony with nature rather than attempting to dominate it. The ecological reading of this story strongly exposes the illusion of human self-sufficiency. Although the outcasts initially attempt to impose order on their situation, the storm ultimately overwhelms their preparations. This serves as a critique of anthropocentric hubris and industrialized notions of progress, emphasizing instead the humility required to coexist with an unpredictable environment. Nature, in this sense, is both a provider and an adversary, offering resources for survival while simultaneously threatening human existence.

Overall, through this kind of portrayal, Harte subtly critiques the anthropocentric worldview that dominated 19th-century thought, advocating instead for a perspective that recognizes humanity's intrinsic dependence on and interconnectedness with the natural world. By emphasizing nature not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active, dynamic force capable of both nurturing and destroying, Harte challenges the era's prevailing notions of human dominance and control over the environment. His depictions of the frontier landscape often reveal a duality: while nature can offer sustenance, beauty, and opportunities for growth, it also wields immense power to disrupt and destabilize human aspirations. In doing so, Harte anticipates contemporary ecological debates surrounding sustainability, environmental ethics, and human vulnerability in the face of climate and ecological changes. His works invite readers to reflect on the fragility of human existence and the long-term consequences of exploiting natural resources without regard for ecological balance. This ecological reading not only enriches our understanding of Harte's literary contributions but also positions his stories as early explorations of humanity's complex and often tenuous relationship with the natural world, offering insights that remain profoundly relevant in today's discussions on environmental sustainability and resilience.

### **3.3 Ecological Consciousness**

Harte also demonstrates a profound respect for wildlife and Indigenous cultures in his works, highlighting their close connection to the natural world and the wisdom they embodied about living in harmony with the environment. He often directly conveyed his deep admiration for the natural beauty of the American West, portraying its landscapes not only as stunning vistas but as vibrant ecosystems imbued with life and meaning. The West held great personal and artistic significance for Harte, and he dedicated much of his creative energy to capturing its essence. While his primary focus often centered on the depiction of characters' destinies and the revelation of social realities, particularly the struggles

and moral dilemmas faced by individuals in frontier communities, his evocative descriptions of the natural environment reveal his sensitivity to ecological concerns. The interplay between human lives and the natural world in Harte's narratives underscores his awareness of the delicate balance that sustains both. His reflections on the relationship between humanity and nature offer new dimensions for understanding ecogism, positioning his works as rich sources for examining the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems. By connecting these elements into his storytelling, Harte provides valuable insights into the broader issues of environmental ethics, sustainability, and respect for diverse cultural traditions.

In Harte's writing, nature is portrayed as having a symbiotic relationship with humanity, reflecting both harmony and tension. The western landscape in his works is depicted as an idyllic paradise, filled with breathtakingly beautiful scenes of nature, from pristine rivers and serene lakes to majestic mountains and sprawling forests. Yet, Harte also underscores the duality of nature, showing that when nature is treated unfairly or exploited recklessly by mankind, it retaliates with formidable vengeance. The lakes and rivers, for instance, are often depicted in contrasting roles: as tranquil and life-giving elements in their natural state, they nurture and sustain life; but when provoked or disrupted by human greed and carelessness, they transform into destructive forces, wreaking havoc by sweeping away villages and altering lives in an instant. Harte's works reflect a deep awareness of the environmental consequences brought about by human actions. After the Westward Movement and the Gold Rush, America's rapid industrialization brought significant economic growth, but at an enormous ecological cost. The western land, once teeming with unspoiled beauty and abundant resources, began to suffer from unprecedented environmental degradation. Harte captures this transformation with painful clarity, portraying the devastating impact of deforestation, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources. Through his vivid storytelling, Harte offers an early critique of humanity's exploitative relationship with nature, highlighting the ecological crises that result from unchecked industrialization and relentless pursuit of profit. Harte has painfully portrayed such a situation in various aspects through his works, which shows Harte's advanced ecological consciousness.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, large-scale mining activities have led to the over-utilization of land resources as well as the destruction of natural resources. Harte, as a contemporary writer, recorded much of the ecological chaos in his realist literature. In his *Miss*, "there were huge fissures on the hillside, and displacement of the red soil.....there were the ruins of some cabin with the chimney alone left intact and the hearthstone open to the sky" [7], he describes the great ecological disasters brought about by mining activities at that time. Besides, in *Tennessee's Partner*, he writes that "The unpicturesque site, the rude and unlovely outlines, the unsavory details, which distinguish the nest building of the California miner with the dreariness of decay super added" [7]. Large quantities of mine waste are often dumped haphazardly into rivers and lakes, causing serious environmental pollution. In describing the ruined landscape of the mountains in the West after mining, Harte is filled with disgust and disappointment at the environmental destruction. He is progressively exposing and criticizing the brutal realities of American ecology. The West in Harte's works has become deeply flawed, and it is no longer the ideal land for pioneers, but has slowly become a barren land. In *Johnson's "Old Woman"*, Harte directly describes that "For a few yards around the actual dwelling there was an unsavory fringe of civilization in the shape of cast-off clothes, empty bottles, and tin cans, and the adjacent thorn and elder bushes blossomed unwholesomely with bits of torn white paper and bleaching dish-cloths" [7]. Amid the tide of social industrialization, Americans became increasingly focused on satisfying material desires and indulging in luxurious lifestyles. In contrast to the fervent industrialization and Gold Rush in the American West, the ecological environment suffered devastating damage, leaving it in ruins.

To put it briefly, in Harte's realist writing, the destruction of natural ecosystems and the cruelty of human society are shown, in an attempt to warn people to restore harmony between human beings and nature promptly. He anticipates contemporary debates about sustainability, environmental responsibility, and the consequences of disrupting the fragile balance between humanity and the natural world.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout the history of the Gold Rush and industrial development in America, anthropocentrism has always existed in the process of natural development, and the conquest and exploitation of nature has become an important theme in the relationship between American society and nature at that time. Harte, as a realist writer, presents his own observed social reality, interspersed in his literature works. From a human-nature perspective, the rapid economic development and the Gold Rush were achieved at the expense of the environment. According to Harte's portrayal, the unrestrained

destruction of the environment and abuse of resources will ultimately cause human beings to suffer from nature's repercussions, which has brought many unfavorable impacts on the sustainable development of the gold mining and the social economy.

The changes in the West reflect the numerous problems of American society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the development of civilization has actually caused the decline of morality and the destruction of the western land, through which Harte provokes the readers to think deeply about the natural ecosystem in the West. The exploration into Harte's works in this paper enhances contemporary discussions on sustainability and environmental ethics. By contextualizing his works within the broader historical framework of American environmental history, parallels between the challenges of Harte's time and those of the modern era will be shown, such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Harte's writings encourage readers to question the cost of unchecked development and to consider alternative models of living that prioritize ecological balance and respect for nature. Ultimately, such study underscores the enduring relevance of Harte's ecological insights and their potential to inspire a more thoughtful and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

However, several limitations need to be addressed in this study. Firstly, the selection of Harte's short stories as source material is limited, and the chosen texts may lack novelty, potentially restricting the scope and value of the analysis. Secondly, the application of ecological theory in the study is relatively superficial and generalized, falling short of providing a comprehensive theoretical framework. Lastly, the engagement with prior research is primarily limited to a straightforward analysis, with the conclusions drawn tending to be more subjective rather than grounded in critical evaluation. Addressing these improvements would significantly strengthen the future study for the ecological awareness in Harte's stories.

## References

- [1] Resnick, Robert Benjamin. *Life on the Frontier as Seen in the Early Sketches and Tales of Bret Harte*. Dissertation, Boston University, 1948.
- [2] Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- [3] Badmington, Neil. "Theorizing Posthumanism." *Cultural Critique*, no. 53, 2003, pp. 10–27. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2003.0017>.
- [4] White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967, pp. 1203-1207.
- [5] Norton, Bryan G. *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*. Oxford University Press, 1991.
- [6] Callicott, J. Baird. "Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1980, pp. 257-275.
- [7] Harte, Bret. *The Luck of Roaring Camp, and Other Sketches*. Legare Street Press, 2022.