“The Luck of Roaring Camp” by Bret Harte
Presenter: Danielle Reites
About the Author

Bret Harte, 1835-1910
Born in New York but moved with family to California
Editor, type-setter, series of government jobs, writer
Success due to his ability to “portray distinctive characters whom he connected to western settings” (Baym 351).
About the Story

- First published in the magazine *Overland Monthly* (1868)
- This and other writings distinguish Harte because they contain “an ironic perspective that often went undetected by readers unfamiliar with California, who wished to believe in noble gamblers and prostitutes with hearts of gold” (Baym 351).
The West was still in the process of being settled

Part of the appeal of Harte’s writing was to inform Easterners about Westerners

Although later regional writing would commonly be associated with women, Harte—along with Twain—was one of the first to capture people in their local environment

Regional writing

“Expression of the realist impulse” (Baym 13)

Designed to both preserve a way of life and come to terms with changes industrialization was bringing (Baym 13)

“By the end of the nineteenth century almost every region had one or more ‘local colorists’” (Baym 13)
Hired for a year to write for *Atlantic Monthly* magazine (1971)

Novel *Gabriel Conroy* (1876) – sold well but was panned by critics

*Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1876) – not successful

(With Twain) *Ah Sin* (1877) – not successful
Discussion Questions

1. Read the first three paragraphs of the story. What impression do you get of the camp?
2. Is this story humorous? If so, how does Harte make it so? How is its humor similar to or different from Twain’s?
3. What is the significance of the title?
4. Is the baby’s christening (Harte 357) just a joke to the camp?
5. Why do you think the men want to keep the baby and change for him?
6. One critic interprets the story as a parody of a biblical text, “a retelling of the gospel story of the Nativity” (Baym 352). Can you find place that support such an interpretation? Do you agree?
1. What motivates the men to keep and raise the baby?
2. How does this story exhibit both characteristics of romanticism and realism?
3. Harte’s original audience would have balked if not been outright scandalized about prostitutes and roughneck miners, yet his stories (especially “The Luck of Roaring Camp”) were very well-received. Why do you think that is?
4. Explain the significant of “luck” in the story.
Themes

- Parenthood transforms people
- The good of the West (ethics even among roughnecks)
- The birth of a child transforming the world (Jesus’ birth)
Symbols? Allusions? Motifs?

Symbols:
- The child – symbol of luck, the West, starting over

Allusions:
- Raffaello Sanzio (Harte 354)
- Romulus and Remus (Harte 354)

Motifs:
- Luck, swearing, fights, God, nature