# Annie Proulx's *Wyoming Stories*: Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity in the American West

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**Abstract**

The myth of the Wild West has inspired men for over a century to follow and live out the example of the long-gone virile cowboy. The romanticized cowboy myth, however, bears a dangerous dark side, since it not only spreads all-American values but also fuels frustration and fear amongst men through its inherent demand for conformity. Annie Proulx has taken up the challenge of denouncing the truth behind the myth of masculinity with her short story collections Wyoming Stories, claiming that the virile cowboy cult is not a natural necessity in the American West but only a construct that has been falsely universalized. Proulx thus presents us an alternative American West, revealing the bleak reality behind the façade of contemporary cowboy devotees.

The following paper will begin with a brief discussion on the importance of masculinity in the western genre, as well as an introduction to the figure of the cowboy to reveal the great impact both, the genre and the figure, had and still have on the American mindset. Moreover, engaging with gender theory, this paper will as well take a closer look at the idea of gender as a construct, which will facilitate the subsequent analysis of the deconstruction of masculinity in two of Proulx's short stories, i.e. "Brokeback Mountain" and "The Mud Below" from her 1999 short story collection *Close Range*. Especially the questions of the construction of masculinity, the results of a failing malehood and systems of reassuring ones manhood in the American West will be closely analyzed.

**Keywords:** American West, Gender, Masculinity, Cowboy

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# Annie Proulx'un *Wyoming Stories*'i: Amerika'nın Batısında Hegemonik Erkekliğin Yapısökümü

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**Özet**

Vahşi Batı miti, bir yüzyıldan fazladır, erkeklere kayıp yiğit kovboy örneğini izlemek ve yaşamak için ilham vermektedir. Bu romantikleştirilen kovboy mitinin, karanlık ve tehlikeli bir tarafı da vardır; sadece Amerikan değerlerini yaymaz, tanımına içkin uyum talebi nedeniyle, erkekler arasında hüsran ve korku da yaratır. Annie Proulx, Wyoming Stories hikaye kitabıyla, yiğit kovboy kültünün Amerikan Batı'sının doğal bir gerekliliği olmadığını ve yanlışlıkla evrenselleştirilen bir kurgu olduğunu ortaya koyarak erkeklik mitinin arkasındaki gerçeğin kötü taraflarını açığa vurma çabasını üstlenir. Proulx, çağdaş kovboyluk hayranları gösterisinin arkasındaki kasvetli gerçekliği ortaya çıkararak alternatif bir Amerikan Batı'sı sunar.

Bu makale, western türünde erkekliğin önemi üzerinde bir tartışma ve kovboy figürüne giriş ile başlayarak, hem bu türün hem de figürün Amerikan zihin yapısı üzerinde geçmişten günümüze gelen önemli etkisini gösterecektir. Ek olarak, bu makale, toplumsal cinsiyet teorisi ile bağlantılı olarak, bir kurgu olarak toplumsal cinsiyet fikrine yakından bakacak ve Proulx'un 1999 tarihli kitabı *Close Range*'deki hikayelerinden ikisinde, "Brokeback Mountain" ve "The Mud Below"'da, erkekliğin yapısökümünün analizini kolaylaştıracaktır. Özellikle erkekliğin kurulumu, güçten düşen erkekliğin sonuçları ve Amerikan Batı'sında erkekliği tesis etmenin sistemleri üzerine olan sorular analiz edilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Amerikan Batı'sı, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Erkeklik, Kovboy

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When talking about the mythical American West, one is often simultaneously referring to American masculinity. The myth of the Wild West has indeed inspired men for over a century to follow and live out the example of the long-gone virile cowboy. The romanticized cowboy myth, however, bears a dangerous dark side, since it not only spreads all-American values but also fuels frustration and fear amongst men through its inherent demand for conformity.

American writer Annie Proulx has taken up the challenge of denouncing the truth behind the myth of masculinity with her short story collections *Wyoming Stories*, claiming that the virile cowboy cult is not a natural necessity in the American West but only a construct that has been falsely universalized. Proulx thus presents us an alternative American West, revealing the bleak reality behind the façade of contemporary cowboy devotees.

The following article will begin with a brief discussion on the importance of masculinity in the western genre, as well as an introduction to the figure of the cowboy to reveal the great impact both, the genre and the figure, had and still have on the American mindset. Moreover, engaging with gender theory, this essay will as well take a closer look at the idea of gender as a construct, which will facilitate the subsequent analysis of the deconstruction of masculinity in two of Proulx's short stories, i.e. "Brokeback Mountain" and "The Mud Below" from her 1999 short story collection *Close Range*. Especially the questions of the construction of masculinity, the results of a failing manhood and systems of reassuring one's manhood in the American West will be closely analyzed.

## The Western, A Male Genre

The western genre is not only frequently considered the most American of fields but has also ever since its beginnings been consistently deemed one of the most virile and masculine genres there ever were. The mythological western thus became the epitome of maleness and has long-since provided a refuge –as both a geographic

space and a romanticized idea– for American men to become qualified in what is considered an ideal masculinity. Maleness in the west is, however, not an open category. It is therefore not accessible to a variety of marginalized and racial male identities but speaks merely about the "inevitable white male hero" (Johnson, 1996, p.255) who has become the naturalized focus of the imaginary history of the American West. Even today, the western has not lost its influence. Its tremendous impact can still be seen in the way it influences not only the American male identity but furthermore how it "inform[s] configurations of power and politics from Hollywood to Washington, D.C., and has been exported by U.S. media to far corners of the globe" (p. 258).

Seeing that the western genre indeed was born at a time in which manliness was put into question, it has from its outset served for the promotion of a mythical dominant masculinity. As a matter of fact, the end of the nineteenth century was a time of great changes in the US, which introduced a plethora of issues able to shake certain wide-spread ideals shared by many Americans. Amongst others, the American population was confronted with "[the] Post-Civil War society, the closing of the frontier, the perceived loss of opportunity for the self-made man, in competition with the large number of new immigrants arriving on American shores, unstable economic conditions, [or] the middle-class woman's movement" (Bordin, 2014, p. 27). Naturally, all of these arising questions challenged "middle-class men's claims on public power and authority" (p. 27), and thus asked for a savior to restore the public's belief in the guiding forces of American virility. In these troubling times the western genre gained immense popularity and with it a new American hero was introduced, namely the western cowboy.

## The Cowboy Myth

The cowboy was an evolution in a succession of American role models –including the backwoodsman and the pioneer– and ultimately gained the status of the ultimate American folk hero whose lasting legacy can still be felt today. Equally important to realize is the fact that the choice of the cowboy as the all-American hero is a rather

peculiar one, seeing that the cowboy reality was everything but noble or romantic. In general, cowboys led a violent, monotonous, and strenuous life. Moreover, cattle herding was a seasonal job, which was badly paid and which allowed no comforts one could find in civilization. Novelist Wallace Stegner once summarized the cowboy lifestyle as being a hardship due to "the prejudice, the callousness, the destructive practical joking, the tendency to judge everyone by the same raw standard" (as cited in Hine, 2007, p. 129). Besides, etymological research has proven that indeed the cowboy was regarded as a low-grade American citizen by his contemporaries, since in the 1880s the word "cowboy" was commonly associated with drunkards, cattle-thieves, or little outlaws (Bordin, 2014, p. 30). What is furthermore quite curious is the fact that about one-third of all rambling cowboys were African Americans, Mexicans, and even Indians – a detail that nowadays is often completely disregarded.

Nevertheless, the cowboy reality also provided positive and empowering values that were filtered through time and elevated to the point of myth. These values, as Richard Slotkin (1992) argues, "have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness" (p. 5). Accordingly, despite all the hardship of cowboy existence, Stegner applauded the values that an idealized cowboy could embody: "They honored courage, competence, self-reliance, and they honored them tacitly . . . . Practicing comradeship in a rough and dangerous job, they lived a life calculated to make a man careless of everything except the few things he really valued" (Hine, 2007, p. 129). Eventually, the mythical cowboy inherited many of these traits while at the same time developing into a rather ambiguous character.

Although the archetypical western hero represents all of the above-mentioned treasured American values, he also embodies a rugged tendency to violence. In fact, he is often portrayed as a loner, a rowdy, as uneducated, stoic and as a rough gunman (Robertson, 1980, p. 161). However, the cowboy's tough traits are a necessity: not only do they enable him to survive in the harsh and violent landscape of the

imaginary West, but, more importantly, since the cowboy's violence usually serves a greater good, in most cases it is also justifiable. This is to say, that the heroic journey of the cowboy is commonly linked to the establishment of progress in the American West. Violence thus serves to institute civilization in the western wilderness. Consequently, society always comes above the cowboy's personal ambitions (Robertson, 1980, p. 164). In sum, while the cowboy is never integrated in society, he is always at the service of society as such.

After all, the importance of the mythical cowboy in the construction of an American standard of masculinity is paramount, especially in the American West, where the cowboy myth is still lived out on a daily basis. Due to the fact that the myth has always "symbolized independence from women and domesticity, while it provided an authoritative and authoritarian hero who was tough, always right, and always had the last say, as in the patriarchal tradition from which he derived" (Bordin, 2014, p. 32), the mythical cowboy has from the beginning served as a source of empowerment for any male American citizen.

## Deconstructing Traditional Masculinity

As becomes evident from the previously described process of mythologizing the cowboy cult, the cowboy identity as such is not a natural, but rather a constructed one. Nevertheless, many American individuals have adopted it as a given form of self-expression. Moreover, this identity also has the power to reaffirm and invigorate another construct, namely the myth of masculinity.

Curiously enough, the western genre has always enjoyed a revival and growing popularity in times, in which dominant masculine ideals and values seemed to be threatened or put into question. The genre thus holds the power of reverting its audience to a time, in which "independent masculinity had unquestionable relevance" (Bordin, 2014, p. 42). Certainly, the humiliating loss of the Vietnam War is one of the most evident and greatest traumas in terms of a failing masculine ideal, which was followed by "inconsistencies in the function of fatherhood,

competition in the workplace, new standards of sexual conduct [...] new ideals for the male body, and the internalization of feminist ideologies by a new generation" (p. 34). These changing gender paradigms slowly shifted masculinity into passive roles that were commonly associated with the female gender. Masculinity was therefore seen as failing.

In addition, major changes in gender perception emerged during the 1960s, when several individuals did not feel represented by the "all-white, heterosexual, middle class intellectual elit[ist] [discourse]" (Skodbo, 2007, p. 38). This means that the image of the untouchable norm of white male heterosexuality especially lost its claim for universality during the Civil Rights Movement, when discourses shifted to minority struggles concerned with race, gender, and class (Arosteguy, 2010, p. 120). The white male entered a crisis, in which he was left out of the conversation until he returned in form of a wounded and victimized body. White masculinity, which had become invisible due to its claim to universality and self-evidence, eventually opened up to enter the field of analysis when being represented as fragile or deteriorating. The birth of gender and queer theory, a respectable academic form speaking for the ones left out of the official historical discourse, therefore not only helped to elevate alterity into the public consciousness, but also made the masculine standard tangible for questioning.

At the expense of a slight digression, it is of importance to address Judith Butler's theories on gender identity in order to get a better understanding of the constructed nature of gender as well as of masculinity. Judith Butler has played a paramount role in revealing the importance of gender subversion in order to reveal its artificiality, best described in *Gender Trouble*. Butler's main claim lies in the assertion that sex and gender are in no way naturally connected to the physical body, but that the notions of gender are social and cultural constructs (Skodbo, 2007, p. 5). This means that genders "can be neither true nor false" (Butler, 1999, p. 174). Thus, gender belongs to the realm of performativity, i.e. the repetition of diverse cultural and social acts and discourses, which reassert the gender identity of individuals in certain social contexts:

> In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (p. 173)

Butler also criticizes the unifying of gender into two categories, i.e. male and female, which firstly supports the maintenance of the so-called two-gender system and further serves the perpetuation of the standard "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 1999, p. 42). In short, the gender system is an excluding one; while promoting heterosexual men and women, all other "deviant" forms of sexuality or gender are rejected. After all, through interpellation, i.e. ongoing reinforcing acts of naming by authorities in order to force upon individuals certain character traits, a two-gender system has been able to be fostered and moreover has turned into a self-evidence (Skodbo, 2007, p. 39-40). However, the system itself is not unchangeable but does leave room for acts of subversion. As interpellation and performativity are never-ending processes and genders are indeed only "produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity," (Butler, 1999, p. 174) the identity-naming process is open to re-signification and re-contextualization and thus can be reversed through repetitive counter-acts that broaden the possibilities of embodying gender.

When considering the performativity of identities, the ideal of excessive masculinity encouraged in the American West can itself be perceived as a construct. In turn, the idea of the cowboy, which is based on specific gendered characteristics, succumbs to similar scrutiny. In other words, by deconstructing the supposedly stable cowboy identity, it becomes apparent that subjecting an entire demographic living in the American West to a hypermasculine ideal represents nothing but a mere fantasy. Yet, as above mentioned, there are ways of countering these reductive notions: both the cowboy myth as well as the idea of male dominance have been perpetuated in the western framework through ongoing repetitive acts of affirmation. Consequently, as interpellation functions in opposite ways, repeated acts of subversion offer a possibility

of changing the hegemonic gender system.

## Annie Proulx and the Necessity of Alternative Forms of Western Masculinities

The need for these so-called counter-acts has been rising especially with regard to the western genre which refuses to adapt to the changing times in the American West and prefers to grasp on to an imagined past and its mythical depictions of masculinity. The dilemma in terms of western mythology lies in the fact that, firstly, the mythical West never existed the way it is presented in popular culture and, secondly, the times in which the western takes place can never be recuperated in any way. Even though the complex reality of the American West differs tremendously from the imagined one, in the general American public mind, the "discursive apparatus of white masculinity has not been dismantled, and the 'American West' still exists as a sort of happy hunting ground for Anglo virility" (Johnson, 1996, p. 257). For this reason, the myth represents a danger as its power and influence have become stronger than the one's of actual history.

Especially when it comes to western masculine ideals depicted in popular culture, one encounters an enormous array of restrictions for marginalized groups – be it men, who do not fit into the framework of dominant masculinity, or women, who have been silenced and trapped into specific gender roles all along. Male archetypes of excessive masculinity in the west therefore lead to conformism, repression and struggle. Thus, a re-definition of masculinity is needed to break the standard and to broaden the ideas and possibilities of what is thought of being "manly."

One writer who has indeed helped in denouncing the various ways in which the western male ideal can have restraining effects on an individual is Annie Proulx. In fact, Proulx has devoted her trilogy *Wyoming Stories* to the life in the West, or more precisely to the life in Wyoming, the cowboy state. Instead of a romanticized West defined by the open range of opportunities, the West in Proulx's *Wyoming Stories* is a place that is very much closed in terms of social values, opportunities

and defined by harsh lives and narrow prospects in regard to gender, identity and sexuality. What one encounters in this West is a clinging to certain myths instead of a facing of reality, which, as will be shown, to some extent brings the downfall of the characters in Proulx's short stories. Story after story we are introduced to the brutal, unstable and violent lives led in Wyoming, in which myths cannot be upheld.

Nevertheless, despite the poor living conditions, many of the characters do still refuse change to happen. Instead, they are presented as trying to replicate the lives of their ancestors; an undertaking that several individuals find impossible to put into practice, as the land or their social position does not provide any support to do so. Hence, there is a constant gap between what these characters "have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them" (Rood, 2001, p. 11). Yet, despite all, in many stories the personal dilemmas of Proulx's characters are not necessarily their own wrongdoings, but it is shown that there are simply no available alternatives for an improvement of their lives.

Naturally, the sparse resources of the landscape and the fragile economic condition contribute heavily to the difficulty of establishing a stable existence in Wyoming. However, the power of myth and of having to and wanting to adapt to certain idealized standards plays as much of an important role. Especially the myth of excessive cowboy masculinity is still of paramount significance to men living in the American West. The idea of a cowboy, though, is not necessarily linked to cowboys as such anymore: as the traditional workspace of cowboys was locked when the open range was turned into a closed range, the mythical cowboy ideal was adjusted to the changing times. As seen in Proulx's stories, the rugged cowboy myth is thus a flexible one and can stand for any western archetype, be it a rancher, a farmer, or any type of rodeo cowboy.

Proulx's Wyoming is filled with western male archetypes desperately trying to hold on to past ideals of masculinity, which, in turn, have been long lost and are almost impossible to live up to. Thus, Proulx's male characters show constructed, fluid masculinities that reveal the performativity of gender as well as the problematic maintenance of the image of manliness. As a result, the struggle of upholding male standards only brings anguish to those with different masculine experiences. In the following, two short stories by Annie Proulx will be closely analyzed in order to demonstrate that the frustrations of a failing masculinity can befall any man in Wyoming, seeing that the western model of masculinity is a utopian vision almost impossible to achieve.

**Brokeback Mountain**

One of the stories that address the dilemma between wanting to fulfill certain societal expectations and not being able to do so due to certain innate desires, is the short story "Brokeback Mountain." The story deals with two high school dropouts, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, who meet in 1963 while tending a herd of sheep on the fictitious Brokeback Mountain. Throughout this summer, the two men engage in a love affair. Yet, in a denial of their homosexual desires when in public, both struggle to come out of the closet in their own way while also embracing their true selves when they are together. Indeed, the time spent on the mountain becomes a pivotal point in their lives that influences the rest of their stories. Although both men marry and raise a family, they start their affair over again and begin meeting each other secretly once or twice a year until 1983 when Jack tragically dies.

Throughout the story we see instances in which the two protagonists try to hold on to a dominant ideal of masculinity that a homosexual man cannot be a part of, as homosexuality is seen as the ultimate failure in terms of masculinity. Although gender identity and sexual orientation are very complex and fundamentally different parts of one's identity, in this context they are understood as being attached to one another and as inseparable. If one of these features fails, the other

one does too. More precisely, in misogynistic Western cultures the stereotyped perception of homosexual men has been that gays are failed men since they are supposedly prone to femininity. A gay individual thus poses a certain discomfort to heterosexuality: "The gay man is a threat to the macho man, since he reveals explicitly that which the macho man must suppress as deeply as possibly: his need for the love of other men, and the possibility of taking the feminine role" (Horrocks, 1994, p. 91).

By introducing homosexuality into the virile western genre, the constructive aspect of masculinity as such can be perfectly underlined, while it can be proven that many other forms of masculine experiences can and do in fact coexist. After all, "the connection between homosexuality and traditional masculinity within a single character results in an endangering relocation, which discusses the boundaries of what has been conventionally considered the limit between 'normal' and 'deviant' behavior" (Bordin, 2014, p. 59). It is of importance to note that historians believe that in 19th century western reality, male-male sexual relationships amongst isolated cowboys were indeed quite common. However, these acts were not publicly discussed and remained an accepted secret amongst the men involved (Patterson, 2008, p. 108-9). Again, this shows how the constructed cowboy identity radically differs from actual historical facts.

If one considers the cowboy characteristics discussed in section 2.1, Ennis Del Mar could be perceived as a paramount example for the ideal of cowboy masculinity: Ennis is a loner, a man of few words, "a high school dropout country boy[ ]" (Proulx , 2006, p. 284) – hence, as uneducated as the mythical cowboy – and a gunman with a "muscular and supple body" (p. 286), who "[sho]ots a coyote just first light" (p. 288). He is self-reliant, rough and violent and does not shy away from getting himself into fights. The notorious cowboy stoicism is as well present in the character of Ennis, best represented by his catchphrase, "if you can't fix it you got a stand it" (Proulx, 2006, p. 301). Even the fact that Ennis has no steady working position mirrors the cowboy myth, as "[o]rdinarily, in story and reality, the cowboy worked for someone else" (Robertson, 1980, p. 161) and "the cowboy was usually without a future"

(p. 164). Right from the beginning of the story, we see him in yet another time of transition, as the ranch he worked at is shutting down and he "has to be packed and away from the place that morning" (Proulx, 2006, p. 283). Thus, superficially speaking, Ennis entails many of the aspects of the mythological cowboy. Likewise, Jack has molded his life according to the cowboy standard. He as well takes up herding jobs and moreover tries his luck as a rodeo star. Nevertheless, Jack's personality, while still embodying the masculine standard, fails to fully represent the cowboy ideal. This is best visible when looking at the characters' roles on Brokeback Mountain.

While on the mountain Ennis and Jack experience a completely new way of living out their masculinity. In this segment, to some extent, Annie Proulx recreates typical gender roles within the homosexual couple – that is, if one was to adapt the relationship of the two men to artificially constructed male/female gender roles. Hereby it is important to realize that while sexual orientations are not defined by particular behavioral or gendered norms, traditional gender expectations are nonetheless often erroneously transferred to same-sex couples. After all, "gay men who exhibit feminine behavior are associated with passive homosexuality and are the ones who embody the stigma of subordinated masculinities, while those who perform as 'straight gays', increase their masculine capital, dilute doubts about their homosexuality, and defend themselves against discrimination" (Aguila, 2014, p. 141-2). Naturally, these generalizations are at odds with the diversity of identities found in both sexual orientations.

Accordingly, having perhaps internalized these notions, at first Ennis is perceived as playing the male part of the relationship, while Jack's role is more feminized. That is to say that the duties on Brokeback Mountain reflect on the domestic role, represented by the camp tender, and the patriarchal role, symbolized by the herder. Ennis turns out to be a better herder while Jack prefers to stay in the "inferior" position of the camp tender. Ironically, the two men are tending "lower-rate" sheep instead of cattle, already signaling that the lovers are not fulfilling the superior cowboy example to its fullest.

In fact, Jack's behavior throughout the short story is mostly described as closer to feminine behavioral expectations and thus he is unable to live up to the male ideal. This can be seen in the fact that Jack accepts the receptive role during sex. Even though the sexual partner who is penetrated in intercourse should not necessarily be perceived as either subordinated, passive, or as taking up a feminine role, this erroneous notion is still widely spread (Aguila, 2014, p. 142). The feminization of the character is as well mirrored in his "verbal fluency [, which] is another characteristic that is usually marked as feminine in westerns" (Bordin, 2014, p. 83). Jack is also presented as being able to open up to Ennis about the way he feels for him and about wanting to build a shared future:

> 'Try this one,' said Jack, 'and I'll say it just one time. 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 . . . . 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'. (Annie Proulx, 2006, p. 309)

Ennis on the other hand prefers to keep his feelings to himself, so as not to have to confront the fact that deep inside he might indeed be gay. Jack's premature death furthermore enhances the idea of his fragility and of being incapable of surviving in the virile space of the American West.

Naturally, Proulx's characters are not constructed as one-dimensional prototypes and hence the binary relationship of the two characters, expressed through the idea of traditional gender roles, will be deconstructed as the story unfolds. If one takes a closer look at the actions and decisions the men take throughout their lives, it becomes evident that Jack indeed embodies more values connected to the mythical cowboy than Ennis. Above all, Jack's character speaks of courage, while Ennis stays rather passive in his life. Out of a desperate need for love and affection, Jack is the one who initiates contact to Ennis after four years of being apart, as he reveals in the following words: "Why I'm here. I fuckin knew it. Redlined all the way, couldn't get here

fast enough" (Proulx, 2006, p. 297). Unlike Ennis, Jack plans to break out of his "own loop" (p. 300) during the story by suggesting building a life together: "Listen. I'm thinkin, tell you what, if you and me had a little ranch together, little cow and calf operation, your horses, it'd be some sweet life . . . . I got it figured, got this plan, Ennis, how we can do it, you and me" (p. 300). Despite knowing the hard facts about being an openly gay man in Wyoming, he nevertheless is up to taking the risk and facing adversity in the name of living a more fulfilled life with the man he loves.

Ennis, however, denies any possibility of a shared future, as he is too afraid of the consequences: "It ain't goin a be that way. We can't. I'm stuck with what I got, caught in my own loop. Can't get out of it. Jack, I don't want a be like them guys you see around sometimes. And I don't want a be dead" (Proulx, 2006, p. 300). This confession is followed by the telling of a traumatic childhood experience, in which Ennis' father showed him the mutilated corpse of a gay man who had become the victim of a hate crime. His shame and terror of possible violent consequences eventually force him into isolation; his fear prevents him to take constructive actions in his life and further distances him from his family and loved ones. Jack on the other hand, is able to be a father to his son and to support his family by helping out in the family business. Seeing that Jack also fathers a son instead of two daughters, as Ennis does, furthermore complies with the expectations of a man and the idea of having an inheritor of ones own masculine achievements. Ultimately, the great problem these two characters pose is the question of how to define western masculinity: is it expressed through a rugged outward appearance and certain skills, as in Ennis' case, or rather through specific cowboy values that Jack represents?

While the two men publicly try to keep up a heteronormative lifestyle by marrying and raising children, their same-sex desires never fully dissipate. They thus can be considered as having failed in fully reproducing the masculine ideal. Since manhood implies heterosexuality, every attempt to build up a virile façade will fail as the characters are indeed aware of their true inner feelings. Ennis' double negation "I'm not no queer" (Proulx, 2006, p. 291) thus gains an ironic double meaning,

seeing that one negation cancels out the other. He will always remain a "queer" despite all efforts of covering up his true identity. In conclusion, "Brokeback Mountain" gives us a perfect example of the power a constructed myth can hold over individual lives. By clinging on to an imaginary reality, the two lovers simultaneously become the perpetuators and victims of the cowboy myth and hence get caught in their "own loop."

**The Mud Below**

The gradual construction of identity is even further denounced in Annie Proulx's "The Mud Below." The story introduces us to the obsessive rodeo cosmos of Diamond Felts. Although he comes from a long line of ranchers, Diamond Felts grew up protected from the ranching and rodeo world, since his mother, Kaylee Felts, disapproved of the bull riding circles, as "rodeo's for ranch boys who don't have the good opportunities [her son does]" (Proulx, 2006, p. 55). At the beginning of the story we experience how Diamond has internalized his mother's opinion, seeing that "Diamond considered rodeo classes the last resort of concrete-heads who couldn't figure out how to hold a basketball" (p. 51). Also, Diamond is described as a rather nervous and insecure teenager; "rapping, tapping, nail-biting, he radiate[s] unease" (p. 47). Indeed, having been bullied for his height throughout his teenage years, his insecurities stem from his short stature which cannot live up to the ideal of a big, masculine man. Furthermore, he is "[a] virgin at eighteen – not many of either sex in his senior class in that condition" (p. 47-8). Diamond blames his virginity and his lacking manhood on his physical body, as all his attempts to find a sexual partner can only "go wrong in the forest of tall girls" (p. 48). The trauma of lacking specific masculine traits will eventually influence crucial decisions in Diamond's life and lead him to turn his identity upside down by embracing a completely new one. The description of Diamond's adaptation of mythological cowboy mannerisms brilliantly shows the performativity of gender.

Despite Diamond's acquired disdain for ranching life, his memories of his grandfather's ranch are all linked to virility and a harsh, manly lifestyle: "[A]n expanse of hoof-churned mud, his grandfather turning away, a muscular, sweaty Uncle John in chaps and a filthy hat swatting him on the butt and saying something to his mother that made her mad" (Proulx, 2006, p. 49). When Diamond finally gets to ride a bull on the Bewd farm, for the very first time he experiences the rush of masculinity that has so far lacked in his life. On page 52 his emotions during this life-changing incident are described as "[a] feeling of power as though he were the bull and not the rider, even the fright, fulfilled some greedy physical hunger in him he hadn't known was there." In this lethal moment, the meager boy thus merges with the majestic animal and believes to have gained new physical powers his body was not able to offer before. Even after the ride, he still feels as if "his life had doubled in size" (p. 53), and with it his manhood grows, while his bodily insecurities shrink. As Diamond wants to stay on the virile "adrenaline wave" (p. 53) bull riding provides, he decides to restructure his life and re-invent his identity by conforming to the image of true virility in the American West, i.e. the cowboy myth.

The great transformation the once meager boy goes through becomes most visible when he returns to see his mother after having spent two years on the road: "Diamond extended his fingers, turned his carefully scrubbed hands palm up, palm down, muscular hands with cut knuckles and small scars, two nails purple-black and lifting off at the base" (Proulx, 2006, p. 59). Not only has his outward appearance become more rugged but, much to the displeasure of his mother, he has also adopted rodeo slang. Instead of a "fucking pie" (p. 60), virile Diamond now prefers "a cup of real blackjack" (p. 60) and purposefully retains a certain body odor since "[a]ll rodeo cowboys got a little tang to em" (p. 63). Later on, he even "adopt[s] a wide-legged walk as though there was a swinging weight behind his thighs" (p. 69). The use of the conjunction "as though" in this sentence underlines the absurdity of his performance. By all means, his transformation has also served as a form of juvenile rebellion to liberate himself from the clingy care of his mother. Losing

her patience, Kaylee Felts confronts her son with the artificiality of his new identity and exposes the mythical idea of the cowboy as an act far from reality:

> Cowboy? You're no more a cowboy than you are a little leather-winged bat. My grandfather was a rancher and he hired cowboys or what passed for them. My father gave that up for cattle sales and he hired ranch hands. My brother was never anything but a son-of-a-bee. None of them were cowboys but all of them were more cowboy than a rodeo bullrider ever will be (Proulx, 2006, p. 64).

Besides the heightened self-esteem Diamond's reconfigured personality provides, he also acquires a new charm for girls. While his first experience with the opposite sex begins with a rather innocent car ride, during which "one of the girls pressed against Diamond from shoulder to ankle the whole way" (Proulx, 2006, p. 57), he soon turns the possibilities of sexual intercourse into a personal vendetta: "He dived headlong into the easy girls, making up for the years of nothing. He wanted the tall ones" (p. 69). Still being haunted by his past, Diamond uses women as "a half-hour painkiller" for a quick rush to empower his self-worth. Particularly the conquering of tall girls offers a certain vengeful satisfaction, since he declared these girls as scapegoats for his lack of sexual possibilities and thus his lacking masculinity during his teenage years. Diamond ends up raping his colleague's girlfriend, accepting all possible negative consequences that will follow in order to get the rush he is looking for. For Diamond, the female body thus serves as a playground to let out his bottled-up frustrations.

As becomes apparent from Diamond's behavior, violence is seen as an important means to prove his masculinity. Indeed, cultural critic Richard Slotkin argues that in western mythology, a certain regeneration of the American man can be achieved through violence (1992, p. 12). Although violence is present in the mythology of various cultures worldwide, the issue Slotkin perceives in the American framework is that "history is translated into myth" (p. 13) and that myth is ultimately used as a guide. In order to improve his manliness, the once timid and

insecure Diamond as well turns towards violent acts. As has been shown, his violence is especially turned towards women. Furthermore, Diamond also uses violence against his own body to enhance his virile look. The practice of rodeo is a significant weight on a man's body and gradually destroys it. However, due to the fact that the body is injured, it is also made tough through violence (Arosteguy, 2010, p. 121).

After all, in "The Mud Below," just as previously in "Brokeback Mountain," the superficial transformation towards a more "manly" identity might serve as a temporary tourniquet but never really stops the interior bleeding that past traumas have caused. Despite the virile shell Diamond has adopted, his past insecurities remain and thus he has to find stronger and new ways of conquering them. Especially the neglect he experienced from his mother and the absence of a father figure in his life have left an urgent necessity for approval in him. This becomes especially apparent when Diamond expresses what rodeo means to him: "Here's to it. Nobody sends you out to do chores, treats you like a fool. Take your picture, you're on t.v., ask your wild-hair opinion, get your autograph. You're somebody, right? Here's to it. Rodeo. They say we're dumb but they don't say we're cowards" (Proulx, 2006, p. 80). Interestingly, for a "little clapping that quickly died" (p. 46), Diamond accepts all the negative aspects that are part of a rodeo cowboy's lifestyle, i.e. the "busted spines and pulled groins, empty pockets, damn all-night driving" (p. 80).

Apart from denouncing the image of the cowboy as a tool in constructing an artificial masculine identity through physical and behavioral changes, the short story goes a step further by presenting living descendants of cowboys, whose masculinities are as well deteriorating and questioned. Firstly, there is Leecil Bewd, Diamond's friend, who grew up on a farm amongst bull riders and "troublemakers" (Proulx, 2006, p. 50) and followed into the footsteps of his family tradition by becoming a bull rider. However, as the story evolves, unlike Diamond, Leecil faces the harsh truth of holding on to a lifestyle that no longer brings revenue, with all its "travelin, traffic and stinkin motels… [and being] [t]ired and sored up all the time" (p. 58). After their father's

death, the Bewd boys are eventually left with a two million dollar debt in estate taxes and decide to sell the family ranch. Leecil himself becomes a failure in terms of the mythical cowboy ideal, having given up the hard life and having lost all his connections to his family's past. Leecil also serves as an example for how maintaining a lifestyle that can no longer exist only brings disappointment to one's life.

The fragile nature of the seemingly unbreakable male becomes even more apparent when one takes into consideration the passage in the rundown bar towards the end of the story. Here, Proulx recreates a textbook example of a traditional scene in a cowboy saloon. The regulars of the bar are described as "crazy" (Proulx, 2006, p. 78) and dangerous people, who gamble and swear. The setting itself resembles a typical western scenario with its "plank door, pocked with bullet holes in a range of calibers" (p. 78). The inside of the bar is "crusty," the counter filled with "[b]ottles, spigots, and a dirty mirror" (p. 78). With the help of these descriptions, Proulx immediately connects these men to the mythical idea of the Wild West. They hence appear to be the true descendants of the old world and thus the epitome of virility. As soon as these men get drunk, however, they show a softer, emotional side, as they talk about "babies and wives and the pleasures of home" and even "cr[y] a little" (p. 79) – all aspects connected to the feminine and traditionally not associated to the cowboy standard. Herewith, not only is the cowboy myth revealed to be a charade but, moreover, the idea of an absolute masculinity is proven to be nonexistent.

In the end, Diamond fails to see the torment that his chosen lifestyle bears and is unable to understand that the masculine ideal he is seeking does not exist in the world he inhabits. Nothing can break his believe that rodeo riding is the only lifestyle that will bring him pleasure. He continues living a fantasy even after visiting Hondo Gunsch, a former bull rider, who could represent Diamond's possible tragic future. Curiously enough, Hondo became an invalid at twenty-six, when "his horse threw a fit in the chute, went over backwards, Hondo went down, got his head stepped on" (Proulx, 2006, p. 67). The formerly celebrated rodeo hero, gracing the cover of magazines, has lost all his independence

and with it his manhood, now leading a pitiful and patronized life. Instead of the tangible crippling reality of rodeo life that is right in front of him, Diamond, however, only sees the picture-perfect magazine dream world Hondo was once a part of.

**Disciplining the Male**

Throughout the presented stories one encounters situations in which men discipline other men in order to keep up the ideal of excessive masculinity as the only and dominant form of expressing one's manhood in Wyoming. Through so-called "'regimes of masculinity' between men" (Arosteguy, 2010, p. 124) –which one can link to the idea of interpellation, discussed in section 3– the patriarchal power in Wyoming can be stabilized. What is created to keep out any "deviant" forms of masculinity, is a binary vision of the world, i.e. *us* against *them*; us being the hegemonic masculine ideal, whereas them are any "deviant" forms that need to be suppressed (Arosteguy, 2010, p. 124). Homosocial bonds amongst men, or rather an unspoken male solidarity, help to keep any unwanted forms of masculine expression away from every day life:

> In other words, there are certain activities, often homophobic or misogynist, that work to consolidate male bonds and normalize masculinity so that patriarchal power structures can continue, acting on those gendered bodies who threaten to disrupt a heteronormative white male patriarchy. (Arosteguy, 2010, p. 124)

This means that through these disciplining acts –which every man should follow and enact if necessary–, men among themselves control and condition each other to fit into the framework of dominant masculinity.

In "Brokeback Mountain" these disciplining acts become very apparent through the role of patriarchal figures, representing the old and expected ways. Ennis (as well as Jack) has been conditioned from an early age on to understand how to behave as a male. Ennis is an orphan and thus grew up without a father in his life. However, while still around

the family farm, his father made sure to educate his sons in accepted masculine behavioral structures by showing them examples of the *other*. He thus takes Ennis to see the mutilated corpse of a gay man, teaching him the ideal of masculinity and what not to be. Ironically – or tragically – Ennis becomes exactly what his role model warned him about. The internalized homophobe teachings of his father will thus haunt him for the rest of his life, as has been previously shown. Interestingly, from the scarce facts Proulx provides about Ennis' father, one understands that his father himself never fulfilled the male myth to its fullest. He failed as a rancher and as a family patriarch, "dr[iving] off the only curve on Dead Horse Road leaving [his children] twenty-four dollars in cash and a two-mortgage ranch" (Proulx, 2006, p. 284).

Jack finds himself in a similar situation. He is an aspiring rodeo rider, always living in his father's shadow, who once "had been a pretty well known bull rider years back but kept his secrets to himself, never gave Jack a word of advice, never came once to see Jack ride" (Proulx, 2006, p. 289). Jack's father as well disciplines his son through violent acts. To punish his son's lack of toilet-training and to reaffirm his phallic patriarchal power, Jack's father beats him and urinates on him. It is in this moment that Jack realizes that unlike his father he is circumcised and thus he understands that his father "had some extra material that [he] was missin"(p. 315). The missing piece of masculinity will trouble Jack for the rest of his life; he will never reach the ultimate masculinity that he sees represented by his father. Again, just like in the case of the Del Mar family patriarchy, Jack's father as well turns out to be unsuccessful as a man in life, ending up on a run-down, "meager little place" (p. 313).

In a similar way, Diamond's brother Pearl is policed from early childhood on. In "The Mud Below" Diamond encounters a man named Sweets Musgrove who gets underneath a car in order to repair it, "with his baby and pulling at the truck's intestinal wires" (Proulx, 2006, p. 57). After Diamond expresses his shock, Musgrove answers: "I rather have a greasy little girl than a lonesome baby," showing that even girls to some extent need to be "manned up" and adopt masculine ideals in Wyoming.

Having grown up without a father figure, Diamond remembers the incident and begins influencing his brother Pearl. By sending him bull riding-themed shirts and contradicting his mother's teachings, he believes to harden his little brother, yet without any graspable results.

The policing of masculinity, as a matter of fact, is a lifelong act that even includes adults. Accordingly, "Brokeback Mountain" presents us the voyeuristic Aguirre who watches the two lovers in intimate moments of proximity while on the mountain. He as well plays the policing role of the patriarch, as the following year he refuses to rehire Jack due to his "abnormal" masculinity. Even the overly masculine Diamond is sardonically reminded to "[c]owboy up" (Proulx, 2006, p. 83) by a doctor in a brief moment of fragility. Men are thus continuously being policed as a reminder to adapt to a dominant idea of masculinity. Almost all of these instances show how traumatic and dangerous these acts of disciplining can be for young boys, but also for grown men; leading from lifelong traumas up to premature deaths.

The disciplining effect achieves its great impact by playing with various fundamental fears. Certainly, there is the previously discussed fear of failing masculinity that each of the characters dread. Furthermore, men also fear social exclusion, seeing that a lack of manliness can lead to bullying, as in Diamond's case, or the social and professional shunning that Jack experiences when he is refused the job on Brokeback Mountain. Likewise, a man needs to adapt out of a fear of physical violence. This is especially visible when examining the character of Ennis, who is terrified of hate crimes and thus prefers to lead a closeted life. Having been traumatized as a child after seeing the corpse of a homosexual man, Ennis believes that there is no other fate for a gay man in Wyoming than a cruel death. So, whenever Jack suggests building a life together, which implies a possible coming out, Ennis makes clear that he "do[es]n't want a be dead" (Proulx, 2006, p. 300). After being informed about Jack's death, Ennis immediately links Jack's fate to a murder, although Jack's wife, Lureen, never mentioned such thing. There is simply no other way Ennis can imagine a homosexual man to die in the West. A violent death will thus always come as a disciplinary act. All of

these fundamental fears eventually lead to the necessity of adapting to the dominant image of manhood in order to fit into a uniform society that shuns difference.

## Conclusion

Despite the different lifestyles the discussed characters lead, all of their lives are dictated and molded by the same oppressing myth. As has been shown, the myth of excessive masculinity in the American West as represented in Proulx's work causes nothing but fear, pain, and frustration. Interestingly, in fact there is no such thing as a 'pure' masculinity and thus any living person is unable to embody it. Masculinity is merely a performative construct, a utopian idealization that forces Western citizens to adapt to certain ways of living. At the same time, it helps to keep up and stabilize the status quo of male patriarchy.

Naturally, the myth first and foremost has been developed and divulged by the media, especially by literature and Hollywood. However, it has subsequently been internalized and kept up by American society as such. As has been discussed in section 4.4, American men amongst themselves play an utmost important role in maintaining and perpetuating the socially required gender roles. The idea of interpellation Butler addresses thus does not only refer to the general idea of gender as such but can also be extended to identity building processes. This means that dominant models for identities are maintained through continuous and repetitive acts of reaffirmation.

Yet, as previously mentioned, these ongoing acts of reassertion can be tackled by alternative repeated counter-acts. While it is a long and tough fight to change a mindset that has been so strongly copied during over a century, there is nevertheless hope that things might gradually be transformed. Indeed, this is the importance of the writing Annie Proulx has dedicated herself to. It is of paramount necessity, though, that these re-written "histories . . . match the narrative power of that old frontier tale" (Neel, 1996, p. 105). Given that Proulx's subversive stories have gained an immense popularity, as has been the case of "Brokeback

Mountain", they might ultimately sink into the public mind and eventually broaden the discourses on the possibilities of embodying gender in the American West.

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