The American cowboy is an iconic and mythic figure who pervades not only the symbol of the American Dream, but also western culture. In western culture he is a powerful force in the codification of male gender and what it means to be a man. The cowboy is a man of nature, out on the frontier, cattle ranching and shepherding the plains of his realm. Proulx’s short story Brokeback Mountain demonstrates the destructive nature of repressed emotions, while Ang Lee’s film adaptation celebrates the emotional outbreaks the Western genre often condemns. By using highly visual western landscape, along with the mythic cowboy, Proulx constructs a narrative that transforms ideals of masculinity. I will explain the stereotypical and iconographic ideal that western culture has come to worship and how Proulx’s narrative works to both tarnish and glorify its status. Brokeback Mountain legitimizes the homosexual cowboy by identifying him within culturally acceptable stereotypes and places. Through Proulx’s explicit prose and the movie’s domestic detailing and sentimental portrayals, we empathize with the characters, not through detached observation, but through sentiment.

The American cowboy is an iconic and mythic figure who pervades not only the symbol of the American Dream, but also western culture. In western culture he is a powerful force in the codification of male gender and what it means to be a man. The cowboy is a man of nature, out on the frontier, cattle ranching and shepherding the plains of his realm. We can visually identify him under the brim of his hat, with his ornate belt buckle, and the jingling spurs on his boots, but he is also a man of “action, mobility, and emotional restraint” (Cohen 57). It is this emotional restraint that Annie Proulx’s novella Brokeback Mountain and Ang Lee’s film adaptation of Proulx’s text, concern themselves with. In Jane Tompkin’s book, West of Everything, she says, “the western teaches us not to cry out or show that we care. For to show that your heart is not hard, to cry when we feel pain, your own or someone else’s is...soft, womanish, emotional, the very qualities the western hero must get rid of to be a man” (Tompkins 121). Proulx’s
short story demonstrates the destructive nature of repressed emotions, while Lee’s sentimentalized visual narration celebrates the emotional outbreaks the Western genre often condemns. By using highly visual western landscape, along with the mythic cowboy, Proulx constructs a narrative that transforms ideals of masculinity. I will explain the stereotypical and iconographic ideal that western culture has come to worship and how Proulx’s narrative works to both tarnish and glorify its status. In Lee Clark Mitchell’s book Westerns, he says, “the versatile Western itself, which has repeatedly transformed itself for different audiences and different ideals of manhood” (Mitchell 4). Both Proulx and Lee, in their respective mediums, take the versatility of the Western to give their heroes, Ennis and Jack, a chance to find renewal in an idyllic setting, away from the urbanization that can stifle the cowboys relationship between nature and his innermost desires. Brokeback Mountain legitimates the homosexual cowboy by identifying him within culturally acceptable stereotypes and places. Through Proulx’s explicit prose and the movie’s domestic detailing and sentimental portrayals, we empathize with the characters, not through detached observation, but through sentiment.

Lee Clark Mitchell says, “The most popular texts are also always a culture’s most powerful, most fragiley balanced, and require attention commensurate to their capacity to move and assuage” (Mitchell 8). A powerful example of a Western novel that uses its narrative to draw emotion and persuade, is Owen Wister’s The Virginian. The novel is politically charged in its debates about the East and West, nature versus civilization, however, its interest for this study is the striking beauty of its cowboy hero. Melody Graulich, in her essay “Reading The Virginian In The New West” says, “There is considerable attention to the body, the corporeal presence created by words and image” (Graulich xv) For purposes of comparison with Proulx’s cowboy heroes, I will use Wister’s Virginian as my seminal cowboy type. As Graulich remarks on the visual image of the Virginian’s body, we can begin to understand the power of the cowboy’s image in western culture. Wister describes,

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant more beautiful than pictures. His broad soft hat was pushed back;
a loose-knotted, dull-scarlett handkerchief sagged from his throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, and the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls shone through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendour that radiated from his youth and strength (Wister 3).

This description, seen through the eyes of Wister’s narrator, is a highly objectifying gaze. Our eyes meander over the subject from hat to dusty boots, and we revel in his perfection. Graulich continues to say this about Wister’s narrator, “he is simultaneously a presence and an absence, reifying conventional masculinity while expressing, ...surprisingly unguarded feelings or homoerotic desires in his descriptions of the Virginian’s body” (Graulich xv). While I agree that there is undoubtedly homosexual readings of the narrator’s character, more important is the idea of reification. Wister wants his reader to visually identify with the perfection of his cowboy hero, and therefore, define masculinity based on his example. Wister’s cowboy is looked at by men, so men can discover what a man really looks like, what he should act like. This act of gazing, in text and film, is described by Laura Mulvey as scopophilia. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” she explains the term as, “pleasure in looking,” and “a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 160). The object of Wister’s narrator’s gaze is to identify a role model by looking and assuring the reader of the character’s perfection.

Annie Proulx’s short story *Brokeback Mountain* works to tarnish, ever so slightly, the perfection that Wister sells to his reader. Her two cowboys, Ennis and Jack, are described in the same controlling gaze, in such a way, that we recognize something has changed. The two men lack the veneered perfection, the immutable manly character that we find in Wister’s Virginian. This is the visual description that Proulx offers of her cowboys. First, we have Jack,

he seemed fair enough with his curly hair and quick laugh, but for a small man he carried some weight in the haunch and his
smile disclosed buckteeth, not pronounced enough to let him eat popcorn out of the neck of a jug, but noticeable. He was infatuated with rodeo life and fastened his belt with a minor bull-riding buckle, but his boots were worn to the quick, holed beyond repair (Proulx 3).

We can see in Jack markers of the stereotypical cowboy. He has his belt-buckle, identifying one of his achievements in rodeo life. This buckle is Jack’s way of expressing his cowboy life mastery; it is his skill with horse and cattle. Everything about Jack is lacking in the splendiferous perfection that we see in Wister’s Virginian. Jack’s manliness does not shine through the worn down nature of his dress, he is filled with quirks and a sense of the ordinary.

Ennis also lacks overall perfection. He is described as,

high-arched nose and narrow face, was scruffy and a little cave chested, balanced a small torso on long, calliper legs, possessed a muscular and supple body made for the horse and for fighting. His reflexes were uncommonly quick and he was farsighted enough to dislike reading anything except Hamley’s saddle catalog (Proulx 3).

Here we find a gangly young man, who is not interested in reading (unless it’s about saddles) and is physically made for fighting and riding horses. Ennis’s beauty is rugged, but lacks the overall perfection to make him worthy of Wister’s high styled objectification. Ennis is Proulx’s example of the stoic and taciturn cowboy; he is a man of duty, loyalty, and of action. This examination of Proulx’s cowboys, set against Wister’s Virginian is important because it looks at what sort of masculinity the popular cowboy sells to its culture and how Proulx’s text works to change that idea of masculinity. She wants us to see in Ennis and Jack a rough and realistic visual of the hard working, labouring, and often poor cowboy of the American west. She tarnishes them, only to later glorify the changeability of the cowboy character.

Ang Lee, in the film adaptation of Brokeback Mountain introduces the characters Ennis and Jack visually. Like both Wister and Proulx, the film allows the audience to gaze slowly over the two men’s forms: cowboy hat, jeans,
boots – it’s all there, but one difference is found. Lee’s choices of leading men are highly beautified and lacking in the awkward quirkiness of Proulx’s text. This casting choice is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the two men, the late Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, are popular teen heartthrobs and draw to the film a large female audience. Secondly, both Ledger and Gyllenhaal are known publicly as heterosexual males. The first choice leads one to believe the movie was marketed more for a female audience, rather than a male and homosexual one. It also explains the highly sentimentalized nature of the film. The love story aims at creating sympathy for its male characters, rather than creating a mimetic representation of the two cowboys as in Proulx text. The second draw for choosing Ledger and Gyllenhaal for the film is their publicly identified heterosexuality. Both Ennis and Jack, at the beginning of the film represent everything that is visually and symbolically identified with the cowboy. But, this representation is transformed as it is in Proulx’s text when the two men find love with each other on Brokeback Mountain. It is unexpected for Proulx’s characters, it is unexpected for Lee’s, and even more so because of the actors who present them. The viewer is immediately aware of the deviation from traditional cowboy stereotype. It is also important that in the casting of Ledger and Gyllenhaal there were no preconceived notions of gay characters. The men cannot be identified with any campy urban film representation of homosexuality, therefore keeping Proulx’s cowboys’ transformative roles intact and full of impact.

Annie Proulx creates ordinary and labouring cowboys to give her story a sense of realism within the rural American landscape. However, it is this rural and mountainous landscape that Proulx uses to hide her cowboys away from society. In order to allow Ennis the freedom to discover his true desires, there must be a place where this transformation from the mythic cowboys’ inner suppression to a cowboy with an inner life can take place. In Stanley Corkin’s essay “Cowboys and the Free Markets” he says this of the Western myth,

This myth defines ‘the west’ as a condition that removes the artifices of civilization from social life, within the resulting state of nature, individuals show their essential qualities of character. Those who
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succeed do so because they are made of better stuff than others. Those who fail to do so as a result of their weakness. Such a view relies on biological determinism, as well as a simplified concept of nature and civilization (Corkin 67).

This explanation of the Western myth would say that Ennis and Jack’s story is a tragedy because they do not fulfill the biological and social status as men to ensure their happiness. But one could also argue that their pursuit of maintaining the gendered role of cowboy type is the weakness that destroys them. Proulx tarnishes her cowboys by bringing them out of their pastoral landscape and forcing them to live within domestic life. This maintaining of the heteronormative takes away the very inner lives and desires the two men find, therefore the weakness created by the stereotypical cowboy’s laconic behaviour, is the downfall of the two men’s transformation.

Proulx’s answer to how the men’s realism can be transformative is her idyllic space on Brokeback Mountain. The mountain is utopia, it is paradise, it is the Garden of Eden. Ennis and Jack discover a place away from the policing eyes of society where they are able to discover, desire, and love freely. This is a natural space and therefore, Proulx’s cowboys are natural men. This is the message that Proulx communicates to her reader – up on Brokeback Mountain, two cowboys find a shared love, a love that is based on mutual companionship, understanding and sexual desire. Lee Mitchell Clark says this of Western landscape, “The one aspect of the landscape celebrated consistently in the Western is the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation, for release from constraints associated with an urbanized East...it always signals freedom to achieve some truer state of humanity” (Clark 5). The time spent on Brokeback Mountain is both idyllic and brief. Jack and Ennis map out weaknesses and strengths between them and share an appreciation for the symbiotic relationship they share not only with the mountain, but with each other. Nevertheless, their time together is like the mountain -- elevated away from everyday life. In the height of their coupling they see themselves as “…the two of them on the mountain flying in euphoric bitter air, looking down on the hawks back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below,
suspended above ordinary affairs” (Proulx 7). Proulx uses third person narrative to distance her readers from the actions and feelings of her protagonists. We have to accept them visually within their frontier landscape, carving a way to their new future. This space leads to their emotional and transformative growth. The mountain allows the men to discover their sexual identities and to come of age as men. Proulx does this transformation explicitly through rough and minimalist language. The two men’s first encounter is as much as we could expect from the laconic cowboy that Proulx describes, “They went at it in silence except for a few sharp intakes of breath and Jack’s choked ‘gun’s goin’ off,’ then out, down, and asleep” (Proulx 7). The description is brief and vivid. Proulx’s language, like her cowboy Ennis, says as little as possible, but enough to be understood. The mountain, for the two men, is a place between the lives the two men would like to live and the life they have to live. This is a liminal space. Ennis is successful in achieving a life both on the mountain and in domestic civilization. It is when he tries to have both simultaneously that the liminal space breaks down. He is no longer able to stand between the two spaces, and be a master of both worlds, he must choose one or the other; be a homosexual cowboy on the mountain, or a heterosexual cowboy in civilization.

Both Jack and Ennis fulfill the stereotypical role of the passionate shepherd. Like Christopher Marlow’s poem from the sixteenth century, it seems as though Jack and Ennis prove upon the mountain the ideals of pastoral love, Marlow writes,

Come live with me and be my love  
And we will all the pleasure prove  
That hills and valleys, dales and field  
And all the craggy mountains yield (Marlow 12)

Marlow’s pastoral paradise allows for the shepherd and his love to live as one with nature. The flowers, the sheep, their love, being all they need to survive. Brokeback Mountain, like many narratives in the Western genre, uses the idea of the pastoral as a place where utopian life can be imagined and created.
Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* ends his novel with a very similar pastoral scene, leaving his readers with a sense of renewal and paradise. This idyllic space is one that Proulx uses in *Brokeback Mountain* to give her reader a sense of an uninhibited freedom and fulfillment, only to take it away so the reader gets a real sense of loss. Wister opens up his character, the Virginian, emotionally in the final passage. He says, “He sighed with supreme quiet and happiness, and seemed to stretch his length closer to the earth. And so he lay, and talked to her as he had never talked to anyone, not even to himself” (Wister 363). Jack and Ennis experience a transformation much like that of the Virginian and Molly on their pastoral island. They learn to communicate their desires, but Ennis remains the most distant and taciturn. He tries to find his emotions, but he cannot separate what ‘he’ wants from his culturally expected role.

The short story takes the third person narrative point of view. There is only one moment where we are able to see through a first person point of view. This moment is that of Joe Aguirre, the cattle owner who has hired Jack and Ennis. The man stands alone above the two cowboys and engages in an extended stare through his binoculars. This intense viewing of Jack and Ennis in a sexual act on the mountain is described by Proulx, “They believed themselves invisible, not knowing, Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes one day, waiting until they buttoned up their jeans” (Proulx 7). Joe’s extended gaze in Proulx’s narrative can be likened to Laura Mulvey’s “controlling and curious gaze”. Mulvey describes this kind of private gazing as a “desire to see and make sure of the private and forbidden,” most particularly regarding other people’s genitals and bodily functions. Proulx is using within her narrative a judging gaze where as readers we are allowed to imply what thoughts we think are shaping in Joe Aguirre’s prolonged look at Ennis and Jack. Proulx suggests through her word choice that his length in looking (ten minutes) was either to assure himself of the homosexual nature of the men’s play, which is obvious as they ‘button up’ their jeans, or that Joe Aguirre is taking some pleasure in looking at the two men. It certainly does not cause shock or revulsion, leading us as the reader to believe that this is not the first time Joe Aguirre has encountered this type
of behaviour between men. In fact, Joe Aguirre does not ‘out’ the two men, which also suggests that this is not an uncommon story being told by Annie Proulx, but homosexual cowboy relationships have a hidden, but long history in the hills of rural America.

In Ang Lee’s film, we get a slightly different view of Joe Aguirre. Firstly, we get an eye-line shot through Joe Aguirre’s binoculars, the first of two first person moments in Lee’s narrative. In the film we do not see an actual sexual act taking place through Aguirre’s binoculars, what we do see are two men at play, like young boys, harassing each other. The close-up facial expression we see on Aguirre’s face as the focalized view ends, is one of disgust. Aguirre plays the socially established interpretation in that we expect the two men on the mountain to be viewed with disdain. As in the novella, Joe Aguirre is concerned for his reputation and does not want the two men to continue in their affair. Aguirre’s character chooses a non-violent solution to his problem, unlike Ennis’s father, who beats and kills two older men who share their lives together. Aguirre releases Jack and Ennis from their jobs, but does not pursue or ‘out’ the two men, potentially saving their lives. Aguirre obviously does not approve of the situation, but his actions or inactions as a character show him at least to be sympathetic.

Essentially, what Proulx offers is a revised coupling of the seminal heterosexual story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Both men engage in an innocent discovery of sexual play and desire in their utopian space. It is not until the judgemental and policing gaze of Joe Aguirre, that the two men are viewed with a culturally coded lens. The men are exiled from their garden through Aguirre’s ending of their pastoral duties and we feel the utter disintegration of the mountain. The garden crumbles as the two men descend from their paradise. Proulx describes their fall,

and 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 on them. 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 bestial drone. As they descended the slope Ennis felt he was in a slow motion, but headlong, irreversible fall (Proulx 8).

Proulx’s diction literally has the mountain crumble at their heels. Proulx glorifies the mountain and the men’s coming of age love story in order to place it in opposition with the domestic space below.

Ang Lee’s interpretation falls short of this allegorical and visceral moment in Proulx’s story. It is a moment that is highly significant for the characters, but is not relatable through film without the mountain literally crumbling around them. This would detract from the realism the film strives for. Lee uses establishing shots throughout the two men’s time on the mountain. This technique illustrates not only the beauty of the men’s pastoral landscape, but reveals the location’s significance as one far away from civilization. This is a Western frontier, where men can be men and, therefore, define the meaning of the frontier space for the viewer. The establishing shots sentimentalize the landscape, specifically the mountain, as a place where two men find love and fulfillment. Therefore, he stresses the importance of Ennis’s emotional breakdown after the two men come down from the mountain. Ennis is taken over by a physical pain that leaves him crouching in an alley vomiting, gagging, and hitting the brick wall that he leans against. Lee shadows Ennis, allowing him as a man to maintain a sense of dignity as he suppresses his feelings in the darkness.

It is as the two men re-enter civilization below the mountain that we feel the dichotomous relationship between nature and domesticity. Nature, utopia, paradise are all encapsulated on the mountain, while Alma and Lureen represent heteronormativity, domesticity, and procreation. The film is definite in its pitting of the pastoral against the domestic, and clearly fleshes out the expected roles Jack and Ennis are supposed to play in society. Neither man is able to make their domestic situation work, even though Ennis manages to be a caring father and provider for his family. Jack and Ennis maintain heteronormative relationships, and this is mostly due to the fear of punishment and outcasting from the social norm. This is especially true for Ennis because
of the tale he relates early on in the story, foreshadowing the end result of Proulx’s tragic cowboys. We read about two men brutally beaten to death by a group of heterosexual men (including Ennis’s father) who identify the older men as homosexuals. Ennis fears this violent death and the disapproval of his dead father. Ennis describes, “They’d took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp... Dad made sure I seen it...If he was alive and was to put his head in that door right now you bet he’d go get his tire iron” (Proulx 15). This dramatic story foretells the future of Jack’s death and what Ennis presumes must be the fate of his lover. As Ennis fears an open relationship with Jack, and Jack seeks to find fulfillment, Jack is punished for his actions with a violent death while Ennis is left alone to mourn his loss.

In James Baldwin’s essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” we find an explanation of the situation in which Proulx’s character Ennis finds himself. Baldwin writes,

we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization. And escape is not effected through a bitter railing against this trap; it is as though this very striving were the only motion needed to spring the trap upon us. We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed (Baldwin 32).

Ennis becomes trapped in his own categorization of heterosexual life when he realises that he might be homosexual. By his fearing of the label ‘queer’ Ennis forces himself to identify only with heteronormative domesticity. Ennis is a failure whether he categorizes himself as a cowboy or a homosexual. He does not live up to the glorified successful ideal that the cowboy sells and because he is unable to find inner fulfillment of his emotional desires he betrays his own identity.

We can parallel Ennis’s emotional deprivation with Wister’s Virginian, who is also unable to express his deepest emotions. In Wister’s text the Virginian tries to deal with his emotions as he carries out the execution of an
old friend. Wister describes

But logic was useless; he had lost his bearings in the fog of sentiment. He knew, knew passionately, that he had done right, but the silence of his old friend to him through the last hours left a sting that no reasoning could assuage (Wister 294).

The Virginian, like Ennis, does not express emotions in a way that exposes him to critical judgement or displacement of honour. The Virginian wants to express his grief over the loss of his friend Steve, but Steve dies honourably, without words, regret, or sentiment. The Virginian carries out the execution in the same manner, therefore neither of the men dishonours the laconic code of the cowboy. Like most Western narratives, Ennis avoids anything that might expose him to dishonour of any kind. This is demonstrated by his vehement statement, “I’m not no queer,” (Proulx 7) to Jack. Ennis does not want to be labelled as anything other than the heterosexual cowboy. It is this fear of labelling that leads to the inevitable destruction of Ennis’s relationship with Jack.

In the article, “What Rough New Beasts – New Westerns?” by John Cavelti he says,

the protagonists not only confront the usual strains of growing up and accepting the knowledge of limitation of adulthood, but also must deal with a very different sense of diminishing expectations and the loss of a bygone time of greater significance and meaning associated with the heyday of the cattle industry and the great cattle drives of the nineteenth century (Cavelti 10).

We can see an example of this strain in the portrayal of Proulx’s other gay cowboy, Jack Twist. Jack decides that he wants to express his cowboy ‘ness’ through the rodeo, and attracts Lureen, an accomplished and confident young woman. When Jack is thrust into Lureen’s successful tractor business, he becomes lost. He has made himself into a show style cowboy, mirrored on a nostalgic era where the large tractor-trailer did not exist. Jack is overshadowed by the technology of his father-in-law’s business. This is just one way that
Proulx uses the nostalgia of the cowboy stereotype to emphasize the loss of the genuine cowboy character through Jack. Proulx and Lee work within their respective mediums to emphasize how Ennis’s inability to express himself is the destruction of his emotional self, while the machinery of the modern world leaves Jack with no contemporary usefulness to his heterosexual family life. Both men need to be reinvented in order to fit within their changing societies. Ennis does this by maintaining heteronormativity and thus, in his opinion, doing what society expects of him. Jack chooses to dream. He chooses to imagine a world where he can live and work with the partner whom he desires and loves. Jack’s inability to convince Ennis to join him in this idyllic pursuit leads to Jack’s desperation and unfaithfulness, which leads to his ‘outing’ and eventually to his violent death.

Like many Westerns before Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain*, her cowboys maintain the traditional mythic status of men who choose honour and duty over their own emotional well-being. Proulx’s and Lee’s narratives work to illustrate the realism of Ennis and Jack as men who seek emotional fulfillment and the freedom to be the men that they choose to be. A poignant moment in the short story that illustrates the transformation of the heterosexual cowboy to the homosexual is described by Proulx, “Ennis’s breath came slow and quiet, he hummed, rocked a little in the sparklight and Jack leaned against the steady, heartbeat, the vibrations of the humming like faint electricity and standing, he fell into sleep’ (Proulx 22). Later in the short story, this childlike embrace, where Ennis cradles Jack in his arms becomes a singular moment and expression of the time the two men shared together. Ennis in his true cowboy way, says nothing of how he feels in this brief moment, he does not even face the man he loves because facing him would only mean that he would have to identify himself as a man who loves another man, and this is not possible for Ennis. In Lee’s film we understand this cradling moment through its visual signifiers as a loving embrace, where the weight of one’s soul is released. The film uses visual fantasy and as an audience we want to watch, to observe the two men’s private world. Laura Mulvey says “film reflects, reveals and often plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual differences
which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (Mulvey 158). We see as a viewer the markers of an intimate moment and Lee brings us close up and intimate, so that we share from our own memories and experiences the intimate nature of the two men’s embrace.

In the novella’s domestic spaces, Proulx uses explicit and realistic prose that does not aim to glorify the heterosexual relationships both Ennis and Jack enter into after their separation from the mountain. Proulx describes Ennis’s conjugal bedroom with his wife Alma like this,

their bedroom was full of the smell of old blood and milk and baby shit, and the sounds were of squalling and sucking and Alma’s sleepy groans, all reassuring of fecundity and life’s continuance to one who worked with livestock (Proulx 9).

Ennis has performed his duty as a man by procreating with Alma, creating his children and being a good father and provider. But the visual of Proulx’s narrative likens this situation to one of a barn, where life is created and worked and taken care of for business. There is no passion in Ennis’s relationship with Alma, he protects them as he protected the sheep on the mountain –he is the passionate shepherd.

Ennis’s bedroom scene can be paralleled to two other spaces in Proulx’s narrative. Firstly, the idyllic space on the mountain where the two men find domestic bliss. Ennis takes the masculine role as he cares for the sheep and keeps away the coyotes, and Jack fulfills the female role in caring for the campsite and making meals. This working couple is harshly contrasted with the dysfunctional relationships with Alma and Lureen. Jack continues to be emasculated by his inability to provide for Lureen and Ennis is unable to provide a loving environment with Alma because of his inability to express his true desires. Both men are glorified in their mountain space because as cowboys this is their true domain, while their domestic life destroys their ability to be free ranging cowboys.

Secondly, Proulx demonstrates the transformative nature of the cowboy stereotype by using manly sensory objects within the hotel room that Jack
and Ennis share. In direct contrast to Ennis’s and Alma’s conjugal room, this room smells of “semen and smoke and sweat and whiskey, of old carpet and sour hay, saddle leather, shit and cheap soap” (Proulx 12). This space brings to mind the traditional bunkhouses that the Western novels idealize as a space for men. There is no softness in this room, it is raw and sexual and leaves no doubt that this relationship is about sexual desire. This room is in contrast to the heteronormative expectation of the romantic getaway where one might expect wine, flowers, and lacy lingerie. The two rooms in stark contrast represent a place of procreation and a place of animalistic passion.

Four years after Brokeback Mountain, the eye-line gaze returns in Lee’s film when Alma, Ennis’s wife, looks down at Jack and Ennis’s first meeting. She looks down at the two men, similar to the style of Aguirre’s gaze, and reacts with shock as the two men embrace and kiss each other. These moments, again, give the viewer a chance to visually judge and interpret the action of the lovers against their own culturally coded feelings. Through female eyes we see the destruction of a heterosexual relationship, as Alma watches the passion of her husband kissing another man below. As viewers we must decipher our empathies in this moment. The film narrates visually the passion erupting between the long separated lovers – this, of course, is the type of passion that we know is missing in Alma’s and Ennis’s marriage. Through close-up facial expressions we feel Alma’s shock; her life is obviously being thrown into turmoil. However, the visual signifiers of heart wrenching romance are also being played on. The two men entwined, hardly able to breathe for pressing together, display a passion that is unable to be ignored as idyllic. Based on gender, this visual moment is encoded for female judgement of the two men in their homosexual embrace. The sentimental nature of Lee’s film encourages its audience to feel for the destruction of Alma’s domestic life; however, it wants us to view the romantic love of the two men as ideal and, therefore, more desirable.

Lee uses visual signifiers in the film to represent Ennis’s emotional state, as a man who finds emotions difficult. After Ennis’s first sexual encounter with Jack we see him viewing a sheep with its insides ripped open by a
coyote. This inner destruction represents the turmoil that is plaguing Ennis. He neither understands nor accepts his homosexual desires and he chooses to never verbally speak of how he feels. The violence of the animal’s death, its insides being out, signify the violence of Ennis’s emotions, the emotions that as a cowboy he unable to allow himself to express.

There is the storm that approaches as Jack and Ennis are about to be reunited. Lightening strikes as the two are finally together showing an electrified passion and a spark between them. Finally, one of the most beautiful demonstrations of Ennis’s emotional state is the Fourth of July scene. Fireworks burst out as Ennis’s anger explodes upon the two men disrespecting his wife and children with foul language. Alma is frightened and is fogged in the background because she has never seen this violent side of her husband. The visual signifiers only give us insight into the emotions of Ennis’s character – the voyeurism of the film’s style negates the one on one relationship with the character’s thoughts. Lee skilfully uses the signifiers to help his audience empathize and visually understand with images what the character is feeling.

Proulx’s story continues themes of the traditional Western in order to emphasize the normalcy of the cowboy love, to glorify his realism as a labourer and a man of silent passions. The Western narrative often ends with a convalescence scene and a marriage. Proulx uses these themes to a tragic effect by not allowing them to happen. Ennis learns of Jack’s death when his most recent post card to Jack is returned, marked DECEASED. His phone call to Lureen confirms the death of Jack and the foreshadowed fears of Ennis that homosexual love ends violently. Although Lureen says that Jack’s death was an accident, Ennis does not know “…which way it was, the tire iron or a real accident” (Proulx 23). The convalescence scene between Jack and Ennis becomes impossible as Ennis cannot save him. Ennis expresses his wish to “turn him over” and therefore save Jack from choking on his own blood, but Proulx’s narrative does not allow for this moment.

Finally, Proulx and Lee’s sentimental expression of the two men’s marriage is represented through the two shirts. Proulx describes, “the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one” (Proulx 26). This is a symbolic
representation of the two men’s love, and Lee shows the two blood stains visually uniting the two shirts and the two men through their own blood. Ennis expresses himself by saying, “Jack, I swear” (Proulx 27) alone, to himself, as a swearing of his faithfulness to the love and memory of their relationship. Finally, Proulx allows us to see the destructive effect of the cowboy stereotype through Ennis. His inability to swear his love to Jack in life, has led to Jack’s death. This means that Ennis is unable to fulfill his true desires to be with and take care of Jack. This ending means to tarnish the cowboy stereotype by showing its inability to allow men expressions of love and desire.

Proulx’s explicit prose and Lee’s visual sentimentality allow the audience to identify with the destructive nature of repressed emotions displayed by Ennis. Brokeback Mountain allows Proulx to create a cowboy that conforms to the iconic stereotype of the laconic cowboy, through Ennis, while allowing the representation of his desires for Jack to show the destructiveness of the cowboys’ gender coded ways. Proulx’s narrative allows her reader to sympathize with her characters through the themes of Western narrative that her cowboys are not able to achieve in glorified status. Ennis is not able to find happiness, fulfillment, and love in domestic life and longs for the idyllic life he experienced with Jack in their utopian space on the mountain. Lee’s film gives the audience a view of the natural and physical beauty upon the mountain and weighs this against the failed domestic sequences with Alma and Lureen.

Proulx’s novella Brokeback Mountain describes her cowboy heroes in a harshly realistic manner, portraying them as cowboys of the rural west—as labourers. The Western as a genre allows Proulx’s cowboys a chance for renewal in the most idyllic setting, away from the urbanized, resisting the domestic community. Proulx and Lee show homosexual love in the context of nature – telling its audience that this is a natural state of love. Brokeback Mountain allows the laconic and emotionally repressed cowboy to be seen in a destructive light and opens the discourse for new stereotypes of the Western cowboy. This transformation allows for a man of feelings, who identifies and strives for what he desires to become a reality. This is the new feeling cowboy: real, natural, and comfortable in the pastoral setting he loves the best. Proulx’s
and Lee’s stories are filled with tragedy in love both heteronormative and homosexual, in civilized and pastoral spaces, which makes the heartbreak more sentimental because it allows for a personal and subjective analysis of the love lost. It allows us to see the transformative nature of the cowboys’ character and also to recognize the destructive nature of categorization and prejudice.

**Works Cited**


