

**Kylo-Patrick R. Hart**

Texas Christian University

Annie Proulx's Imaginative Leap:  
Constructing Gay Masculinity  
in "Brokeback Mountain"

## ABSTRACT

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Non-heterosexual men have long existed on the social and cultural margins. Gay and bisexual male characters in literature, too, have done so for many generations. This essay explores the construction of gay masculinity in the short story "Brokeback Mountain" in relation to the "imaginative leap" that its author, Annie Proulx, undertook in order to conceptualize and represent this noteworthy form of marginalized otherness. It demonstrates that, despite the story's various refreshing elements, "Brokeback Mountain" ultimately relies far too extensively on the logic of melodrama when telling the tale of Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, who fall in love in 1963 and continue their sexual relationship over the course of two decades. As a result, this story ends up positioning its two queer protagonists as enemies of the patriarchal social order and the larger society within which it so comfortably exists, implicitly perpetuating both heterosexism and homophobia as it does its cultural work.

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## ABSTRACT

Like other female novelists, Annie Proulx—until somewhat recently best known for her 1993 novel *The Shipping News*, winner of both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, which focuses on complex romantic and familial relationships amid the backdrop of a desolate Newfoundland fishing village—regularly constructs male characters and masculinities in her various literary creations. In recognition of her noteworthy accomplishments in this regard, various critics have noted that

210 Proulx “entertains the mythic legends of drunken cowboys, rodeo heroes, betrayed lovers, and aging ranchers” (Bakopoulos 43); creates “tough-as-nails characters who do the best they can to make ends meet and to make relationships work” (O’Neal 4D); “vividly portrays the complex interplay between people and their environment” (O’Neal 4D); “deftly uses the influence of the elements taking its toll on the characters’ psyches” (D’Souza 32); understands the “deadly accidents that can strike like lightning in the midst of exhausting daily routine that grant her stories their distinctive impact” (“Close” 91); and composes works filled with “images of unrequited longing, wide-open spaces, [and] hardscrabble lives” (Jacobs 369). In addition, critics have observed that Proulx has “made a specialty of what might be called fancy writing about plain folks” (Rubin 20), possesses the impressive abilities “to reveal both the humor and the sheer awfulness of what it’s like being caught between a rock and a hard place” (Rubin 20) and “to merge the matter-of-fact and the macabre” (“Close” 91), and continually “demonstrates her creative mastery of the English language” (Glover and Hoffert 115) to create “luscious prose” (Jacobs 369) with “descriptive flair [that] few contemporary writers can match” (“Range” 8), effectively “twirl[ing] words like a black-hat badman twirling Colts, fires them off for the sheer hell of it, blam, blam, no thought of missing, empty beer cans jump in the dust, misses one, laughs, reloads, blams some more” (Skow 88).

When it comes to Proulx’s constructions of male characters and masculinities, arguably the most intriguing example of this process occurred with her construction of gay masculinity in the short story “Brokeback Mountain.” Originally published in the October 13, 1997 issue of *The New Yorker* and reprinted two years later in Proulx’s collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, “Brokeback Mountain” tells the tale of two Wyoming ranch hands, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, who fall in love while working together as sheepherder and camp tender in 1963 and later pursue their intense magnetic attraction and ongoing relationship over two decades. As Proulx has revealed, this story began taking shape one evening when she noticed an older, lean and muscular ranch hand in a Wyoming bar who was intently watching a group of young cowboys playing pool (qtd. in “Getting” 130). She noticed something in his expression that suggested a kind of bitter longing, which led her to wonder whether he might be gay, and what it must be like for any man to grow up gay in homophobic rural Wyoming (qtd. in “Getting” 130).

“‘Brokeback’ was constructed on the small but tight idea of a couple of home-grown country kids, opinions and self-knowledge shaped by the world around them, finding themselves in emotional waters of increasing depth,” Proulx has stated (“Getting” 130). With regard to the process

of constructing the short story's two male central characters, she has expressed, "Put yourself in my place: an elderly, white, straight female trying to write about two nineteen-year-old gay kids in 1963. What kind of imaginative leap do you think was necessary? Profound, extreme, large" (qtd. in Minzesheimer 4D). The goal of the present essay, therefore, is to determine just how effectively Proulx used her imagination in constructing the gay masculinity of this story's two protagonists.

Without a doubt, Proulx has done a nice job of creating interesting central characters in "Brokeback Mountain." About Ennis and Jack, she writes that both of these rough-mannered, rough-spoken high school dropouts—a "pair of deuces going nowhere" (257)—were raised on poor ranches at opposite corners of Wyoming and ultimately found themselves with few prospects (256). Ennis is presented as a scruffy, long-legged, muscular, and supple man, possessing unusually quick reflexes, whose body is ideal for fighting and riding horses (258). Jack is presented as a smaller man with curly hair, buckteeth, and well-worn boots who is interested in rodeo life and possesses a love of puppies and other animals (257, 258).

During the summer they work together as herder and camp tender on Brokeback Mountain (Jack's second and Ennis' first) in 1963, when both are still in their late teens, Ennis and Jack ultimately enjoy a special time "when they owned the world and nothing seemed wrong" (255). Although they are officially instructed to spend much of their days apart (the tender is to spend the entire day and night in Forest Service-designated campsites while the herder is to watch over the sheep during the day, pitch a pup tent and sleep with the sheep at night, and return to camp only briefly each day for breakfast and supper), Ennis and Jack begin to violate this policy regularly and spend increasing amounts of time together as the weeks progress (257). At first, they begin sharing memories and quarts of whiskey, smoking cigarettes together, talking about horses and rodeos, singing songs and playing the harmonica, getting up only occasionally to relieve themselves (260, 261). Soon, they become increasingly respectful of the other's opinions and take pleasure in having found a companion that neither had expected (260). Even though Ennis is already engaged to marry Alma Beers at the time he meets Jack, the growing attraction between the two men—romantic, sexual, and otherwise—becomes impossible to ignore (256, 261).

Jack's attraction to Ennis is revealed initially in the short story when he furtively watches his companion undress and observes that Ennis wears neither socks nor underwear (260). Then, after a night of heavy drinking, a dizzy, drunk-on-all-fours Ennis decides to remain in camp overnight and return to the sheep at sunrise. After he is awakened by Ennis' teeth chattering in the frigid night, Jack invites Ennis to share his bedroll and, in the

words of Proulx, “in a little while they deepened their intimacy considerably” (261). By this, she means that Jack takes Ennis’ hand and places it directly on his own erect penis (261). Uninterested in that scenario, Ennis flips Jack over, gets on his knees, unbuckles his belt, lowers his pants, and engages in anal sex—“nothing he’d done before but no instruction manual needed” (261). The next morning, “Ennis woke in red dawn with his pants around his knees, a top-grade headache, and Jack butted against him; without saying anything about it both knew how it would go for the rest of the summer, sheep be damned. As it did go” (262).

As time progresses, Ennis and Jack continue to have sex, first only at night in the tent, and then later outdoors amid both sunlight and firelight (262). With the exception of a brief conversation during which both men state that they aren’t queer, they never talk about their sexual interactions or the resulting emotions they feel. At summer’s end, they part ways, with Ennis reiterating his intention to marry Alma in a few short months (263). As they drive away in separate directions, Ennis feels “about as bad as he ever had” and attempts to vomit, but nothing comes up (264). He does not see Jack again for four years, during which time he and Alma are wed and give birth to two girls, and Jack marries a young Texas woman named Lureen, who gives birth to their son (264, 266).

On the day they are reunited, Ennis and Jack immediately embrace and begin to kiss—so hard that Jack’s buckteeth draw blood—not knowing that Alma is witnessing their passionate interaction (265). Leaving Alma at home, they depart quickly in Jack’s truck, buy a bottle of whiskey, and within minutes check into a motel and begin to have sex; afterwards, their room smells “of semen and smoke and sweat” (267). At first, Jack insists that he didn’t know their sexual entanglements would resume, but then he immediately admits that he is lying; in fact, he says, he redlined it all the way to Ennis’ home in Riverton because he couldn’t wait to be with him again (267). Ennis admits that, even though they both have wives and kids, having sex with women cannot compare to having sex with Jack (268). In response, Jack suggests that the two of them establish a life and ranch together; Ennis resists the idea, feeling it would not be fair to their families and afraid that others will discover they are not heterosexual, make fun of them, and potentially even kill them as a result (269, 270). Instead, Ennis insists that they will need to make the best of a complicated situation, remain with their wives and children, and get together every once in a while in the middle of nowhere (270).

As the years go by, Alma divorces Ennis, takes their daughters with her, and marries the local grocer (272). Although Jack remains married to the affluent Lureen, he continues to get away with Ennis in the wilderness every few months, under the pretense of going fishing or hunting. Their

last sexual encounter occurs in May 1983, two decades after they first met. At the end of their few days together, Ennis informs Jack that, because he needs to keep his current job in order to keep up with his child-support payments, he will likely not get to see Jack again until November, rather than in August as they had initially planned (277). Jack, heartbroken, reminds Ennis that he once proposed they live together:

Tell you what, we could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn't do it, Ennis, so what we got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that. It's all we got, boy, fuckin all. . . . You got no fuckin idea how bad it gets. I'm not you. I can't make it on a couple a high-altitude fucks once or twice a year. You're too much for me, Ennis, you son of a whore-son bitch. I wish I knew how to quit you. (277-78)

Ennis' reaction to these words, which includes him falling to the ground on his knees, is so extreme that Jack fears Ennis is having a heart attack. Then, Ennis recomposes himself and the two men part ways—"nothing ended, nothing begun, nothing resolved" (278). Months later, Ennis learns from a postcard that Jack is deceased (279). Although the "official" story he receives from Lureen is that Jack drowned in his own blood after a flat tire he was fixing on a back road exploded and slammed its rim into his face, leaving him unconscious in the wake of breaking both his nose and jaw, Ennis suspects that his thirty-nine-year-old friend was instead murdered with a tire iron for being non-heterosexual (279). During a brief visit with Jack's parents in Lightning Flat, Ennis learns that Jack had entered into a relationship with another man, for whom he was planning to leave his wife. With this information, Ennis becomes convinced that Jack was indeed murdered with the tire iron (282).

Without question, "Brokeback Mountain" is a story composed of intriguing, non-heterosexual, rough-and-tumble male characters and emotional, thought-provoking narrative developments as it explores the complex sexual and romantic relationship between two ranch hands who find themselves trapped within the confines of a hypermasculine culture. In addition, the extreme masculinity of Ennis and Jack, developed and exhibited in various hypermasculine environments and emphasized at several key points in "Brokeback Mountain," offers a refreshing, counter-stereotypical representation of gay and/or bisexual men in a U.S. media offering. For example, after Ennis takes over the role of herder from Jack, he shoots a coyote—a "big son of a bitch [with] balls on him [the] size a apples" (259)—his first day on the job, then returns to camp to tell the tale to Jack while lathering up soap and shaving his face with hot water and a dull razor (259). During their last day working together on Brokeback Mountain,

Ennis and Jack roughhouse to the extent that Ennis ends up landing a hard punch on Jack's jaw (263). During Ennis' childhood years, he was encouraged by his father to resolve disputes with violence whenever necessary, for there's "nothin like hurtin somebody to make him hear good" (270). During their four years apart, Jack spent half his time repairing his old truck and the other half participating in Texas rodeos, during which he suffered crushed vertebrae, developed a degenerative stress fracture in his arm, broke several ribs and his leg in three places, and experienced numerous sprains and torn ligaments (268).

Also refreshing in this story of sex and love between two men are its touching moments of romantic intimacy, such as when Ennis refers to Jack naturally and immediately as "little darlin" on the day they are reunited after four years, or when Jack recalls his favorite moment ever spent with Ennis on Brokeback Mountain (266). In this latter encounter, Ennis walked up behind Jack, pulled him close—"the silent embrace satisfying some shared and sexless hunger"—and held him tightly as Jack fell into a sleep-like trance while standing in front of the fire, enjoying the humming vibrations of Ennis' steady heartbeat (278, 279). For Jack, Proulx writes, "that dozy embrace solidified in his memory as the single moment of artless, charmed happiness in their separate and difficult lives" (279).

Diana Ossana, who worked with Larry McMurtry to adapt "Brokeback Mountain" into a feature-length screenplay, concisely identifies other of the short story's impressive attributes when she writes: "Its compelling narrative covers a substantial time period—twenty years—in thirty pages. The prose is tight, precise, evocative, unsentimental and yet incredibly moving. The dialogue is specific to the time, the place, the social and economic class of the characters. It is a near perfect short story, in technique as well as emotion" (146). In addition, it is one of a comparatively limited number of literary works that meaningfully explores the realities of non-heterosexual relationships in rural rather than metropolitan settings. When all is said and done, as *USA Today* reader Ron Henry has expressed, "Brokeback Mountain" ultimately "portrays a love relationship full of passion and conflict. The story puts a human face on two [non-heterosexual] people in love" (17A). Proulx herself echoed such sentiments when she stated, "It is a love story. It has been called both universal and specific, and I think that's true. It's an old, old story" (Cohen D6).

I agree with Proulx that "Brokeback Mountain" is a very old story, but perhaps not in the way that she intended. Despite all of its appealing attributes, the most substantial shortcoming of this short story is that it (most likely unwittingly) relies far too extensively on the logic of melodrama when telling the tale of Ennis and Jack, an approach to storytelling that has historically been popular with women but that does not lend it-

self particularly well to providing an effective and nuanced construction of late-twentieth-century gay masculinity.

The character name of Jack Twist immediately calls to mind another literary character named Oliver Twist, created by Charles Dickens. Dickens, an author who intentionally rejected the Romantic and post-Romantic emphasis on creating characters with psychological depth, instead regularly employed melodramatic storytelling techniques in his various novels (Heyck 670). Authors who employ such techniques tend to create characters that are exaggerated and somewhat superficial caricatures rather than well-developed, well-rounded characters (Heyck 670). As such, character is largely transparent in melodrama, a genre of storytelling that itself is intended to express and reinforce values shared in a patriarchal society through a formulaic structure involving the struggle between good and evil, in which good ultimately and consistently prevails (Heyck 670). The rapid compression of time spanning two decades in “Brokeback Mountain” results in a similar form of restricted character development with regard to this short story’s two protagonists, which then readily results in its unfolding according to the logic of melodrama, whether intentionally or unintentionally. About this story, even Proulx herself has admitted that “there was not enough there. I write in a tight, compressed style that needs air and loosening to unfold into art” and requires enlargement and imagination (qtd. in “Getting” 134).

The phrase “the logic of melodrama” refers to the ways that social otherness is formulaically dealt with and resolved within stories that fall into this genre. Critic Merle Rubin appears to have (consciously or unconsciously) picked up on this noteworthy aspect of Proulx’s short story when he wrote, “Life here is raw, lived close to the bone. . . . And for those who don’t fit in, life can be tougher yet” (20). Having emerged initially in Western culture in late-eighteenth-century stage plays and works of prose fiction (and appearing quite commonly later in cinematic offerings as well), melodramatic works continually represent struggles within or against the shared cultural values of a patriarchal society, with some noteworthy form of repressed identity causing social and cultural conflicts to emerge (Lopez 178). Certainly, traditional melodrama focuses on the protagonist as victim and strives “to remain nostalgic, longing for a return to an ideal time of respectability that lacks antisocial and/or immoral behavior” (Hart 31) as they are defined in a patriarchal society, which causes melodramatic works to represent repressive media offerings that appeal largely to audience members’ emotions rather than to their reason or intellect (Beaver 230; Hayward 205; Lang 49). The hallmarks of melodrama, therefore, include the clear-cut distinction between good and evil, the notion that good must triumph over evil in the end, simplification of story and plot, and limited



psychological development of characters (Lopez 178). As a result, as genre scholar Daniel Lopez has explained, melodrama emphasizes “plot and action at the expense of characterization. It may be said, then, that the main objective of melodrama is to arouse one’s emotions in the most direct way possible” (178). The affective nature of melodramatic texts, therefore, is regularly employed to draw focus to “deviant” characters in the story world who, because of their noteworthy forms of “difference,” produce within their surroundings fears and anxieties of “the other” in relation to mainstream social norms of a patriarchal society and must be reacted to/dealt with accordingly (Hall 226; Hart 16).

In “Brokeback Mountain” specifically, by possessing noteworthy otherness in the form of non-heterosexual sexual orientations, protagonists Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist emerge as the characters who deviate in a noteworthy way from their surrounding others in the patriarchal social order of rural Wyoming from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. According to the logic of melodrama, whenever this or any other substantial deviation from patriarchal social norms and expectations emerges, the characters possessing noteworthy otherness are typically forced to restore the patriarchal social order by the story’s end in one of two specific ways: by conforming to the social expectations of the patriarchal social order through some tremendous personal sacrifice or by being eradicated entirely (most often through death) from the patriarchal social order. This is precisely what occurs in “Brokeback Mountain.” Following his final moments spent in the wilderness with Jack in May 1983 and their argument about Ennis’ ongoing refusal to establish a life together with him, Ennis sacrifices his last chance at romantic and relational bliss and conforms to the repressive expectations of the patriarchal social order by again refusing—this time once and for all—to establish a life with another man; he ends up emotionally barren and alone as a result. In contrast, Jack’s noteworthy otherness needs to be dealt with even more forcefully within the story world, because it becomes clear that he has continued to pursue romantic and sexual entanglements with other men outside of his failed relationship with Ennis (e.g. with male hustlers in Mexico and with the ranch neighbor from Texas that Jack’s father mentions to Ennis at the end of the short story for whom Jack was planning to leave his wife in order to establish a life in the aftermath of his interactions with Ennis). From the standpoint of the logic of melodrama, therefore, it is absolutely no surprise that Jack suddenly ends up dead in the end, for his eradication by death simultaneously eradicates his threatening and irrepressible social otherness pertaining to the socially acceptable actions of men within the patriarchal social order of the story world. As media scholar Linda Williams has explained, such outcomes are to be expected because melodramatic texts endeavor intentionally to begin and end in a “space of innocence” (65).



In addition to the story's ending, such an understanding of how the logic of melodrama is incorporated and functions within "Brokeback Mountain" serves to explain additional aspects of this work's overall contents. For example, the careful reader is likely to notice that the most noteworthy and meaningful moments of Ennis and Jack's ongoing relationship in the short story consistently occur amid troublesome weather conditions. Their descent from Brokeback Mountain at the end of their initial summer together is motivated by a powerful storm that is moving in from the Pacific; about this, Proulx writes:

They packed in the game and moved off the mountain with the sheep, stones rolling at their heels, purple cloud crowding in from the west and the metal smell of coming snow pressing them on. The mountain boiled with demonic energy, glazed with flickering broken-cloud light, the wind combed the grass and drew from the damaged krummholz and slit rock a bestial drone. As they descended the slope Ennis felt he was in a slow-motion, but headlong, irreversible fall. (263)

Their passionate reunion after four years occurs amid bolts of lightning (266), and their sexual escapades at the Motel Siesta immediately thereafter are accompanied by "a few handfuls of hail [rattling] against the window followed by rain and slippery wind banging the unsecured door of the next room then and through the night" (267). Their final moments spent together in the spring of 1983 occur amid "the clouds Ennis had expected, a grey racer out of the west, a bar of darkness driving wind before it and small flakes" (275). These recurring troublesome weather conditions implicitly reinforce the degree to which their non-heterosexual romantic and sexual interactions cause disruption and chaos in their surrounding story world.

An understanding of how the logic of melodrama is incorporated and functions within "Brokeback Mountain" also serves to explain why fathers (and/or their absence) are featured so prominently within this short story. Readers learn, for example, that Ennis' homophobic father, who died when Ennis was in his early teens, repeatedly made derogatory remarks about Earl and Rich, two older men who had established a ranch and life together, and even forced the nine-year-old Ennis to view Earl's dead and severely battered body when it was discovered in an irrigation ditch (270). Ennis recalls of this experience:

They'd took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp. What the tire iron done looked like pieces a burned tomatoes all over him, nose tore down from skiddin on gravel. . . . Dad made sure I seen it. Took me to see it. Me and

[my brother]. Dad laughed about it. Hell, for all I know he done the job. (270)

This is the same man who taught Ennis the lesson that, when it comes to unpleasant things in life, “don’t say nothin and get it over with quick” (270). Readers also learn that Jack’s emotionally abusive bull-riding father kept all of his rodeo secrets to himself, never once went to see his son ride, and possessed such a quick temper that he once beat his young son repeatedly with a belt, and then urinated all over him, after Jack failed to make it to the toilet on time (260, 282). This is the same man who, perhaps having come to realize the extent and nature of his son’s ongoing relationship with Ennis, refuses to allow Ennis to scatter Jack’s ashes up on Brokeback Mountain, as his son had requested. Finally, the readers learn that Jack’s disapproving father-in-law “hates [his] fuckin guts” (267) to such an extent that he is willing to pay Jack good money to disappear entirely and permanently from Lureen’s life (270). It is clear from these representations of fathers and fatherhood in “Brokeback Mountain” that Ennis and Jack can neither inherently conform nor adequately measure up to the expectations of the patriarchy. It is further clear that these fathers are featured so prominently in the short story because they represent both the repressive patriarchal social order of the rural Wyoming story world generally as well as Ennis’ and Jack’s internalized versions of its repressive social expectations more specifically. Throughout the pages of Proulx’s short story, therefore, these two male protagonists ultimately are represented as “enemies” of both the heterosexual patriarchal family and the larger society within which it comfortably exists, characters that must be dealt with forcefully in order to restore the patriarchal social order by the time everything is said and done. This reality is efficiently (albeit subtly) reinforced at two key points in the short story as it is revealed that Ennis prefers to engage in anal rather than vaginal sex with his wife; about this preference, Alma thinks to herself while engaged in a discussion about sex with Ennis, “Anyway, what you like to do don’t make too many babies” (271).

In summarizing the overall message of “Brokeback Mountain,” men’s studies scholars Jane Rose and Joanne Urschel have expressed:

As [Ennis and Jack] age, the relationship does not mature. Their experiences with each other are frozen in the memories of Brokeback Mountain. Love that cannot be public, love that is forbidden and dangerous, love that has no future is a love that cannot grow with the aging cowboys. Many of the central aspects of a loving relationship are not developed, do not grow, and in the end produce nearly unbearable pain. Ennis is left with a handful of precious moments. Ennis and Jack glimpsed

the promise of what love can offer, but circumstances and wounds kept them from the fulfillment of the promise. (250)

The restricted character development and overarching presence of the logic of melodrama in this short story, however, render such outcomes virtually inevitable. From start to finish, “Brokeback Mountain” retains a tight focus on the complex romantic and sexual relationship of its two non-heterosexual male protagonists and the resulting conflicts pertaining to gay masculinity in a homophobic and hypermasculine (story) world. By readily incorporating melodramatic storytelling logic and conventions, “Brokeback Mountain” presents extremely limited (i.e., conform or die) options for non-heterosexual men that further contribute to the social construction of a world within which gay and bisexual sexual orientations continue to be devalued, thereby implicitly perpetuating heterosexism and homophobia as the story does its cultural work, even though its author’s initial intentions appear to have been exactly the opposite.

As John Lawrence stated so eloquently in his letter to the editor of *The Advocate*, “Brokeback begins in the early 1960s and ends in the 1980s. By the ’80s (let alone today), it should no longer have been necessary to separate the lovers and have one of them beaten to death” (12). Lawrence is correct in his view, except when it comes to melodramatic media offerings, within which such an outcome is regarded as being the expected, required, most appropriate, and only possible “happy” ending. Given this reality, and despite the short story’s various merits, perhaps the imaginative leap involved in effectively constructing gay masculinity in “Brokeback Mountain” proved to be an even bigger one than Annie Proulx was adequately prepared to take.

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