Bloom's Literature

Essay Topics Close Range Wyoming Stories

1. In an interview with the *Missouri Review* in 1999, the same year *Close Range* appeared, Proulx said, "I like stories with three generations visible. Geography, geology, climate, weather, the deep past, immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them, although the random event counts for much, as it does in life…. I watch for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them." This comment suggests several fruitful topics. For instance, almost every story in *Close Range* does in fact have three generations "visible," even if only one is the focus of the story. How does Proulx use the surrounding generations to relate a sense of her characters and what happens to them? What does the reader learn about the lives of the older generations even when the focus is on the younger? "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," and "Brokeback Mountain" would be particularly suited for this analysis."Geography, geology, climate, weather" could be examined in any of these stories for their impact on character both in the sense of personality and of what happens to characters. How does the detailed description of landscape and weather affect the reading experience? Are these elements ever sentimentalized? In what respects might this writing be seen as pastoral, and in what ways does her attention to the natural world work against traditional notions of the pastoral? The essay by Ginger Jones would be useful for the latter analysis, while examinations of landscape, weather, and geography would be illuminated by the essay by Alex J. Tuss and several of those in Alex Hunt's *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx* (2009), especially O. Alan Weltzien's "Annie Proulx's Wyoming: Geographical Determinism, Landscape, and Caricature" and Elizabeth Abele's "Westward Proulx: The Resistant Landscapes of Close Range: Wyoming Stories and That Old Ace in the Hole."

2. Also in the *Missouri Review* interview Proulx responded to the critics who have questioned the amount of violence depicted in her writing: "America is a violent, gun-handling country. Americans feed on a steady diet of bloody movies, television programs, murder mysteries. Road rage, highway killings, beatings and murder of those who are different abound; school shootings—almost all of them in rural areas—make headline news over and over…. The point of writing in layers of bitter deaths and misadventures that befall characters is to illustrate American violence, which is real, deep and vast." Most of the stories in *Close Range* include scenes of violence and cruelty, some physical and some emotional. Students could interrogate these scenes of violence for their purpose and effect. Are they reasonable or gratuitous in the context? How does human violence correspond to the landscape, the weather, and/or the social climate? In "Brokeback Mountain" the sex between Ennis and Jack is described as violent more than once. How and why does violence become mixed up with love in this and other stories?

3. The Puritan work ethic and late-nineteenth-century celebrations of American drive, inventiveness, and will to progress have been inherited by contemporary generations to some degree, but with significant changes. What does hard work mean in the stories in *Close Range*? Is it typically rewarded? Why or why not? Are there examples of labor that characters find satisfying? "Job History" and "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World" would be particularly interesting to examine through this lens, although insightful examples of the human relationship to work might be found in almost all the stories. What does Proulx have to say about the human relationship to work? Karen L. Rood's *Understanding Annie Proulx* (2001) would be helpful to this undertaking.

4. Students interested in film studies might wish to compare the film version of *Brokeback Mountain* with the short story. Proulx has enthusiastically praised the film; she and others have noted that it is an unusually close adaptation of a story to film; however, the same story told in a different medium changes. Students might track the changes from the printed to the filmed version and assess how those differences serve to shift the emphasis on themes and issues. Which version more accurately depicts the hardscrabble life of ranch workers in the 1960s? Students could consult the interview with Matthew Testa, the essays by Christopher Pullen (in Hunt's *The Geographical Imagination*), James Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones, and the collection by Jim Stacy.

5. After their sexual relationship has begun, Jack and Ennis spend an evening talking by their campfire. Jack tells of being beaten and urinated on by his father when he was a small child and didn't make it to the bathroom in time. When Jack visits Ennis the first time and suggests they run a ranch together, Ennis tells of his father taking him to see a gay man who had been beaten to death by a tire iron. Both of these incidents suggest important rejections by father figures. Students would find it profitable to consider other interactions with fathers and father figures in "Brokeback Mountain" or compare them to issues with fathers in stories such as "The Mud Below," "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," and "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World." What does Proulx suggest about the impact of a father's rejection on a young man? How does she
depict it as shaping identity? For what aspects of identity is it important, and when is it perhaps not important? What if a father figure is vaguely supportive but ineffectual? Students could consult Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones and, for any of these suggested topics, Rood.