

Annie Proulx—A Writer in Quest

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Abstract

This article reviews Annie Proulx's life and her writing career and examines the quest motif throughout her writing, in order to shed light on Annie Proulx studies. It explores Proulx's insight into the existential predicament of contemporary people living in a post-industrial society as traditional culture is getting lost and traditional ways of living are out of date. By setting her characters on the journey of quest in an attempt to discover who they really are, Proulx has invigorated the traditional quest motif.

Keywords: Annie Proulx, quest

1. Introduction

As a fiction writer, fame came to Annie Proulx relatively late in life. When her first novel, *Postcards* (1992), won her the 1993 PEN\Faulkner Award for fiction, she was already 58 years old. As the first female writer who had breached this male cultural bastion (Note 1), she has written her name into the history of the award as well as that of American literature. Her second novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), which became a greater success both commercially and critically, sent Proulx directly to literary stardom. The novel not only received an outpouring of critical acclaim upon its release, but also won many awards for the writer, such as the National Book Award for Fiction, a *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize for Fiction, and an *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize in 1993, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1994. It became a best-seller, with the author becoming the year's most acclaimed "new" novelist, "a potent, and quirky voice that is garnering serious attention" (Streitfeld, 1993, p. 1). Up to now, having five novels and four short story collections published and enjoying readership widely, Proulx has secured her place in the literary circle, and proved herself to be an important and talented writer.

2. Proulx's Earlier Writing and Inspiration

Being the eldest of five daughters, Annie Proulx was born as Edna Annie Proulx (pronounced "pru", as in "true") in 1935 to George Napoleon Proulx and Lois Nelly Proulx (Note 2). Her father is of French Canadian descent, whose grandparents immigrated to New England from Quebec in the 1860s. Her mother's forbears emigrated from England to New England in 1635, "just fifteen years behind the *Mayflower*" (Proulx, 2011, p. 12). As her father was the vice president of a textile company, he travelled around New England and North Carolina, as the job required. As a result, the family had to move frequently during Annie Proulx's childhood, living in towns in Vermont, North Carolina, Maine, and Rhode Island. This experience might have contributed to her fascination with geography. Her mother, a painter and amateur naturalist whose family had "a strong tradition of oral storytelling," encouraged young Proulx "to see and appreciate the natural world, to develop an eye for detail, and to tell a story" (Rood, 2001, p. 2). Fully aware of the mother's influence, Proulx credits her mother with fostering her interest in nature and storytelling. On more than one occasion, Proulx told stories between the mother and daughter in her early childhood, showing how her mother inspired her imagination in observing and describing things at the very beginning, which she benefits for all her future life as a writer.

Growing up, Proulx struggled between school and marriage in her early-stage adult life. She earned an M.A. in history at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal in 1973 and continued her study in history there. Proulx passed the oral exams on Ph.D. in 1975, but has never completed the degree, partly because she decided against a teaching job in college, and mostly because she had to support herself and her three sons. Eventually, her literary achievements have been acknowledged by the academic world. By the year 2000, she had received three honorary degrees, respectively from the University of Maine, Toronto and Montreal.

After leaving school, Proulx settled in Canaan, Vermont. In this remote rural area near the Canadian border, job opportunities were sparse. Proulx managed to find a job and worked as a freelance journalist to support the whole family. She kept writing articles on outdoor life and domestic living, including subjects like fishing, canoeing, trapping, hunting, cider-making, cooking and gardening. These articles were published in such magazines as *Country Journal*, *Horticulture*, *Outdoor Life*, *National Wildlife*, *Gourmet and Organic gardening*. Besides articles, she also wrote how-to books and pamphlets. She coauthored with her friend, Lew Nichols, two books: *Sweet and Hard Cider: Making it, Using it and Enjoying it* (1980) and *The Complete Dairy Foods Cookbook* (1982). Proulx subsequently wrote four more books by herself: *The Gardener's Journal and Record Book* (1983), *Plan and Make Your Own Fences and Gates, Walkways, Walls, and Drives* (1983), *The Fine Art of Salad Gardening* (1985), and *The Gourmet Gardener* (1987). By writing these non-fiction articles and books on rural life, Proulx earned herself and her three sons a decent living. In the meantime, she founded and edited a local newspaper called *The Vershire Behind the Times* (Note 3). This experience with the local newspaper has been written into *The Shipping News*.

Proulx's effort of being a serious writer is well revealed in these books. Carefully written after the writer's extensive research, Proulx's nonfiction books are praised to be thorough and useful to general readers, and won her a Garden Writers of America Award in 1986. Her nonfiction is a pleasure to read, too, for she often brings to her subjects historical perspectives and interesting anecdotes, which can be hardly found in other how-to books. Some of the subjects she worked on appear later in her novels and short stories, such as the trapping techniques in *Postcards*, details of hunting in *Heart Songs and Other Stories*, canoe-making in *The Shipping News*, and accordion-making in *Accordion Crimes*. These true-to-life descriptions help to intensify the authenticity of her story-telling. And also, these how-to books have set the tone for her later fiction writing, for almost all her fictional characters are based in rural areas. As Alex Hunt notes, "These how-to books resonate powerfully with the emphasis in her fiction of the crucial connection, forged in labor, between people and landscape" (Hunt, 2009, p. 5). Furthermore, almost a decade of nonfiction writing has polished her writing style, prepared her as a unique literary stylist and a consummate storyteller, and laid foundation for her future fiction writing. However, Proulx's attitude nowadays toward these non-fiction books is quite negative. She dismisses them, regarding them only as assignments she was set to write for money.

During the period she wrote non-fiction articles on assignments for magazines, Proulx struggled to find time "scribbling away on short stories" (Rood, 2001, p. 4). These stories were published in literary and popular magazines, and most of them were published in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, a magazine with high literary standards for the outdoor stories it published. Proulx valued this experience of writing for the magazine highly. In the 1999 *Missouri Review* interview, she recalled her excitement at publishing there years ago, "There was an intense camaraderie and shared literary excitement among the writers whose fiction appeared in *Gray's*" (Proulx, 1999a, p. 80), and admitted that without this experience, she would probably never have tried to write fiction.

Proulx's academic training as a historian also has a great influence on her perspective in writing fiction. Among all the historians, the Annales School historians' ideas have enlightened her a lot. As she mentions in *Missouri Review* interview, "I was attracted to the French Annales [s]chool, which pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and crafts techniques, the development of technologies. My fiction reflects this attraction" (Proulx, 1999a, p. 80). Unlike the traditional historians, these historians no longer took passive part in perceiving history by collecting data, instead, they saw past events from the standpoint of the present. Strongly influenced by the Annales School, Annie Proulx readily adopts their thoughts in her fiction writing. Traditional history markers often serve as backdrops for the development of her characters. Crucial events such as World Wars, Civil Rights movement, and Back-To-The-Land movement are important clues that help readers to unravel the complexities of the plot and illuminate the diversities of the characters' personalities.

Like the Annales School historians, Proulx's major concern manifested in her fiction is how ordinary people eke out a living in the drastic social, economic and ecological changes, as she reveals to the *Missouri Review* interviewer her interest in "the individual caught in the whirlpool of change and chance" (Proulx, 1999a, p. 85). From her first collection of stories, this has become the consistent theme. *Heart Songs and Other Stories* focuses on the interactions between the rural poor and the urban rich: while the former are struggling to survive in the harsh land, the latter come to the countryside to quest for their pastoral ideal. *Postcards* is about the decline of the small family farms in New England in face of rapid development of urbanization and agribusiness. *The Shipping News* exposes the endangered traditional fishing business in the hands of modernization in Newfoundland. *Accordion Crimes* depicts immigrants' pursuing of American Dream in the hostile, chaotic new world. In the trilogy of *Wyoming Stories*, the farmers in Wyoming are seeking out an existence between

modernization and the traditional way of living, just like the New Englanders and Newfoundlanders. Proulx goes further in *That Old Ace in the Hole* by not only illustrating the plight of the rural farmers encountering agribusiness, but also depicting their fight against it.

3. The Quest Motif in Proulx's Writing

Proulx's struggles to find her own identity as a woman and as a writer were colored by her early experience. Born to a mother whose family is proud of their English roots and a father who is a French Canadian, Proulx becomes aware of ethnic prejudice from an early age. In her memoir, *Bird Cloud*, she depicts the prejudice against his father's family by his mother's family, and her father's struggle to get accepted by the family as well as the whole society. His struggles to get ahead at work, his frequent moving all add up to his struggle for an identity. As a woman, growing up with four sisters and bringing up three sons work together to give her different understanding of gender issues. As a writer, she started writing outdoor articles in the 1960s, when women's liberation movement was prosperous in America. She was warned to hide her gender, and publish her articles under the name E.A Proulx. As a single mother and breadwinner, Proulx managed to earn a decent living for the family, even if she was living in the rural area, where according to Proulx, "there is that natural weight toward the male side" (Detrixhe, 2005). She develops outdoor interests herself, fishing, hunting, canoeing, blurring the distinction between male and female. In her fiction, Proulx explores the strictures of the social forces, and its effect upon the characters' struggle for an identity, male or female. Furthermore, she sets her characters "in situations of change, both personal and social" (Rood, 2001, p. 3). Under these drastic changes, the struggle for identity is even more difficult for them.

In her first collection of short stories, *Heart Songs and Other Stories* published in 1988, Proulx began to depict the quest of her desperate characters for a way out. These stories are set during the second half of the twentieth century in New England rural areas. Small farms are on the edge of collapse while the urban rich come to buy the land. Either leaving to work in the urban area or staying to draw their sustenance on the land, the traditional farmers are facing challenges and difficulties. As an unknown writer to the public then, Proulx's debut wasn't an immediate success, although it did catch the attention of some critics and get compliments from them. Anyway, it strongly encouraged Proulx and her publisher, and served as a milestone in turning Proulx from a nonfiction to a fiction writer. Therefore, years of extensive reading, meticulous research, and sixteen-hour working per day have foreseen Proulx's productivity in the following decade.

Postcards (1992) represents Annie Proulx's first foray into book-length fiction into the journey toward self-identity and spiritual home. Like *Heart Songs and Other Stories*, it is also set in rural New England. It tells the story of a farming family, the Bloods, with the focus principally on Loyal, the eldest son of the family. At the beginning of the story, Loyal accidentally kills his girlfriend, Billy, and has to escape from the consequences. The story then traces his journey across America for forty years ranging from 1944 to the 1980s, against the backdrop of World War II. As a latter-day Odysseus, Loyal leaves his everyday life and enters the special world of the quest. His journey then is both literal and figurative as he wanders around. He works at a variety of jobs, mining, trapping, fossil hunting, potato digging, but none of these allows him to reclaim the intimacy with the land and settle down. At the same time, he fails to walk out of the past. He never comes to terms with the crime he commits, and fails to realize the world is going through drastic changes after World War II. As a result, homeless, loveless, childless, and friendless Loyal finally dies on the road. Meanwhile, the novel also chronicles other Blood family members' life experience, exposing their dilemma and struggle afflicted by the tumultuous changes of social and economic structures, as well as their frustrating quests in such a chaotic world.

In *The Shipping News* (1993), Proulx sends the protagonist, Quoye, to search for his individual identity and a spiritual home. Once again she sets her characters against a background of incomprehensible and massive social change with the traditional fishing business on the verge of collapse in Newfoundland. The story is mostly set in Newfoundland, the border area between Canada and America. Quoye is depicted as a large and bumbling, "unlikely" character. As the story unfolds, he experiences disasters threefold: he loses his job permanently at a local newspaper after being hired and fired for many times, his parents commit suicide upon learning that they both have cancer, and his unfaithful wife is killed in a car accident while trying to elope with her lover. Losing all his connections in New York, Quoye strikes out for Newfoundland with his two daughters and his aunt, to the family's abandoned ancestral home there. After going through difficulties, struggles, and even a symbolic death, Quoye finally overcomes the haunted ghost of his wife and his own fear, reconciling with the past. He becomes a loving father to his daughters, part of the community, a successful columnist at the local newspaper, and winning love of Wavey, the woman he admires.

Accordion Crimes (1996) depicts the early immigrants' quest for an identity and cultural inheritance. This is

Proulx's third and most ambitious novel. Just when critics worried that the great success of *The Shipping News* was hard to live up to, Proulx proved herself as one of the best American writers, as John Sutherland writes in the *New Republic* (7 October 1996), that while *The Shipping News* demonstrates that Proulx is "a good writer," *Accordion Crimes* reveals that she is "a great novelist." In this novel, Proulx continues her examination of people struggling against social and economic changes. Furthermore, she broadens her focus on individual life experience to collective experience of American immigrants. Including an enormous cast of characters, it spans roughly a century, ranging from the 1890s to the 1990s. This novel is taken as of a picaresque genre, following a green accordion transferred from hand to hand. It is made up of eight short stories, each about an ethnic group, whose quest stories are revealed as the accordion travels. Because of the melting-pot acculturation advocated by the American government, the immigrants' quest for a cultural inheritance and a place to settle down meets with racial bias and violence, thus bitter deaths and misadventures often befall them. Furthermore, they fall victims to some social events as well, such as the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, anti-German movements. Just as the title hints, disaster happens wherever the accordion goes.

Close Range (1999b) is the first volume of the *Wyoming Stories* trilogy, and also Proulx's returning to short story writing which she takes as more interesting and more difficult than writing novels. Among the 11 stories included in the collection, "Brokeback Mountain" is the most famous one. Adapted by director Ang Lee into a Hollywood film in 2006, it won three Academy Awards. The success of the film brought a new wave of readership and criticism worldwide. Also the first story, "The Half-Skinned Steer" published first in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1997, was selected by Garrison Keillor for *The Best American Short Stories of 1998*, and then by John Updike for *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. Together with two other volumes, *Bad Dirt* (2004) and *Fine Just the Way it is* (2008), the trilogy depict Wyomingites' desolateness and loneliness, and their frustrating quest to survive on the dangerous, harsh land.

In her fourth novel *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), Proulx sets her protagonist on a more promising journey. Bob Dollar, the protagonist, is working for Global Pork Rinds, a conglomerate that hires people to scout sites for hog farms in rural areas. Being hired as such a scout, Bob Dollar is sent on his journey to Texas panhandle to find farmers who can be persuaded to sell their land at a cheap price. Taking Captain Abert's journal with him, Dollar regards his journey as an adventure into wilderness, himself as the hero who will conquer. What's more, being abandoned by his parents at the age of seven and living with his uncle since then, Dollar's adventure is also colored by his quest for self-discovery and a home. Struggling between maintaining moral integrity and success in career, Dollar experiences a lot and finally rejects the inherent immortality of the work and decides to stay and join the local people to protect their home against the invasion of modern agribusiness.

4. Conclusion

Whether for mere travelling or researching, Proulx is permanently on the road. Vermont, Newfoundland, Wyoming, Texas, she goes back and forth, in search of materials for writing, as well as a place she likes to stay. By writing the hunger and desire of her characters for a home, she infiltrates her own quest for such things in life. She calls herself "a professional outsider", which explains her keeping a distance from her characters, and meanwhile states out her mentality, her own loneliness and her living condition.

As for her fiction, she has been compared to many canonical writers. Ever since the publication of *Postcards*, her first novel, reviewers have compared her fiction to that of Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser for the shared theme. Like the title character in Norris's *Mctague* and Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Loyal kills his partner. But Rood points out that, "Yet Proulx goes beyond the old-fashioned genetic and social determinism that lies at the heart of these novels. Though nature and nurture are factors in her characters' fates, she expresses a more complex view of the forces that influence their lives" (Rood, 2001, p. 11). Together with *accordion Crimes*, *Postcards* then is compared to Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, for the shared concern of American experience and the calling to take a critical look at the American Dream. The journey *Postcards* focuses leads to a comparison with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. As for the intermixture of the humorous with the horrific, Proulx is then compared to Flannery O'Connor, who is famous for her "bizarre characters and frequent use of violence", and Proulx's characters may be called secular versions of O'Connor's grotesques. Rood states that, "The most extreme of them become so obsessed with their emotional scars that they gradually turn into little more than personifications of single overwhelming emotions. Because they are more complex and their emotional deformities have different, and more varied roots than those of O'Connor's apostates, Proulx's grotesques also have more varied fates" (Rood, 2001, p. 13). For the depictions of "rural poverty and varying degrees of violence" in her fiction, Proulx is compared to Cormac McCarthy, who is a western writer. And for the understated language style, Proulx is compared to Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, who trace their style to Ernest Hemingway, despite the fact that she has denied influence from Hemingway in an

interview.

Bearing comparison to many canonical writers, yet no mere imitation from none of them, Proulx has a strong personal style. For Proulx's characters, the journey questing for an identity is more complicated, due to the complicated background. Just as Proulx's explanation in the interview, "The novel should take us, as readers, to a vantage point from which we can confront our human condition, where we can glimpse something of what we are. A novel should somehow enlarge our capacity to see ourselves as living entities in the jammed and complex contemporary world" (Proulx, 1999a, p. 88). We should turn to Proulx's fiction to see how her protagonists make their quests for an identity in between of the old world and the new. Caught in between, they are not at home in either. Unlike heroes in traditional quests, whose journeys begin with a call to adventure. For Proulx's protagonists, their journeys begin with a search for identity. In each of Proulx's novels, the hero undergoes a journey separately, may or may not be there transformation.

Notes

Note 1. As an annual award, Pen/Faulkner was established in 1980, all the winners had been male before Annie Proulx.

Note 2. Proulx's first name "Edna" is never liked and never used by her. Her first four works of fiction were published under the name of E. Annie Proulx, and then she announced in 1997 that she would use the name Annie Proulx on all her future writings.

Note 3. Vershire is a small town with a population of 400 in Vermont, where Proulx lived for 11 years.

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