

# “IF YOU CAN’T FIX IT YOU GOT A STAND IT”: IMPOSSIBLE LOVE STORIES, IDENTITY AND MASCULINITY IN “THE LADY WITH THE DOG” AND “BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN”

M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo, UNED  
(Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia) – Madrid

Email: [mcarmengomez@aol.com](mailto:mcarmengomez@aol.com)

**Abstract:** *Despite their apparent dissimilarities (a nineteenth-century Russian story about an adulterous relationship and a twentieth-century story about gay men in the American West), this essay explores how their common exploration of the theme of impossible happy endings and star-crossed lovers brings Anton Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog” and Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain” together in several aspects. This essay will reveal how in both works, the idea of the individual’s identity is closely linked to masculinity and sexuality. How to be a “proper” man for Dmtri as well as for Ennis and Jack, the protagonists of these respective stories, is crucial to an understanding of who they are and will decisively mark the outcome of their relationships and lives.*

**Keywords:** impossible love, Anton Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog,” Annie Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain” (short story), homosexuality, identity.

**Resumen:** *Pese a sus aparentes diferencias (historia en la Rusia del siglo XIX sobre una relación adúltera y una historia del siglo XX sobre homosexuales en el Oeste americano), este ensayo explora cómo su común exploración del tema de los finales felices imposibles y amantes desafortunados asemejan “La dama del perrito” de Antón Chejov y “Brokeback Mountain” de Annie Proulx. Este ensayo revelará cómo ambas obras, la idea de la identidad individual está íntimamente ligada a la de la masculinidad y la sexualidad. Cómo ser un “buen hombre” para Dmtri así como para Ennis y Jack, los protagonistas de las respectivas historias, es crucial para un entendimiento de quiénes son y marcará de modo decisivo el resultado de sus relaciones y sus vidas.*

**Palabras clave:** amor imposible, Antón Chejov, “La dama del perrito”, “Brokeback Mountain” (relato), homosexualidad, identidad.

The literary production of Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) does not seem to have much in common with that of American author Annie Proulx (1935- ). The same could be said about the protagonists of two of their most well-known short stories, “The Lady with the Dog” and “Brokeback Mountain.” What can possibly connect a nineteenth-century

1 (Proulx 2003: 271).

Russian lady who visits a spa to two homosexual cowboys in contemporary America? cStill, the connecting thread between all of them is an impossible love that questions the identity and the self-image of all of the protagonists, but, most importantly, the masculinity of the male characters in both works. These stories deal with a love unspoken, which in nineteenth-century Russia would be adultery but in 1960s-1980s America, homosexuality. In portraying these love stories, the concept of masculinity for Ennis and Jack in “Brokeback Mountain” and for Dmtri in “Lady with a Dog” is crucial. This essay explores how identity is defined and re-defined for these characters and the potential consequences of such a process while analyzing the innovations that Chekhov incorporated into fiction writing and that Proulx can be regarded as a continuator of.

First published in *The New Yorker* in 1997, “Brokeback Mountain” was awarded the O. Henry Prize and the National Magazine Award and later included in Proulx’s short story collection, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999). Well before the success of its cinematographic adaptation (2005), “Brokeback Mountain” generated a heated debate due to its subject matter. Sexual relations between men taking care of the cattle in the Wyoming mountains, isolated from the rest of the world and with the company of no other human being apart from each other for several months, have for long been known to happen – and silenced. These men often establish a personal connection with their partners, who satisfy their need for human contact, including their sexual necessities. This is basically the premise with which Proulx’s short story begins and how Ennis and Jack see their relationship at first. Denials of their homosexuality are recurrent, as Ennis and Jack insist that “I’m not no queer” (Proulx 2003: 262) and, for this reason, “they never talked about the sex, let it happen” while “they believed themselves invisible” (Proulx 2003: 262). Their refusal to accept their homosexuality reflects mainstream society’s negative attitude toward homosexuality at the time, which prompts them to deny their own identity. For them, being a man excludes homosexuality and, seeing themselves as “real” men, they cannot even contemplate being anything other than heterosexual. That Ennis has a long-term girlfriend and Jack is about to become a professional rodeo cowboy, make them feel that their masculinity is safe and remains unchallenged by their sexual relations. Because “internalized homophobia is a major developmental difficulty in gay men” (Rowen and Malcolm 2002: 77), their assumption of their sexuality is a long process, fraught with difficulties and instances of low self-esteem (if not self-loathing).

In “Brokeback Mountain,” Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar meet while taking care of sheep in the Wyoming mountains and quite soon afterwards they start having sexual relations. Both these young men see this situation as a short-lived relationship, bound to that summer and not to be resumed – or acknowledged. Nevertheless, things are not as clear-cut as they would like them to be. The mixing of the sheep during a hailstorm leaves Ennis with the sensation that “in a disquieting way everything seemed mixed” (Proulx 2003: 262), a reference to the cattle as well as to their own feelings. This restlessness only gets exacerbated once they return to civilization – “as they descended the slope Ennis felt he was in a slow-motion, but headlong, irreversible fall” (Proulx 2003: 263). Both believe that the end of the summer will put an end to their relationship and they will resume their lives (Jack heading off to the rodeos, Ennis to marry Alma, his fiancée), leaving their (heterosexual)

masculinity intact. However, “old Brokeback got us good and it sure ain’t over” (Proulx 2003: 268). Their masculinity has to be redefined, tested by their affair.

Contrary to popular belief that the emergence of a homosexual orientation happens at puberty, it can take place after adolescence (Rowen and Malcolm 2002: 78), as it is the case with Jack and Ennis. Regardless of the time when it emerges, this identity search and formation process is usually confusing and despairing for homosexuals, who may experience a low self-esteem as a result (Rowen and Malcolm 2002: 78). Eventually, becoming gay is a culmination of four previous steps – sensitization, dissociation and signification, coming out, and commitment (Troiden 1979: 362).<sup>2</sup>

Chekhov wrote “The Lady with the Dog” in 1899 during his stay in Yalta, prescribed by his doctors to cure his tuberculosis. There he expected to recover his health, although at the cost of boredom and isolation from the Moscow literary scene. Similarly, “The Lady with the Dog” starts when Moscow resident Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov, bored with life and with his stay in Yalta, meets a lady, with whom he soon starts a relationship. Already in a loveless marriage, he has become a misogynist due to his intense dislike for his wife, to whom he has been unfaithful for a long time. The distaste he feels for his wife and everything she represents has led him to distance himself from her through a number of previous meaningless affairs: “though he secretly regarded her as a woman of limited intelligence, narrow-minded and rather dowdy, he stood in awe of her and disliked being at home. Long ago he had begun being unfaithful to her, and he was now constantly unfaithful, and perhaps that was why he nearly always spoke ill of women, and whenever they were discussed in his presence he would call them “the lower race” (Chekhov 1991: 293). However, this is Anna’s first extramarital affair and her feelings when her husband sends for her just as her affair with Dmitri is starting (“It’s a good thing I am going away ... It’s fate itself!” [Chekhov 1991: 285]) convey her relief. Yet, her husband’s summons will not end their affair.

Apart from similarities in plot, other connections between Chekhov and Proulx can be found in stylistic terms. Once asked to provide biographical information, Chekhov replied that “a few facts, the bare facts, is all I can do” (quoted in Reid 2003: n.p.). Therefore, “the characters in Chekhov’s plays are never fully ‘known’ – as a writer, he seems to delight in maintaining a sense of indeterminacy, and unknowability, about them. The bare facts are always laughably inadequate to the complexity of ‘real’ people” (Reid 2003: n.p.). It was “after 1890 [that] Čexov seems to have realized that the graphic realism ... was unnecessary, and that his talent lay in more subtle depiction of the characters’ emotions” (Conrad 1980: 116), which resulted in that little information is given pertaining his characters’ backgrounds, a shortage matched by the scant physical descriptions.

*Chekhov put it in the following terms: “the short story, like the stage, has its conventions. My instinct tells me that at the end of a novel or a story, I must artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work, and therefore must casually mention something about those whom I have already presented. Perhaps I am in error” (quoted in Nogueira 2010: 24).* He is to be credited with several innovations in the short story genre which can be seen in the writings of Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver

2 However, for Troiden a gay identity is never fully acquired, as it is an ongoing, never-ending process (1979: 372).

(May 1993: 369), Tennessee Williams, James Joyce or Katherine Mansfield (Boyd 2006: 7). These changes had been initiated by Turgenev but it was Chekhov who culminated this transformation of fiction writing (Boyd 2006: 7). These characteristics made critics regard Chekhov’s stories as being artless and casual, deceived by their seeming simplicity (May 1993: 371).

The same lack of physical descriptions found in Chekhov applies to Proulx’s, whose physical and background descriptions are scant. Because of the lack of detailed physical descriptions, in constructing the protagonists’ characters, sexual relations acquire a special relevance in both works. In “Brokeback Mountain” and “The Lady with the Dog,” once their respective relationships have been sexually consummated and the lovers’ feelings have been revealed, characters try to convince themselves that they have nothing at stake, that it is just a temporary liaison and nothing has changed for long or definitely. All of them are certainly aware of how their identity has already been dramatically altered by these affairs. Anna’s identity has been compromised and she sees herself cast as the adulteress. Actually, she is afraid not so much of having an adulterous liaison with Dmitri as she is of the possibility of losing his respect. She fears how this relationship compromises her identity, making of her an adulterous woman. Meanwhile, Ennis and Jack are unsure of their feelings or their masculinity – they are not “queer,” as they repeat over and over again. While Anna fears losing Dmitri’s respect, Ennis and Jack risk losing society’s approval and, therefore, becoming outsiders and social pariahs. Because “I doubt there’s nothing now we can do” (Proulx 2003: 269), they resume their relationship through once- or twice-a-year encounters, resolving that “if you can’t fix it you got a stand it” (Proulx 2003: 271). Changes in their self-image aside, they still cling to the hope that nothing has been permanently changed. Both affairs begin as summer flings, with no intention of outliving the end of summer and the return to their respective homes and responsibilities. However, they are soon proved wrong and their affairs would lead them to question their masculinity.

Back in Moscow, Dmitri cannot forget Anna and neither can Jack and Ennis forget each other, which leads to Dmitri’s visit to Anna’s hometown and Jack’s visiting Ennis. Anna’s subsequent visits to Moscow are not too different from Ennis and Jack’s trips to a number of mountain places over the years. Their respective relationships are far from being broken and they must hide from society to prolong them. Jack is increasingly more frustrated as years go by and their situation has not improved: “we could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn’t do it, Ennis, so what we got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that. It’s all we got, boy” (Proulx 2003: 277). Meanwhile, Dmitri, as much as Jack and Ennis, feels alienated from society. The dissatisfaction he had long felt with Moscow life had until then been somewhat assuaged by a string of affairs:

in the company of men he was bored, cold, ill at ease, and uncommunicative, but felt at home among women, and knew what to say to them and how to behave; and even when he was silent in their presence he felt at ease. In his appearance, in his character, in his whole nature, there was something charming and elusive, which made him attractive to women and cast a spell over them. He knew this, and was himself attracted to them by some mysterious power (Chekhov 1991: 289-290).

However, after having met Anna, he finds it unbearable:

These words, in themselves so commonplace, for some reason aroused Gurov’s indignation: they seemed somehow dirty and degrading. What savage manners, what awful faces! What wasted nights, what dull days devoid of interest! Frenzied card playing, gluttony, drunkenness, endless conversations about the same thing. Futile pursuits and conversations about the same topics taking up the greater part of the day and the greater part of a man’s strength, so that he was left to live out a curtailed, bobtailed life with his wings clipped—an idiotic mess—impossible to run away or escape—one might as well be in a madhouse or a convict settlement (Chekhov 1991: 287).

For Jack and Ennis, their homosexuality places them outside mainstream society and alienates them. They are aware of the impossibility of their situation: “two guys livin together? No. All I can see is we get together once in a while way the hell out in the back a nowhere” (Proulx 2003: 270). Dmitri too feels at odds with society and does not share his wife’s tastes and opinions (representative of the Russian upper classes’) but the difference lies in that Dmitri already felt this alienation before meeting Anna whereas Jack and Ennis’ alienation emanates from their relationship. Even worse, their scarce encounters are fraught with the threat of physical danger, possibly even death, if discovered: “we do that in the wrong place we’ll be dead. There’s no reins on this one. It scares the piss out a me” (Proulx 2003: 269).

Curiously enough, the redefinition of his identity that Dmitri undergoes following his romance with Anna, does not have any moral component. After all, he is committing adultery but that this circumstance might be tainting or spoiling his new-found idea of himself does not cross his mind. This is a consequence of the fact that, in portraying this adulterous relationship, Chekhov abstained from passing a negative moral judgment. In so doing, he was revolutionary in rejecting the convention that a story had to have a moral purpose by punishing those who transgressed social or ethical boundaries, therefore providing an edifying example. This stood in marked contrast to his fellow writer Tolstoy, who was “*writing extended parables of the right and the wrong way to live*” (Cornwell 2004: n. p.).

Even though his protagonist couple is certainly guilty of adultery, adultery is not Chekhov’s main theme and does not deserve his moral censorship. Actually, adultery in Chekhov is not necessarily a sign of moral decadence or a lack of integrity, and his adulterous heroines still retain their purity. Anna frets over having lost Dmitri’s respect after they become lovers: “I am a wicked, fallen woman! I despise myself, and have no desire to justify myself!” (Chekhov 1991: 293) but Chekhov assuages her guilt by blaming her failed marriage on her husband’s flaws. Anna herself is conscious of her husband’s shortcomings: “it is not my husband I have deceived, but myself! And not only now, I have been deceiving myself for a long time. My husband may be a good, honest man, but he is also a flunky! I do not know what work he does, but I know he is a flunky!” (Chekhov 1991: 293). Accordingly, “the romantic heroine is not considered to have done wrong, because she seeks to exchange a relationship debased by her husband for a loftier one” (Smith 1973: 75).

Before Chekhov, fiction writing was ruled by the formula “event-plot.” In Chekhov, the plot is lacking in events, as there is no dramatic event, no turning point on which to build the plot. This gives the impression that we are in front of a random slice of life, not a story which is told for the (moral) edification of its readers. *Chekhov was attacked for*

*refusing to pass moral judgment (even less, to punish on moral reasons) his characters’ transgressions. He objected that “the artist must be not the judge of his characters and of their conversations, but merely an impartial witness” (quoted in Moss n.d.: 46). Moreover, he contended that readers already knew that certain morally questionable events depicted in his works were morally censored, without his having to spell it out (Moss n.d.: 46).*

*Despite Chekhov’s rejection of the moral purpose of literature, he still thought that, through his works, he was contributing to making society better. In his Notebook (a diary of sorts, he wrote that “man will only become better when you make him see what he is like” (Moss n.d.: 46). In 1902 Chekhov came to the conviction that people’s awareness to the bleakness of their lives as they were living them up to then, would lead to “create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again, ‘Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!’” (quoted in Moss n.d.: 46).*

These relationships transcend physical passion, for identity is central. Identity, the question of who one really is, regardless of society’s rules or conventions, is a pivotal issue in both stories. While Anna’s identity and purity do not get compromised by her adultery, their affair shakes Dmtri’s idea of himself. Falling in love for the first time prompts Dmtri to redefine who he is, casting him as a representative of the superfluous man in Russian literature:

someone who understands the problems facing society and the ethical dilemmas facing his fellow citizens, but someone who cannot take steps to remedy the situation because of external pressures placed on him by that society or by the authorities. To qualify as a superfluous man, some say that a character must be alienated from his surrounding and must ultimately have ‘a complete break from and falling out with it.’ (Chances 2011: n.p.).

Because “Brokeback Mountain” is primarily a story about gay love, the fact that they are adulterous has gone largely unnoticed. Admittedly, the point in “The Lady with the Dog” is an adulterous relationship and that of “Brokeback Mountain” is a homosexual relationship, but the latter ultimately is also about adultery, even if this is overshadowed by the stronger emphasis on homosexuality.<sup>3</sup> That theirs is a homosexual relationship has deep implications for Jack and Ennis. The latter pretends not to be gay because he simultaneously has a heterosexual relationship, first with his wife and, after their divorce, with his girlfriend. However, Jack has other male lovers and is willing to, given Ennis’ reluctance, live with another man. In their relationship, we see a common Chekhovian point, the “breach between the character’s feelings and their ability to verbalize these emotions” (Zhao 2010: 38).

While in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* the character Levin dwells at length on the state of Russia (97 chapters deal with him in contrast to the 68 devoted to Anna [Briggs 2004: n.p.]), Dmtri is as unable to work things out for Anna and himself as he is to solve the ills of Russia. Nevertheless, although his love for Anna and their relationship remain hidden,

3 Only after the movie was snubbed at the Oscars was adultery brought up, as “David Carr of *The New York Times* reported that many Oscar voters could not see ‘why a story that was essentially a tale of two men cheating on their wives ... should be chosen to represent Hollywood’s best effort of the year’” (Mehler 2007: 137).



there is a complete break with his past life, even if it is a change known only to himself: “in his home it was impossible for him to talk of his love, and away from home—there was no one. The tenants who lived in his house and his colleagues at the bank were equally useless” (Chekhov 1991: 287). With this affair, a new life begins for him, but this is entirely an inner change, since “we are not seeing the lovers changed in relation to society, but in relation to their own inner lives” (Smith 1973: 215). Dmitri and Anna are not outstanding at all at the beginning of their story: “This slight woman, lost amid a provincial rabble, in no way remarkable, with her silly lorgnette in her hands” (Chekhov 1991: 289) but their love makes Dmitri and Anna transcend their plainness – “on account of their pure and enduring love, they are different from, and ‘superfluous’ to, the rest of society’s members who have never experienced real love. Chekhov shows this superfluity as being a positive quality” (Chances 2011: n.p.).

Jack and Ennis’ relationship also shakes their identity to the core. Jack, who has several homosexual affairs, cannot deny his homosexuality and knows he is not alone, for there are other gay men in his community. Ennis, however, is afraid of being branded (by society or himself) as gay. Not only is his last name Del Mar (of the sea), his name in Gaelic means island and only choice (Stacy 2007: 212), which reflects his isolation from both mainstream society and the gay community. “Ennis is of Wyoming, and the scope of Proulx’s work will not release him from that place” (Perez 2007: 80), as Proulx decided to write stories intrinsically connected to their setting: “I’d been trying to write situational stories that are constructed from landscape, long stories about offbeat kinds of love” (quoted in Winter 2005: n.p.). Although the release of *Brokeback Mountain* saw multiple reviews defining it as a universal story of impossible love (so as to appeal to a wider audience), the fact remains that Proulx’s story is firmly set in a given location. Proulx herself has stated her intention of writing place- and time-bound stories because “place and history are central to the fiction I write, both in the broad, general sense and in detailed particulars” (quoted in “Interview with Annie Proulx” 1999: n.p.). Accordingly, Jack and Ennis live in the Southwest and do not envision moving elsewhere – Ennis is paralyzed by fear and the only solution Jack sees is moving back to his hometown, rather than away from the West. As Jack and Ennis are anchored in the Southwest, they have to face the dominant negative opinion of homosexuality then and there, where “such forms of behavior as homosexuality, bestiality, and transvestism have been interpreted by the societies concerned as ‘injurious to the whole community’ instead of merely to individuals or their families” (Davies 1982: 1032-1033). Their location makes their social acceptance as gays arduous, as “the literature generally concludes that older, less educated people, African Americans, people living in the South or Midwest, males, people residing in small communities, and religious fundamentalists are more negative toward homosexuality than are younger, more educated people, whites, those living on the Pacific Coast, females, residents of big cities or big city suburbs, and religious liberals” (Loftus 2001: 764). A community’s identity is profoundly shaped by a number of factors and “the strong taboos that exist against homosexuality, bestiality, and transvestism in the West are the result of attempts to establish and defend strong ethnic, religious, or institutional boundaries” (Davies 1982: 1060).

Trying to revive their experience in *Brokeback Mountain*, “but never returning to *Brokeback*” (Proulx 2003: 273), *Brokeback Mountain* is a liminal space, a limbo away

from their daily lives: “it’s an image of paradise, as the whole train of mountain imagery is generally glorious, going all the way back to James Hilton’s Shangri-La” (Hunter 2006: n.p.). The mountain is “a refuge, or an island of denial” (Brancolli 2005: n.p.), “their haven and prison” (Mirasol 2011: n.p.), where they can be in love, in contrast to the lies told down the mountain (Brancolli 2005: n.p.). Because Brokeback Mountain is not the real world but a respite from it, the story has been read as a pastoral, with the diverse mountain landscapes where they meet through the years being “an intermediate zone of contentment between the city and the wild, a place of rest that is always temporary. [...] a place in between, a place of license, a place of possibility that can lead to growth and transformation” (Jones 2007: 20). Only there can they love each other while preserving their masculine identity (Harris 2006: n.p.). Further emphasizing the unreal character of their location and the impossibility of continuing their relationship among society, Brokeback Mountain is a made-up name.<sup>4</sup> Jack’s wife, despite ignoring what Brokeback Mountain really was about, puts the finger on its almost mythical, unreal aspect: “I thought Brokeback Mountain was around where he grew up. But knowing Jack, it might be some pretend place where the bluebirds sing and there’s a whiskey spring” (Proulx 2003: 280).

The ending of “The Lady with the Dog” is a zero ending. By the close of the story, nothing has really happened, everything continues more or less as before, no dramatic conclusions have been reached and there is no closure, just like in real life. Defying the notion that, once characters have been fully developed, the narrative must come to a conclusion, Chekhov does not end his characters’ evolution (Katsell 1974: 380). Precisely because his characters fail to solve the conflict they face, Virginia Woolf wondered about Chekhov’s writings:

is it the end, we ask? We have rather the feeling that we have overrun our signal; or it is as if a tune had stopped short without the expected chords to close it. These stories are inconclusive, we say, and proceed to frame a criticism based upon the assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognize. In so doing we raise the question of our own fitness as readers. Where the tune is familiar and the end emphatic – lovers united, villains discomfited, intrigues exposed [...] we can scarcely go wrong, but where the tune is unfamiliar and the end a note of interrogation or merely the information that they went on talking, as it is in Tchekov, we need a very daring and alert sense of literature to make us hear the tune, and in particular those last notes which complete the harmony (2014: n.p.).

After the end, we wonder whether Anna and Dmtri will continue meeting from time to time, in moments stolen to their respective spouses, hidden in hotels where they are unlikely to run into acquaintances. Although their relationship is not progressing any further, “it was evident to him that their love affair would not soon be over, and there was no end in sight. Anna Sergeyevna was growing more and more passionately fond of him, and it was beyond belief that he would ever tell her it must one day end; and if he had told her, she would not have believed him” (Chekhov 1991: 292). Their separations are already taking their toll on them (especially on Anna) at the end of the story: “She was crying from the depth of her emotions, in the bitter knowledge that their life together was so weighed down with

4 Although there is a Break Back Mountain in Wyoming (Testa 2005: n.p.).



sadness, because they could only meet in secret and were always hiding from people like thieves. And that meant surely that their lives were shattered!” (Chekhov 1991: 292) but we ignore if this will be enough for them to end their relationship. *Actually, “the irresolution of Chekhov’s very short fiction is a mark of its greatness, and distinguishes from the genre fiction that was its contemporary” (Brooks 2014: 207).* Dmitri has certainly changed, his relationship with Anna alienating him from his fellows, whom he now sees as vain and selfish, beneath himself and his self-image. This new perception of his masculinity, while crucial for himself, does not lead him to break away from society or to act any differently. His new definition of his own masculinity is not externally acknowledged.

But while Chekhov leaves us wondering what will happen, Proulx brings an end to her story by having Jack die as Jack was trying to work out a new concept of masculinity that suits him – one which allows him to raise cattle, a male occupation, while living with his new male lover. But his death puts an end to this attempt, cutting his re-definition of his masculinity short.<sup>5</sup> Is Proulx’s ending necessary? For Stacy, it is not and, moreover, the author is punishing the protagonists’ past transgressions (2007: 215), very much like Tolstoy had Anna Karenina committing suicide. *Anna Karenina was permeated by Tolstoy’s idea that “happiness for a woman in marriage stems only from the replacement of romantic idealism by submission to duty, the suppression of sexual excitement by humdrum housekeeping, and the pleasures of raising children” (Briggs 2004: n.p.), resulting in Tolstoy punishing the adulteress (Cornwell 2004: n.p.). Similarly, Proulx felt her story inexorably led to that conclusion: “while I was working on this story, I was occasionally close to tears. I felt guilty that their lives were so difficult, yet there was nothing I could do about it. It couldn’t end any other way” (quoted in Harris 2007: 129; italics his).* This is different from Chekhov, who does not feel compelled to kill his own Anna, reading as a life-like, godless story. Chekhov results modern in that he does not offer a moralizing point of view, without punishing his adulteress with death.

While the irresoluteness of Chekhov’s ending may frustrate readers, the resoluteness of “Brokeback Mountain” has exasperated others for its very finality, which contributes, in their minds, to turn the story into “a disappointing heteronormative cautionary tale, the all-too-familiar ‘one dies, one lives’ scenario of the past” (Stacy 2007: 2). The inevitability of the ending has also been questioned: “we should be careful to distinguish the brutality of Jack’s death (imagined by Ennis as a gay bashing), a brutality necessary to Ennis’s terrified vision of the world, from the *unnecessary* brutality of Proulx’s decision, as the writer, to kill off Jack, when Ennis’s emotional and erotic isolation is long complete, and complete without such a price being paid” (Harris 2007: 121). While Chekhov leaves characters and readers wondering what may happen, the ending “Brokeback Mountain” was bound to without Jack’s death (Jack moving back home with his neighbor, leaving Ennis behind, fed up with waiting for him for twenty years), offers a realistic, alternative possibility of how the story could have ended differently.

Jack’s father’s revelation that “he’s goin a split up with his wife and come back here. So he says. But like most a Jack’s ideas it never come to pass” (Proulx 2003: 282), shakes

5 That he died in a homophobic attack, as Ennis fears, or that it was just an accident, as Jack’s wife believes, is irrelevant.

Ennis to the very core, as he realizes that Jack had somebody else to live with, giving Ennis up for good. In the light of this alternative ending that is hinted but not realized, “Jack’s death is entirely gratuitous” (Harris 2007: 129). Jack and Ennis’ impotence to change their situation “constructs gay characters as powerless and tragic victims of forces beyond their control” (Arellano 2007: 59). Proulx sides with Ennis’ negative view about their relationship because she “cannot visualize, let alone write, another ending – just as Ennis cannot visualize it” (Harris 2007: 129). Because Jack, willing to openly admit his new masculinity as a homosexual man, dies and Ennis, who does not dare to defy society’s construction of masculinity as exclusively heterosexual, lives on, no changes in the concept of masculinity has been enacted.

As already mentioned, the vast majority of Chekhov’s stories conclude in irresoluteness, with no conclusion having been reached and without seeing if Dmitri’s new idea of his own masculinity will lead him to make any actual changes in his life. This is not to be understood as a source of frustration, for “Chekhov did not create from the void but from hope in human potential. [...] he shows us that potential beginning to realize itself in fact, but without attempting to depict it in the fullness of its development” (Katsell 1974: 382), left to the readers’s imagination. Dmitri finds himself altered by love: “the memory of Anna Sergeyevna remained as vivid as if he had parted from her only the day before” (Chekhov 1991: 292). Yet, he does not separate from his wife. This is consistent with Chekhov’s “passionate faith in a new, well-balanced, noble life. [...] there lived in his soul a presentiment of the beautiful life that might be realized on this earth” (Patrick 1931-1932: 659) – only that he denies his characters the chance to see it happen. In contrast, Proulx would not give us a zero ending but had Jack dead in what she considered an act of literary determinism but which critics have resented.

While many of Chekhov’s fellow writers devoted much of their thinking and writings to political affairs and social reform, Chekhov chose to deal with particulars and individuals rather than with larger political aspirations. Russian writers at the time made use of their novels to pursue their ideas or to advance their moral concepts (such as Tolstoy), at odds with Chekhov’s commitment to observation and objectivity (Smith 1973: 8). Instead of calling for political reform, Chekhov draws characters who look at the course of their lives but “there is no answer, and this tormenting problem haunts them; for human relations have become so hopelessly entangled that they are incomprehensible, and life itself baffles men and women and becomes for them a strange and puzzling riddle” (Patrick 1931-1932: 660). This is not to say that Chekhov was unaware or indifferent to the current situation, for he repeatedly pointed his finger at the problems plaguing Russian society (Patrick 1931-1932: 658), here embodied by Dmitri’s wife and Anna’s husband.

Dmitri and Anna, while dissatisfied with their current situation and hoping for a better future, do not rebel against their circumstances or actually actively change them. Paralyzed by the uncertainties that plague them, “how should one live? What is to be done? With what should one go? Why should one live? To these questions Chekhov’s characters have no answer. Some of them dream of a different life – beautiful and purposeful; but it remains only a dream, for they have neither any guiding idea nor any definite goal” (Patrick 1931-1932: 662). Dmitri and Anna do not act, and, instead, look at the future hopefully: “it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found and a lovely new life would begin for

them; and to both of them it was clear that the end was still very far away, and the hardest and most difficult part was only beginning” (Chekhov 1991: 293). Their irresoluteness or immobility is the same that plagues Ennis. Jack, in contrast, tries to act but dies before realizing his project, which, in a way, discourages any course of action other than waiting. In spite of the finality of Proulx’s story and despite the irresoluteness of Chekhov’s, the fact remains that Jack’s redefinition of masculinity on the one hand and Dmitri’s on the other, therefore, remain a private issue with no further consequences or effect.

## REFERENCES

- ARELLANO, L. 2007. “*The ‘Gay Film’ That Wasn’t: The Heterosexual Supplement.*” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 59-70.
- BRANCOLLI, A. 2005. “*Brokeback Mountain: A Tragedy of Love, Lies, Silence.*” *Houston Chronicle*. 28 August 2012. <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/film-and-lit/brancolli-review.pdf>.
- BOYD, W. 2006. “*A Short History of the Short Story.*” *The Quarter*: 5-9.
- BRIGGS, A. D. P. 2004. “*Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy.*” *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 30 August 2012. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/people.php?rec=true&UID=4413>.
- BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN. 2006. *Focus Features and River Road Entertainment*; directed by Ang Lee ; screenplay by Larry McMurtry & Diana Ossana; producers, Diana Ossana, James Schamus. Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment.
- CHANCES, E. 2011. “*The Superfluous Man in Russian Literature (1820).*” *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 30 August 2012. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=14900>.
- CHEKHOV, A. 1991. “*The Lady with the Pet Dog.*” In *Forty Stories*. Robert Payne (editor and translator). New York: Vintage Classics, Vintage Books. 277-293.
- CONRAD, J. L. 1980. “*Sensuality in Cexov’s Prose.*” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 24, 2: 103-117.
- CORNWELL, N. 2004. “*Anna Karenina.*” *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2017. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=6589>.
- DAVIES, C. 1982. “*Sexual Taboos and Social Boundaries.*” *The American Journal of Sociology* 87, 5: 1032-1063.
- HARRIS, L. 2006. “*Misunderstanding Brokeback Mountain.*” *TCS Daily*. 1 May 2012. <http://www.lee-harris.org/2459/misunderstanding-brokeback-mountain#>.
- HARRIS, W. C. 2007. “*Broke(n)back Faggots: Hollywood Gives Queers a Hobson’s Choice.*” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 118-134.

- HUNTER, S. 2006. “A *Picture of Two Americas in Brokeback Mountain*.” *Washington Post*. 1 May 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/01/AR2006020102477.html>.
- INTERVIEW WITH ANNIE PROULX. 1999. *The Missouri Review XXII*, 2. 1 April 2017. <http://www.missourireview.com/content-index.php?genre=Interviews&title=Interview+with+Annie+Proulx>.
- JONES, G. 2007. “*Proulx’s Pastoral: Brokeback Mountain as Sacred Space*.” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 19-28.
- KATSELL, J. H. 1974. “*Character Change in Cexov’s Short Stories*.” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 18, 4: 377-383.
- LOFTUS, J. 2001. “*America’s Liberalization in Attitudes toward Homosexuality, 1973 to 1998*.” *American Sociological Review* 66, 5: 762-782.
- MAY, C. E. 2002. *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*. New York and London: Routledge.
- . 1993. “*Reality in the Modern Short Story*.” *Style* 27, 3: 369-379.
- MEHLER, C. E. 2007. “*Brokeback Mountain at the Oscars*.” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 135-151.
- MIRASOL, M. 2011. “*A Great Love Story: Brokeback Mountain*.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. 28 February 2017. <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/film-and-lit/mirasol-review.pdf>.
- MOSS, W. G. “*The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov*.” 13 October 2017. <http://www.wisdompage.com/ChekhovEssay.pdf>.
- NOGUEIRA GUIMARÃES, J. F. 2010. “*The Short-Short Story: a New Literary Genre*.” *Master’s thesis*. Belo Horizonte: Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.
- PATRICK, G. Z. 1931-932. “*Chekhov’s Attitude Towards Life*.” *Slavonic and East European Review* 10, 658-668.
- PEREZ, H. 2007. “*Gay Cowboys Close to Home: Ennis Del Mar on the Q.T.*” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 71-87.
- PROULX, A. (1997) “*Brokeback Mountain*.” *The New Yorker*. 13 October issue. 20 January 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/10/13/brokeback-mountain>
- . 2003. “*Brokeback Mountain*.” *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore: Scribner, 253-285.
- REID, J. 2003. “*Anton Chekhov*.” *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 5 January 2017. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/printer\\_format\\_people.php?UID=843](http://www.litencyc.com/php/printer_format_people.php?UID=843).

- ROWEN, C. J., & MALCOLM, J. P. 2002. “*Correlates of Internalized Homophobia and Homosexual Identity Formation in a Sample of Gay Men.*” *Journal of Homosexuality*. 43, 2: 77-92.
- SMITH, V. L. 1973. *Anton Chekhov and the Lady with the Dog*. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- STACY, J. 2007. “*Love and Silence, Penguins and Possibility.*” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 205-220.
- . 2007. “*Preface.*” *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Ed. Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 1-4.
- TESTA, M. 2005. “*At Close Range: Interview with Annie Proulx.*” *JH Weekly*. 27 April 2012. [http://www.planetjh.com/music\\_arts\\_culture/A\\_100138.aspx](http://www.planetjh.com/music_arts_culture/A_100138.aspx).
- TROIDEN, R. R. 1979. “*Becoming Homosexual: A Model of Gay Identity Acquisition.*” *Psychiatry* 42: 362-373.
- WINTER, J. 2005. “*The Scripting News: Brokeback Writers on the Road from Page to Screen.*” *Village Voice*. 4 April 2017. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-11-22/film/the-scripting-news/>.
- WOOLF, V. 2014. 1925. *The Common Reader, First Series*. *The University of Adelaide Library*. 19 March 2014. <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c/chapter16.html>.
- ZHAO, J. 2010. “*A Comparison of Tennessee Williams and Anton Chekhov.*” *Studies in Literature and Language*. 1, 3: 35-38.