# UPGRADING THE WESTERN SHORT-STORY'S PATTERN. BRET HARTE & *THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT*

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*Abstract: My paper's intention is to demonstrate the way Bret Harte, the Easterner, has improved and modernized the traditional paradigm of the Western short-story, both by introducing the so-called "marginal characters" and by attaching a psychological dimension to his new born paradoxical heroes. Although acknowledged as a "frontier humorist", this particular piece of fiction, The Outcasts of Poker Flat, proves to be highly tragic in its inner narrative construction.*

*Keywords: marginal characters, golden heart heroes, Western fiction*

***Preamble. The Classic Western Story Pattern***.

Whenever referring to the West, the Americans are constantly taking into account two major connotation dimensions: the West as a country landscape little complicated by civilization, a sort of a "lost paradise", a land without time, eternal because of its simplicity, with permanent verities particularized by elementary and primitiveness[1], on one hand and the West as a kind of a substitute for the absent heroic and tumultuous history, on the other hand. In this latter respect, the readers are dealing primarily with the cowboy and his ritualistic confrontations between good and evil. In Ihab Hassan's opinion, that particular uncivilized West "had never really acknowledged Time. Its vision of Eden or Utopia is essentially a timeless vision. Its innocence is neither geographical nor moral: it is mainly temporal, hence metaphysical. This is a radical innocence."[2]

*The Western story* was meant as a special kind of popular literature that always commands to a large audience. The Western stories ordinarily describe a part of the comparatively recent past, a time that lies somewhere between the Civil War and the germs of modern époque; it really doesn't matter whether the events presented in these stories are indeed real or not: they had to be believed, so they had to be true. The Western stories are focusing on the individual – *the cowboy*. His roots are to be identified in the enterprising and dynamic spirit of the Go-Getters[3], as the cattle industry seems perfectly agreeable for them; the Western story's hero is bright and daring, displaying a strong character covered by a handsome figure. He still is America's first athletic idol. The West has always been the perfect refuge for the bandits: they used to hide themselves from the law, but they could never really hide themselves from the community. The cowboy's task is basically an honorable one: protecting the community, saving the heroine or simply defending his honor. The hero is always alone within his own community, in the sense of a moral model of behavior or in the sense of being individuality. He often lacks family and sometimes he is an orphan, lacking his

[1] According to Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Americans: the Democratic Experience*, Vintage Books, 1974
[2] Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel*, Princeton University Press, 1971, Epilogue.
[3] See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans…*, quoted edition.



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mother figure and consequently her kindness. The cowboy is never openly searching for love, but he is prepared to embrace it. If there is a woman who does love him, she is usually unable to comprehend his motives, since she is against killing and being killed. Love complicates things for the cowboy and marriage is not quite an option for him, especially in the community's eyes, as it would eventually force him to give up his status and become ordinary, a failure, respectively a non-heroic figure. The cowboy seldom shoots, but he never misses. Opposed to him, there are *the bandits* – they come in the plural, the villains who are committing irrational acts of violence and whose leader always ends up in a face to face confrontation with the cowboy. *The community* acts as a judgmental, neutral witness to the conflict; it represents the collective mind or the collective character and in the Western story's hierarchy it occupies the third position; it does not wish for troubles and complications to its ordinary life. Collaterally there are also the saloon girls, quite sympathetic to the hero's needs; they usually hide a golden heart under the sinful stereotypical mask.

These all are the basic and constant elements of the traditional Western story dynamic and pattern.

**Applying on Bret Harte's *The Outcasts of Poker Flat***

Paradoxically enough, the first coherent literary idea attached to the Western paradigm has been associated with an Easterner, Bret Harte, who was displaying limited experience as far as the mining camps were in question. 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", a stamp much debatable nowadays.[4] Nevertheless, his witty and now and then melodramatic stories exploring the Western frontier became popular, not to mention his personal narrative strategy, that of introducing the social outcasts, be it gamblers, drunks, prostitutes or unemployed cowboys, and further focusing the tales on their hidden heart of gold – these dimensions definitely ensured the writer's literary success. One recurrent theme identifiable in the author's Western fiction is represented by the denunciation of the Eastern influence civilization was having on the West; he was also constantly preoccupied with criticizing the way white men were using and abusing the minorities that had helped constructing the West (the Indians, the Chinese and the Mexicans). Although Bret Harte is traditionally regarded as and largely acknowledged as a "frontier humorist", our story, *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*, is to be read rather as a tragedy, centering on a limited number of characters whose human inner value is tested under extraordinary circumstances, in a relatively concentrated temporal frame.[5]

*The Outcasts of Poker Flat* was published for the very first time in 1869, within the January issue of the *Overland Monthly* magazine, which was actually edited by Bret Harte himself.[6] The readers are dealing with a rather minimalist and unspectacular plot, at first sight: the events take place in a Californian community known as Poker Flat, near the town of La Porte. During late November of 1850, in the town of Poker Flat (and its name itself represents an obvious symbol of sinful manners), California, a vigilante committee rounded

[4] According to Irina Chirica, Teodor Mateoc, *American Regionalism. An Anthology*, Editura Universitatii din Oradea, 2006, p. 16.
[5] See Idem, p. 26.
[6] According to Gary Scharnhorst, in *Bret Harte*, N.Y.: Twayne, 1992.



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up some "undesirables" and banished them from their town. The "undesirables" are John Oakhurst, a gambler; Uncle Billy, a drunk and a suspected thief and two women - Duchess, a prostitute, and Mother Shipton, her madam. These banished unfortunates are warned that if they attempt to return to Poker Flat, they may be hanged. They have mounts but no food. They decide their best move is to go to Sandy Bar, a small town over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The route to Sandy Bar is "a day's severe travel"[7]. They make it part way, but Duchess becomes exhausted and needs to rest. They find an old cabin and decide to spend the night there. These four outcasts set out for a camp a day's journey away, over a mountain range. But halfway to their goal and despite John Oakhurst's protests, the rest of the group decides to stop for a rest at noon. While on their rest, the group is met by a pair of runaway lovers on their way to Poker Flat to get married: Piney Woods, a fifteen-year-old girl and her lover, Tom Simson, also known as The Innocent, who has already met John Oakhurst and shows great admiration for the poker player, as a result of the gambler's previous behavior towards him: during their poker game, John Oakhurst won a great deal of money from Tom, but he surprisingly returned the money to the boy, also advising him to quit playing the game as he really was a lousy player. Tom is thrilled about coming upon John Oakhurst on that day and decides that he and Piney will join the group for a while. They don't know that the group has been exiled and, in their naivety, they even take The Duchess quite literally: for a noble woman and so on. Decision is made to spend the night all together and Tom leads the group to a deserted cabin he had previously discovered. In the middle of the night, John Oakhurst wakes up and finds a heavy snow storm raging. Looking about, he realizes that he is the only one awake, but soon discovers that Uncle Billy is missing with their mules and horses stolen. The group is now forced to wait for the storm to be over with provisions that would only last for approximately ten days. After a week in that frail and damaged cabin, Mother Shipton dies, having secretly and altruistically starved herself to save her food for young Piney. John Oakhurst advises Simson to go search for help and fashions some snowshoes for him. The gambler tells the others that he will accompany the young man part of the way. The Poker Flat respectable cavalry finally arrives at the cabin, only to find the dead Duchess and Piney, embracing each other in a peaceful repose. They both looked so peaceful and innocent that one could not tell who the virgin was and who the madam. The reader next finds out that John Oakhurst has committed suicide. He is found dead beneath a tree with his Derringer's bullet in his heart. There is a playing card, the two of clubs, pinned to the tree above his head with a note:

*BENEATH THIS TREE/ LIES THE BODY/ OF/ JOHN OAKHURST,/ WHO STRUCK A STREAK OF BAD LUCK/ ON THE 23rd OF NOVEMBER, 1850,/ AND/ HANDED IN HIS CHECKS ON THE 7TH DECEMBER, 1850.*

This is the story, plain and simple, if the reader is exclusively interested in the action, in the so-called thrill dimension of this fine piece of fiction. But nothing is what seems to be in this particular case, since the point or the moral of the story is to be discovered beneath the appearances, beneath the obvious. The classic Western story pattern is abruptly innovated, as

[7] Francis Bret Harte, *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* in *The Penguin Book of American Short Stories*, Edited by James Cochrane, Penguin Books, 2011, p. 154.



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the constant elements belonging to its paradigm and above all the traditional protagonists' inner merits and structure are reversed and demolished by the author. By introducing the so-called *marginal characters*, Bret Harte is actually displaying a new psychological dimension to his protagonists and thus to their largely and ordinarily accepted typology. In this respect, John Oakhurst, the gambler, is the one who proves to be the hero of the story, regarding his true kind heart, hidden under the immoral label given by the virtuous committee of Poker Flat. This judgmental committee, acting as the collective character within the traditional pattern of the Western story, proves to shelter sin under its hypocritical mask of rightness. There is a continuous implied opposition between the apparently moral collective character on one hand and the apparently immoral outcasts, on the other hand; this technique is once again enabling the story's deeper symbolical meanings to be revealed step by step. John Oakhurst is chivalrous, insisting upon switching his good riding horse Five Spot for the mule of the Duchess and refusing to use vulgar language. Another instance of his good nature comes out of his protective and parental attitude regarding the Innocent Tom: "*Tommy, you're a good little man, but you can't gamble worth a cent. Don't try it ever again*. He then handed him back his money back, [and] pushed him gently from the room"[8]. John Oakhurst is not a drinker. He is cool tempered, even keeled and disposes an entirely calm manner all the time. He believes in luck and fate; he proves to possess his own philosophy on luck and life, as he states at some point "life was at best an uncertain game" and "luck … is a mighty queer thing. All you know about it for certain is that it's bound to change"[9]. His suicide spurs the question whether he was simply giving into his bad luck or rather decided he was no longer going to live by luck and took his life. Anyway, John Oakhurst best embodies the villain-saint reversal: the daring and quite charismatic gambler gains the reader's sympathy and admiration for all his generous acts done in his exiled sinner pose. The experienced outcast proves to be the hero, the cowboy or the true leader of the doomed group. Furthermore, the conventional patterns of good versus evil are ironically broken down by the unexpected behavior of the outcasts when faced with extraordinary circumstances: Mother Shipton, the matron, starves herself to death trying to save the pure Piney Woods, for instance. As a logic result, the whole initially given equation concerning virtue and sin is to be eventually and progressively demolished and thus reversed, radically changed: three of the given four outcasts punished by the Poker Flat community reveal their pure, kind heart, while the collective character is finally stamped by hypocrisy and immorality: the citizens of Poker Flat's secret committee appear upright and just, at least to themselves. However, in regard to John Oakhurst, they are hypocrites. After all, they joined him at poker, becoming gamblers themselves. But after losing money to him, they got rid of him and ran him out of town. One citizen, John Wheeler, even suggests hanging him, then taking back their money. The 3-rd person omniscient narrator device makes constant use of paradox and antithesis by merely organizing the minimalist plot around the opposition between public morality, on one side and the so-called violation of norms, on the other side[10]. The exclusion of the four outcasts from the so-to-say pastoral village of Poker Flat equals an exclusion from the Garden of Eden.

[8] Idem, p. 155.
[9] Idem, p. 159.
[10] As demonstrated by Irina Chirica & Teodor Mateoc in *American Regionalism…*, quoted edition, p. 27.



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There is goodness - and even heroism - in the heart of the majority of society's outcasts. John Oakhurst, the Duchess, Mother Shipton, they all behave selflessly when death creeps up on them. For example, they treat the two young people with utmost consideration and kindness. John Oakhurst could have used his snowshoes to return to civilization; instead, he gave them to Tom Simson. Mother Shipton and the Duchess act as surrogate mothers to Piney Woods. Except for Uncle Billy, all the characters are tolerant and altruist to each other as they attempt to keep up their spirits under extremely difficult circumstances. Mother Shipton, the Duchess, and Piney Woods die nobly and courageously. John Oakhurst chooses suicide, revealing that he indeed "was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat," as the narrator opinionates[11].

Nature shows no mercy to the outcasts. After Poker Flat rejects them, heavy snow isolates them. The sky clears, offering them hope, only to form new clouds that bring more snow. John Oakhurst may be a poker player par excellence, but he cannot defeat Mother Nature. The "wooded amphitheater" is both "wild and impressive"; the setting of the story is used in order to exploit a variable thematic, such as: appearance versus essence, intolerance versus forgiveness, morality versus corruption, to all these adding the overwhelming power of nature.[12]

The multiple pairs of opposition, i.e. experience versus innocence or civilization versus wilderness are the equivalent of a multiplicity in interpretation as far as Bret Harte's *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* is concerned. The Puritan prudery and the gothic influence – they both place the story in a very influent tradition of American writing, taking into account the sense of irony that satirizes the conventional ideas about Western frontier life. The author's sympathetic eye along with his vernacular freedom in rendering both authentic and impressive characters and existential crises radically challenged the moral constraints of the Gilded Age and ultimately paved the path for Mark Twain, a master of the genre[13].

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[11] Francis Bret Harte, *The Outcasts…*, quoted edition, p. 162.
[12] See Irina Chirica & Teodor Mateoc, the quoted edition, p. 27.
[13] According to Margaret Duckett, in *Mark Twain and Bret Harte*, Norman: U of Oklahoma Press, 1964.



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