

THE RUINS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Bret Harte

Analysis by Marzia Dati

Non-Fiction

Bret Harte’s *The Ruins of San Francisco* is a satirical short story published in 1868. Combining humor, irony, and speculative imagination, the story envisions a future earthquake that engulfs San Francisco beneath the sea. Presented as a pseudo-scientific excavation report, it exposes the vanity and moral decay of nineteenth-century urban life. Harte’s portrayal of the city’s downfall critiques human greed and faith, foreshadowing real Californian disasters.

Year of Publication	1868
Publication Place	San Francisco
Editor	Unspecified
Entity	unidentified
Magazine	Overland Monthly

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake unidentified

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Coordinates	37.775505, -122.434715
Impacted Areas	San Francisco
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

Anthropization Level	Cities
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	Deaths

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Ingulfed, Calamity, Catastrophe
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Cruel Nature Ruins Prophecy
Syntax	Hypotaxis
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	High Frequency Passive Forms

Bret Harte's short story "The Ruins of San Francisco" was published in the August issue of the *Overland Monthly* in 1868. Known as a short-story writer, essayist and poet, in the same year Bret Harte became editor of the *Overland Monthly* published by Roman Anton with the intention of promoting local writings. "The Ruins of San Francisco" has hardly been critically investigated. Though pervaded by a strong sense of humour and subtle irony, it can be interpreted as a visionary text whilst also showing Harte's fatalistic and pessimistic views.

Most of Harte's stories are deeply rooted in the California Gold Rush, between 1848 and 1855. During that period, the West Coast, and in particular California, were still relatively new and experiencing rapid growth. Earthquakes were a known hazard and danger for the population, and this short story also reflected the realities and challenges of life in this environment.

Harte describes the ruins of San Francisco which "was totally ingulfed by an earthquake" in an unidentified time "towards the close of the nineteenth century" (Harte 168). Strangely enough, Harte seems to foreshadow the earthquake which occurred in San Francisco in October 1868, two months after he wrote his short story. However, while Harte describes the earthquake as something local: "Although the whole coastline must have been much shaken, the accident seems to have been purely local, and even the city of Oakland escaped" (168), in reality the 1868 earthquake, known as Hayward earthquake, was very violent, and had a broader impact. It occurred at 7:53 a.m. in the San Francisco Bay on October 21. With an estimated moment magnitude of 6.3–6.7 it was the largest earthquake to occur on the Hayward Fault Zone, which is parallel to the San Andreas Fault. It caused significant damage and a number of deaths throughout the region, and was known as the "Great San Francisco earthquake" prior to the 1906 earthquake. At the surface, it caused significant ground rupture along the fault line. The rupture was traced for approximately 20 miles from Warm Springs to San Leandro, and historical data suggests it may have extended further north to Berkeley.

Ironically, Harte states that geologists had some difficulties in establishing the real date of the earthquake. He invents two fictional geologists: "Schwappelfurt, the celebrated German geologist" and "Tulu Krish, the well-known New-Zealander" (168), both of whom come to the conclusion that the earthquake occurred in 1880.

San Francisco was hit by a wave of earthquakes in 1880: the strongest ones date back to April 14, and to November 4, 1880. These facts reinforce the idea that Harte was a visionary in the literal sense of the word. San Francisco is defined as “a lost city”, but Harte focuses on “the excavations that are now being prosecuted by order of the Hawaiian government upon the site of the lost city” (168). Harte gives an account of the discovery of old San Francisco, including the uncovering of human skeletons:

The bay of San Francisco was speedily drained by a system of patent siphons, and the city, deeply embedded in mud, brought to light after a burial of many centuries. [...] Shortly afterwards, the first skeleton was discovered; that of a broker, whose position in the upper strata of mud nearer the surface was supposed to be owing to the exceeding buoyancy or inflation of scrip which he had secured about his person while endeavouring to escape. Many skeletons, supposed to be those of females, encompassed in that peculiar steel coop or cage which seems to have been worn by the women of that period, were also found in the upper stratum. (169)

These skeletons seem to belong to wealthy people, and their bodies trapped in the mud remind us of the Vesuvius eruption in Pompei in 79 AD.

What Harte wants to highlight is that wealthy people, attached to money, do not consider the possibility of any natural catastrophe and how it can abruptly change their lives. After this morally instructive digression about the skeletons there follows a scene of ordinary life in San Francisco before the earthquake, which is reported as a quote from Schwappelfurt:

The morning of the tremendous catastrophe probably dawned upon the usual restless crowd of gold-getters intent upon their several avocations. The streets were filled with the expanded figures of gayly dressed women, acknowledging with coy glances the respectful salutations of beaux as they gracefully raised their remarkable cylindrical head-coverings, a model of which is still preserved in the Honolulu Museum. The brokers had gathered at their respective temples. The shopmen were exhibiting their goods. The idlers, or 'Bummers,'—a term applied to designate an aristocratic, privileged class who enjoyed immunities from labor, and from whom a majority of the rulers are chosen,—were listlessly regarding the promenaders from the street-corners or the doors of their bibulous temples. (170)

Harte also details the first side effects of the earthquake from which it emerges that people are completely unaware of the imminent catastrophe:

A slight premonitory thrill runs through the city. The busy life of this restless microcosm is arrested. The shopkeeper pauses as he elevates the goods to bring them into a favorable light, and the glib professional recommendation sticks on his tongue. In the drinking-saloon the glass is checked half-way to the lips; on the streets the promenaders pause. Another thrill, and the city begins to go down, a few of the more persistent toppers tossing off their liquor at the same moment. Beyond a terrible sensation of nausea, the crowds who now throng the streets do not realize the extent of the catastrophe. (171)

The description of the change of the environment during and after the earthquake is detailed :

The waters of the bay recede at first from the centre of depression, assuming a concave shape, the outer edge of the circle towering many thousand feet above the city. Another convulsion, and the water instantly resumes its level. The city is smoothly ingulfed nine thousand feet below, and the regular swell of the Pacific calmly rolls over it. (171)

At the end of the story, he returns to the word “ingulfed” along with fictional geologist Schwappelfurt, who focuses on the management of the catastrophe: “Terrible,” says Schwappelfurt, in conclusion,

as the calamity must have been, in direct relation to the individuals immediately concerned therein, we cannot but admire its artistic management; the division of the catastrophe into three periods, the completeness of the cataclysms, and the rare combination of sincerity of intention with felicity of execution. (171)

In conclusion, Harte's style in "The Ruins of San Francisco" incorporated both satire and social commentary: this satirical sketch shows his awareness of the destructive power of earthquakes and

their potential impact on the region. It is not by a chance that he uses the imagery of “engines of war” to establish a parallel between the devastation that could be caused by the war and that of natural disasters like earthquakes. This might suggest that earthquakes were on his mind as a force capable of causing destruction to nature and men. The same thought can be traced back to his poem *Fate* (1912) where he contemplates the unpredictable nature of fate and the human tendency to take unnecessary risks. The destructive power of an earthquake is highlighted in the last stanza of the poem “But the ship sailed safely over the sea, /And the hunters came from the chase in glee; /And the town that was builded upon a rock/ Was swallowed up in the earthquake shock.” In the poem, Harte depicts two scenarios where individuals decide to avoid potentially dangerous situations (a stormy sea and a treacherous forest) only for their perceived safety to be proven false as others fall victim to those very hazards.

Bibliography

Harte, Bret. “The Ruins of San Francisco.” *Prose and Poetry by Bret Harte*, vol. 2. Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1872.