

LESSON SEVEN “A Peck of Gold”

I. Objectives

- ◆ To analyze a variety of primary sources.
- ◆ To evaluate literary images of the Gold Rush.
- ◆ To compare literary descriptions of the period to historical documents.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The remarkable events of the Gold Rush in California captivated the public’s attention as soon as the news of the discovery slipped California’s borders and found its way into President Polk’s 1848 State of the Union address. The lure of sudden riches and the spirit of adventure drew people of every ilk to California, including a goodly number of literate and well-educated folks whose news articles, letters, diaries, descriptions, and recollections helped establish a written record of the scene right from the start. As the other lessons in this unit have made clear, many people articulated their views in writing at the time, and the society had a great many readers as well. By 1850 there were fifty printers working in San Francisco, and within a few years the city claimed to have more published newspapers than did London.

In addition to the written record left by people who were actual participants in or reporters of the Gold Rush, a wealth of opinions, poems, stories, and books were written about events in California, by literary figures both famous and obscure. The lesson that follows uses brief excerpts from works by Alonzo Delano, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Robert Frost to help students explore the history of the Gold Rush, and points out interdisciplinary connections between the literature selections and materials included in other lessons in the unit.

Delano, an actual Forty-Niner who came to California via an overland route, was among the most popular poets of the region. Harte lived and worked in San Francisco in the 1850s and ’60s and spent considerable time in the mining camps when he first came to California. Twain traveled to California in 1864 and used San Francisco as his base camp for two years while an eyewitness of events in the Bay area, before returning to New York City to begin writing his tales. Finally, Robert Frost was born in San Francisco in 1874, and lived in the city for the first nine years

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of his life. Frost wrote the poem used here, “A Peck of Gold,” as a sort of remembrance of his childhood in the aftermath of the Gold Rush; the poem is the only document used in this lesson that is not part of the exhibition, “Land of Golden Dreams: California in the Gold Rush Decade, 1848–58.”

III. MATERIALS

- ★ **Document 1**—“A Peck of Gold,” Robert Frost, 1928.
- ★ **Document 2**—*The Idle and Industrious Miner*, Alonzo Delano, Sacramento, 1854
- ★ **Document 3**—*The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches*, Bret Harte, Boston, 1872.
- ★ **Document 4**—*Roughing It*, Samuel L. Clemens, Chicago, 1871.

IV. LESSON ACTIVITIES

- A. Distribute the Frost poem (**Document 1**), and lead the class in a discussion about the meaning of the poem. What might have prompted Frost to write the poem? How does the date of the poem’s publication help explain the poet’s meaning, or purpose in writing the piece?
- B. Select two students to read the two parts of the Delano poem aloud (**Document 2**), and lead the class in a discussion about its meaning. Compare this poem to the previous one: Which is far more revealing about life during the Gold Rush? What are some of the more evocative lines in each poem? How does the message of each poem differ? Are there any similarities between the two pieces?
- C. Have students read the excerpted literary selections in **Documents 3** and **4**. Conduct a class discussion about the two pieces, including similarities and differences in the author’s style, the tone and message of each piece, and areas where shared viewpoints are expressed. Next, have students work individually or in groups to compare the images in the literature to historical documents used elsewhere in the unit. Specifically, distribute **Document 3** from **Lesson Two**; **Document 1** from **Lesson Three**; **Documents 4, 5, 6, and 8** from **Lesson Five**; and, **Documents 3, 4, and 6** from **Lesson Six**.

- D. Have students incorporate examples from the literature and the historical manuscripts in the lesson with information from their history textbooks in order to write an essay about the Gold Rush.

V. VOCABULARY

aggregate
animosity
apostrophizing
appurtenances
balsamic
diminutive
ethereal
malignant
pungent
requited

VI. EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- A. Have students read the full version of Harte's *Luck at Roaring Camp* and another Harte story, *The Outcasts of Poker Flats*, and then write a comparative essay about the two stories.
- B. Alternatively, have the class read all of Harte's *Luck at Roaring Camp* and the popular Twain short story, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. Note that both Harte and Twain spent time in Calaveras County, and then have students explore the similarities and differences in the two stories.

“A Peck of Gold”

Robert Frost, 1928

This whimsical poem was published in 1928. Frost dated the poem “as of about 1880,” which underscored his desire to capture the essence of San Francisco at the time of his childhood. He was six years old in 1880, and over fifty when he wrote the poem.

Dust always blowing about the town,
Except when sea-fog laid it down,
And I was one of the children told
Some of the blowing dust was gold.

All the dust the wind blew high
Appeared like gold in the sunset sky,
But I was one of the children told
Some of the dust was really gold.

Such was life in the Golden Gate:
Gold dusted all we drank and ate,
And I was one of the children told,
“We all must eat our peck of gold.”

The Idle and Industrious Miner
Alonzo Delano, Sacramento, 1854

SAD, there should be a converse side
To such a pleasant view,
But history demands the pen
To frame its record true.

The early morn had come and gone,
And in the amber sky
The sun had slowly climbed his course
And stood at noonday high.

Nor sun, nor moon, nor thoughts of fame
Disturb the sluggard's rest,
Last night's debauch has left its sting,
And borne away their zest.

This, then, is how the idler friend
Commenced a bad career,
So fatally and madly run
Within his mining year.

REQUITED toil! Eureka! Look!
And read within those eyes
Their speaking luster, as they dwell
Upon the glittering prize!

The vein is struck! ah, noble heart!
A thrill of joy is thine!—
A purer and a better thrill
Than that produced by wine.

A thousand thoughts of home, and bliss
Reserved for coming years
Have swiftly flashed across thy soul
And melted thee to tears—

Tears—not of grief or vain regrets,
For thou art still a man—
But, thinking of thy poverty
And gazing in the pan!

The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches
Bret Harte, Boston, 1872

By the time Harte left California to return to the East Coast as a literary hero in 1870, he was the most famous writer of Gold Rush stories. *The Luck of the Roaring Camp*, excerpted here, is a revealing sketch of life in the mining camps, and one laced with humor, poignancy, and truth.

It will be seen also that the situation was novel. Deaths were by no means uncommon in Roaring Camp, but a birth was a new thing. People had been dismissed from the camp effectively, finally, and with no possibility of return; but this was the first time that anybody had been introduced *ab initio*. Hence the excitement.

"You go in there, Stumpy," said a prominent citizen known as "Kentuck," addressing one of the loungers. "Go in there, and see what you kin do. You've had experience in them things."

Perhaps there was a fitness in the selection. Stumpy, in other climes, had been the putative head of two families; in fact, it was owing to some legal informality in these proceedings that Roaring Camp—a city of refuge—was indebted to his company. The crowd approved the choice, and Stumpy was wise enough to bow to the majority. The door closed on the extempore surgeon and midwife, and Roaring Camp sat down outside, smoked its pipe, and awaited the issue.

The assemblage numbered about a hundred men. One or two of these were actual fugitives from justice, some were criminal, and all were reckless. Physically they exhibited no indication of their past lives and character. The greatest scamp had a Raphael face, with a profusion of blonde hair; Oakburst, a gambler, had the melancholy air and intellectual abstraction of a Hamlet; the coolest and most courageous man was scarcely over five feet in height, with a soft voice and an embarrassed, timid manner.

The term "roughs" applied to them was a distinction rather than a definition. Perhaps in the minor details of fingers, toes, ears, etc., the camp may have been deficient, but these slight omissions did not detract from their aggregate force. The strongest man had but three fingers on his right hand; the best shot had but one eye.

Such was the physical aspect of the men that were dispersed around the cabin. The camp lay in a triangular valley between two hills and a river. The only outlet was a steep trail over the summit of a hill that faced the cabin, now illuminated by the rising moon. The suffering woman might have seen it from the rude bunk whereon she lay, seen it winding like a silver thread until it was lost in the stars above.

A fire of withered pine boughs added sociability to the gathering. By degrees the natural levity of Roaring Camp returned. Bets were freely offered and taken regarding the result. Three to five that "Sal would get through with it;" even that the child would survive; side bets as to the sex and complexion of the coming stranger. In the midst of an excited discussion an exclamation came from those nearest the door, and the camp stopped to listen. Above the swaying and moaning of the pines, the swift rush of the river, and the crackling of the fire rose a sharp, querulous cry—a cry unlike anything heard before in the camp. The pines stopped moaning, the river ceased to rush, and the fire to crackle. It seemed as if Nature had stopped to listen too.

The camp rose to its feet as one man! It was proposed to explode a barrel of gunpowder; but in consideration of the situation of the mother, better counsels prevailed, and only a few revolvers were discharged; for whether owing to the rude surgery of the camp, or some other reason, Cherokee Sal was sinking fast. Within an hour she had climbed, as it were, that rugged road that led to the stars, and so passed out of Roaring Camp, its sin and shame, forever.

I do not think that the announcement disturbed them much, except in speculation as to the fate of the child. "Can he live now?" was asked of Stumpy.

* * * *

Strange to say, the child thrived. Perhaps the invigorating climate of the mountain camp was compensation for material deficiencies. Nature took the foundling to her broader breast. In that rare atmosphere of the Sierra foothills—that air pungent with balsamic odor, that ethereal cordial at once bracing and exhilarating—he may have found food and nourishment, or a subtle chemistry that transmuted ass's milk to lime and phosphorus. Stumpy inclined to the belief that it was the latter and good nursing. "Me and that ass," he would say, "has been father and mother to him! Don't you," he would add, apostrophizing the helpless bundle before him, "never go back on us."

By the time he was a month old the necessity of giving him a name became apparent. He had generally been known as "The Kid," "Stumpy's Boy," "The Coyote" (an allusion to his vocal powers), and even by Kentuck's endearing diminutive of "The d---d little cuss." But these were felt to be vague and unsatisfactory, and were at last dismissed under another influence. Gamblers and adventurers are generally superstitious, and Oakburst one day declared that the baby had brought "the luck" to Roaring Camp. It was certain that of late they had been successful.

"Luck" was the name agreed upon, with the prefix of Tommy for greater convenience. No allusion was made to the mother, and the father was Unknown. "It's better," said the philosophical Oakhurst, "to take a fresh deal all round. Call him Luck, and start him fair."

Roughing It
Samuel L. Clemens, Chicago, 1871

This excerpt is from the semi-autobiographical series of stories Mark Twain spun together in an attempt to “top Bret Harte or bust.” It speaks volumes about the early scene in California, though Twain actually arrived some fifteen years after the Gold Rush began.

It was in the Sacramento Valley. . . that a deal of the most lucrative of the early gold mining was done, and you may still see, in places, its grassy slopes and levels torn and guttered and disfigured by the avaricious spoilers of fifteen and twenty years ago. You may see such disfigurements far and wide over California—and in some such places, where only meadows and forests are visible not a living creature, not a house, no stick or stone or remnant of a ruin, and not a sound, not even a whisper to disturb the Sabbath stillness—you will find it hard to believe that there stood at one time a fiercely-flourishing little city, of two thousand or three thousand souls, with its newspaper, fire company, brass band, volunteer militia, bank, hotels, noisy Fourth of July processions and speeches, gambling hells crammed with tobacco smoke, profanity, and rough-bearded men of all nations and colors, with tables heaped with gold dust sufficient for the revenues of a German principality, streets crowded and rife with business—town lots worth four hundred dollars a front foot—labor, laughter, music, dancing, swearing, fighting, shooting, stabbing a bloody inquest and a man for breakfast every morning—*everything* that delights and adorns existence—all the appointments and appurtenances of a thriving and prosperous and promising young city,—and *now* nothing *is* left of it all but a lifeless, homeless solitude. The men are gone, the houses have vanished, even the *name* of the place is forgotten. In no other land, in modern times, have towns so absolutely died and disappeared, as in the old milling regions of California.

It was a driving, vigorous, restless population in those days. It was a *curious* population. It was the *only* population of the kind that the world has ever seen gathered together, and it is not likely that the world will ever see its like again. For, observe, it was an assemblage of two hundred thousand young men—not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brim full of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood—the very pick and choice of the world’s glorious ones. No women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans,—none but erect, bright-eyed, quick-moving, strong-handed young giants—the strangest population, the finest population, the most gallant host that ever trooped down the startled solitudes of an unpeopled land. And where are they now? Scattered to the

ends of the earth—or prematurely aged and decrepit—or shot or stabbed in street affrays—or dead of disappointed hopes and broken hearts all gone, or nearly all—victims devoted upon the altar of the golden calf—the noblest holocaust that ever wafted its sacrificial incense heavenward. It is pitiful to think upon.

It was a splendid population—for all the slow, sleepy, sluggish-brained sloths staid at home you never find that sort of people among pioneers—you cannot build pioneers out of that sort of material. It was that population that gave to California a name for getting up astounding enterprises and rushing them through with a magnificent dash and daring and a recklessness of cost or consequences, which she bears unto this day—and when she projects a new surprise, the grave world smiles as usual, and says “Well, that is California all over.”

But they were rough in those times! They fairly reveled in gold, whisky, fights, and fandangoes, and were unspeakably happy. The honest miner raked from a hundred to a thousand dollars out of his claim a day, and what with the gambling dens and the other entertainments, he hadn’t a cent the next morning, if he had any sort of luck. They cooked their own bacon and beans, sewed on their own buttons, washed their own shirts—blue woolen ones; and if a man wanted a fight on his hands without any annoying delay, all he had to do was to appear in public in a white shirt or a stove-pipe hat, and he would be accommodated. For those people hated aristocrats. They had a particular and malignant animosity toward what they called a “biled shirt.”

It was a wild, free, disorderly, grotesque society. *Men*—only swarming hosts of stalwart *men*—nothing juvenile, nothing feminine visible anywhere!

In those days miners would flock in crowds to catch a glimpse of that rare and blessed spectacle, a woman! Old inhabitants tell how, in a certain camp, the news went abroad early in the morning that a woman was come! They had seen a calico dress hanging out of a wagon down at the camping-ground—sign of emigrants from over the great Plains. Everybody went down there, and a shout went up when an actual, bona fide dress was discovered fluttering in the wind! The male emigrant was visible. The miners said:

“Fetch her out!”

He said: “It is my wife, gentlemen—she is sick—we have been robbed of money, provisions, everything, by the Indians—we want to rest.”

“Fetch her out! We’ve got to see her!”

“But, gentlemen, the poor thing, she—”

“Fetch her out!”

He “fetched her out,” and they swung their hats and sent up three rousing cheers and a tiger; and they crowded around and gazed at her, and touched her dress, and listened to her voice with the look of men who listened to a *memory* rather than a present reality—and then they collected twenty-five hundred dollars in gold and gave it to the man, and swung their hats again and gave three more cheers, and went home satisfied.

Once I dined in San Francisco with the family of a pioneer, and talked with his daughter, a young lady whose first experience in San Francisco was an adventure, though she herself did not remember it, as she was only two or three years old at the time. Her father said that, after landing the ship, they were walking up the street, a servant leading the party with the little girl in her arms. And presently a huge miner, bearded, belted, spurred, and bristling with deadly weapons—just down from a long campaign in the mountains, evidently—barred the way, stopped the servant, and stood gazing, with a face all alive with gratification and astonishment. Then he said, reverently:

“Well, if it ain’t a child!” And then he snatched a little leather sack out of his pocket and said to the servant:

“There’s a hundred and fifty dollars in dust, there, and I’ll give it to you if you let me kiss the child!”

That anecdote is *true*.

But see how things change. Sitting at that dinner table, listening to that anecdote, if I had offered double the money for the privilege of kissing the same child, I would have been refused. Seventeen added years have far more than doubled the price.