

## Drinking the Elixir of Nostalgia: Reading Annie Proulx's "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick"

Xiaojuan Liu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Liu Xiaojuan, School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China. Tel: 86010-88320700-8019. E-mail: sunnyliuxj@126.com

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### Abstract

This essay attempts to interpret contemporary American Writer, Annie Proulx's short story "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick," included in *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories II*. Applying related historical, sociological, and cultural data and researches, the essay approaches the story by close reading. By exploring the protagonist, Gilbert's quest for the past values and ethics of the Old West in the contemporary world, this essay presents Proulx's ambiguous attitude towards those who abide to the old values, despite the sweeping changes. The author argues that Proulx has shown her views of the oft-discussed issue—nostalgia or progress—in literature, and brought it to a new and profound existential level—a to-be or not-to-be business. At the same time, Proulx has deconstructed American "dime novels" and exposed the delusive nature of this Old West inheritance. Being criticized to be the "new voice" of American Western literature, Proulx has revived the Western fiction and enriched its connotation.

**Keywords:** Annie Proulx, Old West, nostalgia

It is acknowledged by critics that Annie Proulx is more a short story writer than a novelist, she herself also admits that short stories is her favorite way of writing, although she has published four books of each, and it is the novel *The Shipping News* (1993) launched her to American literary stardom. The success of the Hollywood movie *Brokeback Mountain* based on her same-name story has brought her more fame, however it has also brought annoyance to Proulx, for she is wrongly labeled as a writer focusing on homosexual theme. In fact, trained as a historian, Proulx's focus in fiction is on "individuals living in periods of major social and economic upheaval" (Rood, p. 3), as influenced by the French *Annales* historians. In her *Wyoming Stories* trilogy, she depicts the rural residents' dilemma and struggles under the influence of industrialization and urbanization which has taken over the whole country. Therefore, reading her stories would take readers "to a vantage point from which we can confront our human condition, where we can glimpse something of what we are," and also "enlarge our capacity to see ourselves as living entities in the jammed and complex contemporary world" (*Missouri Review* 1999). Up to now, scholarship on her has been mainly on *The Shipping News* and "The Brokeback Mountain." Despite Proulx's great achievements in her short stories, few of them have been touched upon by critics. Published in 2014, Mark Asquith's monograph, *Lost Frontier: Reading Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories*, has filled up the gap. However, the rich meanings and outstanding craftsmanship of Proulx's short stories await to be further explored.

Most of Annie Proulx's characters are men living in the masculine dream of conquest. But in contemporary America, the rural areas have been plagued by agribusiness, extractive industries and preaching environmentalists. It becomes a world of change and chaos. In such a world, masculinity is no longer defined by endeavor and exploration, but by possession and ownership, instead. The highly praised independence and bravery which naturally lie in the pioneers have been replaced by loneliness and brutality. A century has passed since Turner's closure of the frontier, the land has been settled, and great changes have taken place. Yet Proulx's men stay still at the fixed point. They are caught by the contemporary world and that of their ancestral imagination—the old world which invites men to explore and conquer. They are excluded from the contemporary world because of their obsession with the values of the nineteenth century.

In "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick," the protagonist, Gilbert Wolfscale, is another figure who uses the past as a shield against hardships in life and corruptions in contemporary world. At the turn of the 21st century,

he abides to the family roots by working on the ranch in Wyoming once owned by his grandfather. In "Wyoming: The Cowboy State," Proulx notes that although Wyoming is still called "the Cowboy State" and the bucking bronco remains on the license plate, ranching life is greatly besieged and endangered by the explosion of agribusiness and the tourism industry. In fact, any kind of ranching life can be hardly maintained and altogether it accounts for merely 2 percent of the state's income (Proulx, 2003, p. 500). The landscape now is far away from being the idealized, open-range, virgin land celebrated in Western literature and films. No longer a place full of opportunities and hopes for renewal and self-transformation to people, the land now is plagued by disasters, violence and frustration. Small-scale family ranching has become yesterday's story, which makes the passionate traditional rancher, Gilbert, an awkward existence in the new capital society, just as the awkward, unusual combo of "wolf" and "scale" in his name hints.

To the wealthy suitcase ranchers, Gilbert's century-old family ranch looks "skanky" and run-down, for "the yard littered with stacks of rusted sheet metal held down by railroad ties, a pile of crooked fence posts inhabited by chipmunks, the long string of log additions to the old house" (68). The phrasing of "litter," "rusted," "crooked," and "old" stresses the decline of the once prosperous ranch. And also, some of the "chock-and-log" fence built by his grandfather still stands in the pasture. Gilbert has replaced most of it with barbwire, yet the bones and skulls he uses to maintain tension in the fence seem to speak to the ghosts of his ancestors, which further indicates the decadence and slow death of the ranch. Moreover, the invasion of industry is made clear by the railroad materials and barbwire.

With chain stores and supermarkets taking over control of the whole country, the existence of Gilbert's family ranch is threatened. Gilbert is cornered into an economic "quagmire", and all his attempts to make profits against the globalization trend fail. At first he plans to butcher and pack beefs to dealers, but finds out that the local stores "preferred to stay with the chain suppliers" (64). And his idea of raising and selling turkeys is beaten by "the plastic-wrapped, prebasted Safe-way turkeys with breasts like Las Vegas strippers," too (64). As a result, 55-year-old Gilbert is "caught in the downward spiral of too much work, not enough money, drought" (67). Meanwhile, he is also besieged and pestered by suitcase ranchers, biologists, hunters, and environmentalists with their offering to buy his ranch, or accusations that he has ruined the pastures with his traditional way of ranching.

Seeing himself as the custodian of the authentic West, and heir of the valiant pioneers who overcame Indians and myriad of difficulties to carve out ranches on the open range, Gilbert considers himself embodiment of self-reliance and toughness. Therefore, his response to all of them is to retreat into the archetype of his fantasized tough ranchers who inhabited the old West, and deals with them as his ancestors would do to the rustlers. For the wealthy suitcase ranchers, he dismisses them as "rich pricks are lower than a snake's ass in a wagon track" and threatens them with a gun. With the environmentalists, he performs his toughness by standing aggressively "in a truculent posture, legs apart, chin thrust forward," and delivers a straightforward putdown, "I heard all that shit. But I'll tell you what. I let the cows graze where they want and drink where they will. Been doing this for a while. Guess I know something about it" (69). He insists that he would cling to the family inheritance, and by no means give up the land his grandfather homesteaded. When threatened by outside forces, Gilbert finds security in clinging to the past values and ethics.

Therefore, Gilbert escapes into such illusions that he totally ignores the endangered fate of the ranch. Despite all the problems he is confronted with, he slides into a self-deceptive blindness, believing his ranch is "timeless and unchanging in its beauty" (72). At the same time, he celebrates his "allegiance" to and "scalding passion" for the ranch, and his ownership, too. "His feeling for the ranch was the strongest emotion that had ever moved him, a strangling love tattooed on his heart. It was his. It was as if he had drunk from some magic goblet brimming with the elixir of ownership" (72). With Proulx's powerful language, Gilbert's strong feelings for the ranch are presented. The ownership is so intoxicating that he is immune to the corruption of the ranch, ignoring its changes, and forces the permanent beauty on it. Yet, such a desirable ranch just lies in his fantasy, for it is obviously not the dilapidated and trampled landscape that lies in reality. His wife's version might be more honest, "We couldn't get in or out in the winter. No telephone, no electricity, no neighbors, his mother always naggin, and the work! He wore me down. 'Do this, do that, bully in ways. ...'" (70). Possessing such a legacy separated from reality, Gilbert also suffers from the suffocating pain as if caused by a demon lover, with the "strangling love tattooed on his heart." Therefore, while he is complacent over his ownership of the ranch, he is also owned by it. Meanwhile, he is imprisoned by it so that he couldn't get in or out, not only in the winter.

This sense of ownership also defines his relationships with women. Geraldine Bedell notes in *The Observer* that Gilbert is "like a lot of men in this book (*Bad Dirt*): physically tough, emotionally lost, bewildered by the complexity and deviousness of women, trying to hang on to what they know" (2004). What Gilbert knows is from his imaginary past: that women should be subordinated to men, be their property, help men with farm work

and satisfy their sexual needs whenever asked. And these women need not to be “pure,” for his grandfather picked up his wife from a whorehouse. But there is also something Gilbert doesn’t know. In his grandfather’s time, man needed woman to add to the work forces, because of the harsh reality for the pioneers. So “purity” in true womanhood cult prevailing in 19<sup>th</sup> century America often failed to be valued in old West. On the contrary, “the golden-heart prostitutes” often win the favor of Western writers and readers.

Nevertheless, Gilbert copies his grandfather’s understanding of women and marriage. He first courts May, who he knows keeps an incestuous relationship with her own brother, Sedley (which implies “sadly”). At the same time, this falls into another Western tradition that woman often becomes the tool to enhance male bonds, and man bonds with each other by “exchanging” or “sharing” woman. Marrying May would surely strengthen the male bonds since Sedley is Gilbert’s best friend. However, things do not turn out as he expected. After being “strung” for a year and turned down by May in the end, he married Suzzy revengefully ten days after their first meet to maintain his dignity. The marriage turns out to be a failure, and his possessive attitude finally causes the wife’s leaving with their two sons. Yet, despite all the disagreements and enmity between them, Gilbert refuses to get a divorce until a fierce fight happens in which his wife “yanked out a clump of his hair in the front” (71). Police is involved, and Gilbert has to give up his possession of this nominal marriage. After their split, Gilbert goes back to those women once favored by his grandfather, by visiting whorehouses regularly.

Besides the frontier that his grandfather has cultivated, Gilbert takes a fancy for another frontier—the Vietnam War. As Asquith has pointed out, “one of the most powerful legacies of Turner’s frontier myth was the emergence of rhetoric of civilizing conquest which has been recycled repeatedly as part of US foreign policy” (Asquith 90). This is true in the case of the Vietnam War, which was embellished as a war of liberation over a new frontier, and the ones who fought for it were praised as cowboy heroes. Asquith further observes that fighting Vietnam, is like the conquest of the old West frontier, becomes a defining experience that builds up American masculinity and identity (90). Growing up in such influences, it’s only natural when Gilbert feels it’s a great shame that he missed both of them.

He was denied for the service because of “a growth in his nose” and not able to go to it further intensifies the fantasy of the war. His interest in Vietnam increases as time goes on. Still, his hunger for it is filled in with second-hand information by listening to the war veterans, and “no one was more attentive to war stories” (73). He makes every endeavor to approach the veterans in town, totally ignoring the veterans’ changes after they came back from the war, “Sedley came back angry and crazy; Russ Fleshman returned as a windbag; Pete Kitchen was reclusive and lived in a horse trailer at the back of the old Kitchen ranch. Something had gone wrong for Willis McNitt, leaving him dead-voiced and troubled” (73). His choice of ignoring their wounds and damages identifies with his attitude towards the ranch, “everything told him that the day of the rancher was fading, but he dodged admitting it” (69). However, mere listening to the stories does not satisfy his atavistic yearning, he also buys CDs of battlefield sounds to have a vicarious experience of Vietnam.

Nonetheless, his retreat into the fantasy of the past does not help to improve his conditions, both economically and emotionally. Not only he ends up suffering from poverty, but he soon finds himself betrayed by all his family members. First, it’s his mother, whom he has been living with for all those years. She is involved in a scam claiming that she has a sum of money to inherit, and loses not only her life savings, but also her health and then her life. In this country-bumpkins-fall-victims-to-the-sophisticated-urbanite s Western cliché, the mother’s vulnerability annoys Gilbert, who always prepares his hostility, toughness and even his gun for the urban intruders. What’s more, the mother’s nonexistent inheritance seems to imply the delusive nature of his imaginary Western inheritance.

Then, the divorced wife is charged of embezzlement and put into prison, and the news brought to him by a gloating neighbor further enhances his humiliation. His visiting to his son, Rod, turns out to add fuel to the flames. To Gilbert, Rod is totally eroded by the commercial society against which he fights so hard, for the son is doing a dead-end job as a video store clerk, uses “aftershave lotion” and eats the fast food in KFC. To his greater resentment, he learns from Rod that his other son is homosexual. After all the efforts Gilbert has been tried to force Western masculinity and manhood on his sons, and expects them to love and inherit the ranch like he does, neither of them have lived up to his expectations, and they have ruined all his hope. Furthermore, even the third generation is out of the picture. Since Rod only has two daughters, and one of them is suffering cancer. His dream that there would be “grandsons” to inherit the ranch is also disillusioned.

Quickly, Gilbert finds out that he is turned back on by the whole society. After seeing the son, he is trapped in the marching parade of July Fourth. Watching the local community performing the past and future of the place, he realizes that there is “no ranchers in the parade—it was all pioneers, outlaws, Indians, and gas” (86). The thought

that there is no place for the ranchers both in the past and the future bewilders and finally frustrates him, “he could go, but he found it difficult to step on the accelerator. The light turned green, red, green again, yet he couldn’t move until drivers behind him began to sound their horns [...] He couldn’t tell the size of things” (86). For the first time, he opens up his eyes to see the changed and complicated world, and sadly he gets totally lost. Or rather he is stuck in between, unable to get forward, and losing all the courage to go backwards.

In an imaginary conversation with his deceased mother, as answering the title question, Gilbert mockingly comments, “One thing for sure. He (Jesus) wouldn’t get himself tangled up with no ranch” (86). Whereas, this is far from an epiphany, for “it didn’t come close to saying what he meant, but it was all he could do” (86). Seeing his helpless situation, Gilbert realizes he has to make a bitter compromise. However, for all his resolution to live up to the Western toughness and self-reliance, there’s no way he would easily give in. Although he is finally enlightened to reality, he still habitually slides into the preindustrial past and reconstructs a Wyoming in his mind by imagining Jesus assembling his furniture in the untrodden wilderness, before it is plagued by the complexities of the contemporary world, and stresses that “he (Jesus) would make the simplest round-legged furniture, everything pegged, no nails nor screws” (86). Not only he is unready to accept the “new” world, but he retreats into a deeper past.

Proulxian characters, such as Gilbert Wolfscale, attempt to play Don Quixote in contemporary America. They devote themselves to reviving the Western myths—especially that of the pioneers, cowboys and homesteaders. This is their way to deal with the harsh reality—to hide behind their imaginations, and cling to what they already know. Their efforts to fight against the modern corruptions might be futile, and even preposterous, whereas, their spirit deserves sympathy, if not respect. Yet, not like Quixote who actually comes back to reality and regrets what he has done, epiphanies never come to Proulxian characters. There might be more or less an enlightening moment, however most of them choose to be blind to them.

On the other hand, Clinging to the inherited values dangerously in conflict with the real world, they fall into the dilemma with a past not coming back, and a future not opening to them. This represents man’s dilemma—progress or nostalgia, realism or idealism—for centuries. Generations of historians have showed concerns to this problem after Turner, however, it’s Proulx who brings it to a new and profound existential level—a to-be or not-to-be business.

And also, like Cervantes who aims at the chivalry romance prevailing in Spain, Proulx aims at the cheap, sensational Western “dime novels” which has a delusive nature. That’s why she is regarded as the “new voice” in the West by many critics (Showalter, p. 508). She has revived the Western fiction and enriched its connotation.

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