

eman ta zabal zazu



Universidad del País Vasco Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana y Traducción e Interpretación

Ph.D. Dissertation

**Dangerous and Indifferent Ground:
Naturalism and Regionalism in Annie Proulx's Fictional Realm**

Submitted by

Maja Daniel

Supervised by

Dr. David Rio Raigadas

Vitoria-Gasteiz 2017

Maja Daniel

**Dangerous and Indifferent Ground:
Naturalism and Regionalism in Annie Proulx's Fictional Realm**

RESUMEN

En la introducción a esta tesis doctoral se empieza explicando el origen de la hipótesis de la doctoranda, la hipótesis que establece que la narrativa de Annie Proulx está inscrita en la tradición del naturalismo literario. Además, quedan expuestos los objetivos del estudio. El primero de ellos está relacionado con la certeza de la investigadora en cuanto a la vigencia del género de naturalismo (aunque no el original, el zolesco) en la literatura americana de finales del siglo XX y de principios del XXI; las obras de Proulx seleccionadas para el análisis lo han de demostrar. El segundo objetivo tiene que ver con el regionalismo; se analizan las representaciones de las tres regiones geográfico-culturales que forman el trasfondo de la trama de las obras elegidas para el análisis: Nueva Inglaterra, Terranova y el Oeste Americano. El tercer y último objetivo surge del gusto literario de la doctoranda, de su afición por las obras naturalistas en general.

En cuanto a la metodología, se aplican los estudios de género literario, dado que en este trabajo el naturalismo está comprendido como tal. El segundo marco metodológico general aplicado es el de los estudios culturales, y en particular, los dedicados a la región. El enfoque regionalista será indispensable a fin de examinar el impacto multidireccional de las tres áreas en cuestión, tan culturalmente complejas.

El primer capítulo de esta tesis se titula “Introducción Teórica” y se compone de dos subcapítulos. El primero es extenso, ya que concierne las dos perspectivas aplicadas, el naturalismo y el regionalismo. Con respecto al naturalismo, se empieza repasando la historia y la teoría del movimiento. Se habla de sus bases filosóficas, siguiendo a Charles Child Walcutt; luego se comentan sus bases literarias, empezando por Émile Zola, llamado el “padre” del movimiento. A continuación se pasa a explicar la historia del naturalismo en los Estados Unidos y las diferentes perspectivas representadas por varios estudiosos, expertos en la materia, como Donald Pizer o Richard Lehan. Luego, se pasa al análisis del regionalismo, empezando con unas definiciones generales de los términos más importantes. Además, se habla de ciertas infravaloraciones del campo de los escritos regionalistas y de su reciente renacimiento, y se revisan la popularidad y las características del género en diferentes periodos. El estatus de la literatura regionalista hoy en día y la diversidad de formas dentro del regionalismo contemporáneo son los temas que se tratan en la última sección; también se examinan el concepto del “regionalismo crítico” y teorías de varios reconocidos expertos.

El segundo subcapítulo, titulado “Who is Annie Proulx?”, está dedicado a la escritora. En la primera parte, se examina su biografía, los hechos que podían haber influido en su obra. En la segunda, se comenta sobre su conexión con *Annales School* (siguiendo el ensayo de Stéphanie Durrans), sobre el impacto de este enfoque histórico que priorizaba el entorno, el milieu, al igual que lo hace Proulx en sus textos.

El cuerpo de la tesis se divide en tres capítulos, correspondiendo con las tres regiones que la autora eligió para el contexto de su narrativa: Nueva

Inglaterra, Terranova y el Oeste Americano. Cada uno de estos capítulos empieza con una parte titulada “Regional Identity of [y aquí la región en cuestión]”. El objetivo de estas unidades consiste en contextualizar los textos analizados; por ello, se proporcionan los hechos geográficos, históricos y socio-políticos, junto con un breve resumen de la historia de la literatura de cada área. En el caso de Nueva Inglaterra, se siguen los estudios de Stephen Nissenbaum, Kent C. Ryden y Joseph A. Conforti. La descripción de la historia y literatura de Terranova se basa, no exclusivamente pero principalmente, en el trabajo de Patrick O’Flaherty. En cuanto al Oeste Americano, son numerosos los estudiosos a cuyos artículos se recurre, pero el resumen se centra primordialmente en los textos de Thomas J. Lyon.

La segunda parte de cada uno de los tres capítulos está dedicada a la interpretación de las obras escogidas por la doctoranda. Se inicia con la introducción a los relatos cortos/novelas; se ofrecen los hechos concernientes al contenido, la publicación y a la recepción (se proporcionan numerosos reseñas de diferentes procedencias).

A continuación se pasa al análisis de la narrativa de Proulx. En el caso del Capítulo II, que trata sobre *Heart Songs and Other Stories* y *Postcards*, se comienza con la unidad titulada “New England Landscape and Living Conditions”, donde la imagen de la Nueva Inglaterra rural, tal y como la presenta la autora, está explorada. Al indicar sus feos y prosaicos rasgos y sus difíciles características geográficas, se aplican las dos perspectivas, la regionalista y la naturalista. A continuación, en la parte titulada “Native Inhabitants and Newcomers; Different Ways of Life and Different Perceptions”, se examinan estos dos grupos de habitantes, tan extremadamente distintos.

Una atención especial se le otorga a la mítica figura del arquetípico Yankee y a la manera en la que los personajes de Proulx lidian con esta irrealista imagen en sus muy realistas vidas. La última parte de este subcapítulo es dedicada exclusivamente a la presencia de los rasgos naturalistas en *Heart Songs and Other Stories* y en *Postcards*, y por ello se resaltan los impulsos y los vicios de los personajes. Además, se observa con una particular atención la importancia del medio y del momento histórico en los que las obras se desarrollan.

Capítulo III, dedicado a *Shipping News*, comienza con el análisis del retrato de la región ejecutado por Proulx: “Annie Proulx’s Newfoundland; Its Natural and Social Features”. Los rasgos naturales del paisaje de Terranova, su aislamiento y su inhospitalidad, su extremo e impredecible clima, junto con su mítico pasado y el difícil (teniendo en cuenta los problemas económicos y sociales) presente, son los principales temas tratados. De nuevo, se exploran y se complementan tanto la perspectiva regionalista, como la naturalista. A continuación se estudian los personajes de la novela; se destaca la manera en la que la autora juega con los estereotipos, como burla y golpea las expectativas de los lectores. Finalmente, se examina el texto en búsqueda de los indicadores del naturalismo; aparte del medio y el momento histórico crucial para la sociedad de los pueblos costeros de Terranova, se analizan los incontrolables impulsos de sus miembros y se indica el sensacionalismo del libro.

El cuarto y último capítulo está dedicado al más amplio grupo de las obras de Proulx, tres colecciones de relatos cortos y una novela: *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2*, *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3* y *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Su estructura difiere de la de los

dos anteriores; dada la dificultad en separar los rasgos naturalistas en particular del contenido global, estas se indican en todos y cada uno de sus cinco subcapítulos. No obstante, se empieza con la sección dedicada exclusivamente a la perspectiva naturalista: “Wyoming and Texas Panhandle Landscape: Its Naturalistic Features”. El impacto del paisaje y del clima en las vidas de los personajes es inestimable; en la mayoría de los casos, estas fuerzas de la naturaleza resultan cruciales, si no determinantes. En la parte siguiente se pasa al análisis de los problemas económicos y ecológicos que caracterizan el Oeste Americano de Annie Proulx, ya que estos juegan un papel importante en las preocupaciones de este particular momento en la vida de los americanos. La sección final del capítulo está dedicada a la sociedad de Wyoming y de Texas Panhandle y se divide en dos partes. La primera examina el agudo contraste entre el mítico, heroico Oeste y la prosaica, mundana vida real, es decir, el “lastre” de mito del vaquero con el que se enfrentan muchos de los personajes. La segunda (The Westerners Described: Their Features and Their Identities”) aborda el asunto de la identidad de la sociedad del Oeste, tal y como la presenta Proulx en su narrativa; la imagen que los residentes guardan de sí mismos, la creada por los forasteros y la real casi nunca resultan iguales.

En la última parte, en las Conclusiones, se reflexiona sobre la validez de la hipótesis de la doctoranda, sobre la supuesta inscripción de la narrativa de Annie Proulx dentro de la tradición del naturalismo literario y el regionalismo. Además, se concluye presentando Nueva Inglaterra, Terranova y el Oeste Americano tal y como los percibe la escritora – a través de los ojos de una naturalista.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my dissertation supervisor, Professor David Rio Raigadas. The door to his office was always open, whenever I had a question about my research, he was always there to help me and guide me. I am quite sure this dissertation would never have been completed without his encouragement. Thank you for believing in me more than I believed in myself.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Eugenia Sojka of University of Silesia, Poland. I am gratefully indebted to her for her very valuable comments on the third chapter of this dissertation, referring to Newfoundland and *The Shipping News*. Her extensive knowledge in the field of Canadian, and particularly Newfoundland, literature has been of great assistance.

Last but not least, I give special thanks to my family, especially to my Mother, my Mother-in-law and my Father, who greatly supported me in my everyday busy schedule.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Aitor and to our sons, Aimar and Martzel.

INDEX

Introduction	1
Chapter I: Theoretical Introduction	13
I. Exploring Naturalism and Regionalism.....	13
1. What is Naturalism?	13
1.1. Origins of Naturalism and Émile Zola.....	13
1.2. Naturalism in the United States	20
1.2.1. Historical Outlook	20
1.2.2. American Naturalism and Its Nuances: Different Perspectives	24
2. What is Regionalism?	44
2.1. Regionalism Reviewed	44
2.2. Regionalism Innovated	58
II. Who is Annie Proulx?	65
1. The Author and Her Literary Output.....	65
2. Proulx's Method and the Importance of Place.....	72
Chapter II: New England	79
1. Regional Identity of New England	79
2. <i>Heart Songs and Other Stories</i> and <i>Postcards</i>	99
2.1. Introduction.....	99
2.2. New England Landscape and Living Conditions	105
2.3. Native Inhabitants and Newcomers: Different Ways of Life and Different Perceptions	119
2.4. Naturalism in Proulx's New England Fiction.....	146
Chapter III: Newfoundland	167
1. Regional Identity of Newfoundland.....	167
2. <i>The Shipping News</i>	187
2.1. Introduction.....	187
2.2. Annie Proulx's Newfoundland: Its Natural and Social Features.....	191

2.3. Newfoundlanders in <i>The Shipping News</i>	208
2.4. Naturalism in <i>The Shipping News</i>	226
Chapter IV: The American West	247
1. Regional Identity of the American West	247
2. <i>Wyoming Stories</i> and <i>That Old Ace in the Hole</i>	268
2.1. Introduction.....	268
2.2. Wyoming and Texas Panhandle Landscape: Its Naturalistic Features	275
2.3. Wyoming and Texas Panhandle in Proulx's Texts: The Region's Environmental and Economic Situation.....	300
2.4. The Western Society in <i>Wyoming Stories</i> and <i>That Old Ace in the Hole</i>	322
2.4.1. The Influence of the Myth of the West	322
2.4.2. The Westerners Described: Their Features and Their Identities ...	343
Conclusions	372
Works Cited.....	382

INTRODUCTION

Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere ... Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter. Only the endlessly repeated flood of morning light. You begin to see that God does not owe us much beyond that. ("People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water" 99)

The quotation above comes from the first collection of Annie Proulx's Wyoming short stories, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*; for me, the day I read these few lines turned out to be crucial with regard to this dissertation, for that was the moment I made the assumption that this contemporary writer's fiction is inscribed with the tradition of literary naturalism. I kept on reading, and in each of her short stories, in each of her novels, features recognizable as naturalistic could be distinguished. What I observed is that Proulx follows the general pattern established by the nineteenth-century forefathers of the movement: "dangerous and indifferent" settings prove necessary and overriding, the characters, in the face of natural disasters and harsh climate, though struggling, seem irresolute, weak or unfit, and generally fail in their struggle. Moreover, natural urges govern, in many cases, protagonists' lives. Given these first vague and imprecise observations, together with my personal interest in the genre of naturalism, I embraced the idea of conducting an analysis of Annie Proulx's novels and short stories.

Before undertaking such a task, I considered indispensable the search for a certain legitimacy within the academic world to support my thesis of Annie Proulx's works as belonging to the genre of literary naturalism; this I met in Donald Pizer's publications (to name just a few: *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism. An Interpretation*, *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism*, "Contemporary Literary Naturalism"). According to this renowned American scholar, naturalism in America is not just a literary movement celebrating its times of glory over an age ago; it survived and is alive and flourishing. The reasons behind such a survival, as explained by the critic, seem surprisingly obvious: naturalistic works are as concrete as the Americans themselves, they are sensational enough to attract many readers, and, given their symbolism and allegory, they are related to that most native of American literary forms: the romance.

With regard to the aims of this dissertation, the first one is closely related to the above statement. I truly believe that naturalism continues to live in many examples of the American narrative, and Annie Proulx's fiction confirms such a conviction. With the analysis of some aspects of the author's selected texts I attempt to prove the movement's validity in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first one of the twenty-first century in America.

Certainly, the naturalism present in works by contemporary writers cannot equal the Zolaesque incarnation; it evolved and adjusted to its new environment in order to stay among "the fittest." Its themes had no option but to change; prostitution and free love are everything but controversial or shocking today, Zola's application of Claude Bernard's experimental method in literature was judged long ago as unrealistic. The absolute lack of free will and

unconditional determinism has also been discarded. Nevertheless, my aim is to demonstrate that Proulx's approach to the forces of nature and to the environment, the milieu, where characters of a particular society are shaped in a particular time, although not strictly Zolaesque, belongs to the twentieth/twenty-first-century variety of naturalism (which cannot be defined neatly; in Pizer's words: "there is no neat definition applicable to the movement in America, but rather a variable and changing and complex set of assumptions about man and fiction which can be called a naturalistic tradition" Preface xi).

Apart from displaying incidences of the genre at issue in Proulx's selected works, the notion of place and region will play a crucial role in this dissertation; the author's narrative will also be ascribed to the category of literary regionalism. I will try to indicate some of the relations between the protagonists and their milieu, such culturally complex places as New England, Newfoundland and the American West. To analyze the picture of these three regions is my second aim. Interestingly enough, each of these areas stands out not only due to its particular natural features, its harsh and unpredictable climate and its unique landscape; when considering the aforementioned places, a whole plethora of cultural stereotypes emerges. In her works, Proulx deals with numerous archetypal mythic images and discourses and describes the settings in a realistic, sometimes even iconoclastic manner, which I will intend to analyze.

Last but not least, I have a third aim, which could be called purely personal; it is associated with my literary taste. Naturalistic works have always been my great favorites. I took great pleasure in reading and reflecting upon Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* saga, or Emilia Pardo Bazan's *Pazos de Ulloa* and *La*

Madre Naturaleza. Also, my beloved texts include novels by Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and John Steinbeck. Admirers of postmodernism reproach me for enjoying, as Pizer put it, its “concreteness” and “sensationalism.” I respond by quoting Lawrence Buell’s rhetorical question: “Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?” (ii). I strongly believe the connection between literature and reality is a positive feature, though I am also fond of occasional excursions into the field of magical realism, just like Annie Proulx is in her Wyoming short stories. Also, there is one last reason for my interest in naturalism: I find most of its premises strikingly logical. And this is what I wish to transmit with my dissertation.

Some aspects related to geographical determinism and the importance of place in Annie Proulx’s writings have already been highlighted in such prominent texts as Michael Kowalewski’s essay review “Losing Our Place” or Karen L. Rood’s *Understanding Annie Proulx*. Notwithstanding this, their approach is different: Kowalewski’s view is that Proulx’s fiction “tries to have it both ways – realist and antirealist, romantic and antiromantic” and Rood considers the predilection towards geography and place in the writer’s work as a manifestation of new regionalism. Additionally, essays included in the 2011 publication discussing Annie Proulx’s narrative, *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, collectively, as the editor Alex Hunt put it, “articulate, analyze, and criticize Proulx’s fascination with geography, her insistence that human cultures must be understood as products of interaction with place” (“Introduction” 8). In particular, several essays dealing with the idea of place as a crucial factor shall be underlined with regard to this dissertation: focused on an ecocritical perspective Wes Berry’s “Capitalism vs. Localism:

Economies of Scale in Annie Proulx's *Postcards* and *That Old Ace on the Hole*," Alex Hunt's approach of ecological narrative theory displayed in "The Ecology of Narrative: Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* as Critical Regionalist Fiction," or, insisting on geographical determinism of both individuals and communities, Hal Crimmel's "Born Under a Bad Sign: The Question of Geographical Determinism in the Hardscrabble Northern Borderlands of *Heart Songs and Other Stories*" and O. Alan Weltzien's "Annie Proulx's Wyoming: Geographical Determinism, Landscape, and Caricature." Invaluable these approaches might be, none of them focuses on the writer's relation to the genre of naturalism. Someone who does discuss chosen aspects of this connection in his essays "Considering the Naturalist Ethos in Annie Proulx's *Fine Just the Way It Is*" and "Re-writing the American Naturalist Short Story: Annie Proulx's *Fine Just the Way It Is*" is Aitor Ibarrola. Nevertheless, as of yet, no systematic study of naturalistic features in more than one work of this American author has been performed. Hence, the novelty of my approach involves such a study; the majority of Proulx's texts will be examined with the aim of supporting (or refuting) my thesis. Likewise, the settings of the writer's narrative will be investigated from an innovative perspective; first divided into three groups, corresponding with three dissimilar North American regions, they will be analyzed from the angle of regional criticism.

With reference to the methodology, genre studies will be one of the frameworks. Therefore, genre criticism will be applied, for in my study, naturalism is understood as a literary form and, more precisely, as a genre (although it started as a literary movement in the late nineteenth century). I agree with June Howard when she states in Preface to her *Form and History in*

American Literary Naturalism: “it is not that naturalism has an ideology or reflects an ideology, but that the form itself *is* an immanent ideology” (i). The scholar adds that the brutal, doomed characters and the determined world they inhabit are the best-known aspects of naturalism and that they greatly interested literary critics, but that, on the whole, it is not a fashionable genre for American academics. Anything but disheartened by such repute, I will apply genre criticism and try to analyze Proulx’s texts belonging to such an “unfashionable” genre.

The second general methodological framework applied in this dissertation is the one related to cultural studies, and more precisely, the one focusing on place and region. In order to examine the multidirectional impact the three areas in question, New England, Newfoundland and the American West (certainly, all of them exceptionally culturally powerful) exert on Proulx’s characters, the regionalist approach will be indispensable. As James H. Maguire put it, “regionalism cannot be ignored, since place is one of the forces that shapes mind” (74). Indeed, place and region as fundamental analytical categories have been gaining importance in the last decades; according to Jeremy Wells,

Race, gender, and class were the most useful terms for complicating literary study during the 1980s. Sexuality, along with post-coloniality, were the terms that proved most transformative during the 1990s. Region, with its insistence upon the importance of locality to reconfigure the geographies of literary study, may have become the central complicating concept of the current decade. (203)

Discredited among scholars in the past, representing a tension between region and nation, and therefore, canonical and noncanonical, regionalist writing was relegated “to the footnotes of literary history” (Pryse 19). Nevertheless, such a critical understanding has changed greatly thanks to, among others, publications of *American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910. A Norton Anthology* (1992) or *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field* (1994). David Rio also indicates that “the increasing visibility of region as an analytical category in literary criticism is also exemplified by the 2005 special issue of the journal *American Literature* (Vol. 77, No. 1, edited by Houston A. Baker, Jr.) significantly entitled *Erasing the Commas: RaceGenderClassSexualityRegion*” (*New Literary* 12-13). In my dissertation, this critical foundation will be particularly helpful when examining cultural stereotypes and their influence on the characters daily lives; it will also be necessary for understanding socio-political and environmental changes occurring in the three regions and reflected in Proulx’s narrative.

With regard to my choice of Annie Proulx’s texts for analysis, two of her fiction works will not be touched upon: *Accordion Crimes* and *Barkskins*. As to the first one, the reason of excluding it is due to its multiple settings; the author deals with such dissimilar areas as New Orleans, Texas, Maine, Iowa, and Minnesota. What is more, the characters, apart from dealing with their regional identity, often do not even consider themselves Americans; they are immigrants and they still feel that they remain Italians, Germans, Norwegians, Poles, French Canadian or Cajuns. Therefore, inspecting so many different areas (none of them described profoundly, really) and characters with such a

complicated, international cultural background would not correspond to the main themes of this study. As far as the latest novel, *Barkskins*, is concerned, its primary focus is on the global ecological crisis, the destruction of forests, not only in Canada (its predominant setting), but in general. In addition, the obvious reason for not including the novel in this dissertation is its very recent date of publication (2016).

As to its structure, this dissertation is composed of four chapters. I consider particularly important the inclusion of a certain amount of background theory; therefore, "Theoretical Introduction" is the title of the first chapter. In it, a general presentation of the two perspectives applied, entitled "Exploring Naturalism and Regionalism," is provided, constituting the first extensive subchapter. I begin with naturalism, by reviewing the history and the theory of the movement. To start with, I talk about its philosophical bases; I follow Charles Child Walcott's description of the chain of changes in intellectuals' mentality caused by the newest scientific discoveries. These discoveries and bold theories, for example Darwin's, will eventually lead to some socially innovative (at that time) ideas, such as Herbert Spencer's theory of progress and his famous phrase "survival for the fittest." Then, I pass to the literary foundations of the movement. Before focusing on its founder, Émile Zola, I recall Hyppolite Taine and Claude Bernard's influence. Once the background of the movement is explained, I turn to the history of naturalism in the United States, for it is necessary to provide a general panorama of the historical moment the country was passing through in the second half of the nineteenth century. Among the final points, I present different perspectives by several scholars concerning the American naturalism and its main writers. Following

this, I proceed to examine regionalism. I begin with some general definitions of place, space, region, or landscape. Then, I talk about certain misperceptions concerning the field of regionalist writing and I point out the recent renaissance of the genre. Also, this is a part in which the history of the genre, its popularity or prestige in different periods, and its characteristics, both stylistic and those concerning its main themes, are revised. The status of regional writing nowadays and the diversity of forms within contemporary regionalism is what I deal with in the last section; the concept of “critical regionalism” and theories by several reknown experts are being examined.

The second subchapter is all about the author of the texts to be analyzed, and so it is simply entitled “Who is Annie Proulx?” First, I examine the facts of her biography that might have influenced her writing, and discuss her literary output. Afterwards, I examine the impact of the *Annales* School on her writing, following Stéphanie Durrans essay on this topic. The method Proulx applies in her narrative and the particular importance she assigns to settings, to place, the writer claims to owe to this historical approach, but it is also what characterizes naturalism.

The body of this dissertation is divided into three chapters, in accordance with the three regions Proulx chose for the setting of her fiction: New England, Newfoundland and the American West. Each of these units starts with a brief theoretical subchapter entitled “Regional Identity of [and here the region in question].” The aim of the information they contain is to contextualize the works to be analyzed, and so geographical, historical and socio-political facts, together with a short summary of the history of each region’s literature is provided. In the case of New England, I follow mainly Stephen Nissenbaum’s, Kent C. Ryden’s

and Joseph A. Conforti's studies; my overview of Newfoundland history and literature is based, not exclusively but principally, on Patrick O'Flaherty's work; as to the American West, there are numerous scholars I refer to, but Thomas J. Lyon's texts concerning the history Western literature are the ones I focus on primarily.

The second subchapter of each unit is the part where Annie Proulx's fiction is interpreted. I start with the introduction to the short stories/novels at issue; in it, some of the most relevant facts concerning these works, some remarks on the content, the publication and, above all, the reception (numerous reviews gathered from different sources), are provided.

Next, I pass to my analysis of Proulx's narrative. In the case of Chapter II, dealing with *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and *Postcards*, I begin with "New England Landscape and Living Conditions," where the image of rural New England the writer offers is explored. By indicating its ugly and down-to-earth features and its difficult geographic characteristics both regionalist and naturalist perspectives are applied. Then, in the part entitled "Native Inhabitants and Newcomers; Different Ways of Life and Different Perceptions" these two dissimilar groups of characters are examined. A special focus will be put on the imagined archetypal Yankee figure and the way Proulx's New Englanders deal with such an unreal image in their very real lives. The last part of this subchapter is dedicated exclusively to the presence of naturalistic features in *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and in *Postcards*, and so instincts, impulses and vices of the characters are highlighted. In addition, the importance of the milieu and the historic moment the stories and the novel develop in are observed with a particular attention.

Chapter III, discussing *Shipping News*, starts with the analysis of the writer's picture of the region in question: "Annie Proulx's Newfoundland; Its Natural and Social Features." Natural features of the Newfoundland landscape, its remoteness and inhospitality, its extreme and unpredictable weather, together with its mythic past and its difficult, given the economic and social problems, present are the main issues discussed. Again, both regionalist and naturalist perspectives are being explored and complement each other. Then, the novel's characters are examined; I highlight the author's play with stereotypes, her crashing the reader's expectations. Finally, the text is examined in search of the indicators of naturalism; apart from the settings and a historically crucial moment for the town's society, I analyze its member's uncontrollable urges and point out the book's sensationalism.

The fourth and last chapter, is dedicated to the largest group of Proulx's works: three collections of short stories and a novel, namely: *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2*, *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Its structure differs from the two summarized above; given the difficulty in separating the naturalistic features in particular from the global content, such characteristics are indicated in all of its five interpretative subchapters. Notwithstanding, I start with a section dedicated exclusively to the naturalistic perspective: the impact of landscape and weather on characters' lives; in the majority of cases, these natural forces turn out to be crucial, if not determining. Economic and ecological problems characterizing Proulx's American West today are scrutinized in the following part, for they play an important role in the preoccupations of this particular moment of modern American life. The final section of this chapter is dedicated

to Wyoming and Texas Panhandle society. I divide it into two parts; the first one examines a sharp contrast between the mythic, heroic West and down-to-earth everyday life, that is to say, the “burden” of the cowboy myth many of the characters struggle with. The second touches upon the identity of the Westerners, such as presented in Proulx’s narrative; the image they bear of themselves, the one carried by outsiders and the real one are almost never the same.

In the last part, in Conclusions, I reflect upon the validity of my thesis concerning Annie Proulx’s fiction as an example of naturalistic and regionalist narrative. Also, I will conclude by presenting New England, Newfoundland and the American West as it is seen by Annie Proulx - through the eyes of a naturalist.

It is important to underline that this dissertation does not pretend to encompass a wide range of aspects, and does not pursue a comprehensive approach. Nevertheless, I hope to contribute to the already existing studies on regionalism and naturalism in the contemporary American literature by providing a new perspective on Annie Proulx’s fiction.

CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

I. Exploring Naturalism and Regionalism

1. What is Naturalism?

This is not romanticism – this drama of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words. It is naturalism.

Frank Norris

The true character of naturalism has not been determined. In one form it appears a shaggy, apelike monster; in another it appears a godlike giant. Shocking, bestial, scientific, messianic – no sooner does its outline seem to grow clear than, like Proteus, it slips through the fingers and reappears in another shape.

Charles Child Walcutt

Man is alone and doubtful in an unknown world of struggle.

Donald Pizer

1.1. Origins of Naturalism and Émile Zola

By the end of the nineteenth century the new belief of humans as helpless beings in a constantly changing universe was not only widespread among European scientists and novelists, its influence was also palpable in America. The philosophy of positivism and the recent discoveries in natural sciences were crucial to inspire Émile Zola, using Charles Child Walcutt's designation for the father of the literary movement, the "fountainhead" of naturalism. In order to truly understand the origins of naturalism and to

appreciate its latter diversification, a brief description of the contemporary scientific practices which led Zola to create his theory is necessary.

As Walcutt wittily points out, “naturalism has its roots in the Renaissance, its background in the Middle Ages” (4). The medieval idea was that of a dual universe where the world was divided into heaven and earth, God and Satan, and all humans possessed both soul and body. The worldly side of men was the natural one, the Devil’s playground, where their desires, impulses, and instincts continually corrupted humans’ will and reason. This dualistic concept began to disappear in the Renaissance, mainly thanks to the formulation of the irrefutable mechanical laws of Isaac Newton. His materialistic discovery advocated energy and matter in the universe as constant and indestructible, and hence it “dignified nature and implied that its laws were not subject to God’s miraculous intervention” (Walcutt 5) but rather a force which would subject man to natural law and produce determinism.

The positivism of August Comte and the Darwinian theory of evolution in the nineteenth century eventually stated that one’s natural self was his final self. Comte rejected the previous concepts of authority and supernaturalism; instead he stated that the only method of finding the truth is the naturalistic one, emphasizing the importance of empiricism and experience. Darwin in his *Origin of Species* (1859) gave definite priority to man’s biology and stressed his animal nature; he used the positive method to evidence natural selection and, according to some, ruined morality and religion. It is necessary to underline that, in Walcutt’s words: “They [Comte and Darwin] did not abolish dualism and dispose of the supernatural once and for all, but they made it possible to believe

that man could be completely accounted for by physical, psychological, and social facts" (8).

One of the social effects of Darwin's biological theory was Herbert Spencer's idea of progress. Spencer maintained that the ultimate aim of the evolution of society was the achievement of perfection, also in ethics, for human nature and its environment improve together. At this point Spencer and Darwin were probably in opposition; according to Darwin there was no perceptible purpose in neither the improvement nor the hopeless decay of men.

As far as the concept of human will is concerned, there was, once again, a clear disagreement among the nineteenth century philosophers and scientists. Spencer sustained it was unnatural to think there was such a force as social or collective will, but that individual will did play an important role in natural process. He strongly believed in what today is considered as one of his best recognizable phrases: "survival of the fittest," and so he could not approve of any social exercise designed to protect the weak or the unfit (such as, for example, labor unions). Contrarily, Marx's interpretation of the "struggle for existence" stressed class warfare and stated that working to produce and not for profit was men's natural instinct. As Walcutt concludes, this mixture of ideas serves to remind us that "naturalistic theory was never able to free itself from human passion" (9-10).

Charles Walcutt, when presenting the figure of Emile Zola, leaves no doubts as to the writer's unquestionable prominence of in the field of the literary movement: "Zola is the fountainhead of naturalism, in a double and possibly a triple sense. He is a source of naturalistic theory, he is a model for many

novelists, and he is to a lesser degree a source of critical method in the interpretation of fiction.” (30).

As aforementioned, naturalism has its origins in contemporary scientific and philosophic ideas. Apart from the above, Zola was deeply impressed by such figures as the Goncourts brothers, Hyppolite Taine and Claude Bernard. The Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux* awoke Zola's zeal for the milieu and its consequences and, in general, stood for the prototype of his latter novels.

Taine's scientific account of literature, based on three categories: the "race," the "milieu" and the "moment" - often translated into English as "nation," "environment" and "time," was not at the beginning followed by Zola unconditionally; there were some points of ideological disagreement between both philosophers. One of the issues was that Taine did not perceive art as natural, but only as the falsehood added to the observation of reality, while for Zola the concept of individual temperament in art could not be overlooked. Nevertheless, Taine's influence on French intellectuals, especially on Zola, cannot be disdained. His readiness of seeking the truth in the spirit of a scientist gave its fruit: the creation of the fundamental doctrines in writing. Since then, naturalistic writers unburdened literature by releasing it from its moral and aesthetic attachments, and pointed towards the exact reproduction of life. Settings, topics and subjects changed greatly; now slums were explored, ugly details of civilization emphasized, and imaginary geographical places substituted by the exact ones; polemical or controversial topics such as prostitution, free love and social misery began to be undertaken; characters no longer belonged to the upper, or even middle class (like in Balzac's novels), but to the masses, with the lower class gaining prominence.

Claude Bernard's *Introduction a l'Etude de la Médecine Expérimentale* (1865) was a clear foundation of the method applied by Zola in his novels and previously exposed in *Le Roman Expérimentale* (1865). Bernard's work was based on the positive method of Comte. He developed Comte's idea of experience and applied it in medicine, turning it into a "true science" by distinguishing between observation and experimentation. Thanks to the experimental method, a new hypothesis was to be incessantly tested in the light of new data. Zola unconditionally applauded Bernard's procedure and changed the denomination of literature from art into science, just as Bernard had done previously with medicine. In the preface to *Thèrèse Raquin* (1867), Zola's first experimental novel, the scientific method in literature is reaffirmed and the assumption, later on depicted in twenty volumes of his series the *Rougon-Macquart*, is that

mental phenomena are controlled by physical phenomena or, more precisely, that mental phenomena are physiological and can be truly understood only as chemical reactions are. The scientific novelist will set up an experiment involving carefully defined characters who are subjected to certain carefully defined influences, and from their reactions he will deduce scientific conclusions which can in time be reduced to laws. These laws will ultimately cover the fields of sociology and physiology in a perfected science of man. (Walcutt 33)

As for the role of a naturalistic writer, Zola, once again, insisted on the parallel between Bernard's approach and his own; in Lars Åhnebrink's words:

“By substituting for the word ‘doctor’ the word ‘novelist’, he [Zola] could make his meaning clear and give to the work of art the rigidity of a scientific truth” (23). The objectivity of a novelist had to be extreme, or at least point towards such aim. Similarly to the scientist

the naturalist was to be “as cold as a vivisectionist at a lecture,” abstain from comment, never show his own personality, and never turn to the reader for sympathy ...The naturalistic novel should not satirize nor preach, but only describe human life objectively; the naturalist should draw no conclusions because the conclusions were implicit in the material. (Åhnebrink 26)

Nevertheless, such a design was never strictly fulfilled. Since Zola’s publications, naturalistic writers (that is to say, who considered themselves naturalists or were considered as such) were never able to abandon their critical view of society. It seems that there was always a purpose in bringing into light the violence bursting frequently from despair, injustice, hopelessness (or social determinism), and all the disgusting details of vice and its consequences. Some thought that the intention of these works was clearly revolutionary.

Putting aside this moral, somehow unconscious, background, Zola’s treatment of his characters was unchangeable: they were treated as if they were animals constantly transformed by the environment. Man was to be a product originated from the struggle for existence, remodeled with time by his/her surroundings. According to Richard Lehan, thanks to Zola, the way of thinking about the novel changed, for in his works “temperament was more

important than character; setting could not be separated from a naturalist theories of evolution.” (47). The concept of heredity gained prominence; it was inestimable and was supposed to explain many of degenerations of a character (apart from the influence of the environment). Impulses, instincts, and urges as the main forces pushing characters to act were studied. Very special attention was given to sex, particularly among French naturalists; its importance was exaggerated. Sexual desire was considered to be an uncontrollable natural power, a physical need, almost like hunger or thirst. The romantic idea of love disappeared. The same happened with the romantic concept of nature. From now on, as Åhnebrink points out, “nature should be studied and reproduced objectively and truthfully” and “naturalist chose phenomena which had an everyday, close-to-the-soil, and often repulsive effect on the reader; sounds became noises and odors bad smells” (29). Moreover, such climatic changes and the processes of nature as heavy rains, extreme heat, growth, or fructification began to be faithfully chronicled. As to humans, the scholar indicates the evolutionary doctrine placed them in a new and intimate affinity with the vegetative and the animal kingdom; in conformity with such a concept the naturalist could paint phenomena which directed one’s attention toward the earth. Consequently, it is frequent to encounter parallels between man, plant, and animal in naturalistic fiction. As Lehan points out, “man was in a halfway house between the realm of the animals and some more perfect realm of being which future development would reveal” (47). As to Darwinism, which “was both a continuation of and a challenge to Enlightenment assumptions” (Lehan 55), the scholar observes that as a theory of natural selection, Darwin emphasized the accidental rather than a necessary unfolding of matter in time.

Consequently, in literary naturalism instead of presuming the reality of evolution, the forward process, its “throwbacks,” resulting from devolution and degeneration, are given far more attention. Also, personal decline of naturalistic characters, according to Lehan, finds its equivalence on the social level. The critic considers that this aspect of literary naturalism contains an anticipation of fascism and form of totalitarianism, for “the crowd, more than just an aggregate of individuals, has a reality of its own and is capable of bestial and violent behavior, mindlessly following a leader, whose own fate at the hands of the mob can be extremely tenuous.” (Lehan 48).

1.2. Naturalism in the United States

Naturalism has been in America a literature in which the writer depicts man under pressure to survive because of the baleful interaction between his own limitations and the crushing conditions of life and in which the writer also proffers, through his symbolism, an interpretative model of life.

Donald Pizer

1.2.1. Historical Outlook

One of the key moments in the history of the United States, one that changed American society, undoubtedly was the Civil War and the decades that followed. According to Lars Åhnebrink, the three forces that helped to create the economic, social, and cultural transformation were: industrialism and the rise of the city, the westward movement of settlers and the closing of the frontier, science and the new philosophy of life based on science (3).

With regard to industrialism, Åhnebrink points out that the United States, with its steel, meat-packing, and oil industries, was already a world leader by the turn of the nineteenth century. Of course, the consequences of such a rapid and drastic change were soon to be observed; the society was suddenly divided into financial giants and a proletariat, members of the last one being mere “cogs in a machine.” This new social class, the lowest of all, contributed to the rise of big cities; hands were needed and so the heavy demands of industry upon the labor market were answered by immigrants (Germans, Italians, Poles, etc.) and the rural population pouring into the urban areas. The immediate effect of the influx of workers providing cheap labor was the appearance of the slum and its subhuman living conditions. Many of the main naturalistic writers chose these extremely poor and, consequently, violent and hopeless neighborhoods as the settings of their novels.

As to the collective westward movement of settlers, it was highly driven by the Homestead Act of 1862 which “granted a quarter section (160 acres) of free land to bona fide settlers, after a preliminary period of occupation” (Åhnebrink 4). Åhnebrink indicates that the gold rush and discoveries of other minerals accelerated the already speedy flow of immigrants, closing the last frontier. Since transcontinental railroads were urgently needed, the Congress’s policy, which was adapted towards the railroad companies, was extremely permissive and generous; large territories proximate to the tracks were ceded to them. Again, according to the scholar, this act turned out to be pernicious for common people; fraudulent speculation of land flourished. The railroad companies’ propaganda encouraged settlers to fill the unpopulated areas of the West, and by doing so, they were pushed into the grip of the corrupted

legislatures. Moreover, the companies benefited by charging the farmers exaggerated rates to transport their products. As Åhnebrink underlines: “Actually the settlers were in the grip of a complex forces, including land agents, local middlemen, railroad officials, and Wall Street businessmen that gauged them from all sides” (5). Extremely difficult weather conditions, natural disasters, and crop pests added to the disappearance of the previous optimism among the settlers.

With regard to the new scientific and philosophical theories, most of them rapidly crossed the Atlantic and exerted considerable influence on American scholars. Darwin and Spencer’s premises, in particular, encountered many admirers. There were two main reasons for such popularity of their doctrines. First of all, the philosophy reflected the general mood of despair after the Civil War, the war which, for many, destroyed romantic sensitivity and Emersonian idealism. Man was no longer considered a divine creature and to believe that the world was the work of a loving God turned out to be too difficult a task. The second reason is explained by Åhnebrink as follows:

In the raising age of *laissez-faire* capitalism, Darwinism seemed to justify the ethics of ruthless magnates. The law of the survival of the fittest was applied to society, to business transactions, to almost everything; and many capitalists believed, like Spencer, that the struggle for existence and war were factors desirable and even necessary to human life in their elimination of weaker species. A successful business transaction which crushed a rival firm, was but an illustration of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. Perhaps never before has a rising

plutocracy been justified in its ethical standards and ways of living by a simpler and more appropriate philosophy. (8)

Nevertheless, as Åhnebrink asserts, it is important to bear in mind that, while the Darwinian theory was fully accepted by a large group of scholars, the church was an institution that kept resisting against the new trends of thought. Since evolution clearly weakened people's faith, it was denounced as a threat to Christianity, a diabolic strength that might destroy it. Furthermore, the deeply rooted native American optimism decelerated the impact of the new philosophy and the new way of writing. In spite of the previously mentioned wave of pessimism resulting from the terrible experience of the Civil War, there was still something positive to adhere to: the West. Its concept favored a romantic outlook; it made many people dream that everything was possible, that as long as the frontier was limitless, hope for a better future could not be abandoned.

In his analysis of the American naturalism Lars Åhnebrink insists that European realistic and naturalistic literature cannot be overlooked (48). In the eighties, Russian and French literature was in vogue in the New World. Apart from Tolstoy, whose works were immediately translated and widely read (and who became especially popular in the American puritan society after his religious conversion), Gogol, Turgenev and Dostoyevsky were also situated among recognized literary figures and considered examples to follow. French writers, such as Balzac, Flaubert, the brothers Goncourt, Daudet and Maupassant were likewise known and regularly discussed in literary magazines. Of course, Zola's controversial novels had been introduced to American readers over a decade earlier, but it was not until the eighties that their reception was

less hostile and they became gradually accepted. In the nineties, English and Scandinavian writers, influenced in turn by French naturalism, were also taken into account when discussing new European trends. Figures such as Gissing, George Moore, Hardy or Rudyard Kipling (whose short stories increased the popularity of this literary form) on the one hand, and Ibsen, Kielland and Björson on the other have to be mentioned. Finally, translations of some German (Gerhart Hauptmann, Max Nordau), Italian (Giovanni Verga) and Spanish (Pérez Galdós, Juan Valera, Palacio Valdés, Emilia Pardo Bazán) writers, according to Åhnebrink, “also contributed to the complex of new currents and ideas which were to enrich and influence native American literature and to further the cause of American naturalism” (49).

1.2.2. American Naturalism and Its Nuances: Different Perspectives

Different perspectives of what American naturalism actually was (or still is) and different choices regarding the main American naturalistic writers are clearly appreciated among scholars when studying their critical works.

Lars Åhnebrink, one of the first wave contemporary critics, in his influential book *Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction, 1891-1903* (1950) presents Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris as the three most representative American naturalistic writers and almost equivalents of their French predecessors. Garland calls readers' attention to the West and the Middle West; the farmers' hopeless labor, powerful capital and detrimental life conditions are displayed in his novels. Crane's naturalistic tales are the best reflection of the disastrous living conditions in the slums, particularly in New

York Bowery. Norris, particularly interested in art and the esthetic side of the naturalistic movement, emphasized deterministic philosophy by bringing to light sociological problems that depended on forces which could not be controlled.

However, what makes Ahnebrink's study exceptionally interesting, especially for the development of this thesis, is his depiction of themes, method of preparation, settings and characters chosen by the French naturalists and the way these elements were adapted into the American field. As this scholar asserts, although the French novelists theoretically considered all themes of equal importance, predilection for subjects that fitted the naturalistic interpretation of the world (such as the awakening of sex, intercourse, prostitution, social misery, pathological cases, etc.) is appreciated. The American naturalists dealt both with old themes (such as marital incompatibility), in which case their treatment was different under the influence of foreign examples, and with the new topics that the naturalistic forerunners had preferred. Nevertheless, these new subjects in the United States were always applied to American conditions; as mentioned above, when exposing social evils Garland and Crane did not hesitate to reflect the corruption and misery (the burning questions of those days) in different American areas, and Norris's aim was to create "genuinely American" novels (the Far West, according to him, was especially attractive for fiction, given its not yet wholly explored areas and aspects). As far as the method is concerned, the emphasis was placed on the methodical and scientific study of settings, characters and problems. In his zeal of naturalistic technique of documentation, Zola not only studied manuals, articles and scientific works, but he also looked for personal experience. The American writers applied a similar method; they cared for the

details, the exact settings, and the right atmosphere. Notwithstanding, the reason of applying such an approach, apart from the French influence, may have been linked to the American journalism methods and its omnipresent notebooks. Since milieu formed all individuals, the settings in French naturalistic novels were particularly emphasized, and accurately and minutely depicted. Detailed descriptions of streets, buildings, rooms, etc. were sometimes given more place than dialogue and action. Garland, Crane, and Norris, according to Åhnebrink, followed the Frenchmen and so their descriptions of settings were also extremely elaborated (they included such features as sounds, colors, and odors). Although cities and slums were, on the whole, the most commonly described, importance was also given to rural life. Some of the American writers described the gloominess, joylessness, and the loneliness of the Middle West, stressing the prairie and its emptiness. Garland, especially, devoted his effort to reflect the West of those times and its miseries. As Åhnebrink indicates:

because his chief desire was to strip this section of the country of some of its false glamour by depicting it as it really was, he was perhaps at times liable to overemphasize its gloom and ugliness. Moreover, the majority of his pictures of the Middle West and frontier life savor of his bitterness and indignation at the social conditions of the farmers and at the indifference, even hostility of nature toward man. (180)

Nevertheless, in Garland's descriptions of nature, a tendency to romanticize prevails; the lakes, the sunsets, or the sky are characterized as beautiful, even gorgeous. Norris, on the contrary, stressed the prosperity, vitality, the "grandeur

of America” when describing California and the Far West. To him, this part of his country was “the world’s frontier of romance, inhabited by a new race, a hardy, brave, passionate, empire-building people, primitive, brutal, without fear like the West itself” (Åhnebrink 181). Regarding characters’ descriptions, instead of elaborated and detailed ones, Garland and Crane would rather use few significant adjectives, primarily sordid and brutal, and condensed phrases. In some works of the American naturalists these characters’ lives are determined, but, as Åhnebrink points out, since the doctrine of determinism was not easily accepted in the United States (native optimism and individualism distinguishing Americans could not be easily neglected), fatalism became as important a concept as Zolaesque determinism. Instincts, heredity, environment, and social and economic conditions, together with the absence of free will (both determinism and fatalism lead to its denial) made their characters free from any responsibility for their acts.

Charles Child Walcutt’s approximation, announced in his study *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream* (1956) clearly differs from Åhnebrink’s comparative and descriptive volume. First of all, according to Walcutt, American naturalism was strongly influenced by transcendentalism. Also, as far as the American naturalistic writers are concerned, this scholar considers Hamlin Garland and Harold Frederic as mere announcers of the change. He stresses that, in spite of the fact that a formulated philosophy of naturalism will not be found in their works, they do infuse new vigorous blood in the bloodless Victorian writing. He names Stephen Crane, Jack London and Frank Norris as the most representative writers (though remembering their styles were clearly dissimilar) and he continues listing Winston Churchill (who “understood the new

ideas but could not abandon the old romantic storytelling forms that would not accommodate them” 193), Theodore Dreiser (whose texts “reveal naturalistic ideas struggling to find a structure by which the novel could move without turning upon crucial ethical choices” 180), Sherwood Anderson (whose “work shows what Crane’s might develop into if he had lived another twenty-five years” 222) and James T. Farrell (who “offers a remarkable study in the process by which form or technique controls content” 249). Walcutt culminates drawing attention to the great twentieth century novelists, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Dos Passos, who

have been indefatigable experimenters with form: Dos Passos buries himself in it; Hemingway alone recognizes what he is doing when he pursues ethical values in a naturalistic jungle; Steinbeck has compromised with sentiment and sensation until the distance from the hard if limited integrity of *In Dubious Battle* to the maundering of *Sweet Thursday* and the fatuity of *East of Eden* is a descent painful to contemplate. (294)

Now, when analyzing Walcutt’s approach, different philosophies reigning in the nineteenth century have to be taken into account. Walcutt gives extraordinary importance to man’s emotional needs and to the question of how to unite the scientific and the spiritual world. He perceives that the answer lies in transcendentalism, “the belief that knowledge brings liberty,” “the spirit of American expansion, the statement of the American Dream of individual opportunity, freedom and greatness” (10). But this monism, glowing as well

behind naturalism, this unity of physical and spiritual progress, was rapidly divided by the language of analysis (division “spirit” - “nature”) into “streams of optimism and pessimism, freedom and determinism, will and fate, social reformism and mechanistic despair” (12). The scholar asserts that, although naturalists believed that scientific knowledge could release the society from superstition, fear, pain, and poverty, and that social ills could be diagnosed and cured, the confusion came given the difficulty in uniting determinism and moral idealism in a literary form. This tension between the idea of freedom and the recognition of laws has troubled all the American naturalistic novelists and often pulled them back toward dualism, the old position stating that flesh was vile. Nevertheless, what must be remembered is that the attack on unscientific values, the attack on the dualists, is one of the ideas of literary naturalism. The others, according to Walcutt, are the religion of reason-nature, and “the recognition and slowly growing fear of natural forces that man might study but apparently could not control” (20).

As far as other criteria of literary naturalism are concerned, Walcutt stresses determinism (prevalence of natural law and socioeconomic influences), survival (biological competition), violence (equal to animal survival), and taboo (“improper” topics found in the province of physical survival: sex, disease, bodily functions, obscenity, or depravity). He points out that the forms which the naturalistic novel assumes are clinical, panoramic, slice-of-life, stream of consciousness, and chronicle of despair (premises that could not have been consistently maintained given that naturalism involved a continual search for form). Referring to naturalistic styles, they may only be listed (documentary, satiric, impressionistic, and sensational), but cannot be defined exclusively.

Donald Pizer, another widely recognized scholar, similarly to Walcutt considers crucial to acknowledge that the European and the American literary naturalisms were far from analogous. As Richard Lehan observes,

their work [Walcutt's and Pizer's] tended to undermine the idea of naturalism as an international literary movement, saw American realism as having a distinct character of its own, and emphasized the artistic sensibility and the individual formal distinctions which shaped these novels. ("The European Background" 49)

Pizer's approach is not, as he himself admits, "conventional." He does not judge writers in accordance with the definition of naturalism derived from nineteenth-century ideology, for this is, precisely, the critical procedure, he insists, "which has contributed to the misunderstanding of and hostility toward the movement" (Preface xi). Instead, Pizer's aim was to elaborate an empirical account of naturalism in America; after selecting numerous novels corresponding to the scholar's impression of what this naturalism actually might be, he derived some general ideas, but no static definition. The result of his research is "that there is no neat definition applicable to the movement in America, but rather a variable and changing and complex set of assumptions about man and fiction which can be called a naturalistic tradition" (Pizer, Preface xi). As Pizer explains in Preface to his *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism. An Interpretation*, the working hypothesis guided his selection of novels is that naturalistic fiction usually unites detailed documentation of the more sensationalistic aspects of experience with heavily

ideological themes, whose burden demonstrates that man is more circumscribed than ordinarily assumed. The two large ideas that eventually compose the scholar's hypothesis are that, firstly, since the early 1890s these works frequently contain significant tragic themes, and, secondly, that they constitute three distinct groups.

The three waves of major naturalistic novels and novelists Pizer distinguishes in his critical texts are intimately related to the historical, political, social, and intellectual changes of the three periods. He starts by describing the "original" nineteenth century decade of 1890s, then he points out the 1930s, and finally the late 1940 and early 1950s. Pizer claims that the generation of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser was the first one to abandon the idealistic dream, the American Dream – "the faith that America guaranteed all men the free and just pursuit of self-fulfillment and of the good life" (*Twentieth-Century* 4). After the Civil War what truly mattered was to survive materially in a world controlled by different forces; moral aspects did not prevail anymore. The second wave's novelists also wrote under a strong influence of social conditions (the Depression); additionally, the philosophy of the previous decade (Marxism and Freudianism) exerted a powerful impact on their literary production as well. Pizer names three of these writers: James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck. Eventually, the third wave is claimed to be composed of the early novels by Norman Mailer, William Styron, and Saul Bellow. Their works, according to Pizer, are highly influenced by tragic feelings resulting from the atrocities of the Second World War and of what followed: the Cold war, the Korean War, or the McCarthy witch hunts.

In "Contemporary American Naturalism," one of his later essays, Pizer talks about another period of the American history, the decade from the late 60s until the late 70s, which he believes was a contemporary resurgence of naturalism in American fiction. Again, after some years of tranquility, "hard times" reached America; as principal causes the scholar lists the Vietnam War, prolonged, costly and fruitless, and the Watergate affair, "both of which implied a major breakdown in America's global and national ethical character" (257). Then, in the mid and late 1970s followed the problems related to the crisis of the American city, a severe recession, and the fear that the world was hastening into a nuclear war. The scholar highlights three works of fiction which he believes are examples of reactions to this new sense of hard times, and which forms another phase of American literary naturalism: Joyce Carol Oates's *them* (1969), Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), and Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981). Each one of the three derives, as Pizer asserts, from its writers' distinctive response to a specific inadequacy in contemporary American life. Also, each belongs to a tradition of analogous responses by earlier naturalists to similar conditions, respectively, Crane's *Maggie*, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and Norris's *The Octopus*. The critic comments on this disclosure of the "fourth wave" by stating that "naturalism owes its continued existence to its ability both to draw upon earlier naturalistic expression and to adapt its interests to those of the contemporary scene" ("Contemporary" 270).

As to the connection with the French naturalism, Pizer insists that, although the novels of the first wave of the American naturalists present some

obvious characteristics of Zolaesque naturalism, each of them “is very much his own man”:

Each responds, in other words, to the contemporary belief that the novel was the literary form especially capable of exploring neglected areas of the interaction between social reality and the inner life and that Zola was not the model for this effort but rather the leading wedge in a progressive literary movement. (*Twentieth-Century* 5)

The critic underlines that the source of the strength and persistence of naturalism in America was not Zola’s philosophy or literary method, but rather the French writer’s impulse toward depicting truthfully all ranges of life.

As far as the ideological core of American naturalism is concerned, a certain circumscription of man is present, but it is an idea that derives from the exploration of characters; it does not precede literary works as an ideology. In addition, an American naturalist, when presenting the fallen of the poor (“poor” in all respects, also intellectually or culturally), the handicapped, is not just a dispassionate observer of a scientific process, as the scholar points out, but also displays emotions deriving from his/her compassion, infuses “meaning and dignity and a sense of tragic potential into what he observes” (*Twentieth-Century* 6).

As for the themes, Donald Pizer asserts that three tragic themes can be distinguished in the three generations of American naturalism. The first one is contrary to the Aristotelian belief that tragedy conveys the fall of a full, noble man; the naturalistic tragic hero, because of the circumstances of life, fails to

develop his/her, sometimes evident, individual potential. Stephen Crane's Maggie is an example of such a protagonist. Another theme arises from the failure of undistinguished characters. Before falling, they may have led relatively "successful," though plain lives; unable to maintain this stability, they fall, not from a high point, but from midway. Norris's McTeague represents this kind of a character. The third naturalistic theme is related to the problem of knowledge. Again, a comparison to the Aristotelian tragic hero best demonstrates the contrast, as such a hero in the end always "discovers," as Pizer puts it, his true condition: who he is and who caused his fall. But in naturalistic fiction "man is alone and doubtful in an unknown world of struggle," yet he still yearns for the truth, for the knowledge which is now "elusive, shifting, and perhaps even non-existent except for solipsistic 'certainties'" (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* 7). In *The Red Badge of Courage* by Crane, this sad image of man's fate is provided.

What should be underlined with reference to the three periods Pizer identifies is that, depending on the historical moment writers were immersed in and on the current social sensibility, the idea of knowledge varied. The scholar explains that "in the naturalistic novel of the 1930s, unlike that of the 1890s, knowledge is difficult but achievable. The greater difficulty now is doing" (*Twentieth-Century* 15). The second wave characters manage to understand their world, realize what their weakness is and try to remediate it, generally unsuccessfully. And so, the naturalistic theme of feeling deeply by all men is now added an ability to understand, "and in understanding there is promise for the better future" (*Twentieth-Century* 16), a vital hope. In the late 1940s and early 1950s this hope, due to freshly discovered horrifying events of the Second World War, the atom bomb, the Cold War, the Korean War, or the McCarthy

witch hunts, disappears. The conviction that pernicious systems could be changed, that thanks to the strength of individuals a better collective future is possible, is replaced by chaos, by “the impotence of informed will when confronted by the atavistic destructiveness of human nature and the vast, uncontrollable power of the social and political institutions of modern life” (*Twentieth-Century* 86). Also, similarly to the French existentialists, post-war American writers felt the communal ethical system was no longer valid, that it was untruth, and that the only value laid in the individual seeking of meaning in one’s own experience. The naturalistic novels of the third wave undertake the traditional theme of restriction of freedom, but emphasize the search for alternative values. The conclusion is that freedom “is not categorically denied but is rather submitted to a close scrutiny of its nature and efficacy in a world consisting largely of conditions which limit and qualify it.” (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* 88).

The naturalistic themes, as identified by Pizer, help in explanation with the paradox he reflects on when beginning his study: “the apparent contradiction between critical hostility to naturalism and the permanence and hold to the movement” (*Twentieth-Century* 7) in America. According to the scholar, with relation to the first theme, “because we are a society still committed to the dream of full development of each man’s potential for the good life, we find it more moving to dramatize the crushing or blocking of the potential for fineness of mind and spirit than the loss of qualities already achieved”. Furthermore, “because we are a nation which has celebrated fraternity as a democratic ideal, we are moved more by the destruction of one of our fellows than by the fall of the great of our society”. And finally, “because we have

believed that certain truths are universal, permanent, and comprehensible, we are moved by the realization that we can seldom know anything other than our own desires” (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* 8).

But above all, Pizer underlines that there is a clear explanation for the question why American naturalism, unlike its European counterpart, survived and continued to flourish. First of all, the naturalistic novel, thanks to its documentary method, “has concreteness and circumstantialities particularly congenial to the American temperament” (15), the fiction is solid and strongly plotted. Secondly, its sensationalism attracts many readers. Finally, because of its symbolism and allegory, naturalism is closely related to romance, which is considered the most native American form. Pizer’s method of study is prompted by the above explanations of appeal of naturalism in America. He suggests that there is no single definition applicable to the movement in the United States, but rather “a changing and complex set of assumptions about man and fiction that can be called a naturalistic tradition” (16). And since, as explained above, significant tragic themes frequently emerge in the American naturalistic works

The reappearance of naturalism at several points in our [the American] literary history suggests that it has survived as a significant yet popular literary movement in America because it has responded to the preoccupations of particular moments of modern American life and has discovered appropriate forms for doing so. (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* 16)

Finally, the scholar insists that the general assumption which should be corrected is that the movement and the major subjects of its literature (man’s

bestiality, his bound will, and his confined understanding) were a novelty in Western history. There were some new elements deriving from modern science and contemporary society, indeed, but they only formed a superficial level, not an essential one. The manner the scholar explains the essence of his hypothesis is the following:

For if one adopts a broad and expansive view of man's conception of himself from the beginning to the present, one realizes that there have always been periods when theologians, philosophers, statesmen, and artists – that is men attempting to interpret life – have had a bleak estimate of human nature and experience. Often belief during a period of this kind ... derives from the reaction against an exalted notion of man held during a previous period and a responsiveness to the oppressive conditions of contemporary life. Often this belief thus stressed that man's ability to choose, to express his will consciously and freely, is limited both by his own nature and by the world in which he lives. But this stress, which in every age in which it occurs takes on the distinctive texture and color of that age's social life and intellectual preoccupations, does not preclude the presence of a strain of humanistic value, a strain that also assumes a shape related to the interests and nature of the period. (33)

Another perspective worthy of introducing is the one presented by Richard Lehan in his essay "American Literary Naturalism: The French Connection" (1984) where the social/historical/cultural dimension of naturalism is addressed. The author reminds us that Zola's twenty-volume study commonly

known as the *Rougon-Macquart* novels' full title is *A Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire*, and that, though the attribution "natural" is never overlooked, the adjective "social" is tended to be minimized. Lehan's argument is that literary naturalism cannot be divorced from the three crucial historical/social events: the English/Puritan Revolution, the French Revolution, and the American Revolution/Civil War. The three of them, Lehan claims, were not only similar, but that they actually reveal the same kind of "turnings" away: passages from a feudal/aristocratic world toward a modern urban/commercial/industrial world. This phenomenon of drastic changes was first observed in England by Defoe and Dickens, in France by Balzac and Zola, and by Norris and Dreiser, the two most influential practitioners of American literary naturalism according to the scholar, in America. Of course, the novels by Dickens and those by Zola or Dreiser are very different, indeed, but this, as Lehan asserts, results from the fact that the urban settings of their times were completely dissimilar. The splendor and the slums of London, Paris, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco are shown as part of the same historical process. In this context, it is interesting to notice that

naturalism is more than a literary movement, more than just the workings of shared assumptions about heredity and environment, and it becomes inseparable from the historical processes of modernism, which moves us away from the land to the city, away from the world of craft to the world of factories, away from the manor house/cottage to the townhouse/tenement, away from the lord of the manor to the city speculator, away from the domination by the aristocracy to the

domination by the high bourgeoisie who had begun to control political and financial institutions (parliament and national banks of credit) in the name of national policy and imperial longings. (Lehan, "American" 179)

In his essay, Lehan analyzes the French connection to American literary naturalism. Also, and what is interesting for the development of this dissertation is the fact that he underlines the dominance of money and the forever-lost pastoral rural life. Money, in the scholar's words, "is a force greater than military or political power" ("American" 183). There is no possible way to fight and win all-powerful banks, investors, or massive entrepreneurs; in his novels, Zola described the beginnings of the world city – "the visible tower of the financier with its invisible power, the beginnings of the cartel-like financial deals, the movement of capital and the control of the underdeveloped lands of the world" (Lehan, "American" 182). The further wild development of this invisible but highly influential dominance is clearly observed over the twentieth century and the beginnings of the twenty first. As to the rural reality, Lehan highlights the fact that in Zola's works, far from pastoral, it is now shown as brutal, full of greed and suffering, especially of small farmers. And it seems that no revolution can invert this commercial/industrial "progress" and hand the land back to those who toil it, "that the farmer, large or small, is part of a process controlled by the new mechanics of the city" (Lehan, "American" 188).

It is also worth mentioning that Malcolm Cowley's approach, similar to the above scholars, asserts that theories and doctrines were not the heart of American nineteenth-century naturalism. The reason for American naturalists' turning into Europe, studying Darwin and Spencer, and borrowing methods from

Zola was their act of rebellion against “an intolerable situation at home,” that is to say, “the timid but tyrannical rule of what afterward came to be known as the genteel tradition” (Cowley 49). As Cowley explains, this “gentility,” or “ideality,” or “decency,” was a theory that developed mainly in New York and the Middle West, and flowered after the Civil War; essentially, it can be described as an “effort to abolish the various evils and vulgarities in American society by never speaking about them” (Cowley 50). It divided the world into two, putting on the right side religion, divine human beings, art, women, clergyman, all guardians of art and the ideal, and church. On the other, the wrong side, was business, everything animal, life, men immersed in their practical affairs, and saloons. The culture was set against real life; the language itself was divided into “a sort of bloodless literary English” and “Amurrkn, ungly and businesslike” (Cowley 50). In those years literature was supposed to reflect the feminine realm of beauty, written with pure heroines and happy endings, in order not to disturb the innocent minds of young girls. But new men, like Frank Norris and other American naturalists started to appear, all of them somehow socially disadvantaged. In Cowley's words, “they were in rebellion against the genteel tradition because, like writers from the beginning of time, they had an urgent need for telling the truth about themselves, and because there was no existing medium in which they were privileged to tell it” (51). Thanks to their interest in themes, regarded previously as ugly and unpleasant, they managed to finally broaden the scope of American fiction, they were the first to open their minds and, instead of following themes and legends dealt upon in other books, they created their own ones. As the scholar concludes, the American naturalists “tried to size the life around them, and at their best they transformed it into new

archetypes of human experience. Just as Cooper had shaped the legend of the frontier and Marc Twain the legend of the Mississippi, so the naturalists have been shaping the hasher legends of an urban and industrial age.” (79).

In order to complete the above examination of some of the most renowned approaches to literary American naturalism, after, as Richard Lehan indicates, Ahnebrink’s theory of a direct correspondence between works by Zola and those by Garland, Norris and Crane, and after Walcutt’s and Pizer’s proposals stressing the indigenous nature of naturalism in America and its formal aspects (the idea the literary imagination shaped individual works of art) a third way of reading naturalism emerged. Lehan recalls Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* who “has given us a new historicist and Foucauldian reading of such texts” (“The European” 49). Michaels, instead of emphasizing the writing, focuses on the reading process, and considers that there is no fiction/real division between the text and the culture, that both literary and economic products are nothing but mere constructs. In Lehan’s words, “Michaels sees each culture as producing a set of fictions, so that the economic processes behind naturalism are as much a fiction as the texts that emerge from this literary movement” (“The European” 49). The scholar also mentions some of the more recent approaches, as those by Yves Chevrel (1982) and David Baguley (1990), who both gave an extended definition of European and French literary naturalism, and talks about his 1985 essay, the analyzed above “American Literary Naturalism: The French Connection,” in which he attempted to demonstrate that literary naturalism can work as a narrative mode, a kind of philosophical reality that both precedes the writing and the reading of the text.

To conclude, in “The European Background,” apart from developing his previous ideas, Lehan aimed for the search of a treacherous question: is there a literary naturalism? The result is worthy of consideration, especially bearing in mind the goal of this dissertation. The answer the scholar proposes is not unique and unequivocal; rather, what he offers are several ambiguous points of view. Firstly, the answer is yes, if literary naturalism is understood as “a spectrum of ideas controlled by a literary method but used variously by a group of writers who brought the doctrine into being,” but no, if it is taken as “a coherent and self-sustained doctrine uniformly used by the same group of writers” (Lehan, “The European” 65). The best way to avoid confusion, the critic asserts, is to think of it as involving a “synoptic” text that have elements in common, but preserves its own uniqueness. It generally

depends upon a biological model, relying heavily on theories of evolution and devolution, seeing man as a product of his immediate environment. It is essentially mechanistic in its view of matter and deterministic in its attitude toward human will, moving toward theories of degeneration when viewing the individual, the family, the crowd, and finally the community itself, whether it be the city or the nation-state. (Lehan, “The European” 65)

Now, as a narrative mode, “literary naturalism has a beginning and an end, a European origin and a multinational history;” also, it involved a way of seeing: “It rested upon the scientific assumption that history can be documented and the mind functions empirically” (“The European” 65). As literary way of presenting

reality, Lehan points out that naturalism dominated in Europe, principally in France, from 1870 to 1890, and in America from 1890 to the end of the World War II. Eventually, Richard Lehan concludes that literary naturalism, both as an ideology and a mode of narration, rose and then fell; it was first replaced by literary modernism and then by postmodernism. Modernism moved from scientism toward a mythic/symbolic base; instead of cyclical, it stressed the linear time. Also, by replacing scientific empiricism by subjective reality, an elitist distinction between high and low culture was created. Its symbolism no longer reinforced a given natural reality but, in the scholar's words, functioned as a prism through which reality was viewed. Postmodernism somehow broke the sharp divide between elitist and popular culture and, given its emphasis on reading an individual as simply another sign among signs, became an idealized and a highly antirealistic movement. Postmodernism converted nature into a construct, it attempted to suppress it. Nevertheless, I cannot disagree with the critic when he argues that the rhythms of a day, of the seasons, the cycle of life are too strong to be distanced in one's consciousness by forms of constructed reality. As Lehan insists, "life is too much with us, and realism as a literary perspective is too vital to our sense of being to be shut for long in the airless room of linguistic self-reflexivity" ("The European" 70).

2. What is Regionalism?

Regional writing might be the great comeback story of American Literature.

Stephanie Foote

It would be useful if we formed the habit of never using the word regional without mentally adding to it the idea of the universal – remembering the constant contact between the local scene and the wide world that lies beyond it.

Lewis Mumford

Regions help make America geographically comprehensible.

Humans define regions; they are not geographic entities that define themselves.

Joseph A. Conforti

2.1. Regionalism Reviewed

To talk about region is to talk about place. Talking of place does not mean talking of space, although, as Yi-Fu Tuan underlines, the meanings of both often merge in experience. Nevertheless, as the geographer specifies, “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” (6). Also, according to Tuan, if we think of space as that which allows movement, than place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.

A necessary step before examining the genre of regionalism in depth is to define some of its crucial terms, such as place and space, land and landscape, regional identity, or region itself. This chapter starts with the definition of space and place by Tuan; perfect in its conciseness though it is, the one contained in “Introduction: Regionalism and the Humanities” by Wendy J.

Katz and Timothy R. Mahoney sets its aspects thoroughly. It states that “while space evokes a more neutral quality of spaciousness, positioning oneself amid openness or an unbounded expanse of terrain, place is something constructed by people” (x). Then the authors specify: “Place is space that has been given meaning and borders, and so a location with a human-created ensemble of features.” (x). As to the relationship between land and landscape, Katz and Mahoney claim it is similar; given that landscape is the land already “ordered and shaped by human perceptions and action” (x), it implies power that people assert over the environment. Consequently, the concept of a region itself also asserts power, since, as the scholars put it, it is “the concept of an observable uniformity of certain cultural attitudes, behaviors and artifacts in a socially and naturally defined place and time” (xi). When determining the sensitive concept of regional identity, Katz and Mahoney are especially cautious; they do not forget that it is always subjective by nature, and that, just to begin, the perception of residents and the perception of outsiders may not be the same. The definition they propose is that a regional identity “is a sense of belonging, an awareness of similar traits among people living under similar conditions, or not coincidentally, of how their cultural patterns are distinctive in comparison to other regions or places” (xi).

Now, turning again to the crucial issue of place; to know a place requires experience. As Tuan points out, experience can be direct and intimate, or it can be indirect and conceptual, mediated by symbols. Michael Kowalewski in his “Contemporary Regionalism” evokes the term of a “spirit of place”, coined by Frederick W. Turner, which “in literature springs from a sense of belonging and human attachment” (7). Kowalewski’s words reflect superiority and an

extraordinary importance of the direct and intimate experience in works of regional writers: “The best American regional writing tends to be less about a place than of it, with a writer’s central nervous system immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given location”. (“Contemporary” 7).

Regarding the idea of a “spirit of place” or a “sense of place,” Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of “topophilia” seems to be the mainstay in the understanding of people’s attachment to place, their attitudes, subjective perceptions and interactions with the external world. Katz and Mahoney highlight that the geographer’s emphasis on how surroundings provide individuals with the sense of the coherence of inner lives with the outer world, a reassuring sense that selfhood and culture are interrelated, has been key for writers and scholars interested in keeping nature primary without succumbing to determinism. The two scholars point out that both Turner’s and Tuan’s ideas of a place’s pervading spirit can carry the baggage of, what is significant to this dissertation and related to the nineteenth century’s naturalism, conviction that human culture and human nature are determined by evolution, biology, and even national boundaries. This belief is even deeper when the D. H. Lawrence’s premise on mystification of American regions is recalled: “Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality” (qtd. in Busby 45). It is also interesting to evoke the model proposed by J.B. Jackson; as Katz and Mahoney assert, it acknowledges that, more than any mysterious influence, place as

homeland is the product of human habit and custom, and so it becomes cultural construction. Nevertheless, one of the dangers of considering place, for example, as a region, a mere cultural, or even political, construction, is to generate an artifact, with collaboration by both natives and outsiders.

According to Kowalewski, American regional authors not only have to combat such misperceptions, ignorance, and historical amnesia, but they also need to do so by avoiding the classic evocations of “place” in American literature (the South of Faulkner, for instance) and free from popular, overpublicized representations of regional identity. The scholar observes an interesting cultural paradox taking place nowadays; on one hand, “regional art and identity have never seemed stronger in American society ... High claims are made for ‘living in place,’ for digging in and staying put, and becoming native to the place we inhabit”. (“Contemporary” 8). On the other hand, though, a large and growing amount of Americans has lost any sense of community, they are neither interested in the history nor in the cultural background of the place they live in. Perhaps this lack of concern results from a curious phenomenon Kowalewski indicates: that it is more and more frequent for extensive areas of the United States to look almost identical. The scholar follows here James Howard Kunstler and talks about “the geography of nowhere;” the local distinctiveness of the American landscape disappears. This is especially the case of urban places, although the rural ones are threatened as well, for even there, people are “surrounded by Velveeta landscape of sprawling, look alike suburbs, traffic-choked expressways full of drivers on cellphones, and huge corporate superstores with acres of parking lots.” (Kowalewski, “Contemporary” 12).

And still, in spite of all that, an expansive support for regional identity is observed; the number of regional museums, theaters or local historical societies constantly increases, an important research center may be found in every major region, regional book festivals, conferences and awards benefit authors and scholars. As Stephanie Foote formulates it: "Regional writing might be the great comeback story of American Literature" (25). Yet, Kowalewski perceives that this popular focus on regional identity relies on, here he evokes Hal Rothman's term, "scripted places" and that it "frequently partakes of the "heritage" movement: a promotional impulse that often has more to do with kitsch, nostalgia, and economic "growth coalitions" than with any deep-rooted or stabilizing sense of community" ("Contemporary" 10). Rather than revealing regional distinctiveness, most of regional authors agree that this commercial flat image perniciously obstructs a reliable knowledge of a region. The term coined by Barry Lopez, "false geographies" (55) seems the most adequate to understand the way many Americans think of their country while visualizing images of landscape they know from television programs, magazine covers, or pleasant wall calendars they glance at every morning, without ever actually setting foot on a physical place. In consequence, according to Kowalewski, now it is not only selective historical memory that regional writers have to deal with, but a whole plethora of predigested and preassigned images and characters which eclipse others, more searching evocations of a place. Sometimes, a response to this forced attempt to establish regional distinctiveness is a deliberate deflation of all mythic presuppositions; the scholar indicates that the Wyoming of Annie Proulx in *Close Range*, with its antiheroes and their

antimythical lives, bears no resemblance to the West imagined by most of Americans.

Apart from dealing with the clash between the real and the imagined, regional writing may be defined as “an object lesson in how national literary traditions are constructed through powerful, ideologically driven mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion” (Foote 24). The genre itself, in the heyday of its popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was disdained and treated as “minor” in posterior decades. Rediscovered and reappraised in the last thirty years, it may be characterized as “deeply concerned with what is remembered and what is forgotten, and how; with how local, particular people and places are incorporated or discarded” (Foote 24). According to Foote, what made regional writing so important in its era, and what continues to make it so important to ours, is its dedication to illuminating the often contradictory meanings of the local; it helps critics understand the meaning of local lives, local ideas, and local traditions; it is committed to asking what place local knowledges have in the construction of a national tradition. The critic asserts that focusing on the shifting, historically contingent category of the local can help find in regional writing a vital model for understanding cultural difference in the early twenty-first century. Women, minority writers, provincials, sexual dissidents, and village dwellers, all of whom, until recently, have been considered to be outside of the normative category of American readers and writers, have also been, according to Foote, closely associated with the producers and the subject-matter of regional literature. Therefore, it has been considered a narrow and predictable genre. In addition, given the fact that “nostalgic” is another adjective commonly related to regional writing, the

erroneous conclusion is that “it deals with element of culture whose power is diminishing” (Foote 27). This scholar strongly holds that “conflating regionalism’s concerns with its formal properties has also led to another – odd and often unremarked – error: because critics believe they know what regional writing *is*, they believe they know what regional writing *does*.” (27). And then she explains: “critics have taken regionalism at its word as a genre that deals with merely local or regional concerns” (27). As her analysis and this dissertation intends to demonstrate, it is not so at all.

Foote observes that the settings which the first regional authors seemed to favor were spatially removed from the typical urban and middle class reader. It could not be any other way, given that one of the genre’s main themes associates with preservation of “fast-disappearing folk ways” and that it inscribes “the cadences of village life, the dialect of remote village-dwellers, the rustic concerns of persons seemingly untouched or ignored by the spread of urbanization and modernization” (Foote 28). And because, the scholar asserts, regionalism deals with matters considered as being on the edge of decline and related to everyday lives, it has been mistakenly understood as formulaic and in decline itself.

Regarding the opposition between the urban and the rural, Kowalewski explains that the idea inherited from a late nineteenth-century conception of “local color” which tagged regional writing as provincial and associated with rural culture in the contemporary regionalism does not seem crucial anymore; there are authors that alternate between the city and the country (“Contemporary”). Yet, the scholar adverts that, given its antimodernist (or antipostmodernist) characterization, American regionalism is often considered

as set against the mainstream culture of individualism, freedom, mobility, and interchangeability, features that correspond more to over-civilized and progressive urban areas.

Also, the history of the genre, as presented by Stephanie Foote in her essay, certifies its anti-urban and pro-country character. Foote places the heyday of regional writing between the Civil War and the early years of the twentieth century. Its predominant form was the short story and its themes, far from conservative and antimodern, were profoundly linked to the social contests of the era. It is important to highlight that regional writing “was produced at one of the most volatile moments in American history, and it was a form of writing particularly well suited to the task of processing and mediating the social and political conflicts that occurred with surprising rapidity in the turn of the century (Foote 28). The issues in question were the two broad political endeavors the United States faced in that time: the recovering and the consolidation of a unity after the Civil War, and the country’s first imperial ventures overseas. Regional writing, though not directly or consciously, was in a way implicated in the logic of nation-building, for it dealt with everyday lives of people who “found that their world was changing at an unprecedented rate, but those changes did not register in the same way for everyone” (Foote 28). Undoubtedly, technological advances and the consolidation of the capitalism augured substantial economic improvement for the greatest part of the American society. But meanwhile, while the changes were still in process, social and political inequalities became more and more evident. The deepest inequalities were especially noticeable in cities, where immigration from the countryside was continuously increasing and where the first signs of urban decay appeared. People started to idealize rural life and

its virtues, a space where they knew what to expect, how to act and what their place was, where they would not feel lost anymore. Therefore cities, apart from a sense of desperation and anxiety, produced a strong feeling of nostalgia: “In the heart of an increasingly anonymous urban existence, many people began to see in the countryside the source of a national wholeness” (Foote 29).

Without taking away the importance of the nostalgia, Foote underlines another crucial consequence of the urbanization: the sense that there were new and emerging cultures in the national polity. Such groups as immigrants, women, and African-American citizens began their battle for political and social recognition and regional writing turned out to be a genre particularly interested in representing these non-normative communities or cultures to a national audience. The scholar explains that in order to understand this relation, one must take into account that regionalism as known today was shaped by such elite magazines as *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, or the *Atlantic Monthly*, and that “it had become the resolutely literate and literary testament to the lives of the ‘folk’ who were in danger of disappearing in the face of the very nationalizing tendencies also responsible for bringing them to the notice of the national public” (30).

But in order to fully understand the outstanding popularity of local color fiction in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it is crucial to comprehend that there was a magnitude of social forces implied, urbanization being just one of them. Donna Campbell points out that “the Civil War had made the country conscious of itself as a land full of disparate regions” (101). This awareness, as the scholar asserts, had its consequences in raising curiosity about other, more “exotic” areas, such as the South, the Midwest, or the West. The railroad made it possible to move rapidly and to “discover” even the most remote, isolated

communities. Advances in communication, such as the ubiquity of telegraph offices and the first long-distance telephone service, together with faster and cheaper press, ensured an agile spread of information. Also, as Donna Campbell points out following Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters*, what added to the popularity of local color was that it finally became possible to travel not only for upper-class tourists, but also for middle-class city-dwellers. These new tourists were now able to live an "authentic" rather than "vicarious" experience of a place they previously could only read about. As D. Campbell put it, "authenticity was the keynote" (102), not only in literature; it is interesting to underline that the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was the time when Charles Darwin's and Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theories indirectly drove "native" American families to emphasize their heritage and differentiate their family stories from those of the immigrants arrived after 1892. One of the factors that best demonstrated ethnic and social background of each was the language, and so "'native' American rural dialects and phrases in literature implicitly became a means for shutting out the Irish, Yiddish, Italian, and east European dialects that could be heard everywhere in the great cities." (D. Campbell 102).

As to stylistic features regional writings shared, apart from the obvious prominence of their settings, they were "developed in conversation with the periodicals, which made certain assumptions about the kinds of things their wealthy and privileged audiences wanted to read" (Foote 31). Foote emphasizes that it was common to narrate the story of an incident in the life of a town, or the surprising effect of an outsider on a village or town; copious use of dialect and of local wisdom was applied, proceeded with a measured, elegiac

tone. The characters, according to Foote, either were very old, and unable to regenerate or reproduce themselves, or the village folk were directly threatened by the incursions of modernity in some form or another. Binaries such as nation and region, primitive and civilized, nature and culture, were generally exercised in the regional stories.

Donna Campbell defines regional or local color fiction as “an important literary force during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, local stories focused on the unique locales of what authors saw as vanishing American past whose customs, dialect, and characters the authors of the movement sought to describe and preserve” (93). She explains the terms “regional” and “local color” fiction were used interchangeably in the nineteenth century; before Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse redefined “regionalism” as “a more serious, more sympathetic, and less stereotypical way of writing about region” (D. Campbell 93), “local color” had been a predominant term. The scholar emphasizes the authenticity of the genre. D. Campbell evokes what Hamlin Garland denominated “veritism” as one of its most important features; no “literary tourists” (using Amy Kaplan’s term) can be taken as regional writers, a deep knowledge of all the aspects of a given place is considered essential. The scholar specifies that “making local color authentic (written by a native) and regional in focus, as Garland suggests, would ensure its fidelity to real life and fascinate readers eager to learn about other regions” (D. Campbell 93). This thesis will insist that this is also the case of the twentieth century neo-regionalism.

In order to distinguish regionalism from mainstream realism, Donna Campbell points out such characteristics of the first one as an emphasis on the

local, an interest in the exotic or unusual features of the region, detailed descriptions of settings, the use of dialect, and a use of a shorter form for fiction. Also, in terms of their social status, the two genres are clearly distinguished, realism being the powerful and the dominant one. As D. Campbell affirms, local color fiction was categorized by its detractors as “a lighter, more comforting version of realism, one in which descriptive detail and the humorous depiction of quaint customs painted over its lack of serious themes” (93).

Notwithstanding, the periodicals which published regional writing played a crucial role in approximating the readers to truly important social and political problems of the era. A privileged reader, when reaching for the elite periodical, could now be entertained by an interesting story and learn about the race or class problems suffered in different parts of the country. Moreover, as Donna Campbell indicates, now, thanks to the “Atlantic group” magazines (which, apart from the *Scribner's*, the *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, included the *North American Review*, the *Critic*, and the *Forum*), certain standards were guaranteed also “for a middle class willing to purchase the kind of literary taste that was formerly the carefully cultivated and strenuously guarded aesthetic province of the leisured and highly educated upper class.” (102). Stephanie Foote concludes saying: “Together, the national magazines’ construction of an enlightened and elite reading audience, and a series of demographic shifts in the United States, ensured the success of regional writing.” (30).

Nevertheless, in spite of such a favorable outcome of the genre, nineteenth-century local color fiction was rather belittled by the first twentieth-century critics. By focusing mainly on the aesthetic dimensions of the genre,

they “missed how completely regionalism’s expansive social concerns and conventional narrative strategies enabled its innovative engagement with new cultural formations in its own day” (Foote 32). Moreover, given the status of realism, the genre considered by most of the twentieth-century American critics as the most important of the previous generation, the two genres tended to be analyzed in relation with each other. In consequence, regional writing became to be considered “a feminized versions of its more serious, thematically capacious, and formally developed parent” (Foote 32). This supposedly “feminized” characteristic of regional writings was the one to be repeated and emphasized in the majority of literary evaluations of those times; Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Alice Brown, though regarded as valuable and the finest local color authors, were only acknowledged for the emotional intensity of their works and the faithful representations of their limited world. As Stephanie Foote put it, “local color was thus consigned to be the literary versions of the housework of realism, its cultural work reduced to mere preservation” (33).

Such an unjust and narrow categorization of the genre has been firmly argued by feminist literary critics. They claimed that “regional writing was not a failed version of realism, but a genre with its own aesthetic concerns, narrative strategies, and broad-ranging political ramifications” (Foote 33). The capstone of their investigation was published in 1992 Northon anthology titled *American Women Regionalists*. Edited by Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, this anthology of the most representative nineteenth-century regional writings not only recovered relevant literary creation, but also added to its popularity as a

valuable genre with complete themes, which considerably outreached the nostalgic longing for the lost world.

Foote highlights several features of the regional writing recently investigated, the importance of which nowadays, in contemporary texts and in the present-day world, seems particularly in force. First of all, the idea of the local in regional fiction can be understood as a precursor of what may be called today "identity". In this sense, identity is a contingent notion, meaningful only locally, free from a rigid framework of a normative "American" identity. Secondly, it is important to underline that regional writing did not only represented new people; frequently, the authors themselves were marginalized writers in American Arts, and also sometimes discriminated in their everyday lives, given their race, class, or gender. As this scholar asserts, regionalism was deeply involved in suggesting that racial, gender, and even sexual difference had a place in literary marketplace. In the end, it was a genre which oscillated between "the nation's solid citizens and the citizens on its periphery;" "indeed, it was a genre in which marginalization itself was a positive virtue" (Foote 34).

As to the diversity of forms within the contemporary regionalism in recent years, Kowalewski emphasizes the importance of literary non-fiction which deals with place, especially taking into account its recent popularity, "a national phenomenon," of such genres as memoirs or autobiography. They often provide fresh view of what it means to dwell, or have dwelt, in a given place. Travel writing is another form of literary non-fiction that should not be forgotten since it sometimes results in valuable accounts of regional landscape and culture. Some of these travel narratives, as the scholar puts it, "bear alternatively

marveling and cranky witness to the prodigal variety of contemporary regionalism” (“Contemporary” 20).

2.2. Regionalism Innovated

Regarding the status of regional writing nowadays, many agree with Foote’s words when she states that it is “one of the first genres that tried to understand the nation itself as an ideologically inflected cultural construct, and that tried to supplement the official story of what counted as American by providing ‘unofficial’ histories of the nation’s inhabitants” (38). Therefore, its validity in the twenty-first century culturally diversified world is unquestioned. Nevertheless, in the postmodern, global age there is no space for any conventional definitions; no straightforward or unequivocal theory can be formulated. Neil Campbell, when introducing his interpretation of the genre in *Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, says:

The reframed region/regionalism I intend to extend here is an international, living mix of voices, uncontained, problematic, contradictory – a series of ‘border discourses’ that articulates the contemporary West as it ‘works’ inward and outward. This is a redefinition of regionalism that refuses to get to the border (of region or nation) and turn back, to simply close up on itself in some homely and familiar act of territorialization, as if protecting itself from the wider world beyond, but one that also

deterritorializes and directs us simultaneously outside itself to the postregional and the postwestern. (44)

The alternative which N. Campbell proposes in order to truly comprehend regions, especially the American West to which the scholar dedicates his studies, is to disrupt its conventional role, fold outward and become a reinvigorated “critical (cultural) regionalism.” It is important to point out that the term “critical regionalism”, first coined by Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre in “The Grid and the Pathway” in 1981, is used again and developed in Kenneth Frampton’s influential essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism” (1983). Frampton begins his essay quoting the French theorist Paul Ricoeur, who reflects on the phenomenon of universalization as a potential threat to traditional cultures. Ricoeur asks: “In order to get on to the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the *raison d’être* of a nation?” (qtd. in Frampton 16). The quotation ends not with an answer, but with a revelation of a paradox: “how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization” (qtd. in Frampton 16). What Frampton does in his essay is to apply these ideas in the field of architecture; he recognizes that the only way for architecture to be sustained today as a critical practice is to assume an *arrière-garde* position, “one which distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the preindustrial past” (20). This critical *arrière-garde*, he adds, should “remove itself from both the optimization of advanced technology and the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism or the glibly decorative” (20).

As N. Campbell explains, Frampton's essay seeks "the dialectical interplay between [universal] civilization and [local] culture" and asserts that this might happen through 'double mediation' and 'interaction' whereby modern universalization is constantly interrupted and unsettled by what the architect calls "a revealed conjunction between" (N. Campbell 49). The scholar points out that the usage of the term "conjunctural" denies the assertion of hierarchical order, of the dominant, universal form over the regional, and instead, finds effective ways to "mediate;" this conjunctural process is called by Frampton "in laying" or "layering," whereby the site "has many levels of significance... the prehistory of the place, its archeological past and its subsequent cultivation and transformation across time," exhibiting "idiosyncrasies of place... without falling into sentimentality" (qtd. in N. Campbell 49). After reviewing this part of Frampton's essay, N. Campbell concludes determining that the architect "does present a radical vision of critical regional space as a complex, layered, multiple, and mobile concept comprising past, present, and future that opposes any effort to reduce or limit its capacity through narrow definition or "rootedness" (49).

In his *Rhizomatic West*, Neil Campbell thoroughly examines the genealogy of critical regionalism as an architectural concept in order to, as he reveals, borrow it, apply it, and develop it to be critical with and of regionalism, always with the West as his base line. According to N. Campbell, "region" has to be revised as a "process geography" rather than a cluster of cartographic materials so that "roots" (of the local, the placed, the regional as conventionally drawn) become more intimately connected to "routes" (of mobility, encounter, and travel). He insists that it is only within the tensions between these

processes that is possible to understand a *reframed* critical regionalism and employ it productively to answer the question how and why the West, using N. Campbell's example, functions as real and imagined space, crisscrossing boundaries.

Following the path of the flexibility and the "mobility" of ideas, Douglas Reichert Powell, when introducing the concept of critical regionalism in his study *Critical Regionalism. Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, particularly emphasized the social aspect, so powerful and crucial in its role of constructing places. As Powell puts it, regions are not so much places themselves but ways of describing relationships among places; these descriptions serve a particular interest of a particular descriptor. What he terms "critical regionalism" is this deliberate use of region as a way to envision and critique relationships among people and places and envision better alternatives. The scholar asserts that critical regionalism involves tracing a path across the disciplines as well as the dimensions of the place under consideration and that writing about a region is to participate in the creation of new, potentially revelatory definitions and perspectives on it. For him the "sense of place" bears little relation to its essential qualities or topographical features, but it is rather a combination of "ongoing debates and discourses that coalesce around particular geographical spaces" (14).

Douglas Reichert Powell agrees with other scholars, such as Raymond Williams, Patricia Nelson Limerick, or Lucy Lippard, that during most of twentieth century, the term "regionalism" has been used pejoratively, and sometimes still is. Regionalism connotes "provincialism" or the unclear concept of the local; cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, is considered its antonym and

seen as a positive virtue. It is cosmopolitanism, which “ostensible provides a perspective on all places and all things” (Powell 20) the point of view the university intellectuals tend to adopt, though, according to Powell, “it has one important blind spot: its own locatedness” (20). She scholar concludes that critical regionalism is all about negotiation between the local [regional] and the cosmopolitan [global], avoiding either the excesses or the limitations of the two poles.

Krista Comer, when introducing some of the key terms in her “Introduction: Assessing the Postwestern” leaves “critical regionalism” to the very last paragraphs, which somehow gives the impression of the importance, the complexity, and the diversity of approaches to the topic. After a short presentation of its architectural theory origins and an emphasis on Neil Campbell’s prominence of ideas in the field, she points out the variety of ways the term can be theoretically inflected. Comer underlines some of them; she briefly describes how Gayatri Spivak, in dialogue with Judith Butler, uses critical regionalism in order to theorize the contemporary state and, given the impact of global capital on humans, to suggest statelessness the term might address. Comer also mentions the idea Wickelson developed with Spivak, according to which a deep democratic impulse in critical regionalism is to be found, and the controversial approach by José Limón, who adopts the term, as Comer says, to urge a deep localist knowledge for anyone carrying out global literary studies. It is noteworthy that this last scholar “advances critical regionalism as a set of tools for transnational or critical global literary studies, able to combine poetics, political economy, and attentiveness to the tensions between the local and global.” (Comer 13) Ultimately, according to Krista Comer, as a result of its

longstanding regard for an ethics of place, critical regionalism as the key body of thought might contribute to critical theory and Americanist or Américas literary studies. The scholar insists that it is no accident, nor should it be undervalued, that “a number of competing currents of critical regionalism run through the field in its present postwestern and postregional and rhizomatic and feminist configurations.” (14).

Michael Kowalewski, when commenting on the current critical diversity in his “Introduction” to *Reading the West. New Essays on the Literature of the American West* points out that it is not quite diverse enough. In spite of a lively interest in such analytical categories as class, race, ethnicity, and gender, the category of region has been neglected. One of the possible reasons for this negligence, says Kowalewski, could be that “region or a ‘sense of place’ is not an imaginative factor that can be internalized and struggled with in the same literary rewarding ways that writers struggle with issues of race, class, and gender” (“Introduction” 7). Another explanation the scholar proposes is a surprising lack of vocabulary the critics deal with, especially when it comes to asking rewarding philosophical, psychological, or aesthetic questions about place, its properties, and its influence on humans. Thus, many scholars simply consider these features to be non-influential. Even though “despite the fact that cognitive scientists are now suggesting that memory itself cannot function without place, that there is no awareness of past events in our lives without a sense of place in which they happen” (Kowalewski, “Introduction” 7). Kowalewski recognizes that sometimes it is not clear what kind of link can be established between landscape and writing, between self and environment. Nevertheless, having doubts does not imply denying any kind of regional

identity; and yet finding region an important factor in literary studies is infrequent, and to be labeled as a “regional writer” may result in a literary “kiss-of-death.” The scholar rejects such an appraisal and with his collection of essays pretends to demonstrate that region and place can enclose a far broader range of critical interests and issues than, for instance, Chicano Studies, Native American Studies, or Environmental Studies, it is to say, individual and restricted critical perspectives generally encompass. Addressing a text in place can only add to the complexity of its analysis and vitally enrich its understanding.

II. Who is Annie Proulx?

1. The Author and Her Literary Output

Annie Proulx is a solid, practical looking woman, unadorned, direct. ... When she smiles or laughs, which she does frequently, she shows her teeth, then draws her upperlip down to cover them. She has graceful hands and few lines in her face. She is someone people are comfortable with, though she doesn't seem that comfortable. ("E. Annie Proulx Awarded")

Annie Proulx (/ˈpruː/), who has also used the names E. Annie Proulx and E.A. Proulx (this last one, as she explained, so the men reading outdoor magazines, where she was at first publishing, would not think the author was a woman), is an American writer who was born in Connecticut in 1935 as the eldest of five daughters of George Napoleon Proulx and Lois "Nellie" Gill Proulx. She is of mixed origin; her mother's family was an old New England clan, her father's heritage was French Canadian. When recalling her father, Proulx remembers his "obsessive desire to escape his French Canadian heritage and reinvent himself as a New England Yankee" (*Bird Cloud* 11) as a clear consequence of the discrimination he suffered on the part of her mother's long established New England "superior" clan. The author does not hesitate to admit: "He and his family were victims of the racism that infected the dominant culture of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant New Englanders, who saw immigrants, especially French Canadians from the north, as racially inferior." (*Bird Cloud* 11-

12). The fact that she is a bit of both, must have been an important factor in her cultural development. Her understanding of minorities and disregarded communities, especially in rural surroundings, where she has always lived and is most familiar with, are the fruit of those years. The influence of her father's industrious nature and her mother's artistic ability together with observation skills sculptured her complex personality:

My father was in the textile business and we moved frequently when I was a child as he worked his way up the executive ladder. I suspect my intense and single-minded work habits stem from his example. My mother is a painter and amateur naturalist, and from her I learned to see and appreciate the natural world, to develop an eye for detail, and to tell a story. ("Author")

When she was twenty years old, Proulx spontaneously decided to drop out of the college she attended, Colby College in Maine, to marry her first husband. They had a daughter who, after her parents' divorce, was raised by her father. The writer married two more times and was divorced twice; she has two sons from her second marriage and one more from the third one. After her second divorce she went back to school in Vermont. In 1969 she received a B.A. cum laude in history at the University of Vermont in Burlington and in 1973 she earned her M.A. in history at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. Two years later she passed her oral exams with the idea of doing doctoral work in Renaissance economic history but, instead of completing the dissertation and continuing her career in teaching, she

decided to move to Canaan, Vermont, a rural area near the Canadian border, and earn a living from her work as a freelance journalist. According to various sources, her beginnings in this remote area were extremely difficult: “She was so poor that she would hunt and fish for her dinner.” (“E. Annie Proulx”).

Annie Proulx published her first novel, *Postcards*, in 1992 and she was given PEN/Faulkner Award a year later; that is when she achieved acclaim as a fiction writer. Nevertheless, it was her second novel, *Shipping News* (1993), which converted her into a best-selling writer and earned her four major prizes in a row: the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize for Fiction, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, the National Book Award in 1993, and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1994. She was already fifty-eight, relatively old to be called, as she was by some critics, a “new promising fiction writer,” especially taking into account that these novels were not her first published fiction. During the years that she had worked as a freelance journalist in Vermont she had been writing short stories for magazines (mostly for *Seventeen* and *Gray’s Sporting Journal*) since 1950s, generally about topics she knew first-hand, related to rural life in northern New England. Nevertheless, her primary income came from her non-fiction articles on subjects such as fishing, gardening, cidermaking, or cooking. Her publications from that period also include pamphlets on growing grapes or making insulated window shutters, and non-fiction how-to books, such as *Sweet and Hard Cider: Making It, Using It and Enjoying It* (1980), *The Complete Dairy Foods Cookbook: How To Make Everything from Cheese to Custard in Your Own Kitchen* (1982) and *Plan and Make Your Own Fences, Gates, Walkways, Walls and Drives* (1983). Years later she recognized that at the beginning, when living in the woods, such topics as gardening, architecture,

or the difficulty of maintaining a long, dirt-road driveway were truly of her interest and so she wrote about them and “made some damn good living for a number of years” (“Imagination”). And although she needed this money to provide for her sons, Proulx confessed that gradually it became more and more boring and her interests changed: “I began to move towards fiction for intellectual stimulation.” (“Imagination”).

In 1988 Scribners published Proulx’s first collection of short stories, *Heart Songs and Other Stories*; after brief, but positive, reviews the editor encouraged her to write a novel. Thanks to an advance from her publisher and grants from the Vermont Council for the Arts and the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming, she could finally concentrate on writing as her exclusive occupation. And although “Proulx was at first uncertain that she would be able to write a longer work of fiction, ... once she started writing *Postcards*, she found the process easier than writing short fiction.” (Rood 7). While receiving her Pulitzer Prize for *Shipping News* Proulx admitted candidly: “I hadn't a clue I was a novelist, it never occurred to me,” and then she added:

I had these short stories that were overpopulated and had too much detail and were crammed with too many events, and I didn't know what was wrong, and I had a hard, hard time doing this. So, the novel was just- it was a great relief to have all of these pages to be able to spread the characters out, to build character and take it apart again. (“E. Annie Proulx Awarded”)

In order to reflect the charm of the landscape, (not only of New England, which she knew so well and which is described in the novel with a specially acclaimed mixture of lyrical and tough language), she drove across the country several times. This is when she “discovered” Wyoming as an area with a stunning landscape and as a very interesting part of American history. She also realized that it was a perfect place to write; there, within six weeks she wrote *Postcard* and the rest of her fiction after that. Her explanation, again, has to do with the countryside: “The long sight lines and landscape that called me to walk and explore it loosened ideas, created images and even sentences and phrases” (“An Interview”). She was able to travel several times to Newfoundland, another region that fascinates Proulx because of its harsh geography and bleak history, and complete her research on it thanks to the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Guggenheim Fellowship. The publication of *Shipping News* in 1993, her following novel and a bestseller, was the fruit of these expeditions.

Her third novel, titled *Accordion Crimes*, was published in 1996. Here the author does not explore only one particular area, but, along with the accordion, moves all over the United States, from New England to Louisiana and Texas. The instrument passes from one ethnic group to another, from African-American to Slavs, from Creoles to Scandinavians, all of them in pursuit of the Anglocentric identity, similarly to Proulx’s French Canadian family some decades earlier. Although the original plan for the novel was to set all the stories in Texas, Proulx found it impossible to spend enough time there to do the necessary landscape research, therefore in the end, only one of the sections develops therein. Nevertheless, her next novel, *That Old Ace in the*

Hole (2002), draws an extremely detailed picture of this Western state. In fact, some critics claim that the author's meticulousness, the way she gave detailed accounts of everyday life, is excessive and may become irksome and boring.

In 1999, when the collection of short stories *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* was published, Proulx had already been living in Wyoming for five years. According to Karen L. Rood, the stories "demonstrate the depth to which she has come to understand her new home and its history" (9). *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2*, a sequel to the first collection was published in 2004 and four years later *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3* finally came out. Two of Proulx Wyoming short stories, both included in the collection *Close Range*, earned a special critical appreciation. Her "Brokeback Mountain," originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1997, won two renowned prizes, a National Magazine and an O. Henry award. Another one, "The Half-Skinned Steer," was selected to form a part of such prestigious anthologies as *The Best American Short Stories 1998*, edited by Garrison Keillor (Proulx edited the 1997 edition) and *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999) edited by John Updike.

Bird Cloud, her last non-fiction work (2011), also talks about her "new home." As a matter of fact, here "new home" does not refer only to Wyoming; the memoir is actually about building her new house in Wyoming. Proulx falls in love with 640 acres of a beautifully situated nature preserved piece of land and calls it Bird Cloud. According to Alexandra Fuller, the book is part autobiography, part nature journal, part history of place and, according to the majority of critics, "something of a letdown."

Proulx worked as an editor, too. In 2008 *Red Desert. History of a Place* was published, edited by the writer and with photographs by Martin Stupich. Together with a team of scientists and scholars, Proulx and Stupich resort to a wide range of disciplines (geology, hydrology, paleontology, ornithology, zoology, entomology, botany, climatology, archeology, anthropology, and history) in order to reveal many intriguing facts about Red Desert and its inhabitants. What they hoped to achieve with this essay, was to draw the Americans' attention to this forgotten and arid region, and make them realize that its oil, gas, and mineral exploitation has to be controlled.

Two of Annie Proulx's texts were adapted to films: *The Shipping News* and the closing story in the collection *Close Range*, "Brokeback Mountain." The first one, directed by Lasse Hallström, was released in 2001; Proulx had no influence on it (she had sold all the rights) and the result was not to her liking. The opposite, however, occurred with the adaptation of the latter film. Proulx was very pleased with the screenwriters of *Brokeback Mountain*, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana; as she confessed: "I trusted them with the story, especially Larry McMurtry, whose ear and eye for Western America is equaled by none." ("Testa"). Referring to the result, she said: "It resembles the written story very closely, and the McMurtry-Ossana enlargement is seamless. I do feel it accurately represents Wyoming some decades in the past." ("Testa"). The film proved to be a success; it won a number of awards, among them three Oscars, a BAFTA, and a Golden Globe.

Very recently, in January 2016, Proulx's latest novel was published, titled *Barkskins*. It comprises three centuries of two French-origin families' lives. The novel begins in the late seventeenth century with the arrival of two penniless

Frenchmen in “New France” (part of North America and Canada today) and them becoming wood-cutters. Throughout more than 700 pages their descendants’ lot is examined, always with the background of a taking down the world’s forests and the perspective of a possible ecological collapse. As one reviewer put it, “Proulx is always writing at least partly about our tempestuous relationship with nature;” *Barkskins* is “a tale of long-term, shortsighted greed whose subject could not be more important: the destruction of the world’s forests” (Vollmann). The novel has already become the *New York Times* bestseller, finalist for the Kirkus Prize for Best Novel, a *New York Times* Notable Book and a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year.

2. Proulx’s Method and the Importance of Place

What I find to be very bad advice is the snappy little sentence, ‘Write what you know.’ It is the most tiresome and stupid advice that could possibly be given. If we write simply about what we know we never grow. We don’t develop any facility for languages, or an interest in others, or a desire to travel and explore and face experience head-on. We just coil tighter and tighter into our boring little selves. What one should write about is what interests one. (“Imagination”)

Proulx’s doctoral studies at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal and her particular interest in the French *Annales* School exercised great influence on her latter fiction. As Proulx herself recognized in 1999: “I was attracted to the French *Annales* School, 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.” (“An Interview”).

This attraction, with time, became something more; the method Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch (and later Fernand Braudel), the pioneers of *Annales*, were using in order to collect data, became Proulx’s method of research, as also did their dialectic between determinism and possibilism.

The major innovation of *Annales* (1920s), as Stéphanie Durrans explains in her essay “The Influence of the *Annales* School on Annie Proulx’s Geographical Imagination,” was “to break with the purely backward-looking attitude of traditional historicist discourse and draw attention to the present and to contemporary society” (12). The tools to examine this contemporary society and to widen the historian’s horizon were found in an interdisciplinary synthesis. And so, apart from what is stated in the official documents, information coming from ordinary material relating to ways of life is also considered; population, demography, nature and landscape are stressed. Also, *longue durée* is claimed to be the only tool to examine the history of mankind. The individual is emphasized, but always taking into account the social environment of his/her times, the local background receives as much attention as the national and international backgrounds. Moreover, the in-the-field exploration is exercised.

In the nineteenth century, so called, Vidalian tradition was the movement that gave the *Annales* its primary impulse. Created in 1880s by Pierre Vidal de la Blache, a historian and “the first geographer to be appointed to the chair of geography in the Sorbonne since the chair was established in 1809” (Durrans 13), the school characterized by an innovative approach to the science of

geography; as Durrans specifies, the permanence (*long durée*), the study of the present, the immediate surroundings, way of living or cultural milieu, and everyday life were the primary notions. Rural environments and natural landscapes were stressed as the best suitable fields to study “human geography” (the influences that space and surroundings are to exert on men). Durrans points out that the Vidalian tradition was described as “an original synthesis of naturalism (man as a living being nature), and humanism (man as a social being who acts in his natural surroundings and constructs landscapes)” (14). Consequently, in this perspective, “the land is used as a starting point for the exploration of a whole way of living that even determines the personality of its occupants” (15).

After the Second World War Fernand Braudel gave new impetus to the school and promoted a “geohistory,” the belief that “history could not be understood independently from its geographic setting” (Durrans 16). In addition, Braudel opposed his belief in environmental determinism to the Vidalian possibilism. While for Braudel “man was only a prisoner of the environment and of its contingencies, with no room to maneuver whatsoever,” while he “belittled the role of man as a collective force and presented him as powerless against the implacable constraints of *longue durée*” (Durrans 17) and manifested a pessimistic view of man’s destiny, Vidal believed man did have a chance to adapt to his milieu and succeed. As Durrans asserts, Vidal’s perception was that man is able to alter his/her surroundings and triumph over nature, but only “by using the weapons it gives him and the strategy it imposes onto him but in no way can we say that man’s dependence on nature is similar to that of

animals and plants.” (17). Furthermore, the intervention of contingency is seen as a factor which may always intervene and play a significant role.

The central points of Proulx’s literary work will very much resemble those of the *Annales*. Place, region, geography, and socio-economic aspects will strongly prevail; they will be the core of her writing. People’s lot, the destiny of the inhabitants of these places, their wishes and plans for future, and their down-to-earth everyday lives will be treated in detail. The characters’ lives will be set against a particular time and place. In *Missouri Review* she was clear about that:

Place and history are central to the fiction I write, both in the broad sense and in detailed particulars. Rural North America, regional cultures in critical economic flux, the images of an ideal and seemingly attainable world the characters cherish in their long views despite the rigid and difficult circumstances of their place and time. Those things interest me and are what I write about. I watch for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them. (“An Interview”)

Long durée and the shifting from environmental determinism to contingency, so important for authors of the *Annales*, will also play a crucial role for Proulx:

Much of what I write is set in contemporary North America, but the stories are informed by the past; 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. (“An Interview”)

As far as the method of gathering data is concerned, Proulx conducts her research in a truly scientific way. She generally spends at least a year in a place where her work is going to be set; she studies its history, its people, the names, the climate and, of course, the landscape together with “human marks on it.” As she specified in “An Interview,” she also examines “earlier and prevailing economy based on raw materials” and “ethnic background of settlers.” The information she uses comes from different sources, in most cases not official ones (manuals of work and repair, book of manners, local histories, graveyards, bulletin boards, scraps of paper, etc.). She draws sketches and fills her inseparable notebook with all types of details.

With reference to Proulx’s favorite themes, economy is a common and a very important one in her work. As a matter of fact, difficult economic situations are the background in all her novels and short stories. First, in *Heart Songs*, she examined northern New England and the decline since late eighteenth century of the fundamental branch of its local industry, the dairy farms. Another issue the stories deal with is the shifting of new residents, generally “money outsiders,” replacing the old inhabitants. In *Postcards* the theme of outsiders taking the place of natives is developed, for its main topic, in the author’s words, is the concern of “what happens when a region has only one economic base and it goes under – the breakup and scattering of families, the subdivision of

land, the outflow of old residents or the new position they adopt as service providers to the rich ones moving in” (“An Interview”). In *The Shipping News* it is about the disappearing of the Newfoundland traditional way of living, cod fishing (collapsed because of overfishing), whereas in *Wyoming Stories* it is, once again, about an excessively reduced, short-sighted economic base – cattle ranching and extractive industries. In *That Old Ace in the Hole* the theme of disastrous consequences of polluting hog farms replacing impoverished ranches is developed.

Accordion Crimes and in *Barkskins*, although also strongly related to the recurrent theme of economic struggle, adds a new perspective: the immigrants’ point of view. It is interesting to remark how with this shift in perspective everything becomes even more difficult; as Proulx observes with obvious knowledge of the issue, immigrants were not only forced to work in “the most miserable and dangerous jobs,” but were also forced to “renounce the past, give up the old culture, language, history, religion, even one’s birth name, and replace the old self with American ideals, language, a new name and new ways” (“An Interview”). In describing minorities, what comes to light is the author’s interest in the national character of her country; she believes that Americans can be depicted as “aggressive, protean, identity-shifting, mutable, restless and mobile” (“An Interview”).

In essence, the author’s main concerns and the commonest themes in her work are linked to place, with all its geographic and historical characteristics, understood as a habitat for its residents. Furthermore, economic issues, (hence, social conditions) will play a crucial role as a background in the development of her novels and stories. The method Annie Proulx will often be

referred to, even by herself, is the one used by the historicists in *Annales School*. The reference that comes to my mind when analyzing Proulx's work, her favorite themes as well as the procedure she applies when collecting data and making use of it, is the school of naturalism.

CHAPTER II: NEW ENGLAND

1. Regional Identity of New England

... New England writers defined the national cultural tradition ... From this angle, one can almost say that New England is the nation; “regions” are everywhere else.

Stephen Nissenbaum

Don't presume to tell New Englanders – or people in any region, for that matter, who they are ...; they know very well who they are through the patterns and textures of the lives they have carved out in the landscapes of their immediate places.

Kent C. Ryden

New England is the smallest region in the United States of America. Nevertheless, as Stephen Nissenbaum indicates, it is also what seems to be the perfect American region: “Its history is long, and mostly it is proud” (38). Unlike the vast and unclear in the definition of their boundaries South, West, or Midwest, geographically, New England may seem a “natural” region too: “Huddled in the nation’s Northeastern corner,” its size bestows upon it “a natural coherence and wholeness” (Conforti 2). As well as Rhode Island, the smallest state in the country, another five compose New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The lack of big cities is what characterizes its urban landscape; to quote one of the most recognized New Englanders (out of many) Nathaniel Hawthorne’s words, “We have so much country that we have no country at all” (qtd. in Conforti 2). A profound sense of New England’s “long and proud” history is what seems to emanate from its “towns hived off from larger towns whose boundaries signs announce the date

of birth” (Conforti 2). Even before the Puritans’ settlement was established, Conforti explains, Captain John Smith named the region in 1614; in his works *Description of New England* (1616) Smith described its climate, population, and landscape. In 1634 William Wood widened this knowledge about the area’s natural features in his *New England’s Prospect*. The region was formally recognized in 1680s, when King James II attempted to unite New York and the constituent colonies together under the name of the collective Dominion of New England. Eventually, New York preferred to go a separate way, but Vermont took its place as the sixth state and so, for the last two centuries, the region’s boundaries have been exceptionally clearly defined.

Undoubtedly, from the cultural and sentimental point of view, New England occupies, or has occupied until recently, a special and privileged place in the United States. It has been considered a quintessence of the American identity, the America’s heartland, which nowadays, as Nissenbaum points out, occupies rather much less precise region of “Middle America.” Notwithstanding, the scholar highlights the fact that well before the region came to lose this imaginative spiritual hold, its literature had become inextricably linked to the national culture. Such New England writers as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickinson are even today studied as those who defined the national cultural tradition. Oddly enough, the same does not occur with William Faulkner or Willa Cather, a Southerner and a Midwesterner.

Nissenbaum indicates that within the region, too, New England’s “pastoral heart” has also been moving along the ages. In the eighteenth century the proud title of the “land of steady habits” belonged to Connecticut; by the mid-nineteenth century it had shifted to Massachusetts. At the beginning of the

twentieth century it reached its northern borders, and so Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine began to be seen as best reflecting the essence of the region. The reasons for such a shift towards, what one hundred fifty years ago some would call “a land of half-civilized hillbillies,” is that now “Connecticut is little more than a suburb of New York (the Connecticut Yankee being no more), and Massachusetts is a center of high-tech and academic culture, and those rural northern areas have become the last true bastion of the Yankee spirit” (Nissenbaum 39).

The history of the region is intimately linked to its literature and culture. In spite of the fact that in the twentieth century West was the most imagined and idealized region of America, especially since Hollywood began its massive production and releasing of successful but tendentious Westerns, it was not so in previous times. As a matter of fact, even now, West and New England can compete in the number and quality of their imagined features. Kent C. Ryden asserts that the phrase “the idea of ‘New England,’ when mentioned to most Americans, provokes a spontaneous response of some set of conventional images they unwittingly acquired throughout their lifetimes:

In the popular mind, New England looks a certain way, marked by such things as quaint country stores, white village centers, steepled Congregational churches, venerable stone walls, and blazing fall foliage. It is populated by a certain group of people, largely the descendants of the region’s Puritan founders and of the stalwart Yankee farmers of earlier centuries. And it has witnessed and been shaped by certain fundamental threads of historical experience, notably the arrival of

English colonists and the nation-founding events of the American Revolution. ("Region" 110)

As Conforti points out (6), the region's population's early historical consciousness and high rate of literacy and cultural production were the main reasons of such a mythic image. The scholar observes that New England has been a storied place from the very beginning; New Englanders dominated American historical writing from providential Puritans, to Whiggish antebellum Yankees, to nostalgic colonial revivalists, to partisan academics. Their identity, the scholar insists, has been encoded in narratives about the past of the region, *imagined past* (emphasis in the original), consisting of stories continually revised in response to new interpretative needs, to negotiate, traditionalize, and resist change. It is important to underline that, as the scholar indicates, to call "imagined past" these changing narratives reinforcing New England culture and regional identity, is not to imply they are sheer myth with no empirical foundation; "Rather, it is to argue that these narratives are *partial truths*, selective interpretations of New England experience that are held up as the *whole truth*" (Conforti 6).

In order to understand how regional identity was both created and then passed on to the next generations, and in order to contextualize Annie Proulx's New England fiction, it is fundamental to take an overview of its history and, above all, its literature. Also, it will have to be emphasized that the canon of New England literary history belongs to those who had the power, both by mastering the pen and controlling the press.

This general examination starts with Puritans and, as Conforti formulates it, their “efforts to colonize and exercise imaginative dominion over New England” (8). The first-generation Puritan migrants saw themselves rather as Englishmen in exile, and all they wished and attempted to do was to “purify their church and society while also pursuing and extending the cultural patterns of their old homes – that is, to literally create a new and better *England*” (Ryden, “New England” 197). As Ryden indicates, works such as Governor John Winthrop’s sermon “A model of Christian Charity” with its “city on the hill” metaphor and other countless sermons demonstrate that these first settlers, while guided by the superior aim of their religious mission, cast the New English colony into the Old English image and likeness. When analyzing the second generation of New England Puritans, though, significant changes in colonial life and shifts in their attitude towards the English homeland are observed. According to Ryden, given the fact that Puritans had enough time to acclimatize to their distance from England and to embrace their colonies as home rather than as a site of exile, they began to interpret their migration in terms of separation, emphasizing the “New,” rather than continuity, that is to say “England” (“New England” 197). For the first time lineaments of some sort of regional identity were appreciated. Obviously, the literature that survived and which still rules the popular imagination is the one written and published by Puritan clerics and historians. For this reason, instead of stories based on real characteristics of everyday colonial life, a great majority of texts tend to present the Puritan mission as heroic, “mythologizing it as the ‘Great Migration,’ as an ideological errand into the wilderness, thereby ensuring that the earliest public

versions of a specifically New England identity were linked primarily with religious idealism” (Ryden, “New England” 197).

Because of Puritanism and its developed - in comparison with other American regions’ culture - during the Revolution and afterwards, New Englanders stood out as the collective with the most defined regional identity and strong awareness of their historical and cultural uniqueness. Being religious was not the only feature of this identity; now, with the growing secularization of the society, the political integrity began to gain importance. As Ryden indicates, republicanism was the ideal form of government for New Englanders, “a government which not only located power and authority in the people, but depended on the virtue of those for its strength and legitimacy” (“New England” 198). And so, the model New Englander, apart from the inherited Puritan religiousness, was supposed to be industrious, frugal, and simple. This political ideology, Ryden insists, influenced the development of an idealized social type that New England inhabitants were encouraged to follow.

That was also the time when the popular culture provided the figure of the Yankee. According to Conforti, as early as the eighteenth century the notorious geographers Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight observed the distinctiveness of New Englanders, also in their appearance; they were presumably taller, more athletic, and frequently had darker skin and eyes. But primarily they focused on the character of these people – “a hearty republican character forged from ancestry, history, piety, and even climate” (Conforti 115). This image of the Yankee was soon to be adopted by writers and artists, and transformed into an ethnic stereotype. Morse and Dwight, despite recording this ethnic identity in the early republic, never actually employed the label “Yankee.”

As a matter of fact, Conforti explains, the term “Yankee,” though originated in the seventeenth century as an epithet against the English inhabitants of the region by their enemies, was never used in writing regarding regional identity until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when writers such as Noah Webster and Washington Irving speculated on its derivation. In spite of numerous different theories, the most plausible explanation is that it is of Dutch origin; the term may have developed from “Jan Kees,” literally John Cheese, a Dutch name of mockery used by New Yorkers to ridicule the English, with whom they were in a constant conflict over boundaries between the two colonies. The Revolutionary song “Yankee Doodle,” Ryden points out, was originally sung by British troops to satirize their enemies from Connecticut and part north, whom they perceived as rustic, ignorant, uncouth, and ill-clad. Nevertheless, another, much more positive for the Patriots version of the song was adopted at the time of the colonists’ first military triumphs, and it started to be sung with pride and defiance. According to Ryden, eventually, from the rough-hewn soldier from the song, a steady regional character emerged:

Sometimes appearing as a clever traveling peddler, sometimes as a simple but shrewd farmer, the Yankee put a patriotic, comic gloss on republican virtue, and toward the mid-nineteenth century the virtuous, rural New England Yankee, by now shorn of many of his attributes, came to popularly represent the region for readers both within and outside New England. (“New England” 198)

Notwithstanding, Conforti underlines that not only did the cultural redemption of the Yankee during the Revolutionary war not lead to national identity for the newly independent states, but even in post-Revolutionary New England it occupied conflicted cultural ground. In Federalist circles, for example, the association was that of the “New England commoners’ increasingly bold assertions of their rights, native ability, and distrust of deference and hierarchy” (Conforti 154).

For the first time the major literary representation of a full-blown Yankee appeared in Royall Tyler’s play, *The Contrast*, in 1787. In the play, a servant (though he proudly calls himself “waiter”), a Massachusetts farm boy named Jonathan, “awkward, foolish, gullible, and dressed in patched and outgrown clothes” (Ryden, “New England” 198), but also patriotic and resistant to the fleshpots of a big city, embodies the regionally representative figure of a Yankee. Jonathan and his master, Colonel Manly, a virtuous American and revolutionary hero are presented in a sharp contrast to their opponents, the anglophile Billy Dimple and his deferential servant Jessamy. Tyler’s play was but the first of a genre of “Yankee plays,” plays which “maintained the theme of national and cultural contrast while placing the Jonathan figure in the starring role; the regional representative had become a national spokesman” (Ryden, “New England” 198).

This emerging New England ideal, as Ryden asserts, is best demonstrated in works of the mid-nineteenth-century author, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Though the writer’s most famous novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) principally takes place in the South, some scholars, such as Nissenbaum, suggest that it “can be plausible, even powerfully, read as a parable of the

social history of New England during the first half of the nineteenth century” (55). The scholar offers various examples to prove his statement, for example the fact that the villain of the novel, Simon Lagree, seems more a Yankee capitalist than a Southern slave owner and a Cavalier, or that the Kentucky farm where Tom is first met, is nothing but a Southern version of the village the writer remembers from her childhood in Litchfield, Connecticut. But above all that, Beecher Stowe wrote about New England strongly romanticizing it, indeed. She idealized the New England village landscape and populated it with strong Yankee republican figures, which she promoted to powerful symbols of the whole region. In such works as “A New England Sketch” (1834), *Oldtown Folks* (1869), or her fictionalized autobiography *Pogonuc People*, the author, according to Ryden, offers a sentimental, pastoral vision of a changeless world; this image was also highly selective, since no hints of commercial activity or the increasing presence of Irish immigrants are appreciated. Nevertheless, in spite of all, Ryden insists that Beecher Stowe

was one of the most prominent nineteenth-century voices establishing a popular sense of who ‘real’ New Englanders were and where they lived, and in her whitewashing of New England history and the New England landscape she established a practice and a political stance that other writers after her would follow. (“New England” 199)

Now, the whole nineteenth century, but especially the years after the Civil War, was a time of crucial changes in New England society’s lives. The most important alteration of, until then, supposedly peaceful, pastoral, and

changeless country existence, came hand-in-hand with the industry boom. Ryden points out that with water-powered factories, entire new industrial cities, like Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Manchester, New Hampshire, were founded. Also, with the advent of steam power, factories were freed from remote river valleys and grew along the New England coast. For the rural parts of the region the unfavorable consequences were immediate; an extensive rural depopulation occurred, mainly due to rapidly increasing difficulties farms began to suffer when competing with the produce shipped east on railroads and canals from the American Midwest, a much more fertile and easily farmed region. Members of these displaced farm families began to form the factories' workforce; the system covered teenage girls too, who under paternalistic supervision were employed in New England mills, though later substituted by immigrants from Quebec and southern Europe. In consequence, "New England was changing from a region of farms and small towns to one dominated more and more by industry; in the process, it was becoming increasingly diverse ethnically" (Ryden, "New England" 202).

With relation to this period in New England history, Stephen Nissenbaum highlights the fact that cannot be overlooked: "New England was the birthplace not only of the small town but also ... of the industrial city" (39). The scholar underlines Gary Kulig's idea that just when the region's small town was first being sentimentalized, by 1860, New England as a whole transformed into the "the single most urban part of the nation – the most industrial, the most Catholic, the most heavily immigrant, and the most rapidly changing area in the United States (Nissenbaum 39-40).

Apart from the nation's centennial celebrations in 1876, the colonial revival, according to Ryden, was a response to these changing conditions. This is when the white-painted Georgian-style houses gained popularity and recognition, and village centers were restored to resemble a colonial ideal. Also, a sudden interest in historic preservation was observed, driven mainly by New England elite, but in time popularly embraced, and especially focused on the surviving farm houses of their earliest colonial period. Moreover, that was when the Pilgrim story rose in the Northern imagination. Oddly enough, Conforti indicates that the term "Pilgrim Forefathers" was not used by colonial New Englanders to describe Plymouth's settlers, but the "Great," expansive Puritan migration into New England. By the mid-nineteenth century, "the story of the Pilgrims had been transformed into an epic account of the religious and republican origins of New England and America" (Conforti 171-172). It is important to highlight, then, that the image created during the colonial revival was a highly exclusive one and its protagonists were limited to idealized hard-working English settlers and Anglo-Saxon farmers; as Ryden put it,

In the face of rapidly changing circumstances, elite New Englanders tried as best they could to stake a physical, historical, and imaginative claim to conceptual ownership of the region, defining its identity on their own terms and inscribing that identity insistently on the landscape, essentially repopulating the landscape with those vanished Yankee farmers. ("New England" 202)

It will undoubtedly be useful, considering the study of the texts by Annie Proulx which will be conducted below, to take a broad look at the New England writers, their texts, and the role they played in constructing this idealized vision transmitted to both a regional and a national audience, as described by Ryden in his essay “New England Literature and Regional Identity.”

The first significant example of the literary re-imagining of the New England past worth underlining is Lucy Larcom’s memoir *A New England Girlhood*, published in 1889. Already the title of Larcom’s work suggests that her girlhood should be considered regionally representative; the author, when a teenager, was a Lowell mill girl, and so she participated directly in the region’s transformation. When describing that time, the writer does not focus on the dangers and hardships of the mill’s machinery, but how she enjoyed working with other Yankee girls, the high morals and religious paternalism of their overseers, or the beauties of the landscape viewed from the factory window. As Ryden points out, “her achievement in the book is to make New England’s industrial present seem continuous with its virtuous Yankee past; while life and economy seem to have changed on the surface, the ‘real’ New England, in Larcom’s view, remained fundamentally unscathed” (“New England” 202).

There were other writers whose intention was to communicate a certain idealized image of New England identity, and so, since the present did not correspond with their version, they focused on the past. Many of these authors, as Ryden asserts, have been condescendingly referred to as “local color” writers, as they focused on small-scale, closely drawn scenes of village life, frequently paying attention to regional folk ways and patterns of dialect. Rowland Robinson with his “Danvis Tales” first published in popular magazines

in the 1890s and then compiled in story collections, exemplifies this kind of writing. Robinson's tales take place in the fictional village of Danvis, Vermont; his characters occupy an Edenic landscape, speak in a heavy Vermont dialect, are uniformly morally upright, always willing to help a neighbor in need. According to Ryden, though, by setting his tales in 1830s, the author makes clear that this idealized vision is unreal, that it is just a part of the lost past where his readers can travel for comfort in their imagination.

Another literary work, probably the best known example of the village-centered New England novel, is Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. It is relevant to signal that in this case the portrayal of an idealized New England is ambiguous, "an ambiguity that would increasingly come to characterize New England regional literature in the twentieth century" (Ryden, "New England" 204). On the one hand, the novel is set within the geographical margins of New England, inhabited by good-hearted Yankees living in an idyllic domestic contentment. This image was the one which a sophisticated urban reader from *Atlantic Monthly*, where the vignettes of the novel first appeared, willingly embraced, happy to believe in this supposedly stable, reassuring New England past. On the other hand, however, Orne Jewett presents a realistic portrayal of a world where the unfortunate consequences of the historical decline of the region's villages and rural areas are not ignored, a place far from being perfect, moribund, unsustainable, and deserted, especially by young people. In conclusion, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, "both reinforces the sense of regional identity argued for by the colonial revival and contains within its pages the seeds of a critique of that same identity. As such, it exemplifies the

literary debate over New England as a cultural region that has characterized the hundred-plus years since its publication” (Ryden, “New England” 205).

Other nineteenth-century New England texts followed the critique of the region’s artificial image; works such as Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s short stories “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” (1890) or “A New England Nun” revealed social and emotional limitations that small-town residents, particularly women, had to deal with; also, these works foretold the social criticism later developed in, for example, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), or Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920). As Ryden explains, that was the time when the ongoing decline in the region’s agriculture and loss of population in rural communities, even in spite of its literary myth, was more and more frequently observed, and so New England started to be considered a place in recession: “Regional and national commentators fretted that New England, seen as the cultural heart of the nation and the repository of national strength and virtue, was losing its vitality and going to seed” (Ryden, “New England” 205). In order to somehow recover the previous status of the region, New Hampshire instituted “Old Home Week” celebrations, with the aim of tempting departed residents to come and, preferably, to stay, or at least invest in the local economy; also, New Hampshire and Vermont began their aggressive marketing action of looking for summer home seekers or would-be farmers to purchase the deserted farms. The opinion of those New Englanders who had never left their rural homesteads, became highly negative; they “came increasingly to be seen as shiftless, inbred, and morally bankrupt, their continued resistance in shabby villages now seen as a sign of fecklessness rather than incorruptibility” (Ryden, “New England” 205).

New England twentieth-century regional literature reflects this unfavorable image of a desolate place in economic and moral decline.

Edwin Arlington Robinson, for instance, offered a poetic critique of the small-town New England characters, inhabitants of a fictional village of Tilbury Town, Maine. From such poems as “Richard Cory” or “Mr. Flood’s Party,” emerges a portrayal of dissatisfaction and disappointment with their life, marked by loss, grief, and loneliness Yankees. A similar depiction of the New England decadent rural population in prose is found in the novels by Edith Wharton, a part-time resident of Massachusetts. Her *Summer* (1917) and *Ethan Frome* (1911) develop in morally corrupted, marginal, somnolent, and desolated towns; her characters’ fate, such as that of Ethan Frome, exemplify the author’s judgment of the New England hopeless existence: “trapped in his home town, unhappily married, unfulfilled in every way possible – indeed, suggesting the impossibility of fulfillment in such a place” (Ryden, “New England” 206).

One of the best, if not the best-known New England twentieth-century poet was Robert Frost. Ryden describes him as a writer who, after publishing his first two books, *A Boy’s Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1915), though a much more complex and sophisticated person, embraced the image of himself as “a New Hampshire countryman and farmer who happened to also be a fine and talented poet” (“New England” 207), a “Yankee-farmer-poet,” “a celebrant of and spokesman for the region” (“New England” 206). His collection *North of Boston*, which first gave him literary prominence, contains some of his most famous poems, such as “Mending Wall,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” and “Home Burial.” It is interesting to underline the change Frost underwent from this first book, “far from being a celebration of happy simple rural life,” “a sober

critique of the social and emotional costs of living in a poor and declining part of the country” (Ryden, “New England” 206), to the reinforcement of the conventional views of New England in his 1923 collection *New Hampshire* (as Conforti assures, Frost often poeticized the Yankee values with irony and doubt, 267). Ryden indicates that this latter collection best exemplifies the poet’s self-assigned role as regional mouthpiece and apologist; Frost reached the point of lamenting that in New Hampshire and Vermont, which he describes as the best states in the Union, “it’s hard to create literature from New England life, because there is so little tragedy to be found there” (Ryden, “New England” 207). Ryden ironically comments that such a statement would have been likely to surprise many of the speakers from the poet’s North of Boston collection.

Of course, what cannot be overlooked and what surely influenced Frost in his shift of perspective, are the historical and social events of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. The Great Depression brought a sudden economic collapse, “with southern New England in particular reeling from shutdown mills, high unemployment, and labor unrest” (Conforti 267). The Second World War had a devastating moral influence on many Americans; full of doubt in modernity and history, in many cultural areas a return to regional themes, with an emphasis on “rural,” as a symbol of changeless and premodern world, was observed. The founding of *Yankee* magazine in 1935 was one of the most notable responses to this need of the good old stability. The magazine was dedicated to the Anglo-Saxon and rural issues, equating the real New England with its northern states, and offering “within its pages a refuge from the world in which its readers actually lived” (Ryden, “New England” 208).

Some writers - Ryden gives in his essay "New England" an example of E. B. White and his column for the Harper's magazine under the title "One Man's Meat" (later collected and published as a book with the same title) - used this *idea* of New England as a pastoral, authentic, and morally solid place similarly as in the colonial revival period. White and many other authors made the most of "New England's cultural usefulness as an imaginative counterbalance to an imperfect world. As such, the New England that he and others have created and recreated is a region whose identity has been defined as much negatively as positively, as much through what it does *not* contain as through what it does" (Ryden, "New England" 209).

Obviously, this kind of image, though cherished by the elite of the region and sought after by tourists, who still expect to see stone walls on every field and a flawless white villages inhabited by white Anglo-Saxon Yankees every few miles, is false and highly exclusive. One of the literary examples of such exclusion is a novel by Thornton Wilder, published in 1938 and titled *Our Town*, presenting a fictitious New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners. As Nissenbaum points out, Wilder's aim was to universalize Grover's Corners as a home of all, presumably all the New Englanders or even all the Americans, the heart of the nation. Notwithstanding, the marginalization of the region's industrial face, the face with heavy immigrant, mostly catholic, population, was what Wilder opted for, and so his archetypical New England town has two sides: "*Our Town*," inhabited by the "real" Anglo-Saxon New Englanders, and the "*other side of town*" (Nissenbaum), where those who do not fit the pattern dwell.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century a much more inclusive regional fiction eventually began to be created. These writers, "partisans of

place,” as Ryden calls them, first dared to challenge the conventional image of the region. They argue “not only that New England has historically included many more kinds of people that have conventionally shown up on the printed page, but that those people are just as much New Englanders – if not more so – as any quaint old Yankee farmer” (Ryden, “New England” 209). In his essay “Region, Place, and Resistance in Northern New England Writing” Ryden asserts that, due to the latter-day imaginative imperialism and its homogenizing aim, numerous New Englanders, such as “mill workers, the rural poor, and people of French-Canadian descent, regardless of the vitality of their communities’ social and cultural lives, were imaginatively elbowed out of conceptual citizenship of their own states” (113). The scholar claims that the “partisans of place” try to write a more fair and democratic regional literature, try to address the imbalance in the idea of New England, they try to write these communities into the regional literary imagination.

Ernest Hebert and Carolyn Chute are clearly the most representative authors writing this kind of fiction, although Ryden mentions Russel Banks and Cathie Pelletier too, calling them all “neorealist” (“New England” 209). As to Chute, in her novel *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985) she categorically crushes all possible idealized images of Maine and its residents that her readers might hold dear. The characters, the Bean clan’s members, are “poorly educated, groomed, and dressed, ... variously violent, hard-drinking, criminal, and promiscuous” (Ryden, “Region” 117). But, the writer implies, it is not entirely their fault; the society and economy in which they live made them be so. In her essay “The Other Maine” (1989) Chute underlines the authentic Mainers from small towns she knows are not the artificial icons that the office of tourism and

realtors intend to advertise, but real people, with their flaws and their weaknesses, who anyhow deserve respect and fair literary reflection.

Ernest Hebert is best-known as the author of seven novels, by now, set in the fictional southwestern New Hampshire town Derby: *The Dogs of March* (1979), *A Little More Than Kin* (1982), *Whisper My Name* (1984), *The Passion of Estelle Jordan* (1987), *Live Free or Die* (1990), *Spoonwood* (2005), and *Howard Elman's Farewell* (2014). His reasons to choose the particular kind of characters he prefers for his fiction are explained in Hebert's essay "People of the Kinship," where he says he was not interested in maintaining the stereotype of frugal Yankees, but in portraying the townspeople as he believed them to be. And then he adds: "I also deliberately put the emphasis on the neglected classes, what today would be called rural underclass and rural working class" (11). Furthermore, the author stresses the frequent conflict, not to say the "war" existing between the old residents, the Locals, and the new ones, "the Commuters," people who move from big cities, "believe themselves superior to just about everybody" (14), and try to live according to the concept of Yankee living they were culturally fed with for years. As a matter of fact, the plot of *The Dogs of March* is based on such a conflict: Zoe Cutter moves from New York to Darby, a fulfillment of her childhood dream. The rich widow, when she was an unhappy little girl in Kansas, cherished the image of a New England perfectly white village she found in a National Geographic magazine; life there, surely, had to be perfect as well. But when finally living in the actual place, Zoe could not deal with the sharp contrast between her illusion and the reality. And so, she insistently tried to change it, beginning with her neighbor, the "real" local resident Howard Elman and his shabby and decrepit property which stood right

in her view. She does not understand that Elman naturally belongs to his place, that “he is as much a native species in this landscape as the birch trees Zoe so loves” (Ryden, “Region” 116). Ryden’s conclusion is that, though Howard might claim some moral victory over Zoe in the end, he cannot win, as her alignment with wealth and power makes their competition unequal. According to this scholar, Hebert in his novel “emphasizes the social and cultural inequalities implicit in the image of New England and, by extension, any other region. Regions may seem like harmless cultural constructions, but when they become templates for action they can have unfortunate consequences (“Region” 116-117).

Kent C. Ryden indicates some other contemporary northern New England novelist and poets, for example Richard Russo, Howard Frank Mosher, Donald Hall, Wesley McNair, or David Budbill, who, in their works, describe depressed, beaten-down New England places and focus on sharply realized, unglamorous scenes, all of which stand in an obvious resistance to prevailing ideas about what this region should supposedly look like. I believe that Annie Proulx, with her naturalistic (or “neonaturalistic”) works, the collection of short stories *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and the novel *Postcards*, somehow inscribes herself in this informal group of the “partisans of place”.

2. Heart Songs and Other Stories and Postcards

2.1. Introduction

Loree Rackstraw, when reviewing Annie Proulx's *Heart Songs and Other Stories* back in 1989, began quoting R. V. Cassill's definition of the short story genre; according to this master fictionist, it is "a refuge for those who want to explore the human condition as sentient men and women" (qtw. in Rackstraw). The reviewer observes that, in her stories, Proulx not only reveals touching and bizarre struggles of country folk, but she also makes vivid the painful, though somehow softened by irony, irresolution of human need. I believe Rackstraw accurately summarized one of the crucial aspects of the writer's collection; notwithstanding, in my study, the influence of the settings, both the physical and cultural burden of the milieu, will be emphasized above all other facets.

The first edition, published in 1988, contained nine stories; two more were added to the 1995 edition. The earliest stories from the collection had appeared in the magazine *Gray's Sporting Journal*, the favorite magazine of "an ardent fisherperson and bird hunter," as Proulx described herself in those times and of "everybody who was even faintly literate and involved in outdoor stuff" (Cox). The anecdote related with the payment for one of her texts the writer shared when interviewed by Christopher Cox is that, since the magazine kept running out of money, she "swapped a story for a canoe at one point" (Cox). And then she clarifies: "It was a three-way deal where *Gray's* ran an ad for Mad River Canoes, I got a canoe, and they erased the cost of the story. It worked out

pretty well – I think the canoe was eleven hundred dollars. I named it Stone City after one of the stories *Gray's* published” (Cox).

Heart Songs and Other Stories take place in northern New England, mainly in Vermont, “in Chopping County, a North America of shadowy ravines, monumental trees and cliffs too sheer even for the average mountain goat” (Cumming). The stories are set during the second half of the twentieth century, the hard times for New Englanders from the rural areas, both economically and socially. The small dairy farms are not profitable anymore, the progress does not reach the remote villages, no perspectives for a decent salary in the surviving local trade are awaited. Many had to abandon the hopeless search for a decent job and moved to urban areas; those who stayed linger accepting welfare and occasional, low-paid jobs. Neighbors, families who knew each other for generations, living in strongly-linked, always willing to help communities, disappeared. New residents occupy their homes now, the rich outsiders, who gladly purchase the shabby farms, painfully sold out by the desperate farmers, and try to convert them into their dream bucolic summer houses. In this regard, Proulx short stories can be inscribed into the texts dealing with the class differences issues.

Nevertheless, in her stories Proulx does not classify characters into the evil, heartless outsiders and the virtuous, genuine local residents. As a matter of fact, the newcomers are rather mocked; as Karen L. Rood points out, the newcomers in *Heart Songs and Other Stories* are often “sources of humor as they misinterpret and misjudge the actions and motives of rural individuals who are more attuned to the cycle of the seasons and steeped in a way of life alien to city dwellers” (17). The locals, on the other hand, “are not merely victims of a

national market economy that has made their ways of earning a living obsolete” (Rood 17), victims of the modernity which destroyed their traditions. As a matter of fact, Proulx’s rural characters are far from being idealized, as the author straightforwardly describes “the effects of years of poverty, backbreaking work, domestic violence, incest, rape, and anger that sometimes smolders for decades before it erupts in acts of revenge” (Rood 17-18).

The reception of Annie Proulx’s first book was rather cautious, but altogether favorable. Jane Gardam, although considering the stories “rather ordinary,” admits that some of them resemble little novels with “good dialogue and distilled construction” (34). The reviewer observes that Proulx not only can write “very well indeed,” but also that she “has a passionate feeling for country matters, for weather, especially if it’s hard, for hard living, hard folk and she cares about the sinful and the seedy and the poor and the disappointed (33-34). A short review in *Library Journal* states that “although the subject matter may not appeal to every reader, the stories flow effortlessly and the prose is elegant” (Allen). The novelist Mary Lee Settle praises Proulx for not romanticizing or judging or stooping to sensation when depicting backwoods and its people; also, for ignoring fashion “in favor of a true voice and vision” (qwt. in Rood 16-17). In the *Times Literary Supplement* Laura Cumming affirmed that “with her tales of solitary lives going awry in an extreme landscape, Proulx is the Cormac McCarthy of the north;” and then she explained: “where McCarthy tends to anthropomorphism, her [Proulx’s] style draws simply from local detail ... The effect is sweeter. Less fatalistic, but just as powerful” (148).

The contract Proulx signed with Scribners to publish *Heart Songs and Other Stories* included also a novel. And although she had never written any,

she willingly accepted; the result was *Postcards* (1992). Her inspiration was a handful of some old mug shots of escaped convicts done in the '30 and '40 as postcards and sent by warden's office to alert county sheriffs to escapees. The handsomest escapee became the author's Loyal Blood. Moreover, some Vermont fire marshal's reports from the 1930s about an extraordinarily high number of arsons of farmhouses and barns provoked by their owners provided Proulx one of the leading themes.

Postcards was compared by critics to such twentieth century masterpieces as Jon Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and different works by John Steinbeck. Also, with this "first novel about the disintegration of a Vermont farming family," as David Streitfelt put it, Proulx became the first woman to win the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Streitfelt cites some of the best reviews by such critics as Frederick Busch, who wrote in January 1992 in Chicago Tribune: "This novel is about powerful matters. It is made with a language that demands to be lingered over – for the pungent bite of its effect and for the pleasure of learning how good, and even gorgeous, sentences are written," or the enthusiastic *Boston Globe's* valuation: "You could use the word 'great' about *Postcards* without embarrassing yourself," and underlines how impressive achievement it is for a writer "no one had ever heard of a mere 18 months ago."

The novel is about Loyal Blood, a short-tempered man who rapes and kills his girlfriend in the act of anger and then escapes to live in the exile in different parts of America for another forty years. But it is also about the hardships of the rest of his family, left behind in an unproductive and undoubted dairy farm. The background of their story is the social change, the Second

World War being its catalyst. As Karen L. Rood observes, the trend toward urbanization that had begun earlier in the twentieth century accelerated during the war; also, in the 1950s big corporations, chain stores, and large-scale agribusiness begun to drive locally owned stores and small farms into economic ruin as one national market replaced the regional one (39). But this is what Proulx is really curious about; as she confessed to Patti Doten from *Boston Globe*, what she liked about *Postcards* was that it shows the twists of events over a forty year period: “What interests me is social change – the melting away of older ways of living and thinking and the effect on language, clothing, food, attitude. In social shifts there is a time flow”. And she does not doubt to introduce all kind of details about such, some would say, prosaic topics as rural electrification or uranium mining, for, according to what she told Alice Steinbach, “I love obscure facts and odd quirks and finding out about them. To me, it’s boring to write about what you know.”

The reviewers of *Postcards* praised the author’s powerful language as well; in *Library Journal* Barbara Love wrote Proulx had “an uncanny ear for dialog,” and in *Kirkus Reviews* we read the novel was “shrewdly, imagistically written” though “not exactly invigorating” (“Postcards”). For Sybil Steinberg from *Publishers Weekly* the author’s prose is “rich” and “sensuous,” and captures “the earthy, hard-bitten voices of men and women resigned to travail” (“Fiction”). Notwithstanding, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Zachary Leader criticized the novel as “often overwritten, crowded on the level of the sentence,” and added:

It aims, somehow, to be simultaneously spare and expansive, realistic and archetypal, comic and tragic. Individual ingredients or moments are powerfully rendered, there are terrific set-piece descriptions (of a collapsed mine, tornado), but these come at the expense of larger effects and themes – those that need to unfold gradually, to be set in relief, to give the narrative some final, or at least clearer, shape and meaning.

The fact that cannot be questioned is that Annie Proulx's *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and *Postcards* are excellent examples of a critique of regional identity. Obviously, this critique is not explicit, but, as Kent C. Ryden insists, "simply by virtue of setting her fiction in Vermont, a state with a long history of being imagined as a romanticized locus of escape, she forces a consideration of the differences between the place that New England has taken in the national imagination and the place that frustrates and kills its inhabitants ("The Corpse" 74).

The New England such as presented in both texts is ironic; Proulx plays with the dominant tropes of regional identity, she inverts them, she penetrates "the rural surface to get to the underlying mechanisms that produce that surface and the human costs of that production," and this is how she discovers New England, a place that is "deeply troubled, extremely complicated, and continually whipsawed by contingency and bad luck" (Ryden, "The Corpse" 76). My aim in this chapter will be to examine the portrait of rural New England created by Proulx, sometimes surprising, sometimes disheartening. Likewise, the characters, both the region's inhabitants and the outsiders, will be closely

analyzed and commented on. Eventually, the writer's short stories and the novel will be inspected from the perspective of the literary naturalism.

2.2. New England Landscape and Living Conditions

New England that emerges from *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and *Postcard* is clearly unlike the image of a bucolic, flawless white village, numerous stone walls perfectly bordering its lush green fields, images which some of New England writers cherished in their texts. And although a stone wall does play an extraordinarily important role in one of the cases, it grotesquely symbolizes the physical and moral decay of the region rather than enshrining its idealized image. Proulx does not hesitate to present the New England countryside of the middle of the twentieth century with all its unaesthetic details, its grim and severe living conditions, and its economic struggle. Also, in accordance with one of the main naturalistic determinants, the author does not overlook the importance of natural forces characterizing the area, such as natural topography, soil properties, and, above all, adverse weather conditions. It is interesting to highlight that, as I will demonstrate below, even though the ugly and down-to-earth features of the New England landscape prevail, the beauty of its nature, sometimes described in a romanticizing manner, is also present in Proulx's narrative.

Before beginning with the actual analysis of the texts, it is worth mentioning Stephen Nissenbaum's observations with reference to the "dear to both the American public and academic historians" (44) concept of "the New England Town". According to several historical geographers, Joseph Wood and

Martyn Bowden among them, “the idea of a centrally arranged, or *nucleated*, New England village, with its collection of neat white houses facing a central ‘common,’ or ‘green,’” (43-44) was inaccurate. Not only were the houses painted bright red, green, or blue instead of white, but most importantly, not until the 1820-30 could anyone talk about compact villages; the rural New England before the American Revolution was composed of dispersed and isolated farmsteads. Also, ironically, it has to be underlined that “New England town centers developed not in simple opposition to capitalism but rather as an early strategy of adapting to it” (45), for it was vital for shopkeepers and professionals to establish their businesses and homes in the village centers. As to the bucolic “greens” or commons in town centers, they were bare and muddy rather than actually green. The commons, as Nissenbaum indicates, began to be beautified by businessmen and organizations of newcomers after the Civil War. Such valuable historical facts are an interesting introduction to the study below about the New England imaginary landscape; they should also be remembered when examining the fictional outsiders’ efforts in changing and “improving” the region, when adjusting the place’s reality to its artificial, but much more attractive alternative.

References concerning the grimy aspect of New Englanders,’ or, to be precise, rural Vermonters’ properties, sleazy and cluttered with junk, are frequently used by the author in her place descriptions. Sometimes they signal the loss of such a property by its native owner as imminent; in “On the Antler” Hawkheel observes his hated neighbor’s place “had run down” (8). The immediate conclusion Hawkheel draws, based, evidently, on the similar cases in the area, is that “the real-estate agents would get it pretty soon” (8). But in

general, it seems that the shabby houses and the trashy surroundings result from some kind of a mixture of poverty, carelessness, and lack of aesthetical sensitivity. In "Heart Songs" Snipe, a newcomer, on his way to the mysterious country musicians' dwelling, passes "trailers and shacks on the back roads, the yards littered with country junk – rusty oil drums, collapsed stacks of rotten boards, plastic toys smeared with mud, worn tires cut into petal shapes and filled with weeds" (73), all of them "proofs of poor lives" (73), as the narrator indicates (one can only guess Proulx is not only referring to material poverty). When finally there, Snipe's impression is that the Twilights' mountaintop farm made a "Godawful place to live" (74). His senses detected all the annoying details: "He could smell cow manure and hot green growth. Pale dust sprayed up at every step. He felt it in his teeth, and when his fingers picked at his face, fine motes whirled in the thick orange light of the setting sun" (74-75). At the entrance, instead of a doorstep, pragmatically, someone put a broken millstone. The house itself, "old and broken, the splintery gray clapboards hanging loosely on the post-and-beam frame, a wavery glass in the windows mended with tape and cardboard" (75) completed this picture of decay and grime. Inside, in the "stifling" kitchen, "the stamped tin ceiling was stained dark with smoke" (75), above a table hung a "fly-specked" calendar, and a chair Snipe was pointed to had "a ripped plastic seat off to the side" (75); the ubiquitous dirt and slovenliness seemed a natural feature of this place. The contrast between the Twilights' property and the one Snipe rented and lived in with his girlfriend, "a modernistic glass horror stinking of money and crowded by forty mammoth blue Arlas cedars set out at the turn of the century" (80) was sharp. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the juxtaposition of the two places is not perceived

as an image exemplifying the obvious difference between bad and good, ugly and beautiful. Proulx makes this inequality much more complex, for the reader realizes that the new-fashioned “Cedar Cliffs” was not only aesthetically in discordance with the landscape due to its artificiality, but it was also highly impractical (Snipe’s commitment as a tenant was to “tend shaggy branches and clean up the litter of twigs and cones that fell from them in a constant rain” 80). The Twilights’ farms, on the other hand, in spite of its shabbiness or maybe precisely because of it, seemed to belong to the area perfectly.

A similar case of two contrasting properties is encountered in “The Unclouded Day” and, again, it is not an easy task to judge the beauty of each. Santee’s, the best local birds hunter’s place looked poor and untidy; the first thing to see was “the warp screen door”, “the scabby paint on the clapboards” and “the run-down yard” (90). A newcomer’s and Santee’s hunting apprentice named Earl’s place, was a very different property; it was a huge spick and span new house, with a big porch for his baby to crawl around and a flawless yard. Notwithstanding, its description suggests that the New England country was not a proper place for such a construction, that, more than impressive, it gave the impression of being artificial and ridiculous: “an enormous Swiss chalet with windows like tan bubbles in the roof and molded polystyrene pillars holding up a portico roof” (93).

What should be pointed out is that such properties as the ones belonging to the Twilights and to Santee, seem to be part of a common view among the local society of those times. Their untidiness and their deficiencies were not extreme enough to surprise anyone, not extreme enough to be commented in the neighborhood. However, the case of Warren Trussel in “A Country Killing”

was different. His poverty and grubbiness was such that even the locals were unable to get used to the shameful aspect of his “property”; “Don’t know how anybody can live that way” (159), they criticized. Indeed, Proulx’s description of Warren’s place in the middle of New England countryside is striking and highly myth-dispelling:

... the road bent like a folded straw before it went nowhere, seven or eight miles of uphill woods ending in Warren Trussel’s yard with its chalky rake-ended trailer un on blocks, the thirdhand kind from the back of the lot, the kind of spaceheater between the bedroom and the door? The mobile-home salesman, laughing in their plywood office, called them roaster ovens ...

The trailer swam in a sea of junk auto parts, mildewed hay bales, cable spools, broken shovels and tractor seats, logging chains, the front half of a bus without windows or engine, a late-model wreck folded like a wallet. (159)

It is noteworthy that such dwellings as trailers, usually clustered in trailer parks, became part of the New England rural landscape. In *Postcards* Jewell, desperate and indebted widow, one day suddenly noticed that the wide field she had been forced to sell was now divided into forty half-acre lots, “too small for anything but cemetery plots” (151). Soon it turned out the field was being prepared for a mobile home park which, some years afterwards, a drug addict newcomer described as a tedious place with “the skirl of motorcycle wheelies in dirt. Busted-muffler trucks. The fucking trailer church with its tin steeple.

Morning noon and night loudspeaker serenade of carillon tapes (337). And even though, in this case, the perception of the describer may be considered somehow distorted and exaggerated, there is no doubt the trailer park on a New England hillside is not a pastoral image one could expect.

In addition to these realistic, sometimes striking in its ugliness pictures of the New England rural properties, many of the true-life details of farming and austere living conditions are depicted in a naturalistic manner in Proulx's fiction. In *Postcards*, the diary farm run by the Bloods is an example of a Sisyphean task that most of the farmers were condemned to in the war and post-war New England. With seventeen cows to hand-milk, after Loyal's departure Mink and his one-armed son Dub needed to work overly hard to fulfill their commitments. They toiled in a dim light of a lantern, listening to the old crackling battery radio, in a cold barn stinking of "ammonia, sour milk, cloying hay and wet iron" (110), Dub moving away milk pails, wiping down the flanks and udder of the cows and Mink milking "on and on, fourteen, seventeen cows, his forearms aching, his back cracking, and Dub saw it was a prodigious job" (19). And even though Mink Blood was not a person unaccustomed to a hard farm work, for this was all he knew in his family's and his neighbors' lives, the moment came when he realized it could last for too much longer. For after seven hours of milking a day, still other chores were to be rendered:

add in grainin' and hayn' 'em, clean up the barn, got to spread some of that manure before the snow comes, tomorrow we got to get the cream down to the road by seven, plus the rest of little chores like diggin' the

potatoes we got to get dug, we ain't got the wood hauled down yet. The bucherin's got to be did this week if we stay up all night doin' it. (19)

Mink concludes saying that if he was to prepare a list of the things that needed to be done in that very day, "it would take every piece of paper in the house" (20), and, anyway, he could not hold a pencil, his hands got used to "cow teats" so much.

Most of the problems these overworked farmers suffered from, could surely be solved with a hired help and, above all, electricity. Notwithstanding, finding an efficient helper during the wartime was practically impossible; one of the Blood's neighbors, after almost a year searching, "got to know everybody for twenty mild around that could hold a pitchfork" and the only ones able to work turned out to be "school kids and hundred-year-old grandpas with wooden legs and canes" (23). As to the electricity, even after the War not all rural areas were lucky enough to obtain it. In the Blood's case, the power lines missed their farm for about twenty miles and such luxury as a light bulb or "the easiness of a milking machine and a water pump and the pipe running right along the wall in front of the stanchions" were still achievable only for some favorably located farm owners. The disappointment resulted especially acute for those who, like Dub, believed the papers' headlines about the imminence of the electricity coming after the War: "First priority to farms" (112). Six years after the end of the War Dub knew they were lying, and that the priorities were different: "First priority to towns, any town, to garages, stores, knickknack shops" (112). Furthermore, there was another war coming, the one with Korea, and so the common people expected everything but the Government's help.

In *Heart Songs and Other Stories* some examples of the inconveniences the farm dwellers had to struggle with, especially before the arrival of electricity, are also observed. In “A Run of Bad Luck” we see a father waking up at three-thirty in the morning in order to heat the stoves, so the breakfast can be warmed. We see a house with no indoor bathroom, and so the uncomfortable need to go outside, even in wintertime. Finally, once electricity is there, we see the family’s delight over an electric plug-in pot: “The novelty was still on it; they thought it luxury to drink the fresh hot coffee before the kettle on the wood-fired kitchen range boiled” (63). In “Electric Arrows” the narrators remembers his father’s satisfaction when, as a worker of Ironworks Electrification Power Cooperative, he repeated loftily: “If you put a light on every farm, you put a light in every heart” (147). And this special pleasure he took every time he was revealing the open-mouthed farmers the enormous advantages waiting for them once the job was done and the dwelling electrified:

No more stinking privies. No more strained, watery eyes from reading by lamplight. No more lonely evenings for widowers who could turn on a radio and hear plays and music. No more families dead from food poisoning when Ma could keep the potato salad in a chilly white refrigerator. No more heating sad irons on a blazing stove in August. The kids would stay on the farm. (147)

Another topic that Proulx touches upon in her New England texts relates to the multiple kinds of dangers all families of farmers had to face in their everyday lives. In *Postcards* Dub, who as a young man had a stupid and

reckless idea of jumping from a running train and as a consequence lost one of his arms, reflected sourly on his father's exceptional luck: "Look at Mink, pitchfork tines through his thigh when he was five years old, two car wrecks, the tractor rollover, the time the brood sow got him down and half tore off his ear, but he was still there, gimping around, strong as a chain" (28). Nevertheless, not everybody was so fortunate; Jewell's brother's case proves "A lot of people didn't make it past the time they were kids" (28). Jewell was just a little girl when the accident happened, when her brother Marvin had fallen into a well, but she found it impossible to forget any of it, such was her trauma. Also, maybe in order to warn her own children, she somehow enjoyed telling the story of her older brother's death, no naturalistic details spared:

He was smashed up terrible. Every bone in him was broken. That well was forty foot down, and he pulled stone on top of hisself as he was falling, just hit a stone and it'd come right out. They had to move eighteen rocks off him, some of them weighted more than fifty pound ... You could hear Marvin down there, "unnnh, unnnh," just didn't stop. ... the only thing holding him together was his skin, he was like an armful of kindling inside. When Marvin come out of the well on the little table all black and blue and covered with blood and dirt and his legs twisted like cornstalks my mother fainted. ... Took Marvin all night to die, but he never opened his eyes. (39-40)

There cannot be any doubt that the living and working conditions Vermont rural residents had to deal with were arduous and extremely

demanding, even taking into account the reality of those times. Some people, especially the young ones, knew it; they felt there was a different, much better life waiting for them outside Vermont, outside New England. Loyal's girlfriend Billy and Dub's wife Myrt genuinely believed that "The money's just pouring down, all you have to do is stand in the right place with your hands out" (82); the problem was "this ain't the right place" (82). And farms were particularly "ain't right", for it seemed that one's life was determined by being brought up on them, brought up to be a farmer; Dub realized that when he sang ironically "Oh the farmer's life is a happy life" (43). The narrator's rhetorical question: "Had anybody ever sung it another way?" (43) demonstrates Dub was not the first one aware of his "happy" lot.

But apart from the difficulties resulting from poorly civilized state of the region, Proulx's characters frequently had to tackle with natural adversities. Loyal Blood, though a real enthusiast of his region, when imagining his perfect future farm could not help visualizing something "not like the home place with its steep rough fields and sour soil, its invading brush and trees" (*Postcards* 59), and its ubiquitous stones. For in order to successfully raise crops, or at least be able to ensure some quality nourishment for cattle, particular meteorological conditions are necessary. New England, though not characterized by the harshest weather in America, is not a land of a nice mild climate either. And in Proulx's texts it is clearly pointed out; the significance of the weather is crucial. Hal Crimmel in his essay "Born Under a Bad Sign: The Question of Geographical Determinism in the Hardscrabble Northern Borderlands of *Heart Songs and Other Stories*" touches upon it as well; he emphasizes climate as an important factor that shapes regional consciousness. The scholar invokes

studies of regional folklore which have shown that enduring extreme weather patterns “fosters a shared sense of resiliency and survival, which in turn becomes a source of pride for members of the community, who see in their common perseverance a source of identity” (65).

In addition, there are numerous examples of the weather being an obstacle in the outsiders’ lives. What prevail are the severe and unexpected winters. In “Stone City” the protagonist, a newcomer unprepared for sudden cold and snow, “serious snow” (33), was lucky enough to come across a local bird hunter who always carried coffee in his game vest for cold days. Another time the newcomer discovered that it turned really difficult to leave his house or receive visitors, for “a gusting wind ... drove snow under the door” and some hour later “built a knife-edged crescent drift across the drive” (37). In “Run of Bad Luck” even an experienced New England inhabitant recognized the difficulties and dangers of hunting with his sons when snowing: “Tracks get covered up, can’t see nothin’, deer all bed down in the cedars ..., your clothes get wet, you can’t see where the boys are or what trigger-happy hunter from New Jersey is out there ready to shoot blind at the first sound he hears” (64). The perspective of a hard winter was the reason, and an excuse, for one of the new residents, Buck B., a former television star, to abandon his glass house in a New England mountain (“Negatives”). The Moon-Azures in “Electric Arrows,” planned leaving “somewhere hot” (144) in wintertime too.

It is particularly significant that the weather in the author’s texts, apart from determining their way of living or influencing some of their actions, in some cases has a symbolic dimension. In *Postcards*, Jewell did not die because of the sudden cold and sleet. She recklessly chose to drive off of the main road, a

shortcut which eventually turned into a stony track. With the bitter cold and heavy sleet Jewell struggled to level her car out of a rock, and to solve the pitiful situation she got herself into, just like she had toiled and struggled all her arduous life on the farm. Finally, “the fatal aneurism halted her journey” (242) and she fell. Her hand “relaxed” (242). It is easy to imagine how the snow that followed for the next few days covered her body, tucked her in. Her body was never found, the New England earth retained her in its womb; she became a part of the woodland landscape. In “Country Killing”, on the other hand, the long-standing scorching heat was not only making people abnormally nervous, irascible, or, as in the protagonist’s case, extraordinarily lustful. The weather is a metaphor of the intensity Albro’s sexual tension and the development of the story. Albro, after days and days of an extremely high temperature and a very brief touching up with a neighbor, was “messed up, a snake eating his tail. He couldn’t think of anything but the hot, ringless hand, the big haunches under the dress. He couldn’t stand it, waiting until night when it might cool down” (165). But neither the temperature, nor his tension entirely cooled down that night, not even after short sexual intercourse. It seems that both Albro’s and the story’s climax came with his lover’s death; the catharsis adopted the form of “bursting rain and luminous blue hail that sounded like an avalanche of gravel,” thunder and bolts of lightning included.

Regarding the exceptional role natural forces play in Proulx’s narrative, in this case in *Postcards*, the three disasters that almost finished Loyal’s ramble forever, though outside New England, have to be mentioned. In Minnesota, a tornado partially scalped him; in North Dakota the equinoctial dry storm covered everything with tumbleweed, which immediately caught fire, put many lives in

risk, and burnt several properties, Loyal's among them; in Montana, a ground blizzard surprised Loyal away from home and he found his way back only thanks to his extraordinary luck. Indeed, the New England climate, though demanding and imposing certain limits, does not seem so harsh after all.

Finally, what cannot be omitted when analyzing the New England landscape, such as presented in *Heart Songs* and *Postcards*, are the descriptions of its beauty. In "On the Antler" Hawkheel is an example of a native resident who, though not ashamed of having sold his home place, truly cared for the natural wealth surrounding him. The mountains, the forests, the game animals – these were the riches he cherished. The depiction of a pool he accidentally discovered on one of his excursions in search of new fishing waters is remarkable:

At the head of a rough mountain pass a waterfall poured into a large trout pool like champagne into a wine glass. Images of clouds and leaves lay on the slowly revolving surface. Dew, like crystal insect eggs, shone in the untrodden moss along the stream. The kingfisher screamed and clattered his wings as Hawkheel played a heavy rainbow into the shallows. (12)

In "Stone City" the narrator, a city newcomer, perceived in a similarly romantic manner the surrounding landscape while hunting. On one of the chilly mornings of the season, for instance, he noticed that "in a rain-filled hollow a rind of ice imprisoned the leaves, soot-black, brown, umber, grey-tan like the coats of deer, in its grassy clasp" and that "under the trees the hollows between the

roots were bowls filled with ice crystals like moth antennae” (24). Similarly beautiful, though not so literally praised, seem the legendary and impenetrable Yellow Bogs in “The Wer-Trout”. The mysterious charm of the Bogs attracts the reader and demonstrates the variety of the New England environment.

In *Postcards* Loyal is the one who discerns the unique beauty of his home place, though a special burden is linked to this affection. For Loyal, his family farm was perfect, especially when he contemplated it for the last time in his life:

The place was as fixed as a picture on a postcard, the house and barn like black ships in an ocean of fields, the sky a membrane holding the final light, and there were the blurred kitchen windows, and up behind the buildings the field, the rich twenty-acre field propped open toward the south like a Bible, the crease of the water vein almost exactly in the center of the ten-acre pages. (14)

The Biblical connections Loyal unconsciously invokes not only demonstrate the fact he idealized his land; according to Kent C. Ryden, they also suggest “the farm becomes a paradise lost for Loyal, a place of grace that can be glimpsed, that can be remembered, but can never be brought forth on this earth” (“The Corpse” 74).

Yes, for Loyal his field had a particular meaning, after several years of hard work to turn it into a perfect pasture for his cows. This is what he wanted to share with Billy, just before his emotional act of murder. For Billy, who did not want anything but to leave, there was nothing special in Loyal’s adored

countryside. For her, the rural New England was a synonym of decay and hopelessness. It is a cruel irony that she was entombed in one of the best recognizable symbols of what she hated, that her boyfriend and murderer buried her inside a stone wall. As Ryden concludes, the stone wall, this icon of New England, in Proulx's novel "has something dead and rotting at its core. It stands not for Loyal's proud hard-working life but for the impossibility of pursuing such a life; it contains within it criticism, rejection, and the seeds of despair." ("The Corpse" 75).

2.3. Native Inhabitants and Newcomers:

Different Ways of Life and Different Perceptions

One of the most recurrent themes in Annie Proulx's narrative is the one presenting dissimilar points of view and ways of life, as well as contrasting behaviors, of both local residents and newcomers in a particular place. This is also the case of her New England fiction; there are numerous examples of outsiders whose image is contrasted with that of the locals. Yet, it has to be pointed out that Proulx does not paint a portrait of stereotyped characters known from the history of the New England literature. Both in *Heart Songs* and in *Postcards* the reader will find a broad spectrum of New Englanders, some of whom may resemble the imagined archetypal Yankee, and others the opposite; there are even cases of those who, conscious of the mythic image they are supposed to represent, are capable of using it financially. As to the newcomers, a certain pattern in their representation can be distinguished; their faith that reality reflects the image of New England they grew up with frequently

makes them ridiculous. As Kent C. Ryden put it, it seems that for newcomers, the value of Vermont is “the way it receives romantic projections from the observer’s mind” (“The Corpse”). Nevertheless, it will be evidenced that much more complex examples of “summer people,” as the locals called them, or “commuters,” to use Ernest Hebert’s denomination, and the locals, the “rural insiders who, explicitly or quietly, through thoughts or words or actions, contradict and critique the roles to which they’ve been assigned” (Ryden, “The Corpse” 79) are also part of the analyzed text.

In “On the Antler” there is a very interesting case of two contrasting native residents of Chopping County who abhor each other since childhood. The first one, whose point of view is adopted by the narrator, named Hawkheels (his name, as Karen L. Rood points out, suggests “he is the last of the lone woodsmen, like James Fenimore Cooper’s noble outdoorsman Natty Bumppo” 18) who, since his wife had abandoned him, had been selling parts of the family property “until he was down to the trailer, ten spongy acres of river bottom and his social security checks” (3). Oddly enough, unlike the model of a hard-working Yankee, living on welfare did not bother him; on the contrary, he believed “this was the best part of his life” (3). What mattered was that he could still reside in the place he belonged, among the Vermont forests and mountains. It is interesting to observe the parallel between the nature and the religion Proulx applies when describing Hawkheels’ eagerness for hunting, a hint of irony included: “He has his secret place hidden all through Chopping County and he visited them like stations of the cross; in order, in reverence and in expectation of results” (4). The way Hawkheel perceived the passing of time, a

circular perception characteristic for those living close to nature, is also significant, though its romanticism generates an intriguing discordance:

The deer hunt was the end and summit of his year: the irrevocable shot, the thin, ringing silence that followed, the buck down and still, the sky like clouded marble from which sifted snow finer than dust, and the sense of a completed cycle as the cooling blood ran into the dead leaves. (4)

Even the sudden fondness of reading Hawkheel experienced in old age, was intimately linked with game animals, most of them in danger of extinction.

While Hawkheel's hunting passion was actually the only feature of a supposedly typical Yankee figure, in the eye of the outsider Bill Stong had them all. What cannot be denied is that Stong's childhood was somehow typical for a New England country boy: "He hunted with his father and brothers [unlike Hawkheel, whose father suffered mental disease] and shot his first buck when he was eleven" (4). Everything changed when the boy was fifteen and all the members of the Stong family but Bill died poisoned with the strychnine contaminated pork roast, "an event that exposed his mother's slovenly housekeeping ways" (5); morbid story, indeed, one of many demonstrating the sensationalistic character of Proulx's naturalistic fiction.

The reader meets Bill Stong in his sixties, but with surprisingly developed business acumen. "It was a time when people were coming into the country, buying up the old farmhouses and fields and making the sugarhouses into guest cottages" (7), and Stong knew how to take a financial advantage out of it. He was somehow "selling" the New England myth. He arranged everything so as to

meet the expectations of the summer people of how a typical Yankee farmer should act and look like. To start with, he adjusted his physical aspect; to a “fine platinum white” hair and “good bones” (7) his face showed after losing weight, he added overalls and a red bandana around his neck; mockingly, when Hawkheel first noticed Stong this way, “he looked to see if there was a straw hat on a nail” (9). In his feed store now, apart from “salt blocks for the deer, sunflower seeds for the bluejays” (7) and mash for chickens, Stong offered everything the outsiders could wish and expect in such a “typical” New England country store. And so he carried from his house almost all the family goods: canning jars, books, tools, pieces of old harness, wooden canes, or chipped china; “He arranged generations of his family’s possessions on the shelves beside the work gloves and udder balm” (8). The best customers, those who provided Stong the most of his income, were the autumn hunters, and he fooled them unashamedly: “The hunters bought Stong’s knives and ammunition and went away with rusted traps, worn horseshoes and bent pokers pulled from the bins labeled ‘Collector’s Items’ ” (10) . Also, though he adjusted his looks to the Yankee image, he did not bother to conceal his anti-Yankee greed; by boldly informing his customers: “Take what I can get,” (10) in Hawkheel’s disapproving eyes Stong was “making a country virtue out of avarice” (10).

The “summer people” in “On the Antler” are presented in a clearly unfavorable light; as a matter of fact, they are totally ridiculed. For instance, though buying old New England houses in order to taste the country life, they were immediately transforming their gardens into posh and unfitting tennis courts. They wanted to feel they had purchased a part of their imaged region, to touch the mythic New England. Most of them were held dear the image of Stong

as an archetypical Yankee, in the end that was one of the main reasons for their coming into the country. They expected to meet the kind of “rednecks” they knew from “Rupert Frost” (7), as twisted ignorantly by a city woman, poems. This is why they gladly paid for Stong’s trash, and this is why they eagerly listened to his interminable and fictitious stories, reading morals out of these “rambling lies” (7). The height of their naivety and of Stong’s uncontrolled imagination and arrogance was their believing in his macabre explanation of why the Antler Mountain bore its name. The “summer people” actually believed that there had been an Antler family living in mountain cottage years ago who had lost their baby, but, disconsolate put its body in a huge jar and set the jar on a stump in front of their little place. The cottage was already gone, but Stong drew maps for those who wanted to see its last morbid trace, the stump. Of course, “every stick from that cut maple was in his woodshed” (11)!

Similarly foolish in their ingenuity seem to be the newcomers from “Electric Arrows”, the Moon-Azures. Very much interested in everything related to the rural New England, they were especially fond of the Clew family, whose old homestead they had bought and inhabited in summers. Nevertheless, it is significant that “all of their fascination is with the ancestor Clews; living Clews exist ... to be used. Dead Clews belong to the property and the property belongs to the Moon-Azures” (144). It was as if they wished to become a part of what they probably perceived as the core of the Yankee protoplasts of the nation. Some of the Moon-Azures’ research consisted of searching for maps of the farm, tracing Clews’ genealogy or even the ear notch pattern Clews used more than a century ago to mark their sheep; they took for granted that both the dead and the living Clews were farmers, as all “real” Yankees should be. The

reality was not what they were curious about, especially if it could not be adjusted to the idealized image of the place they now possessed. I agree with Ryden when he argues that this kind of superior attitude, this imposition of a specific image onto Vermonters “amounts to a kind of colonialism or cannibalism; rural residents are consumed and put to work according to the needs of outsiders, pressed into roles that do not suit them and that they do not want to play” (“The Corpse” 79).

The lack of an objective knowledge about the area and its native residents, and a naïve faith regarding its mythic past encoded in their minds, led them to the ridiculous “discovery”. For there is no other explanation why they took for “Thunder God”, for native tribes’ petroglyphs, one of the Clews’ self-portrait carved in a rock. The “god”, whose discovery was proudly announced in papers, clenched three bolts of electricity in one hand, and around his waist hung a lineman’s belt, the same one used by all workers of the electric company used, the old Clew included.

Another irritating feature of the Moon-Azures pointed out by the narrator, one of the impoverish Clews inhabiting now the old hired men house, was their arrogance. From the very beginning they did not hesitate to indicate the “locals”, especially the Clews, “things they do to better the place” (142). They made it appear that without them this part of New England countryside would probably be lost forever, doctor Moon-Azure criticizing openly: “I’ll never get used to the way you people let these fine places run down” (143). They knew that, in spite of standing on the supposedly weaker position of outsiders, their money would assure them the real power. They can afford to make allusions, their unfavorable hints and comments. Also, maybe because of the same reason, or

maybe just because of the mythic Yankee helpfulness, they continually expected neighboring favors (“getting their car going, clearing out the clogged spring, finding their red-haired dog” 144).

The native residents of the area severely judged the Moon-Azures. The Clews, their neighbors the Beaubiens, even Yogetsy (who is a particular case of a different newcomer, not rich but hard-working and waiting for his investment in a piece of land to bear fruits), all of them considered the Moon-Azures were opportunists. They mocked their “fancy” habits, such as walking for pleasure, admiring the landscape and the New England flora: “You drive somewhere and here come the Moon-Azures, stumbling through the fireweed, their hands full of wilted branches” (143).

As to the way of life of these rural insiders, they had undoubtedly lost a great part of their identity over the previous years. It seems that together with the destruction of the local community, for only some “leftover” neighbors still lived in a few “worn-out houses” (138), they also lost their strength. The catastrophic perspective of “Venezuelan millionaires” and “cocaine dealers” occupying their lands made them feel disheartened and vulnerable. The Beaubiens, in order to survive, felt forced to “eat quick, afraid of losing time that could be put into work” (140). The Clews, after giving up their property, at least tried not to give away their family photographs, the only legacy they managed to maintain; a true success, indeed, taking into account the Moon-Azures’ “insistence on denying the Clews’ very identity, their distinctiveness, their history, their humanity” (Ryden “The Corpse” 80). It is important to comprehend the magnitude of the consequences such unequal social encounters, like the

one of rich and bearing culturally mistaken preconceptions Moon-Azures with humble rural Vermonters, can eventually generate. In Ryden's words:

the juggernaut of Vermont and New England identity, when applied to particular places, can warp the structure of current human lives and eradicate any awareness of, let alone respect for, lives in the past. As with other colonial relationship, while it may be remunerative for the colonizers, it can be culturally and materially destructive for the invaded. ("The Corpse" 80)

Finally, it is interesting to highlight one of the characters' life story, the narrator's father. The old Clew was all but a stereotypical Yankee; he stood out for the unusual fantasy in naming his property *Atlantic Ocean Farm*, (for this "man full of hopeful imagination" actually believed he saw from there "a shining furrow of sea" 139). He also stood out for his stubbornness in going against the big growers and producing a variety of apples that, though appreciated and profitable some decades later, in those times ruined him, as well as for his artistic sculpturing talents, talents that somehow made him similar to a colorful parrot among plenty of colorless, dull sparrows. Not to forget his job in the first electric company in the region, and his appliance business afterwards; indeed, by creating this figure's life story Proulx exemplified the history of progress in any remote rural New England area. The way I see it, the author also hints at the ignorance of these communities when it came to notice and appreciate something less palpable than their everyday hard chores: a transcendental and abstract piece of art.

With regard to the mockery of the newcomers, it is a recurrent theme in Proulx's New England short stories. The author does not hesitate to highlight their ignorance as to the place they decided to move to, to underline their incompatibility with this new environment. These city people, generally very rich, are not only ridiculed because of the "glass" houses they built with their money, these "heliodor mansions" that at sunset "flashed like an armada signaling for the attack" ("Negatives" 171). Not even because of the highly unsuitable decoration of such residences, for example Buck B.'s bathroom "with the François Lallane tub in the shape of a blue hippopotamus" ("Negatives" 177). In the native inhabitants' eyes, the newcomers are foolish and laughable because of their inability to adapt to the country surrounding, the rules of nature. In "Negatives" Walter Welter explains to a local poor drunk the reason of his partner's injury: Buck B. hit a deer... riding his bicycle. And then, after an incredulous laugh of his talker, he explains ironically: "The deer stood there and he thought it would run off so he kept on going but it didn't and he hit it. Then the deer run off and Buck had a broken ankle and a wrecked bike" (176).

In "The Unclouded Day" the stupidity of Earl, a young outsider dreaming about becoming one of the fine local hunter of birds, seems even greater. According to Karen L. Rood, the story "is in some ways typical of the sort of fiction that has been published for years in magazines for hunters and fishers, humorous stories that often feature a wily outdoorsman who gets the better of an arrogant city slicker" (26). In my view, however, Santee is an example of an honorable New Englander, who does accept the money, but truly tries hard to earn it, even after Earl stops paying him. As to the newcomer, before turning to Santee and offering him a good sum for teaching him how to hunt, Earl had

“prepared” himself properly; he had purchased an expensive gun, “overrated and overpriced” according to Santee, some fancy boot and clothes; he had also read a lot. This is precisely what he was telling Santee every time he missed a bird, that he had read the books and so he knew “it takes years before you develop that fluid, almost instinctive response to the grouse’s rising thunder” (93). In addition, the bizarre body posture Earl developed when shooting, trying, in vain, to follow Santee’s advice, could only be described as ridiculous; with the gun on his hip, he was twisting “in an odd backward contortion as he fired” (92). Santee’s efforts in correcting his trainee’s mistakes were useless; it seemed that the strange twisting had already become Earl’s “trademark”. As a matter of fact, “with his legs spraddled out he [Earl] looked like an old-time gangster spraying the rival mod with lead” (92). Nevertheless, doubtlessly, the height of the ambitious apprentice’s ridiculousness was his final “big breakthrough”: his conviction that he managed to shoot three birds in just one shot. Lightning struck the very moment he fired his shotgun somehow escaped Earl’s attention, and Santee, happy to finally free himself from the burdensome trainee, only laughed the next morning “wondering what Earl had said when he plucked three partridges that were already cooked” (100).

What is especially meaningful when analyzing most of the newcomers’ behaviors in the stories, is that they actually can afford to act nonchalantly, arrogantly, or foolishly; they are rich enough. Mr. Rose in “On the Antler”, the Moon-Azures in “Electric Arrows”, Buck B. in “Negatives”, and Earl in “The Unclouded Day” (Rood points out that Earl treats Santee “like a servant” 27), all of them stand on the position of power granted by their money. The sharp difference between the two groups, the city people and the locals, is

demonstrated by Santee's brief reflection after learning Earl's job was consulting, that he was analyzing stocks and economic trends: "Santee saw that Earl was younger than his own oldest son, Derwin, whose teeth were entirely gone and who worked up at the veneer mill at Potumscic Falls breathing fumes and tending a machine with whirling, curved blades." (91).

As to the image of the native inhabitants, in "The Unclouded Day" it is rather positive. Except for the touch of slyness shown by Santee in the end, he and his family are presented as upright and decent people, especially taking into account that during the second year of Earl's training there is no money involved; Santee simply feels he can neither charge nor dismiss his apprentice until Earl actually learns something. It is the only fair thing to do. It is interesting, too, that the locals in Proulx's stories are not always obstinate and narrow-minded; they can sometimes be observant and impressionable, as was the case of Santees' wife. Verna's contact with Earl made her appreciate the aesthetic aspects of one's surroundings, and it made her act in order to clean and decorate her own property (all in spite of her husband who, as Rood observes, resented that she wanted their place to look "more like the 'gentrified' country homes of the city people" 27). Besides, in "The Unclouded Day", but also in "A Run of Bad Luck", the New England families are presented as quite model. They are united and close, and the children raised in a typical county manner, taught how to hunt since just a few years old. The mothers are housewives, responsible for feeding their families, though in "A Run of Back Luck", with Mae being "a workin' girl" (61) for some months, a certain change is perceived.

What draws the reader's attention is the importance, not to say intimacy, between the local characters and their dogs. It can be clearly appreciated in "The Unclouded Day" and "Stone City". The bird hunters in both stories share with their dogs something more than a primitive pleasure of tracking a prey; a full complicity and a complete trust is what unite the men and their dogs. In "The Unclouded Day" Santee tries to encourage his dog, Noah, when the first signs of storm become noticeable, and he is truly upset when Earl inconsiderately screams at the animal. In "Stone City" the bond between Banger and his Lady was even more affectionate; Banger cared about Lady not as though it were a dog, but as a family member. Sadly, somehow that was actually the truth, for the dog was the only one saved from a fire which killed his wife and child. And so, such feelings as jealousy or an immense sorrow after Lady's death seemed just right and natural. This special affection between a rural insider and his dog is also the case of Loyal Blood and his Little Girl in *Postcatds*.

"Stone City" is also a story where the unwritten rules and expectations of the local community are put on display, for better and for worse. The narrator, a newcomer looking for guidance in bird hunting, receives a lesson as to the local solidarity right at the beginning: nobody will help him as long as he criticizes one of their peers, one of their community members. It seems that it is almost impossible to lose the appreciation and sympathy of any of the lifelong neighbors, unless one really crosses the line, as was the case of Urna and Stong in "On the Antler" (she stopped making excuses for his mean behavior the moment he told the game warden about the summer doe in her cellar). As to the expectations, in "Stone City" there is the case of Raymie. This young boy's father, as proper for a New England country resident, knew everything

about traplines and made some good money on furs in his boyhood. This is why he simply expected Raymie to set and run the twenty-five traps he gave him every morning, before going to a hardware store, a highly “improper” place where the boy actually worked. Failing to follow his father’s indications, which frequently happened, meant receiving a violent beating. Only a few people understood that this remote New England village was not a place for Raymie, that he did not fit in; his aunt once confessed: “he hates trappin’. He wants to get out of here, go to New York, be a rock singer.” (32). Dreaming of being a singer, within the environment Raymie was born into, could only bring him trouble.

Regarding the narrator of “Stone City”, the newcomer mentioned above, did not moved to the New England countryside just because of his sincere admiration of nature and his interest in bird hunting. He needed to run away from the burden of his previous life and assumed Vermont would be this peaceful shelter he had been looking for: “I had retreated from other people in other places like a man backing fearfully out of a quicksand bog he has stumbled into unknowingly. This place in Chopping County was my retreat from high, muddy water.” (23). For him, the New England he had imagined was just that, a safe refuge complemented with the beauty of landscape. What distinguishes him from the other characters that had also come to this region carrying a mistaken image in their minds, is that he managed to correct his misconception on time. After discovering the village’s violent past, and after witnessing some of its inhabitants’ present dramas, he did not hesitate to sell his house and move out. His buyers were a New Jersey couple and it seemed that, just like himself before, they were purchasing something more than the

physical property, for, as the narrator ironically observes: “They were innocently enthusiastic about the country” (40).

As far as the region’s mythic image is concerned, there are at least three other stories where its influence is observed, though manifested differently. Snipe, the protagonist of “Heart Songs,” can only be called an eternal dreamer. The character’s unsuitability to the New England countryside is already demonstrated in the opening sentence; “through a ravine of mournful hemlocks” (73) he was not driving, let say, a pickup truck, the most logical and common choice of the locals, but a small and delicate Peugeot. Snipe, after leaving his wife, moved to the country with his girlfriend Catherine, both acting under the influence of their enthusiasm generated by imagining how simple, how wonderful their life would be “selling bundles of white birch logs tied with red ribbon to fireplace owners in New York City, or growing ginseng roots they would sell through a friend whose brother knew a pharmacist in Singapore” (78). Obviously, all these plans failed miserably, but Snipe kept dreaming. He somehow developed a taste for “real”, in his view, life of rural musicians, with all the grimy details it supposedly entailed. He imagined he would

play his guitar in rural night spots, cinder-block buildings on the outskirts of town filled with Saturday night beer drunks and bad music. He wanted to hook his heel on the chrome rung of a barstool, hear the rough talk, and leave with the stragglers in the morning’s small hours. He recognized in himself a secret wish to step off into some abyss of bad taste and moral sloth, and Chopping County seemed as good a place as any to find it. (74)

Snipe was truly delighted the moment he met the Twilights, this family of, in his eyes, “real backwoods rednecks” and “as down and dirty” (77) as possible. Not only because of his dark, primitive instincts of getting deeply into their humbleness and simplicity, something desired probably as a natural response to his own complicated situation, but also because he knew there was a chance of earning some money. He thought it would not be difficult to convince them to record their songs, let him organize tours and promotions. He even mentally designed the cover of their album: “a photo of them standing on front of their ratty house, sepia-toned and slightly out of focus, rural and plain” (80). It would be like a dream come true, his and Catherine’s imagined country life finally fulfilled: “Simple times in an old farmhouse, Shaker chairs by the fire, dew-wet herbs from a little garden, and an isolation and privacy so profound he could get drunk and fall down in the road and no one would see” (80).

The moment these plans of Snipe failed as miserably as the previous ones, he decided to try somewhere else; as Rood observes, indifferent to any emotional damage he could have caused, “like the sniper his name suggests, Snipe strikes his victims and moves on” (26). As in other Proulx’s stories and novels, “the wealthy can easily escape situations that have become uncomfortable for them while the poor are left behind to eke out a living as best they can” (Rood 26). In this case, the eternal dreamer and his girlfriend turned to the only myth still left, the everlasting promise of infinitive and marvelous possibilities: they would go west. In New Mexico or Arizona they would lead a simple and easy life, for “Snipe knew somebody would pay him good money to collect the wild seed of jimsonweed” (86).

Is it interesting to point out the universality of the myth of the West, equally powerful for the sophisticated myths-seekers, such as Snipe and Catherine, as well as for crude country native residents. "In the Pit" shows two interesting examples of characters, one of them being a simple New England farmer, and the other a cynical self-made young man and a city dweller. The reader meets the Vermonter, Mr. Fitzroy, through the eyes of Blue, who as a child spent several summers in the New England woodland, where his parents had their cabin. Mr. Fitzroy's first image is disagreeable: he seems to turn into one of "those old boys", "pumping along on a kid's bike with its fat tires and faded handlebar streamers, face blazing with drink and the abrasive wind thrown off by passing cars" (105). Then Blue remembers this is a man whose barn he knew well, for every evening his father drove to the Fitzroys' place "for sweet milk dipped from the tank, the shuddering liquid releasing a smell of torn grass and rain" (107). Indeed, the way Blue remembered those people and their farmhouse is not only a consequence of the collective New England mythology, but it is linked to his own idealized memories. With his parents constantly arguing, yelling at each other in hatred, this Yankee couple's life appeared calm and steady, enviable even for Blue's father:

After the milking was done he [Mr. Fitzroy] sat beside his wife on the porch and played "Lady of Spain" on the accordion. Mrs. Fitzroy cut and whittled. There were her wooden animals on the windowsills ... At light the light quivered behind them and they seemed to shrink from the assaults of moths on the glass. Blue and his father listened, sitting in the

car with the windows down and slapping mosquitoes with a sound like sparse applause. (107)

But now Mr. Fitzroy is a living image of a failure, his personal one, and the imaginary Yankee's failure too. Actually living in the milking room, his wife having passed away, ex-convicts are his only company; this depressing and myth-crashing picture is what Blue receives with dismay. Furthermore, it seems as though values such as work and helpfulness were never the New Englander's true features; Fitzroy has no intention of running any dairy business anymore, and he is tired with, a recurrent and comic detail in Proulx's stories, "these new people from down below always goin' off the road and want you to pull them out for nothin' with the tractor" (109). Finally, it can be considered especially meaningful and ironic that what this old Yankee dreams about, unaware of his own role in the American imagery, is to go west and become rich, naively believing the ad: "No down payment, no interest, your own spread on Wild Buffalo Mesa. Get away from it all. Come to the big sky country where wild horses roam free among the sagebrush and breathe the unspoiled air." (110).

As to Blue, his unhappy childhood made him a nonbelieving and a contemptuous person. For a moment, when repairing and cleaning the cabin, and when some of the good memories came back, he thought with enthusiasm of using the summer camp with his own family now. But it did not last for long; the image of a mythic woodland village was destroyed together with his childhood, the locals were nothing but drunks and thieves, no honesty could there be expected; his judgments were fast and decisive. In the end, they also

turned out to be mistaken, for the Fitzroy's companion did not steel what Blue instantaneously accused him of. Less "tolerant", to use Rood's words, than the hospitable old farmer, just like the protagonist of "Heart Songs", Blue "causes emotional pain through his misreading of others' intentions" (Rood 27). The final conclusion as to the moral condition of both characters is left to the reader, although I coincide with Rood when she says that the impression is that his mistake "embarrassed Blue and probably dampened his plans to vacation at the cabin, but it has contributed little to his understanding of his own character" (28).

A different approach concerning outsiders' preconceived idea of the region is presented in "The Wer-Trout." The protagonist, Rivers, moves to the house on a New England mountain and opens a fishing store with fancy but unpractical items. The reason he does so is not linked to any idealized or sentimental cause; he is a recovering alcoholic seeking for tranquility. He does not mind losing his retirement money, as long as his fishing hobby and his books of Chinese poetry keep him away from drinking. Nevertheless, one cannot easily escape his vice, not even in the New England countryside; after his wife's departure he self-destructively abandons his fight in the bogs, drinking as if it were the only way to connect with the nature and eventually catch the dreamed of giant trout, the only medicine for his emotional ailments. In the height of his alcoholic intoxication he becomes "a grotesque embodiment of all the pain he has sought to avoid" and "he finally glimpses his own culpability in the failure of his marriage" (Rood 30).

As to Rivers' wife, she seems one of the best examples of a city person who quickly realizes the countryside, with its remoteness, mentally unstable and

unfriendly neighbors, and a bankrupt husband, is not where she belongs. Her description of the New Englanders she happened to know, the “tongue-tied, hostile natives squat in claptrap trailers” (121), reflects well the difference between the two worlds.

The only two stories with no presence of outsiders in the collection are “Bedrock” and “A Country Killing.” In “Bedrock” two different families are displayed, united by an inappropriate marriage. The old widower Perley is a farmer, working his land for decades and growing Green Mountain potatoes. He remarries, and the chosen girl (as a matter of fact she was the one who actively chose him), Maureen, comes from an extremely poor family, badly fed all her life and clothed with rags. She is a fan of Brute potatoes, the significant parallel established from the beginning. The story is all about instincts, deep and destructive feelings, but it also touches upon the theme of social class. Years before the actual action of “Bedrock” Maureen, in her poverty, was at the bottom of the social structure; Perley, though only a rung higher, had no second thoughts when raping the little girl. This is how he exercised his social and gender dominance, the power provided by his material stability and by being a male.

The poverty presented in “A Country Killing” is not as extreme as Maureen’s family in “Bedrock”, but it is accompanied by moral decay. Warren Trussel, Archie Noury and Rose, Archie’s wife and Warren’s mistress, live among trash, work collecting trash, and are, in fact, considered trash by their neighbors. The lack of a decent dwelling and of a job, any job, makes them live day by day, with no plans, no aspiration for the future, drinking and eating whatever they get, dogfood included. Such characters are also a part of the

New England countryside; they are also a part of its landscape. Their swollen faces, fat and lustful bodies, their violent lives and deaths are an alternative to the predominant smooth picture of the region's native inhabitants.

Unlike in the above cases, the family whose members are the main characters in *Postcards*, the Bloods, could probably be considered representative of its area, the northern New England countryside, at least at first sight. Their dairy farm was just like all the farms around them, though only at the beginning, before the installing of electricity for the lucky ones made a great difference. Mink Blood, with his "black Irish hair" and just as stereotypically Irish violent character, and his older son Loyal were sincerely committed to the land, but strongly contrasted in methods; Mink preferred the old ways, Loyal was all about the progress. It is interesting to notice how simple townspeople, the neighbors, could tell who was truly born to live and work the land, understanding its importance and profoundness; when old Mrs. Nipple learnt that Loyal had left, she commented on it prophetically: "He's a country boy from the word go. She'll find you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy." (23).

The relevance and unity of the local community is a particularly significant topic in Proulx's fiction. In *Postcards* this solidarity is also observed, but only at the beginning of the novel, before and until the end of the Second World War. Afterwards, with the arrival of new times, new people, and new problems, this bond loosened up, a sad consequence of the interruption of the modernity into the rural environment. Mink, when reflecting upon the farm's financial problems, tried to understand why they could not be solved as they

would have been years before, why “it was so different now” (115). He remembered

there had been poor people when he was a kid. Hell, everybody had been poor. But things kept going, like a waterwheel turning under the weight of flowing water. Relatives and neighbors came without asking to fill in. Where the hell were they now when he was sinking under the black water? (115)

It seems that the old Mrs. Nipple, who appears to be the matriarch of the neighborhood, was the last representative of those fading social rules. The neighbors were not always happy to see her, that is true, for she tended to be meddling and inquisitive; they knew “Mrs. Nipple had an instinct for discovering trouble as keen as the wild goose’s need to take flight in the shortening days. She was sensitive to the faintest janglings of discord from miles away.” (21). Nevertheless, her helpfulness was just as proverbial and everyone agreed she was “a decent woman and a good soul. Somebody got sick why she’d go right on over and help out. Fix supper, do the warsh.” (127). Mrs. Nipple could be counted on, and she could also count on all the others; the neighborhood willingly and immediately came to her aid when her grandson disappeared, everyone looking for the toddler with devotion. This readiness to provide assistance and being surrounded by kind and benevolent friends and relatives is what Jewell regretted when she suddenly became an indebted widow. Feeling lonely, vulnerable and lost, she complained to Ronny, Mrs. Nipple’s son:

'Ah, I dunno. When I was a girl there were so many aunts and uncles, cousins, in-laws, second cousins. All of 'em livin' right around here. They'd be here now, that kind of big fam'ly if it was them times. The men would put the plank tables together. Every woman would bring something, I don't care, biscuits, fried chicken, pies, potato salad, berry pies, they'd bring these things if it was a get-together or a church picnic or times of trouble. ... And here we sit, the three of us. And that's all.'

(126)

And although it looked like Ronny wanted to continue his mother's honorable tradition and help Jewell in finding the best solution to her problems, he did not hesitate in doing good business from his neighbor's disgrace.

Another noteworthy theme in Proulx's novel is the depressing lot of the rural housewives. Jewell Blood is the best example of the unhappiness some of these women experienced. The physically hard work they were expected to carry out daily was one of the reasons; spending hours, from dusk to dawn, in their primitive kitchens, cooking to feed the outdoor working men with at least three hot meals a day, the never-ending pile of dishes to wash afterwards, the laundry, cleaning the house, etc. But for Jewell, these were not the most difficult characteristics of her life. The worst aspects she had to deal with were the confinement and the sameness. After Mink's death, living in a trailer with just a piece of the property left and used as a garden, she eventually felt happy. She was finally free from the hard and monotonous domestic chores, free from Mink's violent attacks of fury. But above all, she eventually learnt how to handle

the tool that made her free from the sameness: the car. When she drove she felt young and full of pleasure; it was “as though they had given her the whole country for her own” (143). She frequently wondered if men, when driving, had similar feelings of “lightness, of wiping up all troubles when they got into their cars or trucks?” (143). She doubted, for

men understood nothing of the profound sameness, week after week, after month of the same narrow rooms, treading the same worn footpaths to the clothesline, the garden. You soon knew it all by heart ... You couldn't get away from troubles. They came dragging into the mirror with you, fanning over the snow, filled the dirty sink. Men couldn't imagine women's lives, they seemed to believe, as in a religion, that women were numbed by an instinctive craving to fill the wet mouths of babies, predestined to choose always the petty points of life on which to hang their attention until at last all ended and began with the orifices of the body. (143)

Apart from violent but hard-working Mink, devoted to his land and even more hard-working Loyal, and the surprising complexity of the figure of Jewell, there are two other members of the Blood family: Mernelle, shy but decided to leave the farm, “to get away no matter how” (133), and Dub, according to their parents' words, “fool since he was a baby”, “a cripple” and “a drunk” (45) (the ability of the latter to adapt and triumph will be analyzed in the following chapter, together with Ronnie Nipple's figure). These are the native inhabitants of the area; some of them enjoying their rural lives and occupations, some others

looking for an alternative. A common denominator of all is their capacity to understand the nature of their region, its essence; they form a constituent part of the landscape. The city people who purchased the most picturesque piece of the Bloods' land lacked this comprehension.

Doctor Franklin Saul Witkin, the new owner of the Bloods' woodlot and sugarbush at the top of the hill, did not seem a bad option for a new occasional neighbor. As Ronny pointed out to Jewell, Witkin gave the impression of being "nice enough", "Real neat. Quiet-spoken. Wears glasses. A little stout, high-colored." (129). Dermatologist, earned well enough to "drive a big Buick and wear a gold wristwatch" (129), but most importantly, able to pay Jewell a good price for the land. The image of Witkin in the novel is similar to that of the other outsiders from Proulx's fiction; he is ignorant but enthusiastic about the country, "urban in habitat but haunted from childhood by fantasies of wilderness" (146). Though feeling uneasy in chaotic environments, losing track in the woods and so always coming back to the stone wall, the only element of human's interference, "finding in its linear perseverance, its lichened stones, a rope in the wilderness" (146), the doctor cherished the idea of his own hunting camp. It is significant that the plan of creating the camp "had come to him when he was fourteen, studying photographs of Teddy Roosevelt in some log room decorated with the heads and skins of animals" (147). In his stubbornness he decided to pursue this childhood dream, starting with the ownership of a land he had imagined, trying to adjust the reality to the internalized images.

At first, Witkin wished his family would share his enthusiasm. But neither his wife nor the children enjoyed a direct contact with the New England "wilderness". His half brother Larry was the only one interested in spending

together weekends in the woods together, somehow looking for a way to get to know and understand each other. They both took pleasure in sketching plans for a log cabin; Larry being somehow more practical. He realized they needed something to cook on; comically, this New York gallery owner considered that a German postwar stove, an art piece, would match the cottage perfectly. Witkin's ideas were even more naïve; his dream-log cabin would necessarily have a huge porch in which to relax and drink coffee, a boot-scraper, and two spruce trees on each side of it, though... the place was in a maple forest. Hal Crimmel accurately comments on this last fancy: "Witkin's desire for spruce in a hardwood forest epitomizes the newcomer's need to alter the landscape to meet an imagined ideal, and it also reveals how easily one is misled into thinking that the landscape of northern New England can be transformed into a welcoming locale for a vacation home" (67).

Years after he kept drawing plans to improve the cabin, including a sauna and a swimming pool, thinking he might turn the property into his retirement home. Although "his hands and arms developed a strength they'd never had when he was young" (278-279), the doctor still needed his half brother to guide him in the woods: "He could not sort out the trees, could not understand the wind direction or the scramble of branches." (280). Unable to accept the flora the way it was, he resolved "to put the chaos of nature in order" by cutting the nearest trees, tearing roots "from their two-hundred-year grip of the soil" and sowing "grass seed for his lawn in the wilderness" (280). To the construction of a stone patio he decided to use stones from the old wall, the same wall Loyal used to bury his girlfriend's body. The bones and the skull discovered, Witkin's interpretation of the finding can only be compared to the

Moon-Azures' foolish judgment: "A pioneer grave. Some early settler's wife, exhausted by childbearing, or, perhaps, scalped and slain by Indians, or killed by typhoid or pneumonia or milk fever." (282). The city doctor's naïve imagination, his faith in New England's one and only pure and noble past, saved Loyal's and Billy's families from the painful truth.

In order to highlight even more the contrast between the native inhabitants of the northern rural New England and the outsiders, their ability to hunt serves best as example. While Witkin and Larry tried to hunt birds just because, in the end, they were in a hunting camp, they bought the shotguns and proper clothes, they purchased an expensive dog and gave him an expensive training, summarizing with their words: "We wanted to be bird hunters" (186), Loyal's sophisticated trapping of foxes and coyotes was his means to make a living. Also, while Loyal was wholly used to killing animals and feeling nothing, though always aiming for them to suffer as little as possible, Witkin never managed to feel comfortable when handling a dead bird, "as if some part of him believed in a confused way that the birds were tiny patients" (186). The difference between both attitudes is even more detectable through their dogs. Loyal's Little Girl meant a lot to him; similarly to the examples in "Stone City" and "The Unclouded Day," she was the character's best companion, she was fully trusted, and she was an intelligent animal. In Witkin's and Larry's case though, the dog seemed just another expensive hunting item. Furthermore, in the doctor's eyes, the animal was not even well adapted to its surroundings, a parallel suggested: once, after hunting, Larry drinking "a tumbler of black wine like an Italian", they were sitting in twilight with their dog,

which was laying in front of them and “waiting for a bowl of water. Too stupid, thought Witkin, to walk to the spring and lap up water from the overflow.” (185).

From an ecocritical point of view, the novel implies that something much more profound dies with Loyal’s sad and lonely death: his love and adjustment to nature. The conclusion, in Rood’s words, is that

Americans of the late twentieth century ... are much more likely to be like Witkin than like Loyal, with his deep understanding and respect for the land and its flora and fauna. The result is the exploitation and despoliation of nature by some of the same people who romanticize it, as well as traditional, rural ways of life. (58)

Also, by this juxtaposition of Loyal and Witkin, and their families after their passing away, Proulx seem to reflect over what the New England countryside awaits in a very near future. Maybe even right now. With the Blood family extinguished, their farmhouse’s trace almost unnoticeable, and Loyal’s field converted into a trailer park, doctor Witkin’s drug addict son reluctantly takes over. With such a panorama one actually wishes that more Witkin and Larry-like newcomers would come back and “play” at being Vermonters, as Ryden put it (“The Corpse” 78), even if it implicates accepting “their connection to their new Vermont home is primarily aesthetic ... rather than experiencing the authentic historic textures of rural life” (Ryden, “The Corpse” 78).

2.4. Naturalism in Proulx's New England Fiction

There cannot be any doubt that most of Proulx's characters are led, or rather misled, by their own instincts, impulses and vices. Rational and serene decision-making is not what characterizes the author's New England fiction either. Sexual urges turn out to be just as strong as any other vital necessity, such as thirst or hunger, and they are often improper and accompanied by violence. Violence itself seems to be a natural consequence of a wide range of feelings: rage, hatred, humiliation, jealousy, or deception, to give just a few examples. Vices, generally alcohol, make the characters waste their chances for a better future, a decent life, and valuable relationships; instead, bring moral sloth and brutality. To a certain extent, heredity is a factor that influences some of the figures; determinism and fatalism are observed in some cases. The settings, the influence of the milieu, in my view, are clearly the key point of Proulx's texts. The importance of the historic moment the stories and the novel develop in is undeniable; certainly, the impact and consequences of a rapidly changing world is a crucial characteristic of any naturalistic text.

The theme of sexual urges is probably the most frequent and its influence on the plot unquestionable. "Bedrock" is an example of a story where everything happens for and because of (though at the beginning the reader can only presume it) the protagonist's sexual appetite. It is also an important example of one of many stories in which "rural farmhouses ... can be facades for all manner of human perversity, and the pastoral hills breed horrifying social pathologies and violence" (Ryden, "The Corpse" 81). Perley marries a girl younger than his daughter a month after her brother unexpectedly leaves her in

the widower's farm to "clean up" and "do some home cookin" (46). Although Maureen did not stand out in domestic chores, she beguiled the old man the very first night, when she came to him "knowing, but meek, and her limbs folded into yielding positions at his lightest touch" (46). The two sentences after this brief description of their intercourse give the reader a hint as to the past of them both: "The guilty scents of willow pollen and the river in spring flooded the room, the looming shape of the past was suddenly uncovered like a hand pulled away from a face. He [Perley] seemed to feel drying mud beneath his nails." (46). In spite of more and more frequent manifestations of violence exercised by Maureen on her husband, Perley found himself unable to oppose, always succumbed to his desires the following nights, though "with a groan of self-hatred" (48). Furthermore, he realized "he couldn't hit her; he deserved what was happening" (48). The announced reason of Perley's remorse is explained in the final paragraph of the story, when he remembers clearly what he did ten years before, being fifty-nine and "his flesh still firm" (55). That was the time he bumped into a girl on a bank of a river, "the dirty little thing", wearing "men's boots, worn out and patched, a muddy jacket" (55); what happened next determined the lives of both:

She made a short rush up the muddy bank on all fours, clawing at the dangling willow roots, her worn out boots gouging greasy scimitar-shaped marks in the clay. But when he pulled her down she was as slack and yielding in his grip as worn rope. (54)

It is significant that Perley had not regretted he had raped a child until Maureen's revenge made him suffer. For him, a prosperous farmer, she was not only from a different social class, but almost a different species. This is also the explanation Perley thought of when he became aware of the incestuous relationship between Maureen and Bobhot, her brother, their sexual intimacy "that of an old familiar couple" (54):

The Mackie kids, beaten, dressed in rags, fed on scraps he wouldn't give to pigs, clinging together like little monkeys for warmth and affection. He remembered them, years ago, out in the field digging potatoes when they should have been in school, thin kids raw by the wind off the river. (54)

And yet, the Mackies, typically naturalistic characters, extremely poor, sloppy, incestuous and depraved, Bobhot a hard drinker, managed to survive. Not only survive, but to succeed; guided by instincts and feelings of revenge (as Karen L. Rood put it: "Maureen has taken her revenge by stripping Perley's soul to its bedrock and hammering away his granite essence with her superior hardness" 23), or maybe some twisted sense of justice, they took over Perley's farm, they were in charge now. Young, desperate and battle-hardened, the Mackies turned out to be much fitter than the old, lonely widower.

Nevertheless, it is not always the case; even more archetypically naturalistic characters in "Country Killing" did not share the Mackie's favorable outcome. In fact, their lot and the way of life of Warren Trussel, Archie Noury and Rose, resemble to perfection the first naturalistic writers' characters. To start with, they were poor. They were unemployed, their only occupation picking

up bottles along the roadside and use the deposit money to buy alcohol and cigarettes. Also, they lived in a trailer, at least Warren and Rose, the worst quality and littered trailer one can imagine. Finally, they were promiscuous and full of vices.

Warren and Rose are described briefly, but meaningfully; what the reader knows about Warren is that every Friday morning, “wearing brown overalls that stood away from his legs like tarpaper rolls, nodding his big pandhead with its greasy cap” (159), he was down in the village store looking for half-price cans without labels. He did not care what was inside; beast-like, he considered the dogfood, generally kangaroo meet, the tastiest bargain. A macabre story of Warren “taking care” of the summer people’s horses, two ponies which ended up with their “guts and blood all over the road” (160), adds to this picture. As to Rose, we know she was Archie’s wife, but abandoned him to live with Warren, and that she has always been a “big fat slob” (164). Archie Noury’s description is more profound and refers to his family roots, too; he is described as having “ginger hair, bloodshot eyes and a scar down the middle of his nose” and being “greasily handsome despite the scar and bad-tempered” (162). He lived constantly observing other people’s faces “to see whom he resembled, for his parentage was uncertain” (162). Also, the heredity’s topic is touched upon when the narrator explains that, in spite of a few exceptions, the Nourys were “a rat’s nest:” although “one of the Nourys was a pastry chef, another the principal of an elementary school in Massachusetts, ... the others were brawlers, knifers, crazy log-truck drivers known for taking corners too fast, rolling the load and leaping clear, unhurt” (162). The three characters were violent and morally corrupted, and so, when Warren and Rose were found murdered, it was immediately

assumed Archie was the murderer. It is never said explicitly, the reader left with some doubts, but taking into account Archie's condition that day, the violent bloodshed seems likely to be of his authorship:

Archie Noury started to drink ... He began with a dreggy swallow of Old Duke from almost empty bottle in the stifling shithouse, switched to warm beer at 7.30, found a quarter pint of cheap tequila in the glove compartment, then, at noon, drove down to the shopping mall, cashed in his deposit bottles and bought a fifth of Popov. (166)

It is important to point out that the way of describing the dead bodies is explicit, no unpleasant details spared. When discovered, Rose was "lying face up in the front of the stove, ... a grimy brassiere in some huge triple-X size, and her face with its raccoon's mask of bloody pulp" (155). One of the discoverers, two Jehovah's Witnesses, could not help staring "at Rose's pale pubic hair, the skin color of baby hair" (155). The strong smell of roasting chicken dominated over the crime scene.

As in the majority of naturalistic texts, senses play a significant role also in "A Country Killing." Smells seem to be crucial. Albro, the protagonist of the story, becomes obsessed with Rose, as though her vanilla scent enchanted him. He cannot help stealing little bottles of vanilla fragrances from his wife's kitchen in order to excite him later. For, although now more than middle-aged and somehow marred, Albro was a good-looking man in his youth. He was promiscuous, too: "A silvery scar the size of a beer cap marked one thigh from the time when he was married to his first wife and had fallen raving drunk into a

barbwire fence after a jealous fight because she knew he was cheating with other woman" (157). And so, his brief and vulgar affair with Rose is explained not only by the unbearable temperature reigning the summer the action develops, but also because "that supple, hot-blooded self was still stored in his stiffening body, though long unused" (158). Also, it is interesting to touch upon the topic of Albro's two mentally disabled sons, both adult and living permanently in an assisted living center. Firstly, the reader can only imply their father's vices were directly responsible for the brothers' condition, for no reference as to the heredity background is mentioned. And secondly, in spite of the fact that Albro was visiting his sons no more than once a year, on Father's Day (significantly), and so he could not be considered a devoted parent, the force of a natural parental love, an instinct of a father, was unstoppable: "Although he tried to cramp it back hopeless affection fluttered in Albro like a tic." (161).

In "A Run of Bad Luck" the theme of strong family bonds is brought up as well. On one hand, there is a subject of treachery: one brother puts his improper sexual relationship, an affair with his brother's wife, over brotherly loyalty. On the other, the father desperately tries to protect both of them, tries to avoid a tragedy provoked by such irrepressible feeling as jealousy and eagerness to revenge. The intensity of this parental protection was outstandingly strong and even one of the minor sons perceived it: "A sense of the mysterious force of generation rushed in on him." (70).

Another story full of references as to the family relations, heredity, impulses, and survival is "Stone City." The narrator, a newcomer engaged in an adulterous adventure with a Vermonter Noreen, thanks to her and his local

hunting companion Banger, discovers the story of the Stone City, a place where several families of the Stones lived years before the action develops. According to Banger's words, "the Stone boys was all wild, jacked deer, trapped bear, dynamited trout pools, made snares, shot strange dogs wasn't their own and knocked up every girl they could put it to." (29). Their little community followed no rules of civilized world ("tax collector never come up here" 28), but had their own "natural laws." The leader, the old Stone, a tyrant who controlled the family members by beating and keeping them in fear, "had kids that was his grandkids" (30). Floyd Stone, Noreen's stepbrother, was the one who dragged the whole "city" to its end the day he shot a man standing on a caboose porch of a passing train for no reason; the only explanation laid in overdrinking: "Floyd was just like all his brothers and cousins, had a crazy streak in him when he was drunk; he'd do just anything, just anything." (35). Villagers got furious, for they had enough of Stones' excesses from a long time, and assisted the police in arresting Floyd: "They come up to get him from all over. Had the state police, the sheriff, couple hundred men from down below, all had guns and anxious to use 'em. It was an army." (35). What followed was all violence, both parts implicated. Since the Stones did not want to surrender and hand over Floyd, the crowd "ready for action, real savage" administered its justice:

'They swarm all over those houses, pullin' rotten boards, kickin' in windows. Somebody got an axe and pried up the ends of the clapboards and ten more would rip it off like it was paper. Stones come flyin' out of those houses, women, kids, drunk Stones, some old granny, all of 'em yellin' and cryin'.' (36)

Floyd was found and arrested, but it was not the end of the assault. The crowd undressed everyone except women and children, poured hot tar on them, and then threw chicken feathers all over their bodies. That was the enraged people's vengeance, violence provoked by violence. "Christ, ... what kind of people were these?" (36) was the narrator's reflection. The inutility of such an impulsive action, of the abandoning of human restraints and giving oneself to pure instincts, is pictured by the sad personal story of Banger, one of the participants of the assault; his house was deliberately set on fire by the revengeful old Stone, and his wife and a child burnt inside.

The story of the Stones' violent end is also a story of survival; until then the Stones were the ones in charge, their crazy acts unpunished, the villagers powerless in the face of their savage strength. According to Banger's commentary, "people around here had trouble with the Stones since the town began. Fact, the Stones were the first settlers here, but nobody brags about it" (34). It is probable that this "seniority" of the family was what had halted the society earlier. But in the end, the fittest, the most numerous "succeeded;" the crowd, this unstoppable force when furious, turned out to be more powerful than the brutality of the Stone family.

As far as survival is concerned, the secondary story of a fox should also be mentioned. Its primitive, infallible instinct of a wild animal let it move confidently through the woods, let it avoid the human traps; that was not the case of Banger's dog, Lady, dead due to her naivety and loss of instincts. The final paragraph of the text demonstrates that the fox was the only living creature capable of inhabiting the abandoned and accursed Stone City, one of these

places “that fill us [the humans] with immediate loathing and fear” (26); remarkably, the animal felt sure enough to make its den in a cellar foundation and found a family. Oddly enough, just before leaving this New England village and moving back to the city, the narrator discovered that Banger had bought Stone City years after the violent incident for the back taxes; bewildered, his conclusion was that, in spite of any official records, “the Stones owned it and they always would” (40). Rood, when analyzing this thread, points out that “Proulx, however, suggests the vanity of any concept of human land ownership within the larger context of geological time” (22).

Another subplot worth analyzing is linked to Noreen’s half-brother, Raymond. As the narrator discovers, Raymond’s father was Floyd Stone, condemned to the electric chair for his crime. Raymond proved to be a worthy successor of the Stone family; Noreen confessed that they had an incestuous relationship when teenagers. Also, the way was educating his son Raymie, resembled the old Stone’s methods: “Raymie got another beatin’ last night ... you shoulda heard the way Raymon’ tore that kid up.” (32). The explanation everyone accepted was that “he’s got a real violent temper” (32); as if only the heredity was to be blamed. In addition, when it turned out the trap that had killed Lady was the young Raymie’s, it became clear that the villagers’ triumph over the wild and violent Stone family was not complete after all, and that there was nothing to be done, for “even to the bastard descendants the Stones were predators. They could not help it any more than Banger, fluttering in suspicious apprehension, could help being their victim” (40).

With an act of vengeance, though not so violent (but “bloody,” indeed), finishes “On the Antler,” too. Hawkheel is unable to stand his long-life enemy’s

trick. Stong fooled him in the worst possible way: he intoxicated him with liquor and the next day, the first day of deer hunting season, revealed Hawkheel's special private deer stand to one of "summer people." Stong and the newcomer's trophy was the biggest buck ever hunted in the county. Hawkheel's revenge was unusual: when finally recovered, he destroyed all the valuable books he had been buying from Stong for ridiculously low prices, him being a cheater too. He made sure his enemy would see the damage and realize, by the number of torn pages, that he had been fooled for a long time: "One after another he seized the books, ripped the pages and cracked their spines, he hurled them at the black, swaying deer and they fell to the bloodied ground beneath it." (18). According to Karen L. Rood's interpretation, this act of vengeance "seems as self-destructive as the anger at Stong that has filled Hawkheel's life" (20-21). And then the critic adds another perception, related to the troublesome relations between the city people and the townspeople, and to the changing reality of the rural New England, a more symbolic one, is possible:

The way of life described in these books [the books Hawkheel destroys] is fast becoming extinct. Furthermore, as the books become collectors' items rather than guides for true outdoorsmen, they come to represent just one more investment commodity in a modern capitalist economy. Hawkheel's destruction of the books may be seen as a last-ditch effort to keep the knowledge they contain away from outsiders who neither appreciate nor understand the lore of the reverent woodsman – a symbolic attempt to prevent the books from being appreciated only for their monetary value. (21)

Another kind of vengeance, or, as the narrator put it, “acting out an event that gave us [the children involved] a sharp satisfaction” (149) is observed in “Electric Arrows.” The narrator, Mason, now a grown man, and his little sister were victims of sexual abuse by their father’s friend and coworker in childhood. Diamond, the abuser, according to Mason’s sour memories, “used to pick up first me, then Bootie, my sister, sliding his old dirty paws up between our legs, putting his tobacco-stained mouth at our narrow necks” (141); traumatized, “Bootie would get in the closet when she heard Diamond coming up the drive” (146). Their father’s overlooking of his friend’s actions (“He don’t mean nothin’ by it,” “quit your cryin” 141) should probably be considered normal for those times when children’s rights were inexistent, but Mason and Bootie got emotionally affected. Their only relief was to act out again and again Diamond’s accidental death, electrocuted, with all its naturalistic details. That was the only recompense, the only justice they could hope for.

There are two stories where moral decay, vices, or ugliness of the New England rural way of life are not only present, but they actually attract some of the city characters, epitomizing a sort of new fashionable aesthetics. “Heart Songs” and “Negatives” are the texts in question, Snipe and Walter Welter the “connoisseurs.” Snipe, as mentioned in the previous subchapter, when moved to the rural Vermont, “recognized in himself a secret wish to step off into some abyss of bad taste and moral sloth,” and felt “a dirty excitement” (74) when contemplating the landscape full junk. As Ryden put it, “Snipe had basically been slumming, attracted to the Twilights’ exoticism, their dangerous and thrilling sense of shabbiness and abandonment and decay, not to their

authenticity or traditions or anything to do with who they actually were.” (“The Corpse” 82). In love, as he first believed, with one of the members of the “rednecks” Twilights, the fat Nell, he longed for “the freedom of dirty sheets” (83). The description of the moment he could finally carry out his sexual desire abounds with references to almost all human senses; alone with Nell in her kitchen, Snipe heard “the chain saws in the maple sugar bush beyond the cornfields ... as monotonous as the night cicadas,” the room was “flooded with the heavy, cloying perfume of blackberry jelly,” Nell’s hands were “stained purple and a rose flush tinted her round, solid arms” (84). Just before the intercourse, he had sensed she “smelled of road dust, of goldenrod and crushed sweet blackberries”, “far away in the woods there was a cadenced shout and the leafy, thrashing fall of a tree” and even a yellowjacket was “intoxicated by the sweet, musky scent” (84). As if sweetness of the jelly were too much, as if to compensate, immediately after their sexual act the scene of one of the Twilights bloody wound is depicted, sensory references maintained: “Drops of blood fell heavily into the sink, puddling with the jelly. Snipe could smell Eno’s underarms, a sharp skunky odor that mixed with the reek of sex and sugared fruit.” (84). Pure and romantic concept of intercourse is not what characterizes the naturalistic fiction, indeed.

As to “Negatives” and the photographer Walter Welter’s aesthetic taste, he was mainly interested in macabre or ugly objects: “an arrangement of goat intestines on backlit glass, a dead wallaby in a waterhole, a man – chin up – swallowing a squid tentacle coming out of a burning escalator, Muslim women swathed in curtains of blood” (174). Prints of an Inuit child a friend sent him awoke Walter’s curiosity only the moment he realized the model was a corpse.

That was also the way he saw Albina Muth, a local drunk, always dirty and promiscuous (one of her previous sexual partners was “an elderly curtain-rod salesman made such a satyr by rural retirement that Albina had been rushed twice to the emergency room” 172; according to Hal Crimmel, this immorality and debauchery, already felt by Puritans centuries ago and then presented in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” was encouraged by the New England wild forests, 66), and with numerous “thick-lidded eyes and reptilian mouths” (172) lousy children. She, indeed, appears an archetypal naturalistic character. The height of Walter’s artistic achievement and the fulfillment of his ambitions was to photograph Albina, naked and in humiliating positions (positions which, as Rood observes, “portray her as a victim and betray his eroticized hostility toward her” 34), in an old, just as wrecked and ugly as the model, poorhouse. The scene is completed by an act of rape, Walter excited by beastly and hideous images he had been “lucky” to immortalize with his camera.

In her analysis, Karen L. Roods indicates that “Proulx’s treatment of Walter and his photographs shows her realization of the danger inherent in his art.” (35). She refers to his manipulation of the image, generally a macabre image, in order to transmit a particular meaning. Rood invokes Proulx’s article published in *Aperture* (Fall 1997) and later excerpted in *Harper’s* (April 1998) in which the author wrote about this new school (Buck B. and his friend Barb wanted Walter to produce objective portraits of such pleasing subjects as, for example, perfect autumnal leaves, typical of the earlier aesthetics). The critic observes that “though she too manipulates her subjects, Proulx has no sympathy for Walter’s method, particularly in his photographing of Albina” (Rood

36); the difference consists on the treatment of the models. Proulx, similarly to the photographer Andrea Modica, whose works she praises in "Reliquary" (1996), does not remain outside and use her subjects egoistically, but "immerses herself in the culture that she shapes into art" (Rood 36).

In the case of *Postcards* examples of features characteristic for naturalistic fiction are numerous as well. Uncontrollable urges, violence, explicit and gory descriptions, characters both apt and unable to adapt, form part of the novel. Also, it is important to underline that right from its very first page - the first postcard - the author's intention is to create a certain illusion of reality, make the reader believe in documentary character of the text. The postcards are generally Loyal's brief accounts of his life on exile, but they can also be advertising pieces, complaints, or police records. In addition, throughout the whole novel, numerous references to the history of the twentieth century are included; the characters are directly influenced by the consequences of the Second World War or, as in Jase Shears's case, mentally wrecked by participating in the Vietnam War. Social issues, such as the introduction by authorities of the government trappers, with their savage hunting methods, or illegal bear hunters and their impunity resulting from the flawed justice system, the awakening of the animal rights conscience, and taking advantage of the immigrants' unfortunate situation, are also part of the plot.

As to the theme of sexual urges, the very first paragraph of the novel evidences its importance; as a matter of fact, Loyal's incapacity of controlling himself, his raping and killing Billy, is a direct cause of his latter life-long exile: "Even before he got up he knew he was on his way. Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his

way.” (83). Loyal had to run, run from himself, from the disposition he inherited, for, as Karen L. Rood observes, his plans were “destroyed by his quick temper, which has been passed down from grandfather to father to son through merciless beatings for minor offenses” (40). Moreover, it is indisputable that the reaction his body developed afterwards, a kind of an allergy for any women’s touch, was a straight consequence of his unclear conscience, his flesh and his mind closely connected. The symptoms he presented were proper for those of an allergic reaction for certain food or material; the two times he tried to touch a woman, he suddenly could not get a breath and he choked. On the second try the attack was more intense, he even fainted; fortunately, a doctor who happened to be in the same bar administered adrenaline on time and diagnosed confidently: “Allergic reaction. Probably something you ate or drank.” (58). But Loyal instinctively knew it was his body punishing him, he “knew it wasn’t anything he’s swallowed. It was the touching. Touching the woman.” (58). He realized that the day he killed Billy “some kind of black mucky channel that ran from his genitals to his soul had begun to erode” (59). Also, in that moment, Rood points out, the significance of the protagonist’s name can be read as following: “He will be faithful to Billy not through any conscious choice but in his ‘blood.’ His loyalty has been created by his unconscious mind and is enforced by his body.” (42). Nevertheless, another interpretation, proposed by Kent C. Ryden and connected to the character’s homeland, and simultaneously explaining the cause of his future failings, is also possible: “Had Loyal Blood remained close to that earth, rooted in the steady bedrock of Vermont – loyal to the blood that he spent shaping the farm, if you will – he would likely have flourished ... Regional loyalty is paid back only in pain.” (77).

“Luckily” for Loyal, his need of the intimate contact with women was not crucial in his life; he knew he would suffer out of loneliness, with no wife and no children, “the pitiful easement of masturbation” (59), but he felt he was able to stand it and go on living. It was not the case of a secondary character, Mr. Nipple, though, whose story, after much insistence, Jewell finally agreed to tell her daughter. Mr. Nipple, whom Mernelle remembered as “the old man rubbing his hand over her heinie when she was on the ladder in the barn” (203), appears as typically naturalistic character; his sexuality the most important sphere in his life. Even when already married, to a girl he previously had gotten pregnant, he kept “tomcattin” every night and with different women (203). But then, when he was about forty-five, he was diagnosed with a prostate cancer. He agreed to have an operation and became impotent. And it was the end of Mr. Nipple everybody knew, for, as Jewell explained,

he was that kind of man, you know, where that was the most important part of life. He went cold, then. He wouldn't even put his arm around Mrs. Nipple any more, wouldn't joke with the ladies like he always done. Wouldn't touch any of them in tenderness or affection. It was as if he'd turned impotent all over. See, the touching was all connected with sex for him. (204)

And so, after Mr. Nipple's only purpose of life was gone, he was constantly talking of committing suicide; after six years of torturing his wife by trying to convince her to die together, he finally hung himself.

While Mr. Nipple can be considered a serious case of a sex addict, another secondary character in *Postcards*, Ben, pictures alcohol dependence. In *Heart Songs* there was also an example of an alcoholic; Rivers (“The Wer-Trout”) could not handle his problems, the real marital issues and his exaggerated competitiveness when fishing, without turning to the bottle (after some years of abstinence). But with Ben it is all about losing potential, it is about an intelligent amateur astronomer who wasted his chances due to his vice. As he confessed to Loyal, he was unable to conduct his promising research because of his drinking: “you can’t make accurate observations and you can’t keep good records if you’re drunk. Record-keeping is the heart and soul of astronomy. If the records are broken, what good are they?” (191). This character’s only uncommon naturalistic feature is that he actually realized he could not develop his potential, not because of any external adversities, but because of his own weakness, his incapacity to fight the vice.

Certainly, Loyal Blood is another clear example of a character with his potential wasted. Truly devoted to the family farm, courses in Agriculture and Agronomy and Manual Training completed, trained in dairy management, reworded for pasture improvement with a certificate – all these skills useless in his exile. An exile provoked by an act of killing committed in anger, because of “the Blood temper” (18) he inherited from his father (the father, as a matter of fact, whose name was Minkton, “appropriately nicknamed Mink, after a small member of the weasel family almost as well known for its quick temper as its valuable pelt” Rood 41). And that is how he begins his rambling through America and the story of his making a living – in mining, uranium prospecting, fossil picking, or trapping – is the story of poorly-educated American workers in

post- World War II period. His job in a hard-rock gold mine was one of the worst, though some of his coworkers would not agree; the shift boss, who had worked outdoor while the mine was closed due to the War, came back to the mine happily, for his adjustment to the underground environment was perfect and irreversible: "I spent so many years underground, Jesus Christ, off and on since I was seventeen, I felt like I was peeled down to the meat up on the Plateau ... I swear to Christ I'd work for nothing, get out from under that sky." (92). The mine's working conditions, the final tragic accident and the way the mine is described (it is animated, compared to "outlaws and cripples" that it (she?) attracted: "The little Mary Mug was a cripple herself" 93) reminds strongly one of Zola's masterpieces, *Germinal*. Loyal's job as an overseer in a potato farm, on the other hand, with extremely poorly paid Mexican workers and the disregard for their lives on the part of the owner, could be read as parallel to *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck.

It is also interesting to point out a parallel between Loyal and a bear pictured on the postcards he has been sending home all through his life. Not only what happened to the photographed bear is similar to the protagonist's adventures, but they both could be described as creatures in danger of extinction: "Loyal and his way of life are becoming as anachronistic as the bear." (Rood 50). Also, I agree with Rood when she asserts that Loyal's anger consumed him and made him a scarcely human creature: "His shambling, bearlike outward demeanor mirrors his inner deformity. Appropriately enough, the bear and weasel families were traditionally considered to be related. Loyal is truly his father's son." (50).

Oddly enough, not all characters in Proulx's novel are determined to fail, even in spite of unfavorable circumstances they happened to face. Ronnie Nipple is an example which proves that to be the fittest does not mean to be the strongest, not even the smartest; he simply managed to adjust on time to the changing world around him. Instead of clinging to the old ways, he understood the potential of his area and became a moderately successful, sly real-estate agent. After explaining to Jewell some of the changes in the real estate market, the importance of the abstract "pretty view" (128), the woman realized Ronnie "had smoothed out, had learned something. Jewell thought of him years earlier, a dirty boy who loped in the woods with Loyal, a tagalong with no ambition that she could see. Look at him now, see his jacket and briefcase, shoes with crepe soles." (128). She sadly compared Ronnie present situation to that of her sons, Loyal "lost out in the world" and Dub "locked up" (128). What she could not know then was that her younger and crippled son, the family fool, will eventually achieve much more than anyone could expect. Dub, the character in question, seemed to be flatly determined to fail, given the circumstances. Though physically strong and hard-working, he was unable to find a well-paid job and so maintain his wife and a child; in rural New England a man with only one arm could not be considered a valuable worker. The course of his life changed in Florida; there Dub heard and actually believed in a Miami Realty Junior College professor's motto: "I refuse to accept the fate life handed me. I will MAKE my OWN fate" (164). And there he became an extremely prosperous realtor and married a woman with a similarly extraordinary "instinct for the protected properties" (274), on which they made a fortune. Florida was his real home; for Dub, changing of the environment turned out to be the key to success.

Annie Proulx's both New England works are written following the documentary method and they feature such naturalistic qualities as concreteness, circumstantiality and sensationalism. They are filled with examples of landscapes and characters that are nothing like those conventionally associated with the region's identity, and even less with its mythic image. In Ryden's words, they are rather written "against the weight of New England regional identity" and indicating

the absurdity of the assumptions that characters have brought to Vermont, populating pastoral scenes with often desperate lives, suggesting the cultural costs exacted on rural residents by the imposition of regional identity that would just as soon sweep them away if they don't behave properly. (83)

Most of the inhabitants of this rural Vermont, generally shabby, full of junk and sleazy dwellings, are presented as hopeless and morally questionable. While those belonging to the group of newcomers are ridiculed for their naivety and ignorance, their money bailing them out of any trouble though, the locals are usually determined to fail in their life prospects. They fail due to such factors as poverty and lack of professional possibilities, vices (some of them inherited), their incapacity to control violent impulses and destructive feelings, or their unmanageable sexual urges. Sometimes their failures, or their unexpected deaths, can only be explained by fatalism. Proulx seems to be objective, though maybe not scientifically objective. Nevertheless, in my view, she cannot help sympathizing with the most unfortunate and miserable characters. And it does

not necessarily exclude her from the category of literary naturalists, but rather approximates some more to the first writers trying to apply naturalism in literature; not even Zola managed to conceal his critical view of society.

CHAPTER III: NEWFOUNDLAND

1. Regional Identity of Newfoundland

Come to Newfoundland and Labrador, a place that stays the same, but changes you forever.

Funny how getting away from it all can lead to everything you've been missing.

Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism

The huge island, in which the scene of our story lies, stands, with its sheer, beetling cliffs, out of the ocean, a monstrous mass of rock and gravel, almost without soil, like a strange thing from the bottom of the great deep, lifted up, suddenly, into sunshine and storm, but belonging to the watery darkness out of which it has been reared.

Robert Traill Spence Lowell

Newfoundland is more than just a maritime province of Canada. Like few places these days, it seems remote, even exotic in a chilly way, and it's likely you haven't been there. It can therefore assert itself as a setting to the point of claiming a character role: a vast, desolate mystery hovering just over our northeast flank.

Luc Sante

Newfoundland is a large island situated on the east coast of North America, in Canada's Atlantic region. Together with Labrador, the mainland to the northwest, they form the most easterly province of the country. As the Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism webpage affirms, the province is a little smaller than California, slightly bigger than Japan, and twice the size of the entire United Kingdom. Nevertheless, in spite of its considerable size, it "certainly doesn't feel crowded" (*Newfoundland*), for its population is of 510,000. The capital city, St. John's which, according to the webpage, shares the same latitude as Paris, France, and Seattle, Washington, is where almost one-third of

all the inhabitants live. Its landscape is impressive and unique, vast and varied: “here, you'll find Arctic tundra, ancient mountain ranges, lush boreal forest, and rugged coastline” (*Newfoundland*). The province boasts such remarkable wonders of nature as the Iceberg Alley, thousands of whales and millions of seabirds attracted by “the abundance of marine life” (*Newfoundland*)

The area known today as Newfoundland and Labrador was originally inhabited by the Beothuk, the Inuit, the Innu, and the Mi'kmaq. There is little known about the first European visitors to the Island, though it is accepted that the Norsemen from Greenland were those who visited its coasts as early as the eleven century. The next European visitors came from Portugal, Spain, France and England, and they were all fishermen. In the eighteenth century a significant migratory wave from Ireland added to the heterogeneous society of the province and, so, today its people like to think that “the unique culture of Newfoundland and Labrador is a product of our English, Irish, French, and Aboriginal heritage” (*Newfoundland*). But the topic of the Newfoundland identity is much more complex; Rob Greenwood points out that the Newfoundlanders “pride themselves on their English and Irish roots - the first colony of the British Empire - yet the Aboriginal people to the island are extinct and the first Europeans to settle the province, the Vikings, did not maintain a permanent presence” (43).

In order to fully comprehend the sense of identity the inhabitants of the region share nowadays, it is indispensable to glance at its history and its literature, both intimately related. Such a general overview will also be necessary for my later interpretation of Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* and the contextualization of the novel within the framework of literature of and about

Newfoundland. This outline of the history of the region's literature will mainly be based on Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (1979), but I will also refer to essays of some of the more contemporary scholars (O'Dea, Mathews). In cases, both areas' (Newfoundland and Labrador) history and literature will be treated, but it should be pointed out that the island is the setting of *The Shipping News*, the reason why Newfoundland only is the true objective of this brief analysis. What should also be emphasized is that this introduction will not be focused on the complex nature of constructing Newfoundland identity and, although it will embrace various discourses, its analysis will not be exhaustive. The aim here is to examine the characteristics of the region and its culture, the image of Newfoundland such as presented in numerous literary creations, in order to contextualize the novel by Annie Proulx.

It is officially considered that John Cabot, a Venetian navigator under patronage of Henry VII of England, on 24 June 1497, discovered what most authorities believe was the Newfoundland mainland (there was a debate about whether it was Nova Scotia, Maine, or Cape Cod). After returning to the English court, Cabot reported his discovery and what is seen "in the first excited accounts ... by European ambassadors in London [is] the mixture of greed, fantasy, and idealism that constituted the usual Renaissance response to the New World" (O'Flaherty 3). In addition, as Neil Earle indicates, the Italian agents interviewing Cabot's sailors on their return fixed the area's image very early: "That sea is so covered with fishes they can be caught not only in a net but also in a basket with a stone in it so it may be plunged into water." (Earle 2). But it was not until 1580s, according to O'Flaherty, that English commercial interests

began to exploit the island's rich fishery and, hence, until any significant written testimony was actually produced. Accounts survived from Sir Humphrey Gilbert's voyages that contribute to the knowledge about the "new fund Yle;" Edward Hayes in "A brief relation of the New found land, and the commodities thereof" judged the island from the point of view of the potential settler. Hayes optimistically advocated for settlement, even in spite of the harsh climate, underlining the land's natural richness in fish. His testimony contrasts with Stephen Parmenius's account; the young Hungarian poet and scholar felt irritated by the wilderness of the forests surrounded St. John's and unable to accept the severe and unpredictable climatic conditions. As O'Flaherty accurately put it: "In Hayes and Parmenius similar experiences evoke contradictory responses, reminding us that even in the earliest literature about Newfoundland we are receiving impressions of the island filtered through the author's personality and influenced by his hopes and fears" (9).

After the war between England and Spain ended in 1604, interest in colonizing lands previously discovered in North America renewed and plantations were established with clear economic motives; the factual developing of the country was disregarded. O'Flaherty asserts that the texts from that period were mostly written by propagandists to promote settlement and encourage investments, offering to potential colonists and investors the prospect of tempting opportunities without limits:

Though usually based on actual experience of life on the island, these are filled with exaggerations, deliberate oversights, and judicious side-stepping of the country's short-comings, and we may expect to find in

them, not the true picture of Newfoundland they pretend to give, but rather the flourish of many fine phrases. (10)

It is interesting to note that apart from these promoters and enthusiasts, some of the written responses of the settlers themselves to their milieu survived; many of them cherished their chance to escape from the immovable European social structure, others complained, anxious to return. Most of the colonies failed (for the west country migratory fishery proved as the best economic option), except for those around Conception Bay and on the Southern Shore, whose settlers became the first resident white population of Newfoundland. The last seventeenth century text worth mentioning seems to be James Yonge's *Journal*, published in 1663. In his account, this naval surgeon, a member of a crew of migratory fishermen, describes the task of fishing on the island in minute detail, including its numerous hardships. In O'Flaherty's words, *Journal* is an invaluable literary document because

What Yonge brings home to us is the essential continuity of life in Newfoundland over the centuries. From the primitive beginnings of organized society which he observed around the coast, the 'planters,' 'inhabitants,' and 'interlopers' who would stay on in Newfoundland after the migratory fishermen had gone home, would grow a people shaped by the same fickle, relentless pressures of geography that dominated life in Renews in 1663. (13)

In his analysis of the Newfoundland history and literature Patrick O'Flaherty describes the decades between 1660 and 1770 as a century of anarchy. England's position, favoring British mercantile interests, was rather that of discouraging settlement. In order to decelerate the development of the colony "King William's Act" was passed, which impeded any form of residential law or government. As a result, eighteenth-century Newfoundland "presents the unusual spectacle of a society developing, or at any rate existing, without the benefit of government" (O'Flaherty 16). The letters and reports of missionaries, in spite of administrative obstacles, were the only texts to reflect the process of growing society. Nevertheless, these missionaries, sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, were unprepared to endure the difficult living conditions of the region, its harsh weather and scarcity of commodities. Therefore, their texts were full of complaints, also about the ways of the inhabitants, the supposed immorality and willfulness of their parishioners. As the scholar points out, it is hard to read these accounts without detecting the conspicuous concern of their authors for their own status and welfare (O'Flaherty 20).

The signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763 led Newfoundland to enter into a phase of expansion and exploration. All of New France, including Labrador, was handed over to England, and the Newfoundland governor, in charge of the Labrador coast, unhesitatingly took steps to enforce the dominion's control over the fisheries of the area. Apart from the development of the coastal settlement and enterprise, that was also the time when the interior of the colony was explored; George Cartwright's *Journal* and William Cormack's *Narrative of a*

Journey across the Island of Newfoundland in 1822 are examples of texts of more than just geographical relevance.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century several important improvements in the organization of the Newfoundland society were finally made. The legal system, once chaotic and complicated, evolved into properly constituted courts, the first schools were established, religious tolerance succeeded. The American war was crucial for the change of Newfoundland as well; the resident population increased, the English migratory fishery was undermined, St. John's prospered. The first suggestions regarding the establishment of representative institutions began to be put forward. But it was only after the Napoleonic Wars that the official demands were made. A Scottish doctor, William Carson, and a merchant coming from Ireland, Patrick Morris, went down in history as the first nationalist agitators. Significantly, as O'Flaherty indicates, these two middle-class outsiders were probably not so responsive to local pressures and grievances as they were to articulating the commonplace sentiments of the white elite, similarly to all other white colonies (51). Nevertheless, in order to provide such a grievance, necessary in the foundation of nationalistic rhetoric, they resorted to the colony's history, and so "they began, and later nineteenth-century historians and commentators endlessly echoed and extended, a view of Newfoundland's past that is still a part of the mythology of the island" (O'Flaherty 51). The scholar agrees with Keith Matthews in asserting that the work that innocently supported nationalists with the hints they needed to sentimentalize the past was that of John Reeves's *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland*, published in 1793 (O'Flaherty 51).

Undoubtedly, by the nineteenth century the general attitude of the Newfoundlanders regarding their identification evolved. In Shane O’Dea’s words:

The Newfoundland sense of identity began as work definition – the Newfoundland men, the migratory fishers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the 1840s there was an assertion of nativism, a distinction between the bush-born and the Old Country people, which became submerged in a more general and inclusive sense of belonging and identity by the end of that century. (379)

Moreover, the island’s newly developed conscience of its North American potential, becoming aware of its strategic position, and the attention the colony was given in foreign books and periodical articles, were some of the reasons for local historians to produce works exalting the island’s attractions. Moses Harvey, Philip Tocque and D.W. Prowse with his magisterial *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial, and Foreign Records* (1895) are considered the most relevant.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as a result of enthusiastic and promotional works of the above authors, but also deriving from the general scientific and literary international curiosity about the North (for many Americans, O’Flaherty asserts, the island and Labrador somehow substituted the image of their own diminishing frontier, 83) the region was brought to the attention of foreign authors, especially those of adventure stories. Through these and through numerous other observers (missionaries, doctors, travelers)

different, sometimes even contrary information as to the inhabitants of the colony was provided; “accounts of the Newfoundland people in late-nineteenth-century literature were as varied as the motives and intelligences of the writers describing them” (O’Flaherty 86). If anything they had in common can be pointed out, it is that they all were proclaiming the distinctiveness of the Newfoundlanders. Following this foreign trend, Richard Howley and P.T. McGrath, both native from St John’s, became the first local essayists to mark the national self-consciousness and try to delineate residents of Newfoundland; as O’Flaherty put it, “the colony was becoming a nation and to some extent beginning to sense that it was one” (91). As to the first valuable literary texts by foreigners, but based upon actual experience of life on the island and inspired by its inhabitants, these were R.T.S. Lowell’s, American, *The New Priest in Conception Bay* (1858) and Norman Duncan’s, Canadian, collection of stories titled *The Way of the Sea* (1903). The latter one was the precursor of the fiction focused on ordinary Newfoundlanders as main characters and the outport life “seen as great adventure, as unwitting epic” (O’Flaherty 97).

The final decades of the nineteenth century and the first ones of the twentieth covered a complicated period in Newfoundland history. Until the 1880s, the general attitude was that of optimism in expecting imminent wealth coming from a transinsular railway, mining, agriculture and, of course, fishing. Moreover, a powerful patriotic spirit arose and spread; in 1869 Newfoundland voted “no” on the issue of confederation with Canada and began to insist on its own self-assertion. Notwithstanding, a long period of decline crushed the colony’s ambitious hopes. In 1894 the financial crisis derived into bankruptcy of banks and mercantile houses; the imminent result of such an uncertain

economy was emigration. But yet, the crisis and confrontation with other nations over territorial and fishery questions, united the population and so, between 1885 and 1915, numerous patriotic and scholarly writing was produced. In 1901, starting Newfoundland literary traditions, the magazine *Newfoundland Quarterly* was founded. The magazine became one of the first tools of constructing a local/regional/national spirit; the region's literary intelligentsia, which, according to O'Flaherty, was fully established by 1900 and composed mainly of St. John's residents, published on its pages.

E.J. Pratt, "Newfoundland finest poet" (O'Flaherty 124), a crucial mythologizer of Newfoundland, unlike the authors writing for *Newfoundland Quarterly*, was from a rural and an ecclesiastical background. Born and raised on the island, this Methodist probationer left Newfoundland in 1907 to collect his studies at the University of Toronto, Victoria College, and remained associated with this educational center throughout his entire life, returning only for short visits (the fact for which O'Flaherty entitled his chapter describing Pratt's work "Emigrant muse" and Jennifer Bowering Delisle, in her *The Newfoundland Diaspora: Mapping the Literature of Out-Migration*, considers him as one of the earliest and the most recognized representatives of the Newfoundland diaspora). In 1917 *Rachel*, his first poem on Newfoundland, was published and "though it is flawed and immature, showing too openly the influence on Pratt's undergraduate reading in the English Romantic poets, yet it is in fact his most sustained study of Newfoundland life" (O'Flaherty 120). The scholar points out that Newfoundland, as presented in *Rachel*, is sentimentalized and "lumbered with the stock imagery and themes of Victorian sea romances, and honoured, more in flattery than in truth, with a large share in the traditions of the English

sea dogs" (O'Flaherty 121). *Newfoundland Verse* (1923), *Many Moods* (1932), and the rest of his works inspired by the island, are filled with themes of tragedy, horror and grief. The way O'Flaherty sees it (the view which will be contrasted by Jennifer Bowering Delisle), Pratt's Newfoundland is not real, but functions as "little more than a convenient stock of images and illuminations for an aspiring imagist poet to draw upon, and Pratt did not attempt, much less achieve, a comprehensive statement about his homeland" (124).

The First World War strengthened the Newfoundlanders' sense of local identity. Pretensions to international status emerged again, especially taking into account considerable advances in diversifying the region's economy. But modern commodities, resulting from such an industrial impulse were only tangible in urban areas, and besides, within just a few years the Depression put Newfoundland in a hopeless economic situation again. Those who suffered most the painful consequences of the years between 1929 and 1934 were the poorest inhabitants, those of the outport. Oddly enough, who took their lives as the background to her novels was a member of St. John's elite, Margaret Duley.

Duley, daughter of a prosperous tradesman and educated in the best schools, also in London, started to write fiction late, probably in order to help her family in the Depression period. Her first novel, *The Eyes of the Gull* (1936) "expresses perfectly the disdainful attitude towards the outport that we would expect from a coddled sophisticate in St John's East" (O'Flaherty 132). The second one, *Cold Pastoral* (1939), though also loathingly describing the tiny community of fishermen, shows greater attention to the reality of the outport life; it seems as though the author begins to show interest and understand its harsh conditions, and partially abandons her snobbishness. In the third novel,

Highway to Valour (1941), Duley, according to O'Flaherty, works her way towards acceptance and insight, and a reversal in her view of the outport society has to be highlighted: "The author has now tried to enter the lives of these people, whereas previously she had stood aloof and passed judgment. There is a new alertness here to the texture and meaning of life in outport Newfoundland (O'Flaherty 137).

The years of the Second World War signified a time of prosperity and social changes in Newfoundland. The island's strategic position turned out to be crucial; it became the principal link between North America and Britain. Numerous Canadian troops and US marines appeared on the island; in Placentia Bay an enormous American naval base was established. The impact of the war was inestimable; as O'Flaherty put it, "Newfoundland was pulled out of obscurity into unexpected international prominence" (145-146). New and unexpected job opportunities emerged and many abandoned the uncertain lives of fishermen to begin a comfortable salaried mode of life. Nevertheless, the temporary Commission Government appointed by Great Britain was clearly failing to protect the region's long-term interests, a fact which was reflected in island's literary production and led to the renewal of nationalism. The new magazines were the direct effect of this literary awakening, the most important, according to O'Flaherty, the *Courier*, the *Atlantic Guardian*, the *Magazine of Newfoundland*, the *Protocol* and *The Islander*. The majority of significant post-war period writers were introduced through these publications.

Artur Scammell and Ron Pollett, both associated with the *Atlantic Guardian*, are often described as representatives of a sentimental writing about the outport, which they recreated as a "pastoral idyll" (O'Flaherty 152). Their

works, together with the writings of other authors of British background, are clear examples of colonial perspective; realistic representation, hence those constructing Newfoundland from postcolonial perspective, will emerge later. Scammell and Pollett, both outharbour men, immersed in the traditional culture, wrote from the exile. Scammel's essays and a volume of his stories and songs *My Newfoundland* (1966) and Polletts's writings reprinted in *The Ocean at my Door* (1956) idealize the pre-confederation outpost and barely mention the poverty and hardships of these communities. As the scholar asserts, "Their tendency is to prettify, to reduce the human story which unfolded in Newfoundland over the centuries to the level of whimsical reminiscence. And so a heroism that went beyond mere eccentric survival is not explored" (O'Flaherty 156).

Another Newfoundland writer sometimes compared to those above was Ted Russell. But although his writings are dedicated to the outports too, there are two substantial differences between them; firstly, Russell spent his whole life in Newfoundland, and secondly, he was concerned not with the sentimental past, but the present and real outpost. He published in *The Islander* and broadcasted on a local radio as "Uncle Mose" (two selections of these stories were published: *The Chronicle of Uncle Mose* in 1975 and in 1977 *Tales from Pigeon Inlet*).

A very different attitude towards the outports, though not the exclusive theme of his works (he turned to the study of environment and the Inuit culture over time), is found in Harold Horwood's writings. This writer, born and educated in urban environment who was strongly involved in the Newfoundland political life, expressed his opinion in a daily column in the St. John's *Evening*

Telegram. At first, a follower of “Joey” Smallwood, he became gradually disenchanted with the Premier and turned into his greatest adversary. A strong hatred for Smallwood’s voters, for “what he thought was outport meanness and narrowness” (O’Flaherty 164) accompanied this aversion. In a novel *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* (1966) Horwood, from a typical colonial perspective, with very little sympathy for the poor, “explored” the world he had never got to know first-hand; his portrait of the outport is that of ignorance, sexual taboos, lack of hygiene and religious fanaticism. No value is placed on the fishermen’s survival skills, their merit to be able to adapt to such a harsh milieu; no outport “culture” is recognized.

When considering Harold Horwood and Ted Russel’s writings, I concur with O’Dea’s point of view displayed in his “Culture and Country: The Role of the Arts and Heritage in the Nationalist Revival in Newfoundland.” The critic complains that Horwood, in spite of having published the first major post-confederation novel (Newfoundland eventually confederated with Canada in 1949) did all but to exalt the island’s culture. On the contrary; “If Confederation needed a local collaborateur, it had one in Horwood who fed, nay grossly embellished, negative notions about Newfoundland, and fed himself from them.” (O’Dea 381). With Ted Russel, however, came the discovery of the outport: “This discovery occurred just as the outport seemed to be under great threat, since one of the logical conclusions of post-Confederation modernization and development was centralization and resettlement.” (O’Dea 381). According to O’Dea, whose opinion I share, that was when the phenomena of mythologizing of the nation and the creation of the mythology of place began (382) in Newfoundland.

Percy Janes, Horwood's contemporary, is the last Newfoundland writer (although the critic actually finishes describing briefly works of some of the outsiders writing about the island, highlighting the Canadian Farley Mowat and the New Zealander Franklin Russel) O'Flaherty examines in his study. And, as the scholar indicates, his work is "yet another expression of alienation and dismay" (172). Born and educated in St. John's, he later studied and worked in Canada and in England, to finally return to Newfoundland again. After his father's death, Janes wrote his best-known novel, *House of Hate* (1970), based on his family life, but exploring the context of the island's society as a whole. The novel is filled with "the atmosphere of hatred, recrimination, and violence" and "domestic scenes of frightening rawness" (O'Flaherty 174) that pervades and twists the lives of the family members. The outside world, the little outport village, is presented as repellent, stinking with garbage in summer and paralyzing with cold in the long winters, no sentiment wasted. Moreover, sadly in its iconoclastic overtone, Percy's community social life "consists mostly of boozing, fornicating, fighting, and gossiping" (174). With all that, but especially with its "semi-retarded and contemptible" (O'Flaherty 175) characters, the novel strikes painfully against the myth of the outport, more thoroughly inspected below.

As to the Newfoundland literature from the 1970s onwards, O'Dea, in his essay focused on nationalist revival, highlights some of the most important works; one example is Cassie Brown's *Death on the Ice* (1972), a moving account of the 1914 S.S. *Newfoundland* sealing disaster (78 sealers died in that tragedy), a book that "made myth of a hunt that was already under pressure" (382). O'Dea also underlines the plays of Irish-born Michael Cook, such as *The*

Head, Guts, and Soundbone Dance (1973) and the *Evening Telegram* columns and a play *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* (1985) of the satirist Ray Guy. With Cook's and Guy's portraits of outport life "we are back to the blood and guts of the fish stage and the milltown, but now they were the subject of art, not the object of denigration" (O'Dea 383). Moreover, the scholar mentions The Mummers Troupe and their collective productions, such as *Gros Mourn* (1973) or *East End Story* (1975), which "more than being a local scene by a local artist in a local venue, ... was to effect local action by generating local commitment to the concerns covered" (O'Dea 383). All of the above artists, indeed, should be considered as those who participated, consciously or not, in a creation of the indubitably positive representation of Newfoundland, and whose reasons, most certainly, were due to the growing nationalist sentiment of the island's society.

As far as the literary production of the 1990's onward is concerned, O'Dea briefly comments on Bernice Morgan, who in *Random Passage* (1992) "took us back so viscerally to the early nineteenth century, creating what strikes one who has read the pages of missionary reports as absolutely true" (385); Michael Crummey and Kevin Major, according to O'Dea, worked in a similar manner. Finally, there is a new wave of Newfoundland writers such as Wayne Johnston, who, according to O'Dea, "plays with history" (385) and three other authors who are rather interested in the present: Ed Richie, Michael Winter and Lisa Moore. O'Dea concludes his essay saying that these authors "represent another maturation of the culture ... There is no need to validate the past or escape to it; the outport is no longer the required setting; they write of themselves and their lives are interesting enough for the critical reader" (385).

Lawrence Mathews in his “Report from the Country of No Country,” the essay that opens the special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (2000), offers a more recent proposal of a list containing writers and works significant to the history of literature of Newfoundland, a list that should fill the gap after the publication of Patrick O’Flaherty’s *The Rock Observed*, “the first and still the only scholarly work that attempts to present a comprehensive overview of the province/nation’s literary history” (Mathews 1). Mathews says that “if O’Flaherty were to write a last chapter today, using the work of Horwood and Hanes as the standard for inclusion, he would need to discuss more than a dozen fiction writers” (1). In order to narrow the field, the scholar limits himself to ten books, with the restriction to one per author: Bernice Morgan, *Random Passage* (1992), John Steffler, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1992), E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News* (1993), Patrick Kavanagh, *Gaff Topsails* (1996), Paul Bowring, *The Night Season* (1997), Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998), Joan Clark, *Latitudes of Melt* (2000), Michael Winter, *This All Happened* (2000), Michael Crummey, *River Thieves* (2001) and Lisa Moore, *Open* (2002). Mathews recognizes that “such a list is contentious” and, what is especially important for this thesis, that the novel to be analyzed in the following subchapters as an example of a “literary response to Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders” (which was O’Flaherty’s criterion), *The Shipping News* “is one that many Newfoundlanders would repudiate vigorously” (2).

With reference to the mentioned above special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*, there is a number of different articles to take into account in this study. Tracy Whalen’s text “‘Camping’ with Annie Proulx: *The Shipping*

News and Tourist Desire” reveals this Newfoundland scholar’s valuable point of view; it will be an interesting material to put in perspective my analysis of some aspects of *The Shipping News*. Adrian Fowler’s “Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails* and the Myth of the Old Outport” and Danielle Fuller’s “Strange Terrain: Reproducing and Resisting Place-Myths in Two Contemporary Fictions of Newfoundland,” though none of them dealing with Proulx’s novel, address issues crucial to this dissertation: the place-myths.

Fowler, when referring to the myth of the old outport, points out that, although an interest in the texture of outport life is already seen in earlier Newfoundland literature (E.J. Pratt’s and Margaret Duley’s work), the outport as community became a major theme with the creation of Arthur Scammell, Ron Pollett and Ted Russel. As the scholar indicates,

by 1970, it was widely recognized that these little fishing communities were unique to Newfoundland, that they constituted a treasure trove of folklore and dialect, and that, after centuries of gradual evolution in isolation from the outside world, their distinctive character and very existence were threatened by the enormous changes that swept over Newfoundland following Confederation with Canada in 1949.

And then Fowler indicates that, although the outport community was already taken for granted as “the quaint social background against which heroic acts of bravery and endurance were highlighted,” it was about that decade when it became to be acknowledged “the heart and soul of Newfoundland” (71).

At the beginning, explored in newspapers, plays and poems, in the 1990s Newfoundland novelists addressed the still inspiring theme of the myth (Bernice Morgan and Patrick Kavanagh, to name just a few); they insisted on the value of community as the primary value of the outport. Fowler asserts that an ethic imperative that developed in these remote fishing villages in response to the dangers and extremely harsh conditions of the Newfoundland coast, turned out to be interdependence, not independence; such a correlation, I believe, can be observed in *The Shipping News*. As a consequence of acknowledging the outport as the emblem of whole Newfoundland, this special value of community extended to the rest of the island.

As to the essay by Fuller, she begins highlighting the significance of the place-myths about Newfoundland and cultural stereotypes about its residents. The scholar explains that “what enchants outsiders is frequently the myth of Newfoundland as a cure-all for the urbanite’s ills, a wilderness space, a quaint cultural backwater offering old-time folky charm” (22). These myths, states Fuller following James Overton’s words, on one hand, have been deliberately constructed and promoted by government and businesspeople to attract tourism; on the other hand, they are an effect of the cultural preservation and regionalist discourse “that set a model of a rural, humanistic lifestyle against the alienation of urban modernization” (Fuller 22). The critic insists that there are actually several place-myths responsible for preserving the image of Newfoundland as a rural province; the profession of its inhabitants is always that of the fishery (in spite of the collapse of the codfishery):

One of them posits Newfoundland as “other” to urban centers such as Toronto and therefore a leisure space where city dwellers can enjoy “wilderness” pursuits far away from the stresses of life in a global city ... Another persistent place-myth upholds Newfoundland’s heritage and folk culture as distinctive, shaped by the hardships of life on a wind-battered rock in the midst of the Atlantic ocean and resistant to outside cultural influences. (24)

In addition, with reference to the myth of the island as a rural space offering “a less complicated lifestyle to the morally bankrupt and physically exhausted metropolitan one” (Fuller 24), what the scholar argues is that Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* and Lasse Hallström’s Hollywood film adaptation are works that promote precisely such an image (a view which, to a certain extent, I share). In the study below, one of my aims is to inquire about the image of Newfoundland as constructed in *The Shipping News*, and particularly about the characteristics of Killick-Claw, the coastal town Proulx created for the setting of her novel.

2. The Shipping News

2.1. Introduction

The Shipping News, published in March 1993, is the second novel by Annie Proulx. It is set in Newfoundland, the land she visited for the first time during a fishing trip in the mid-1980s and then, enchanted by its extraordinary landscape, extremely harsh climate and the traditional way of life its residents still seemed to cultivate, decided to buy a house on the island's Great Northern Peninsula. As Karen L. Rood indicates, by the time Proulx completed *The Shipping News* with the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1991 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1992, she had made nine trips to the island (8). A year after its publication, the novel won an American National Book Award, *The Irish Times* International Prize for fiction and Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The inquisitive writer, while staying in Newfoundland, observed the inhabitants of this land, their ancestral customs and their manner of coping with modern dangers, and took notes. Proulx "explored the island and pored over maps, mirroring the eccentric place names with her own inventions. She absorbed the Newfoundland dialect by going to bed every night with a vernacular dictionary" (Steinberg, "An American" 58). Nevertheless, in spite of her exhausting field research, I believe it is important to underline the fact that the author had never actually lived in the place she set her novel in.

The epigraph of the novel ("In a knot of eight crossings there are 256 different 'over and under' arrangements possible ...") comes from *The Ashley*

Book of Knots (1944), just as the headings of most of the chapters, with quotations which provide a clue to the main theme of each of them, without actually revealing too much. The main character of the text is Quoyle (the reader is never told his Christian name), a man that has been “walked on” until his mid-thirties (the headnote to the first chapter explains that his name is related to a coil of rope which “is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary” 1). He is introduced as “a kind of Everyman as loser” (Rood 62). After a painful childhood, with insensitive parents (who later commit suicide together) and a cruel brother, after his unsuccessful years of college and even more disappointing jobs, living in a depressing upper New York State town, he starts his newspaper reporter “career” and, some time afterwards, meets the love of his life, Petal Bear. Unfortunately, the marriage turns out to be extremely unhappy and, after his adulterous wife’s death, he and his two daughters follow his aunt to Newfoundland, the land of their ancestors which Quoyle knows absolutely nothing about. There, in the little outport town, he will eventually succeed as a person, as a man and as a valuable professional.

It is interesting to point out that *The Shipping News* was received with enthusiasm in America, but this was not the case in Canada, especially in Newfoundland. In the United States, *Publishers Weekly* described it as “a moving evocation of a place and people buffeted by nature and change” and that Proulx was “in her element both when creating haunting images ... and when lyrically rendering a routine of gray, cold days filled with cold cheeks, squidburgers, fried bologna and the sea.” *World Literature Today* praised the language, which triumphs in Proulx’s book:

First, its postmodern episodic hero Quoyle is himself a writer ... second, the book's language is alive. Its syllables urge and slice and spin the reader like a dervish wind. Salty, luscious, mind-grabbing, chewable words and phrases like drenty, Nutbeem, and the terrible Nightmare Isles energize the people and events. (St Andrews)

In *The Atlantic* we read that "Ms. Proulx blends Newfoundland argot, savage history, impressively diverse characters, fine descriptions of weather and scenery, and comic horseplay" and that her Killick-Claw town, though "a small world ... is a real and fascinating one" ("Brief"). Notwithstanding, it is also true that not all the American reviews glorified the novel, its faults overlooked; in *The New Republic* Verlyn Klinkenborg wrote that all the way through the text he had been feeling "the reluctance you feel when someone you scarcely know puts his arm around your shoulder and pushes you toward the door." And then added:

The Shipping News is a very skillful work of a writer who has given it comic characters with comic names and comical utterances, and who places her characters in comic situations, but who is uncertain whether the reader will detect the comedy. (Klinkenborg)

And that at times, reading it, was "like watching a silent film comedy accompanied by the wrong musical score: *The Gold Rush* with music by Stravinsky" (Klinkenborg).

As to most of the reviews in Newfoundland, as well as to the actual reception by the Newfoundlanders themselves (such as St. John's University

students' described in the essay by Tracy Whalen), the veracity of the settings and the authenticity of the outport communities' culture was questioned. Stuart Pierson in his review of the novel published in *Newfoundland Studies* expressed his negative opinion, shared by the majority of residents in the Great Northern Peninsula area, regarding Proulx's employment of the local "dialect." The scholar observed that readers meet with *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* on every page, for the writer "loves words, and especially she loves archaic words with abrupt consonants in them." And, though that may not be bad per se, she uses the book "rather mechanically, without taking into account the nature of the *DNE*, how it was compiled or how it stands in relation to how people speak." Pierson concluded with a slightly mocking comment that "it is as though everyone who lives in Killick-Claw has all the entries in the *DNE* ready to hand." As far as the image of the island is concerned, the "real trouble," according to the scholar,

is not that her [Proulx's] Newfoundland is a fancy; rather it is that the author has made out of it a fable, and even worse, not one well-thought-out. She is explicit in seeing it as a pastoral, in which a gentle, humane bucolic past has been overcome or subverted by the violent, harsh American present.

The conclusion Pierson expressed is that given its "passages of stunning beauty" and the fact that it is "funny and it is highly serious in the Arnoldian sense," it truly deserves the Pulitzer Prize; nevertheless, "where it fails ... is in its risky portrayal of Newfoundland."

My aim in the following subchapters is to examine the northern Newfoundland region as presented by Annie Proulx in *The Shipping News*. As was the case in the previous chapter and as will be the case in the following one, the analysis, based on cultural studies, will focus on the area's landscape and its inhabitants. Moreover, now, instead of the overwhelming impact of the New England and American West popular culture, the potential influence of the Newfoundland myths will be taken into account. In addition, some of the features examined also in Proulx's New England and Wyoming/Texas Panhandle texts, which, in my view, place the novel among other naturalistic works, will be explored.

2.2. Annie Proulx's Newfoundland: its Natural and Social Features

Newfoundland, as a place constructed by Annie Proulx in her novel, is a remote place of rocky, inhospitable landscape, though not lacking a special charm due to its indomitable natural features. It is a place in which the people's way of life directly depends on its sudden and violent climatic changes. Eventually, it seems to be a place where the mythic past bangs against some very real economic and social issues.

To start with, it is important to observe that, from the very beginning, Newfoundland stands in contrast to the place where Quoye, the protagonist, spent most of his adult life in: Mockingburg, New York. Apart from the general poor economic situation, the "bedraggled" (10) New York State does not share any characteristics of the woody and quiet island:

A place in its third death. Stumbled in two hundred years from forests and woodland tribes, to farms, to a working-class city of machine tool and tire factories. A long recession emptied the downtown, killed the malls. Factories for sale. Slum streets, youths with guns in their pockets, political word-rattle of some litany, sore mouths and broken ideas. Who knew where the people went? Probably California. (10-11)

But in spite of this supposition, against all those desperate people who “probably” went to sunny California, Quoye headed north. In Newfoundland, the earth of his ancestor, he would have a chance to, as his aunt Agnis put it, “a clean slate,” “a fresh start” (27); obviously, an immediate connection with the idea of the American West as a place of the last chance for a better future, comes to mind. In her essay “M. Robinson’s *Housekeeping* and E. A. Proulx’s *The Shipping News*” Maria Moss points out that “Quoye moves from one extreme to the other, from never feeling any kind of connectedness to his family to having to acknowledge his more than gruesome ancestry” (87). All the protagonist wanted, according to Moss, was “a place to provide sanctuary – and Newfoundland will indeed become his ‘new-found-land,’ his cave” (87).

The first image of the island, from the ferry, is filtered through Agnis Hamm’s eyes, and so it is necessarily subjective. It was her home, “this rock, six thousand miles of coast blind-wrapped in fog. Sunkers under wrinkled water, boats threading tickles between ice-scabbed cliffs. Tundra and barrens, a land of stunted spruce men cut and drew away” (32). Nevertheless, she was far from idealizing it; Agnis could not avoid thinking of all the past “discoverers” of the island, such as described in literature constructing Newfoundland in a specific

way. She imagined them “drawn by the cod, from the days when massed fish slowed ships on the drift for the passage to the Spice Isles, expecting cities of gold” (33). And then their disappointment, when instead of riches and a fertile soil, there was only ice, “bergs with cores of beryl,” “bog and marsh, rivers and chains of ponds alive with metal-throated birds” (33). Not a pleasant or a welcoming image, indeed, especially taking into account its later fame as “a place that bred malefic spirits” (33).

Once on the actual island and driving towards the family’s old house on Quoye’s Point (the family and the actual place united forever by this toponymy), was when Quoye began his process of discovering the island, his construction of the place: “cracked cliffs in volcanic glazes,” “Harbors still locked in ice. Tombstone houses jutting from raw granite, the coast black, glinting like lumps of silver ore” (35). In the distance another element of the landscape: fishing skiffs and “waves bursting against the headlands. Exploding water” (36). His emotions, his undeniably agitated psychological state, seem a relevant influence in these first moments on the island, somehow guiding the protagonist’s attention to the untamed and primitive nature.

The remoteness of the Quoye family’s old home is demonstrated on the very first day of the characters’ arrival; seventeen miles from the main road to Capsize Cove, an abandoned village, and then still eleven more to the house. One half of the stretch almost impossible to drive, “the sumpy road,” “churned mud” (38). Then, suddenly, an excellent gravel roadway, ended in an asphalt parking lot and an empty concrete building (one of the many examples of a failed Canadian business plan for the region); all in the middle of rarely

disturbed nature: “A moose stood broadside, looming; annoyance in its retreat.” (40).

This isolation and solitude of some Newfoundland places is also observed by the protagonist while exploring Quoyle’s Point’s surroundings some days after having settled in. Walking to a stone cairn and reflecting over its legendary past (wondering who the builders were: the ancient Beothuks, the Basque fishermen, or the wrecker Quoyles, his villainous ancestor), he found himself coming to the profound conclusion: “At last the end of the world, a wild place that seemed poised on the lip of the abyss. No human sigh, nothing, no ship, no plane, no animal, no bird, no bobbing trap marker nor buoy. As though he stood alone on the planet.” (209).

But if any of the Newfoundland landscape’s natural features should prevail, it would definitely be its rockiness. In order to reach the mentioned “end of the world” Quoyle had to climb over “rocks as big as houses” (208). As Billy Pretty, a native inhabitant and Quoyle’s workmate, put it when explaining to the newcomer the local habit of rock-naming (generally bizarre and filled with meaning names, such as Hell’s Rock, Cleopatra, Baker’s Loaf, or Net-Man): “we got ‘em all along, boy, thousands and thousands of miles with wash balls and sunkers and known rocks every foot of the way. Newfoundland itself is a great rock in the sea, and the islands straggled around it are rocks.” (162). Gaze Island, the place Quoyle’s family originally came from, a volcanic island with nothing but hard, uncultivable soil, finally provided Quoyle an explication of why his father’s extraordinary fondness of their New York garden, of fruit cultivation and collection, of him saying: “Some sweet land we got here, boy.” (166). Previously convinced the reason was a simple “immigrant’s patriotic sentiment,”

he now “balanced it against the scoured childhood on a salt-washed rock. His father had been enchanted with deep soil.” (166).

Nevertheless, it is often the case in the novel that right after revealing some of these severe and unappealing features of the Newfoundland landscape, the narrator, manifesting a somehow ambivalent attitude to nature, does not hesitate to point out the exceptional beauty of the place. Such a literary technique, in my view, accentuates the diversity of the Newfoundland characteristics; also, it provides a more realistic portrait of the region, placed somewhere between the tourist and the local perspective. In the commented text excerpt, right from the top of the gaze that gave the name to the small aforementioned island, the view was breathtaking, not only to Quoyle, but to everyone who would

look down to the cup of harbor, could turn again, look at the open sea, at distant ships heading for Europe or Montreal. Liquid turquoise below. To the north two starched sheet icebergs. There, the smoke of Killick-Claw. Far to the east, almost invisible, a dark band like rolled gauze. (165)

Billy Pretty explained that it was where, in the old days, cows were grazing in the summer; and then he added proudly: “Never a cow in Newfoundland had a better view” (165).

As to the town, Killick-Claw, where the Quoyles were supposed to lead their daily life, its first description is given by means of a map and a brochure. Readers receive some scarce and impersonal information:

The bay showed on the map as a chemist's pale blue flask into which poured ocean. Ships entered the bay through the neck of the flask. On the eastern shore the settlement of Flour Sack Cove, three miles farther down the town of Killick-Claw, and along the bottom, odds and ends of coves. (36)

The brochure, read aloud by the aunt, provides more irony than news, as if it were the narrator's aim to make the readers build Killick-Claws' image individually and gradually throughout the entire novel. First, there was some information about the town's "charms," apart from "statistics of its government wharf, fish plant, freight terminal, restaurants" (36). And then, the mysterious indication: "Population, two thousand. Potential unlimited." (36). It was up to the Quoyles to explore the limits of their new environment.

Quoye's very first day in this town of promised unlimited potential, his entrance into it, provides the reader with an image of what the place was, and to some extent, what it was still trying to be. The protagonist noticed "a few hauled-up boats," "fish flakes, scaffolds of peeled spruce from the old days of making salt cod," "a straggle of docks and fishermen's storage sheds. Humped rocks spread with veils of net" (56). The image, in summary, was that of a somehow decrepit fishing village, which has not yet rendered, which still hold tight to its prosperous past. A very Newfoundland picture, many might say, easily connectable to an outsider's vision, indeed.

As to the town's dwellings, through such descriptions as the one of Quoye's boss's house, the Buggits coming from a long line of Newfoundlanders, an idea of the "typical" local way of life in the region is

provided. The décor was all about the sea and its derivations, all “tatted and doiled in the great art of the place” (213). There were

designs of lace waves and floe ice, whelk shells and sea wrack, the curve of lobster feelers, the round knot of cod-eye, the bristled commas of shrimp and fissured sea caves, white snow on black rock, pinwheeled gulls, the slant of silver rain. Hard, tortured knots encased picture frames of ancestors and anchors ... (213)

Also, the Bible was placed in a visible, easily reachable spot, as if attesting the household’s ethical code.

Another “typical,” not to say “stereotypical” picture of the town’s everyday life is the one Quoye observes from his definite house kitchen window, that of a stern trawler leaving a nearby fish plant. And the protagonist’s reflection is one of someone who already knew something about fishermen’s tough labor:

Ten days with a fourteen-man crew, towing the net, the slow haul back, the brief moment of excitement when the cod end of the net came up, the cod pouring into the hold. Or nothing much. And down to gut and bleed. And tow again and haul back. And mend net. And again. And again. (290)

Finally, the image of some of the local restaurants projected in the novel is worth highlighting. Even though some of these places obviously stood out for their obvious lack of hygiene, the locals’ loyalty remained intact; no fancy junk

food, no sophisticated foreign cuisine could change that. Skipper Will's place seems to be the best example of what truly matters when a Newfoundlander goes out to have lunch. No "blast of hot oil and scorch" is a nuisance, not a company of "fishermen still in bloody oilskins and boots hunched over fries and cod" bothered the clients; "cigarette smoke dissolved in the cloud from the fryer" (131) did not matter either. Not even the filthy apron of the chef and his coffee, "a weak but acrid brew with undertones of cod" (132), were obstacles for those who wanted to enjoy some delicious local food, such as stewed cod or Skipper Will's specialty: the squidburger. The same appreciation of the outstanding home-made cuisine is recognized, this time not only by the Newfoundlanders but by tourists too, in a little restaurant of a neighboring village. Its daily baked bread, its meatballs, its squid stuffed with shrimps, or its "old-fashioned figgy duff" (177) (whatever those might actually be), were just a few of the delicacies offered by the cook. The two examples above, again, put in display Proulx's ambivalent perspective, her complex manner of describing Newfoundland, its characteristics and its people.

Returning to the region's natural characteristics, however, as many believe, a picture of any place will never be complete without at least mentioning its climatic conditions; in the case of Newfoundland the climate is evidently the fundamental pillar of its image. It is a feature that conditions its inhabitants' lives in every respect, shapes their characters just as it shaped its landscape; the concept of geographic determinism, proper for all naturalistic works, is clearly manifested in the text by exhibiting all such factors.

In the novel, there are numerous examples of the harshness the Newfoundland weather characterizes with. Significantly enough, Quoye and his

daughters, his aunt being used to it, are surprisingly hit with a snow storm on their very first day on the island. As a matter of fact, the newcomer cannot believe that to be possible in May. But Agnis invites him to accept such anomalies as natural by saying: “Any month of the year, my boy. Weather here beyond anything you know.” (50). And it was not just any storm Quoye has experienced in New York; its violence surpassed all he knew:

He bent against air. Cracking sky, a mad burst. The sign above the gas pump, a hand-painted circle of sheet metal, tore away, sliced over the store. The man came out, the door jumped from his hand, wrenched. Wind slung Quoye against the pumps. ... Then the gusts bore out of the east, shooting the blizzard at them. (51)

Then, after some days secluded in a road motel, they witnessed another characteristic of the local climate: its sudden change: “In the night it turned to rain, the wind came from the south, warm and with a smell of creamy milk.” (55). As if the family were receiving their first notification concerning the region’s climate: “You can go from the warm breeze to the polar blizzard in ten minutes.” (274).

Sometimes, even the locals admitted that the weather was odd. Billy Pretty’s comment about one of the early autumn days was: “Tis a strange time, strange weather. Remember we had a yellow day on Monday – the sky cast was an ugly yellow like a jar of old piss. Then yesterday, blue mist and blasting fog.” (155). Fog, in point of fact, “as dense as cotton waste, carried a coldness

that ate into the bones” (234), could be counted as one the main ingredients of the mysteriously looking Newfoundland mornings.

Sometimes, a month such as September, with its “shortening days and chilling waters” (190), with storms “blowing in and out”, surprised with an unexpected warming: “Sudden sleet changed to glowing violet rods, collapsed in rain. Two, three days of heat as though blown from a desert.” (191). But in spite of these occasional “heat waves,” it is indisputable that cold appears as the central feature of the island’s weather. As early as in October, dark clouds were announcing “storms on the way” (225). Winter months, evidently, were the hardest to endure, but the temperature was already overwhelming in November. People, even the native residents, could not avoid asking themselves while driving “with the snow off the ice and the wipers froze up and the car slipping sideways”: “It’s only November. How can this be?” (244). The bay stayed frozen until spring, motionless; “Pancakes of submerged ice joined with others into great sheets, the rubbery green ice thickened, an ice foot fastened onto the shore, binding the sea with the land. Liquid became solid, solid was buried under crystals.” (272). The December storms in Newfoundland, as one of the locals put it, were usually “the most treacherous, changeable and cruel” (274), and could break one’s heart: “Just a few years ago, first week in December we had screeching bitter winds, fifty-foot waves thrashing around, it was like the bottom of the ocean was going to come up.” (273-274). Then, a rapid and catastrophic change again: “a week or two later the heaviest rain anybody ever see. Floods and destruction” (274). As for January, the winter was reaching its pinnacle; the time of frequent storms and “savage cold” (299):

The sky blended imperceptibly into the neutral-colored ice that covered the ocean, solid near shore, jigsaw floes fifty miles out and heaving on the swells. Snow fell every day, sometimes slow flakes, as if idling between storms. Deepened, deepened; five, eight, eleven feet deep. The roads were channels between banks, metal, wood silenced. And every ten days or so ... another storm. (284)

Eventually, in April, closing the first year of the Quoyles on the island, another sudden and extremely violent storm demonstrated the climatic nature of the place; the cold “straight from the glaciers” (318) and the wind blowing with an extreme force. The strength of the gale was terrible; not only did it devastate the coast and as a result “more than forty men and three women and one child drowned” (319), but it also swept away the Quoyles’ old family house, “lifted by the wind, tumbled down the rock and into the sea in a wake of glass and snow crystals” (322).

There is no need to explain that these remarkably hard climatic conditions were the original factors of the region’s poor economic situation, that they determined the area’s doom. Yes, cod abounded, but it was not enough for most of the settlers to survive. Fishing was not an easy task, for “the alchemist sea changed fishermen into wet bones, sent boats to drift among the cod, cast them on the landwash” (33). Agnis remembered stories she heard in her childhood (a technique clearly used by Proulx to emphasize the importance of oral history in the representation of the place), stories about the difficulties that caused the starving inhabitants unspeakable tragedies:

the father who shot his oldest children and himself that the rest might live on flour scrapings; sealers crouched on a floe awash from their weight until one leaped into the sea; storm journeys to fetch medicines – always the wrong thing and too late for the convulsing hangashore. (33)

Nowadays, however, it seemed that those problems had been overcome. The seasonal workers could finally count on unemployment insurance, the people hoped the offshore oil money would reach them soon. Apparently, now “all was progress and possession, all shove and push, now. They said.” (33). Irony contained in this last phrase is the first sign of the narrator’s skeptical view, confirmed throughout the novel, of the government’s approach to Newfoundland’s economy.

What best exemplifies this nonsensical approach after Newfoundland became confederated with Canada, is the story of Jack Buggit’s professional path. Jack, like almost all men in his village, was a fisherman, and although it was a satisfactory life – for there was plenty of fish – it also was very hard. And so, encouraged by Joey Smallwoods’ administration: “Boys, pull up your boats, burn your flakes, and forget the fishery; there will be two jobs for every man in Newfoundland” (64), Jack decided to resort to the Canada Manpower office, let them redirect him. What the rest of his story proves is an absolute and complete failure of the system. Enormous amounts of money were wasted for modern and shining factories, but no raw materials were provided, no professionals employed. Immense industrial plants created, but never actually opened; a catastrophic lack of information between interdependent industries. Indeed, the

benefit for Jack was that he learnt his lesson and realized that one could not count on the useless administration, but on oneself only.

Notwithstanding, in spite of the general lack of organization and knowledge as to the Newfoundland reality, some undoubtedly important improves on behalf of the Canadian government were implemented; even the most skeptical Newfoundlanders confirm that. The Killick-Claw harbor was upgraded with seventeen million dollars (“reconstructed dock, new container” 81), and so it was now a popular cruise stop; as the harbormaster explained to Quoye: “They don’t stay more than a day or so, but, my boy, when they sets foot on the dock they commence to hurl the money around.” (81). As a matter of fact, Killick-Claw itself had nothing and meant nothing before the Second World War; it “used to be a couple of rickety fish stages and twenty houses” (157). Now, because of a nearby harbor’s being potentially dangerous (given tons of the War’s ammunition covering its bottom), but also because of the government’s improvements, Killick-Claw has transformed into an important reference place, also in receiving and repairing some enormous carriers.

With relation to Canada’s policy almost a century before Quoye’s arrival, its image is seriously damaged by what Billy Pretty reveals about his father’s story. In those times, England and Scotland were “sweeping up” their orphans from the streets and shipping them to Canadian farmers: “Just a little waifs shipped abroad to a life of rural slavery” (167). Because of a terrible shipwreck only twenty-four children out of three hundred and fourteen survived – Billy’s father among them. He also turned out to be the only truly lucky boy, for he stayed in Newfoundland with the family that rescued him. What happened to the other twenty-three who were forced to continue their journey, made the

inhabitants of that little island of Billy's childhood genuinely detest everything Canadian:

You ask me, Canada was built on the slave labor of those poor Home children, worked to the bone, treated like dirt, half starved and crazed with lonesomeness. ...

There was never a one from Gaze Island that voted for confederation with Canada! My father would of wore a black armband on Confederation Day! (168-169)

Moreover, it seems that the government was managing defectively and clumsily the only economic sector of the island that could provide some real money: oil extraction. Again, there are examples of the administration's good intentions combined with an extreme lack of professionalism. One single, ordinary storm, "Storms like that comes along every winter." (194) was enough to destroy the rig with ninety-seven men on it, their bodies never recovered. Wavey, the woman with whom Quoyle was finally able to create a stable relationship, lost her husband in that disaster; this is what she remembers:

The government didn't have any safety rules for these things. The design of the rig was bad. Nobody on the rig knew who was in charge. ... Most of the men on board didn't know nothing about the sea. Geologists and cementers, derrickmen, mud watchers, drillers, welders and fitters, they was after the oil, no attention to the water or weather. ... A sea broke the portlight, come in and drenched the control panel. They wasn't properly

trained. No operation manuals. ... And the lifeboats wasn't any good, and most of the men never made it to the boats because the public address system went out when the control panel failed. (194-195)

Furthermore, with reference to oil extraction, apart from such problems as those exemplified above, negligence and lack of preparation, the Newfoundland society was clearly divided between its supporters and opponents. In the novel, Tert Card, Quoyle's workmate, represents those in favor; he believes oil to be "the hope of this place" (198). He had purchased some stocks from the largest reserve in Canada, the McGonigle field, and he was convinced it would bring plenty of money to everyone: "Jobs all over the place, dividends for stockholders, manufacturing, housing and supplies. ...It's to be golden days" (198). And then he added, self-confident: "Newfoundland is going to be the richest place in the world. It's a new era. We'll be rolling in the money." (199). The opponents, on the other hand, Billy Pretty being their spokesman in the text, holded no real advantages should be awaited, especially for common people: "The only ones getting the jobs and the economic benefits is down to St. John's" (198). As a matter of fact, not even one good point related to the "oil hysteria" is found in Billy's antiglobal and catastrophic discourse. The portrait he paints of the outports is also worth highlighting:

What you'll have is the international oil companies skimming the cream off the pot. How much is going to trickle down to the outports? It's outsiders will get the gold. There's drugs and crime here now, and

prostitutes wagging their red behinds, and it's only started. Vandalism, stealing and smashing. ...

... alcoholism, moral degradation of the lowest kind. Divorce and cruelty and abandoned children moping along the roadside. (199)

Indeed, it seems that the old Newfoundlander, apart from having some proof-based reasons as to the greediness of the global oil companies, tends to blame everyone but the actual outport society for their miserable moral condition. And the pernicious oil industry would only add to the already existing problems the region struggled with, according to Billy and some other fishermen, from the time Canada ended the local economy balance, that is when the fishing started to go “down, down, down, forty years sliding away into nothing, the goddamn Canada government giving fishing rights to every country on the face of the earth, but regulating us out of the business” (65). Billy knew what he was talking about; throughout his whole life he witnessed acts that, he believes, brought Newfoundland to economic ruin:

I seen the cod and caplin go from millions of tons taken to two or three bucketsful. Seen fishing go from seasonal, inshore, small boats to the deep water year-round factory ships and draggers. Now the fish is all gone and the forests is cut down. Ruined and wracked! (199)

The pollution coming from the oil industry, as Billy saw it, would only finish off the remaining fishery. The trawls would surely be destroyed by “clits of wires and barrels and broken metal,” oil spills would “kill off the few midget cod

that's left ... scum the landwash with a black stinking ooze" (199). Unquestionably, any kind of agreement between the oil enthusiasts and the fishery advocates was out of the question.

In *The Shipping News* the theme of overfishing, due to the government's erroneous policy, is recurrent; Jack Buggit complains about how the stocks of cod practically collapsed after being "overfished mercilessly for twenty years" (191). Then, after learning that even three fishing plants in the area might soon be closed, he cannot help criticizing the fish quotas system, the catalyst of the closing: "If there's no fish you can't allocate them and you can't catch them; if you don't catch them, you can't process them or ship them, you don't have a living for nobody." (292). Also, Jack repeats Billy's complaint as to selling fishing rights to foreigners and so eradicating the inshore fishing; frustrated, he asks rhetorically: "How can the fish come inshore if the trawlers and draggers gets 'em all fifty, a hundred mile out? And the long-liners gets the rest twenty mile out? What's left for the inshore fishermen?" (292).

Obviously, the examined economic problems above translated directly into social instability. Unemployment was high, and still increasing. People, especially the young Newfoundlanders, in the majority of cases had no other choice but to abandon their coastal home town and migrate to bigger cities in search of work. Newfoundland was losing its people. Jack's son Denis and his family were some of those who, in spite of being genuinely fond of their place and strongly linked to their community, given the hopeless professional perspective, planned on moving to Toronto. A decision just as devastating for them, as for their family and friends; Quoye, despite his only one-year-experience as a Newfoundlander, "knew they would be lost forever if they went,

for even the few who came back were altered in temper as a knife reclaimed from the ashes of a house fire” (326).

The problems put in display above, economic but at the same time ecological as well, seem to demonstrate the author’s commitment with both the social and the environmental issues of the region. In the next subchapter her sympathy for the traditional, environmentally friendly way of life will prove even more noticeable; Proulx’s choice of characters to represent adversarial views regarding such topics as critique of the Canadian government policies or the state’s negligence as to the island’s fauna and flora will be revealing.

2.3. Newfoundlanders in *The Shipping News*

Most characters from *The Shipping News* cannot be described in a generalized manner; not because of their complexity, but due to the author’s play with stereotypes. Some of the Killick-Claw’s inhabitants seem to reflect almost to perfection “typical” Newfoundlanders an outsider would expect, the constructions spread by literature and popular culture: they are good-hearted fishermen, upright citizens and old fashioned patriots. Their women are deeply involved in the town’s social life and actively support elderly and disadvantaged neighbors. Nevertheless, their little community is not free from cheaters, criminals and sex offenders; as a matter of fact, there appears to be more of them than in other regions of Canada. Also, everyone agrees Quoye’s arrival and his settling in the town is a remarkable exception, for it is usually the other way around; for those who run away, Newfoundland is definitely not such a paradise after all.

Before I begin my analysis of the Killick-Claw residents, some of the theories concerning the protagonist himself, a newcomer, an outsider, and his arrival to Newfoundland should be touched upon. Paul Chafe in his “All the qualities o’ th’ isle’: *The Shipping News* as Island Myth,” compares Annie Proulx’s novel with William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, both of them “oft-cited examples of this ‘island myth’ in which a disillusioned or downtrodden European hero steps outside society to create his personal island paradise” (87). The scholar observes that “Newfoundland has had its share of island myths: from the letters of the first settlers enjoining others to prosper in this land of possibility and plenty” (87) to its idealized image on the tourism websites. According to Chafe, the author “examines this idea of Newfoundland as a place of restoration and introspection [similarly to the image of the American West, the place of opportunities and second chances]; Proulx’s protagonist abandons life in New York and escapes to the island of Newfoundland in an odyssey toward self-improvement, inspiration and control.” (87). But it is also important to underline, following the scholar’s words, that *The Shipping News* is unique among island narratives, for it ends with the ‘castaway’ remaining on the island; he eventually finds true happiness, because he does not attempt to shape the island – or its inhabitants – to fit his purposes. Chafe concludes saying that “Proulx’s novel is Quoye’s quest to find himself, but it also appears to be a quest to become a true Newfoundlander, such as Proulx perceives it” (96).

A strong connection between the island and the protagonist’s psychological condition is also explored by Christian Hummelsund Voie. In his essay titled “Drinking the Elixir of Ownership: Pilgrims and Improvers in the

Landscape of Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* and *The Shipping News*," the scholar points out that "to Proulx's characters, relocation from urban cityscapes to wide-open rural landscapes may represent the beginning of ideological transformation" (41). According to Voie, Quoye finds hope and a sense of at-home-ness in his ancestral Newfoundland (42). The element Voie considers crucial for Quoye's internal development is, interestingly, the landscape (unlike Robert Scott Steward, who favors the influence of community):

Quoye does not pursue landscape as a reservoir for his own mentality, but as *querencia*, a place from which to know and speak his beliefs. He comes to worship nature specifically as an 'other,' a reliable constant, a source of recourse that is unimpeachable and permanent. Long before his eventual attainment of love, identity, community and articulation, Quoye finds sustenance in the landscape itself. (43)

The scholar indicates that only the landscape is an inflammatory enough topic to awaken Quoye's dormant self-assertion and to break his silence, which he does in order to stand for the landscape he is committed to preserve.

As far as Quoye's initial silence and inarticulacy are concerned, Rachel Seiffert's approach to the novel needs to be highlighted: "Broadly speaking, *The Shipping News* is about Quoye's development of a voice, and with it a sense of self and belonging." (515). The protagonist "starts the book as a silent, lumbering giant, with a deep sense of his own ugliness and inadequacy" (Seiffert 515), and finishes it as a successful journalist ("The success of his

column both with Jack the proprietor and the community provides Quoye with means of self-expression and self-acceptance” Seiffert 516), a self-confident head of household and happy fiancé to a good and loving woman; his identity turns out to be intimately related to his articulacy.

Eventually, another approach worth mentioning is that of Jennifer Denise Ryan in her “Landed Bodies: Geography and Disability in *The Shipping News*”. Ryan describes Quoye as “marked from birth as physically misshapen and socially invisible” and, until the age of thirty-six, “stigmatized by nearly every community and relationship into which he would entry” (127). Ryan draws our attention to the fact that both man (Quoye) and land (Newfoundland) “are framed in terms that suggest alienation from human community as well as the terrain itself” (127). The link between geography and the physical self seems to be obvious; Newfoundland, according to Ryan, is a place which reflects Quoye’s own bodily characteristics and his poor social reputation. Nevertheless, the scholar argues that the protagonist, in spite of his physical “disabilities,” “possesses positive intellectual and emotional traits that are overlooked both inter- and intratextually, by fellow characters and critics alike” (129). Ryan’s argument, which I believe accurate, is that “Quoye both participates in narrative drama and creates a viable conclusion without altering his fundamental characteristics” (129).

The analysis of the Newfoundlanders such as presented in the novel I execute below is my attempt to indicate both the “mythic” and the “realistic” features of the region’s inhabitants. Most of the time, the line separating these two is somehow blurred, other times it will seem rather evident. It will not always be true that Proulx in *The Shipping News* reiterated “the image of the island

province as a rural space that offers a less complicated lifestyle to the morally bankrupt and physically exhausted metropolitan one” (Fuller 24); such a place-myth will be contrasted by some very uncommon and complex Killick-Claw’s residents (though the archetypical ones will clearly be there as well). As to the myth upholding “Newfoundland’s heritage and folk culture as distinctive, shaped by the hardships of life on a wind-battered rock in the midst of the Atlantic ocean and resistant to outside cultural influences” (Fuller 24), linked intimately with the myth of the old outport, a special value of community and the interdependence of its members will be noticed in the novel, indeed. Nevertheless, when analyzing any of Proulx’s texts, one should never trust the apparently obvious interpretations; there are no black-and-white rules in this novel either.

The manner the characters are selected and used by the author to convey specific ideas she has about the place should be highlighted. It is not a coincidence, obviously, that all those who somehow represent the tradition or the environmental concern seem to be honorable and likeable, though not free from flaws, while those representing the oppression of the state or of the oil industry are, in general, mean and shallow. Although such a division cannot be analyzed as a rule, it definitely is revealing.

Jack Buggit and Billy Pretty, undoubtedly, stand as symbols of the good old Newfoundland, of the honest men with the outport origins. Raised in poverty, the story of both families is extremely tough and heart-breaking; Billy’s father, as mentioned in the previous subchapter, a Home boy sent from England, only to settle in a virtuous, but very humble household; Jack’s “great-great-grandfather had to go to cannibalism to stay alive” (64). Billy spent his first

years of childhood living on a rocky and inhospitable Gaze Island and that is where he learnt to sail his boat, guided only by senses of smell and hearing, perfectly adjusted to a hostile environment. He remembers those years fondly, particularly because of the unity of the tiny Gaze Island's community:

... if it was hard times, they shared, they helped their neighbor. No, they didn't have any money, the sea was dangerous and men were lost, but it was a satisfying life in a way people today do not understand. There was a joinery of lives all worked together, smooth in places, or lumpy, but joined. The work and the living you did was the same things, not separated like today. (169)

The theme of the contrast between the "good" old days and the "bad" new ones will be recurrent in the novel. As a matter of fact, Jack is equally sentimental when talking about the past: "It was a hard life, but it had the satisfaction." (64). Proud of his ancestors, he explains to Quoyle that "Buggits fished these waters, sealed, shipped out, done everything to keep going" (64). Although an owner of a newspaper now, Jack's year was still divided according to the fishing and seal hunting seasons. Also, Jack was a patriot and took his home island very seriously; though characterized with a sense of humor, he warns the newcomer on the first day they meet: "I never want to hear jokes about Newfoundland or Newfoundlanders. ... I hates a Newfie joke" (69).

Moreover, it is significant what readers learn about Jack Buggit and his family with reference to their attachment to the sea. In spite of their father's effort to keep his four children away from any water-related profession, the

young Buggits were all attracted to it immensely, as though it ran through their blood. In the end, they could not help it; the oldest, Jesson, drowned in a shipwreck, the youngest struggled as a carpenter, but desiring to fish, one of the daughters worked as a sailboat instructor and the other on a cruise ship. They were their homeland's products and not even Jack's special gift, his instinct to detect danger and find his way to an unfortunate, to a drowning man out at sea, could stop them. The irony Proulx exercises in the last pages of the novel is that this old gifted man is incapable of sensing his own death (or as it later turns out, hibernation), imprisoned under the water by the line of his lobster trap.

Apart from Jack and Billy, who actively participate in the plot, their presence being relevant, there are several other anecdotic Newfoundland archetypal characters. One of them, probably the most picturesque, is Killick-Claw's harbormaster, Diddy Shovel. His physical appearance was, indeed, perfectly reflecting that of an authentic seadog:

Diddy Shovel's skin was like asphalt, fissured and cracked, thickened by a lifetime of weather, the scurf of age. Stubble worked through the craquelured surface. His eyelids collapsed in protective folds at the outer corners. Bristled eyebrows; enlarged pores gave the nose a sandy appearance. (79)

In addition, the harbormaster was an extremely strong man; in his twenties, he found a brotherhood called "The Finger Club" – his members had to be able to suspend themselves from a beam in a cellar using only one of their fingers. But

now all the other members were gone and Diddy, given his age, about to retire: “Seventy years young and they force me to retire.” (81). The story of his life, obviously, matches the stereotype too. Shovel was only thirteen when he started as a deckhand on his uncle’s sailing schooner; this is where he built up his strength. Later he fished on a dory-schooner, worked on a coastal ferry and was in the Merchant Navy. During the Second World War he served in the Canadian Navy and afterwards, joined the Coast Guard. Then, eventually, thirty years before his now imminent retirement, Diddy became the harbormaster. It is interesting to outline that his way of talking about ships, appreciating their technical details, but also admiring their beauty, their elegance, is significant and makes the reader sense the sea; the sea and all related to it was this man’s whole life.

Another character that corresponds to the typical picture of a Newfoundland coastal village dweller is Wavey’s uncle, Alvin Yark, a highly regarded boatbuilder. His physical appearance was somehow odd, just like the majority of the characters with whom Proulx peopled her novel; he was “a small man with a paper face, ears the size of half-dollars, eyes like willow leaves” (236). His boatbuilding technique was entirely traditional, he did not follow any modern “improvements,” the feature that is pictured when he explains to Quoyle that the timber for his new boat will come directly from the forest: “you builds with green wood and water will never go in the wood. I never builds with dry wood.” (237). What is more, Yark’s attitude towards his boats was remarkably personal, he personified his creations: “Each tree grows a little different so every boat you make, you know, the rake of the stem and the rake of the stern is a little different too ... Each one is different, like men and women, some good,

some not so good.” (265-266). His image stands as that of a legendary boatbuilder who “feels” his craft deeply and whose products are his offspring. Furthermore, the extraordinary goodness of the Yarks, their incredible commitment to the community should definitely be considered “mythical” too, if not unrealistic. According to Wavey, after the village’s fire some years ago,

everybody built a new house with the insurance. There was some families didn’t have insurance, five or six I guess, the other shared along with them so it all came out to a new house for everybody. Uncle Al and Auntie Evvie didn’t need such a big house as the old one, so they chipped in. (235)

As far as the whole coastal Newfoundland community is concerned, the way it is idealized is worth pointing out, for it matches the myth of the old outpost almost to perfection; the lives of the characters are “set always within a complex cultural web of obligation, understanding, and support” (Fowler 72). The rules which seem to guide this united society are those of helping their neighbors, mutual respect among all its members and cultivation of traditions. Right from the first time Billy Pretty joined Quoyle on a work trip, he had a chance to instruct the newcomer as how to act when a pedestrian passes by, especially in rainy weather and even in spite of going in the opposite direction: “We should of give her [Wavey] a ride, boy. ... Wouldn’t take a minute to turn round. Rain coming down like stair rods.” (114). Some weeks afterwards, when living in Denis and Beety Buggits’ house, Quoyle observed another characteristic of the

Killick-Claw's society: neighbors naturally entering each other houses and serving themselves a cup of coffee.

But the time when the town's inhabitants demonstrated the widest range of local customs, the time when any outsider would easily see how intimately these people knew and respected one another, was Christmas time. To start with, the whole month of December seemed to emanate a special kind of energy. Besides the preparation of decorations, Quoye observed with surprise that everybody, not only children and their parents, was preparing themselves for the pageant at the town's school. The day of the performance, the school auditorium was filled with Killick-Claw inhabitants of all ages, wearing their best outfits with elaborated hairstyles and scented bodies. What made the difference was that, as Quoye noticed, "it was not only schoolchildren. People from the town and the outlying coves came onstage as well." (276). The participation was varied: a rough-looking man singing in a "fruity tenor" (276), an old woman pretending she was a hen (the famous "Auntie Sofier's chicken act" 277). And then finally Beety, telling the audience a teasing made-up story about some real-life characters, the town's neighbors; all laughing, nobody offended, the perfect image of one happy community.

Christmas day, obviously, was also celebrated in a special and homely manner. Quoye and his family, whose Christmas in New York had been miserable and disappointing, celebrated their first year in Newfoundland; they

had Christmas dinner with Dennis and Beety in Mrs. Buggit's kitchen, people in and out, the fire bursting hot and stories of old-time teak days and mummings and jannies. Jack skulked around the edges pouring hot

rum punch. Some distance away they heard sporadic and celebratory shotgun fire. (281)

In Killick-Claw, the poor and disadvantaged were not neglected either, particularly at Christmas time. Dennis and Quoye were sent by Beety, who had first prepared a cake and some bread, to attend the aged and half-insane old Nolan, Quoye's second cousin. When they found him at the verge of death due to weakness and starvation, Dennis knew they had to seek help from their women. As it turned out, Beety and Wavey were the ones to organize support groups and places to stay for all the unfortunate (mainly abused women). They would take the best decision as to what to do with old Nolan; "some women" (282), as Quoye commented, and as Dennis answered: "My son, ... you don't know the half of it." (283)

The general image of women Proulx creates in the novel is worth pointing out, indeed. They are strong, caring, benevolent, they are fighters. Both Beety and Wavey, who represent Killick-Claw's female community, fought for the weakest, involved in developing the general social help. With all that, Wavey struggled with her personal problems. She became a widow during her pregnancy and then Herry was born with Down syndrome. Instead of resigning herself and allowing the boy "to be stuffed away in some back room of left to cast and drool about the streets like in old days", she thought that "things could be done" (146). She searched for other disabled minors, convinced their parents they were able to learn if only challenged, wrote petitions asking for the special education class. And in the end, she achieved her aim: "Rescuing lost children, showing them ways to grasp life" (146); an idealist and entirely anti-

naturalistic approach. Moreover, as Rachel Seiffert observes in her essay, some of the novel's female characters are particularly surprising, though one needs to read closely in order to discover their secrets and their special talents: "The small, poignant, painful and funny details that are revealed are always suggestive of much that remains hidden" (521). And Agnis Hamm is not the only one who turns out to possess a complex personality and a wide range of uncommon skills. Beety, apart from her role as a perfect, caring housewife, she is also an outstanding mimic and teller of tall tales; she "also has a capacity to amaze, to surpass expectation" (Seiffert 521). As to Wavey, we find out that she plays the accordion, though, as Seiffert put it, "not much is made of this talent in the novel" (521). However, and I agree with the scholar, "to a devoted reader, who knows the special place which accordions and accordion players occupy in her [Proulx's] work, Wavey's hobby marks her out as a character worth noting" (Seiffert 521).

Nonetheless, in spite of the above examples, it can also be noticed that the worldview of most of this closed society's women is somehow limited and under the influence of some powerful gender prejudices. Mavis Bangs, one of Agnis's employees (and then, surprisingly, her partner), symbolizes such a mentality. She considered that her strong-minded boss had "a boldish air, she grasp on things like a man do" and that it was due to "living in the States. All the women down there are boldish." (179). Mavis was also highly disgusted when she found out that a female American client, intoxicated with alcohol, was seen quarrelling with her husband: "A woman drunk!" (180). To complete the picture of the middle-aged small-town's widow, Mavis was not an enemy of gossiping, especially if the object was the newcomer who mismatched the well-known set

of masculine features. This is how Quoyle's employment in the newspaper was depicted: "Whatever he does. Writes things down. Don't seem too heavy a work for a man." (222).

With regard to the particularities of the Newfoundland people, some other general features can be pointed out. First of all, the climate undoubtedly, influenced this society's character. Agnis, for instance, realized that the cold, together with her miserable personal life, gave her an unusual strength: "that life had hardened her" (226). In addition, it seems that most of Newfoundlanders developed a special connection with their environment; Billy, Yark and Jack all simply sensed the weather changes, they felt the storms coming and could advance their intensity. Moreover, the extraordinary gift Jack Buggit possessed, to mystically feel things without actually seeing them, did not make him unique. Bunny, Quoyle's older daughter, was also, as Agnis put it, "sensitive in a way the rest of us aren't. Tuned in to things we don't get. There's people here like that" (134). Eventually, it is interesting to observe how some of the outport society's characteristics were preferred to be forgotten, while others were cultivated with pride instead. The Killick-Claw men, only when extremely drunk during Nutbeem's farewell party, spoke in the former dialect: "Accents thickened and fell into the old outport patois" (256). On the other hand, the skill many men were not embarrassed to acquire, especially those with a fishery past, was that of knitting. Quoyle could not get used to the image of one of his workmate, a huge coarse-looking man, entertaining himself with a needle: "haul out the stocking, ply the needles for half an hour as rapidly as the aunt. No sooner done with the blue stuff than he was tearing into white wool, some kind of a coat"

(308). As Billy explained to the amused Quoyle, it was “more than knitting. Benny was champion net mender.” (308).

But in *The Shipping News* the image of Newfoundland’s inhabitants is not always put on a pedestal, the Newfoundlanders are not always presented as honorable, likeable and patriotic. Some parts of the novel give the impression of the author constructing specific images only to deconstruct them afterwards, indeed. On the Quoyles’ first nights on the island, they were forced to spend a night in a motel because of a sudden and violent snow storm. Due to the weather, the place was full; it seemed that the only available room was The Deluxe Room, according to the manager, very luxurious and, of course, expensive: “the prime minister slept in it last year when he come by here” (52). But they were cheated, for the room was in a disastrous condition: “the inside doorknob came off in Quoyle’s hand,” “the carpet trodden with mud,” “the sink next to the television set had only one faucet. Where the other had been, a hole. Wires from the television set trailed on the floor. The top of the instrument looked melted, apparently by a campfire.” (52). The motel management took advantage of their clients, just as any motel’s executives on the continent would. The second time Quoyle was fooled, the cheater was a simple fisherman who sold the newcomer a useless boat, as if to remind the reader that this humble social class, generally presented in a favorable light, was not free from faults either; the first hint of the author’s attempt to destroy the outport myth.

The Newfoundlanders’ “faults,” to say it gently, were especially emphasized and brought to everyone’s attention in the local newspaper, *Gummy Bird*. As a matter of fact, the paper had its established pages which covered crime and sexual abuse on the island. Nutbeem, who was in charge of

the latter, had plenty of work: "We run two or three S.A. stories every week, one big on the front page, the others inside." (68). Sometimes there were more of them, other times less, but they were always there. The day Nutbeem collected more than ever, he knew his boss would be happy, for the readers (just as much sensational news-hungry as any other people on the planet) sought these topics with anxiety; he had

the usual yaffle of disgusting old dads having it on with their kiddies, one more priest feeling up the choirboys, a nice neighborly uncle over in Stribbins Cove who gives the girls rides to Sunday School and buys them sweets if they pull down their knickers for him. (155)

But, that day, Nutbeem also had an unusual story, which, as he put it, "gives you a glimpse into the darker side of the Newfoundland character" (155):

This lad was a bouncer at a bar down in Misky Bay, tried to throw out some drunk. But the drunk went to his truck, got a tomcod from the ice chest in the back, into the bar again, overpowered the bouncer, ripped his trousers stem to stern and sexually assaulted him with the tomcod. (155)

Billy Pretty, who was covering the page on crimes, could not complain about not having enough real-life material either. The example of a mother of three children who attacked her grandmother with a metal towel rack and then set fire to the house, was one of the most signifying stories; as if these apparently nice

and pacific people turned into beasts in the intimacy of their homes. The end of this violent young woman's story is, as it is often the case in Proulx's narrative, ironic: "in the kitchen, the fire volunteers finds a treasure trove. In a bucket under the sink is three hundred dollars worth of religious jewelry shoplifted from Woolworth's over the past year. Each says the other done it." (156).

It is interesting to point out that the Newfoundlanders themselves, though receiving badly criticism from the outsiders (according to Nutbeem, he would remember Newfoundland for many things, but most of all for "the inventive violence" 247 of its inhabitants), had few difficulties to label negatively other groups, even their neighbors. That was the case of Quoyle's ancestors; as the newcomer found out, the place where his family used to live, Omaloor Bay, was named after the image they supposedly projected: "An omaloor – big, stun, clumsy, witless, simpleminded type of fellow." (58). Moreover, the Quoyles were also believed to be pirates: "They were wrackers they say, come to Gaze Island centuries ago and made it their evil lair. Pirate men and women that lured ships onto the rocks." (171). Very few Newfoundlanders were able to recognize, as Billy Pretty did, that the Quoyles were not the only ones to take advantage of the rocky sea:

Truth be told ... there was many, many people here depended on shipwracks to improve their lots. Save what lives they could and then strip the vessel bare. ... There's many houses here still has treasures that come off wracked ships. And the pirates always come up from the Caribbean water to Newfoundland fro their crews. A place of natural pirates and wrackers. (172)

With all that, but especially given the region's lack of professional perspectives and, the aforementioned extremely difficult climatic conditions, apart from the "patriots" enjoying their native land and its community, there were also many of those who wished to abandon these coastal towns forever. Some, like Agnis's employee Down, seemed desperate to emigrate, willing to work in any field whatsoever if it only meant moving. Others, like the Burkes, after years of spending the harsh Newfoundland winters in Florida, decided to move for good to the place where "they have got two orange trees and a palm right in front of the yard" ready to "picks the oranges right off" (228). Finally, there were people like Tert Card, who truly hated the Newfoundland climate and, in general, his native environment. At first, he followed "the general emptying in the late fall;" as Billy put it: "Away they all go to the south" (248). Once Tert confessed to Quoyle that after the first freezing months of winter, deriving in fatal traffic statistics, "in February only one thing keeps you going – the air flight ticket to Florida on your dresser" (244). And then, finally,

if you make it to March, boy, you'll make it to heaven. You get on the plain in Misky Bay, there's so much ice on the wings and the wind from hell you doubt the plane can make it, but it does, and when it glides down and lands, when they throws open the door, mu son, I want to tell you the smell of hot summer and suntan oil and exhaust fumes make you cry with pleasure. (244)

In the end, Card managed to abandon Killick-Claw. He was offered a job in St. John's, closely related to the oil business, as he always thought that this would be his chance for a better future. With time, he would probably be promoted and go to Texas ("Though it's Florida I loves" 274). The last impression of this character that the reader receives is that of an unpleasant character, ungrateful towards his native land and a chauvinist with women, even the closest: "Wife! She's not going down there. She's staying right here, right at home. Stay home where she belongs. ... A woman stays at home." (274).

Finally, it is worth underlining that a different character, Nutbeem, not a native Newfoundlander, dreamt of leaving Newfoundland too. But after his boat was completely destroyed during a wild farewell party, it seemed that he was doomed to stay; as if Newfoundland did not want to lose him. Nevertheless, in the end he decides to fly to Brazil, a warm paradise, with the water "lovely swimming-pool green" and "balmy breezes" (268). The thought of marvelous exotic meals, already creating wonderful recipes in his head, was only adding to his excitement. Ironically, what comes to the reader's mind with relation to this fantasy is the case of Partidge, another amateur chef and enthusiast of exotic cuisine. When he and his wife moved from New York to Los Angeles, they were also convinced that they were going to live in paradise. But with the riots and bullets flying over their heads, Partridge realized it was rather the hell their new home resembled, and that, anyway, with the turmoil all over the continent, "There's no place you can go no more without getting shot or burned or beat." (291). No place but... Newfoundland?

In her Newfoundland novel *Annie Proulx*, on the one hand, follows the method of playing with stereotypes, with the "typical" representations of the

region's inhabitants, constructing and deconstructing such representations, the method she used in her New England and the Wyoming writings as well. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the writer herself seems not to be completely free from the spell of the area's myths. She does not doubt to unveil the Newfoundlanders' supposed flaws, even deviations, but my impression is that she keeps holding dear the constructions implanted by most of the former literary works. As to the characters' realistic/naturalistic features, they will be thoroughly examined in the following chapter.

2.4. Naturalism in *The Shipping News*

The analysis of the novel reveals some evident similarities between Annie Proulx's technique and most of the principal characteristics of naturalism. To a certain extent, the settings, already examined in one of the previous subchapters, are described in a realistic and a detailed manner, although, undoubtedly, idealized and stereotypical depictions can also be found. The action of *The Shipping News* takes place at a historically crucial moment for the whole society of Killick–Claw. Some of the characters are, again, idealized and unrealistic, but the descriptions of many others, the protagonist among them, correspond to their naturalistic models. Also, such topics as human senses and natural urges are constantly present in the text; precisely, characters dominated by their obsessive and uncontrollable sexuality, incidents of rapes, sexual abuse or incest abound. The sensational tone of the novel is undeniable.

It is important, I believe, to begin the topic concerned with the realistic dimension of the novel commenting upon the essay by Tracy Whalen

“‘Camping’ with Annie Proulx: *The Shipping News* and Tourist Desire”. The scholar, Newfoundlander herself, indicates that “Newfoundlanders’ reading of *The Shipping News* have been primarily of the corrective sort, pointing to the limited status of Annie Proulx’s vision or offering alternative representations of Newfoundland” (51). Texts emerged questioning the validity of the American author’s use of Newfoundland as the setting for the novel, workshops in edutourism, “to dispel myths and combat stereotypical depictions of the island and its residents” (51) were organized. Stuart Pierson, Newfoundland historian, criticized inaccurate representations of the dictionary-dependent use of outport dialect. As Whalen points out, “these critical responses, whether they call for geographical, cultural, or linguistic change, speak of a search for the truth, a desire for narrative felicity with actual experience or real culture in Newfoundland” (52). Nevertheless, what the scholar argues in her essay is “for a playful reading of *The Shipping News*, for a reexamination of the novel through the lens of what Susan Sontag defines as ‘Camp’” (53), through a post-tourism lens. In short, “Camp refers to a disengaged sensibility that reveals in artifice, stylization, irony, playfulness, and exaggeration rather than content” (57). The novel by Proulx, according to Whalen, corresponds with such features, it “celebrates the extraordinary” (59). Moreover, apart from her use of grotesque, ridiculous characters and bizarre narrative style, its romantic attitude has to be highlighted. Proulx’s Newfoundland seems to be the new frontier, the frontier longed for by many after its supposed disappearance in the American West, a magical and romanticized land.

Undoubtedly, Whalen’s approach should be taken into account when examining the novel’s settings and characters, both the stereotyped and the

unconventional ones. But also, at the same time, one cannot overlook what I believe are elements placing *The Shipping News*, if not “in,” than “around” the naturalistic tradition.

With reference to the historical context, Quoye’s arrival to Newfoundland coincides with a difficult time for its inhabitants, especially for those from the coastal towns and outports. As already mentioned, it seems that the society the newcomer encounters is sharply divided; there are the defenders of the good old Newfoundland and the promoters of its new and modern version. The conflict between them is inevitable, for their aims are incompatible; the local fishery cannot coexist with the international interests for fishing rights, or the massive oil extraction; the self-sufficient traditionalists and the commuters, somebody else’s employees were unable to understand each other. As Jack Buggit put it:

There’s two ways of living here now. There’s the old way, look out for your family, die where you were born, fish, cut your wood, keep a garden, make do with what you got. Then there’s the new way. Work out, have a job, somebody tell you what to do, commute, your brother’s in South Africa, your mother’s in Regina ... Leave home. Go off to look for work. (286)

Indeed, socially, politically and economically, the last decades of the twentieth century were a difficult and complex time for the Newfoundland society, a real breakthrough, worthy of being described by a naturalist. The concept of geographical determinism needs to be taken into account here: the

unemployment, the migration, the hopelessness, the general sensation of loss, of losing one's roots. The novel's background, the atmosphere, emanates with disheartenment and frustration.

As to the characters, such figures as Jack, Billy or the harbormaster are probably too archetypal to be properly analyzed from the naturalistic point of view, though, at the same time, their attachment to the place where they were born and their way of living indicate what perfect products of the environment they were. The harbormaster, Diddy, needed to stay close to the sea, his occupation necessarily related to the shipping business. And the two friends, Jack and Billy, although their work was no longer their passion, could not live without fishing. As a matter of fact, Jack's rhythm of life was circular; it was clearly adjusted to the fishing and the seal hunting seasons. Furthermore, their intimate knowledge of the inshore waters and all the dangerous, invisible rocks, as well as their special instinct, an extraordinary ability to "feel" the sea and to "feel" the weather changes, only confirmed their perfect adjustment to the milieu.

On the other hand, Quoye is presented as a completely unadjusted character, at least at first, to both of his living places. The first image of the protagonist is that of a disagreeable and unsuccessful person. His physical aspect resulting highly unpleasant; he was too big, even in his childhood "a head taller than any child around him" (2). With years, it was only getting worse:

A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighted eighty pounds. Ay sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair ruched back. Features as bunched as

kissed fingerprints. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting the lower face. (2)

And it was not only his aspect, for after eating “prodigiously,” the way he was eating always, his gut was “roaring with gas and cramp” (1). His brother Dick, their parents’ favorite, “pretended to throw up when Quoyle came into a room, hissed ‘Lardass, Snoface, Ugly Pig, Warthog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, Fart-tub, Greasebag’” (2).

These first years of his childhood were truly difficult for Quoyle; he felt alienated, as if he did not belong, as if “some anomalous gene had fired up at the moment of his begetting as a single spark sometimes leaps from banked coals, had given him a giant’s chin.” (2). As a teenager, he even cherished the thought that there had been a mistake and that his real family was not the one he lived with; but then he found some old photographs with his father’s relatives on them and “recognized himself in their hair, their legs, their arms” (2). The power of heredity established as crucial from the beginning.

Apart from his “failed” aspect, Quoyle was a constant failure in practically everything his father expected him to learn; in everything he himself tried to do. It seemed impossible to teach him to swim: “Again and again the father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes and surf.” (2). With time, “the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells – failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning, failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure.” (2). This last phrase, once again, emphasizes the particular importance of heredity in the novel.

In spite of this, somehow, Quoye survived. Using some very basic adaptation skills, “hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence” and he “stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing” (1). That was Quoye’s life in New York, unable to learn, unable to succeed, nor at the university (“he took courses he couldn’t understand” 3), neither in his first newspaper job. His debut as a reporter was disastrous; as his friend Partridge, his only friend by then, put it: “It’s like reading cement” (7). Then, though trying really hard, he still seemed “another sample of the semi-illiterates who practiced journalism nowadays” (8), as one of his workmates described it. For the whole time working in the *Mockingburg Record* Quoye did not manage to overcome his limitations: “After six months of copy desk fixes Quoye didn’t recognize news, had no aptitude for detail. He was afraid of all but twelve of fifteen verbs.” (8).

Finally, the protagonist turned out to be a failure in love, his idealistic idea of romance, of the pure and elevated feeling clashed against his wife’s indifference and cruelty. And what is worse, he was unable to protect his children... from their own mother; they were not sexually abused by a pedophile film producer thanks to him, but to the Police’s quick reaction.

Once in Newfoundland, the situation changed; a slow but effective process of adaptation began. Obviously at first, Quoye felt just as unadapted as he did earlier in Mockingburg. He did not understand the local ways, the rules of courtesy, of daily coexistence. His car, a station wagon (instead of a pickup or a truck), only highlighted his distinctiveness, the fact remaining that he was an unpractical outsider. He did not have a boat and he did not want one; he grew

up terribly afraid of water, unable to swim. Nevertheless, in spite of what at first seemed an even more difficult task than that which he faced in New York, Quoye managed to adapt well in the island. He willingly accepted the new community rules, for he had always been a helper. He overcame his fears, especially those related to the sea. His huge body did not provoke mockery anymore; as a matter of fact, his fat saved him from drowning when his boat capsized. And his “prodigious” eating did not disgust the locals; they gladly noticed his passion for their Newfoundland meals. It was as if he finally found his original environment, the milieu he was always supposed to have been born into. As if he finally found himself in the land of his ancestors.

The role of heredity in Quoye’s adaptation, in this recovery of his identity, cannot be overlooked. In Newfoundland the protagonist found his real roots, he found himself in his relatives’ faces. On the one hand, he was ashamed of the abhorrent stories the Quoye family was known for, he “hated the thought of an incestuous, fit-prone, seal-killing child for a grandfather” (25) and the rest of the cruel, violent clan, and he was disgusted by the thought that his ancestors might have been pirates. He reluctantly accepted that the bay his family house stood on was named after the Quoyes, remembered as: “Loonies. They was wild and inbred, half-wits and murderers. Half of them low-minded” (162). On the other hand, though, he eventually understood his and his daughters’ looks. First, when the aunt met the children and asserted: “The girls look a lot like Feeny and Fanny used to, my younger sisters” (26) and then, already on the island, the moment Quoye saw the old cousin Nolan, “saw what he had sprung from” (264):

Even in the dim light, even in the ruin of cadaverous age, Quoyle saw resemblance. The aunt's unruly hair; his father's lipless mouth; their common family eyes sunk under brows as coarse as horsehair; his brother's stance. And for Quoyle, a view of his monstrous chin, here a somewhat smaller bony shelf choked with white bristle. (264)

With reference to the importance of heredity, Wavey's son's case is also interesting. The readers know little about him; they know Herry was born with Down syndrome, they know about his father's lustful life and his sudden, shocking, for the pregnant Wavey, death. The boy's disgrace could be interpreted as a certain punishment for his father's sins, as a reminder of the family's shame. On the other hand, Herry inherited the only good feature his libertine father might have passed on – his beauty: “a pretty boy, they said, with his father's beauty only a little distorted” (192).

As far as heredity is concerned, the case of the Buggit family and their irresistible attraction to the water should be pointed out too. As mentioned before, it was as if the sea were the sense of their life, as if they inherited this biological need to stay close to it. As if, being Jack's children, it were an unavoidable obsession. On the other hand, an interpretation related to all men's destiny, which Jack tried to fight in vain, is also worth highlighting. Jack Buggit's four children were determined to work on the water, and his oldest son's drowning was a necessary and natural death.

When analyzing most of the characters of *The Shipping News*, it can be noticed that some are examples of survivors, perfectly adapted to their environment, while others fail in their struggle of everyday life. Nevertheless,

given the author's mastery of irony, it is sometimes the case that the happy and the tragic ends unexpectedly switch places, leaving the readers astounded.

Ed Punch, the owner of the *Mockingburg Record*, is presented as a man who knows his job, not only as a professional of the local press, but also as a shrewd employer. Punch realized he could use the new reporter, pay him a ridiculously low salary, fire and employ again whenever he needed, simply because, thanks to his special instinct, "he smelled submission in Quoye, guessed he was butter of fair spreading consistency" (5). In addition, although when hiring the protagonist back it seemed he was doing him a special favor, "the truth was Punch had noticed that Quoye, who spoke little himself, inspired talkers" (9). Ed Punch was a strong and a triumphant character, indeed, and so his death at the hand of a madman who attacked the editorial offices with a machine gun, can only be explained by the mysterious forces of fatalism.

Another secondary character, Quoye's only American friend Partridge, is an interesting case of, again, Proulx's masterly irony. He is described as an incurable optimist who "was sure of his own good fortune" and who "saw beyond the present" (4). After some years living in Mockingburg, Partridge decided to follow his wife to California, the place where she would develop her professional career as a truck driver; he did not hesitate to move, for, as he idealistically believed, "everything that counts is for love" (10). In addition, they were moving to one of the most paradisiacal of the regions... The outcome of their story is paradoxical, indeed, with the violent riots overrunning the streets of Los Angeles, Partridge's love almost killed by a stray bullet and his optimism superseded by incredulity and desperation.

As already mentioned, the reason Quoyale and his two daughters settled on the island was to have “a chance to start all over again” (27). Quoyale was truly depressed after his wife’s death and after everything she had maliciously done before that, and Agnis knew what could help, what could change his life: a fresh start; “you can be anything you want with a fresh start” (27). She knew it, because that was what she did herself, trying to forget about what happened to her in childhood and trying to conceal her homosexual condition in adulthood. Aunt Agnis was a survivor. Raped by her brother when only a young girl, she somehow did not sink into despair, but fought, fought and managed to have a satisfactory and prosperous existence. She tried to pass onto her nephew some of the knowledge gained:

We face up to awful things because we can’t go around them, or forget them. The sooner you get it over with, the sooner you say ‘Yes, it happened, and there’s nothing I can do about it,’ the sooner you can get on with your own life. ... you’ve *got* to get over it. What we have to get over, somehow we do. Even the worst things. (72)

She hoped Newfoundland would harden Quoyale, just as it hardened her. She could not have suspected that he would adjust so well, that, instead of running away from the land of his cruel and violent ancestors, he would stay and, somehow, manage to adapt to the local community. It is worth underlining that Agnis herself, reasonable in her daily decision as she was, could not avoid giving full rein to her necessity for revenge. It seemed a natural need, an unstoppable force that obliged her to toss her brother’s ashes into their Quoyale

Point outhouse; the satisfaction she felt every time she urinated or defecated on them provided certain relief for her terrible childhood memories.

With reference to the “wild” Quoyles, in the past “they was a savage pack” (139). As Skipper Alfred remembered: “In the olden days they say Quoyles nailed a man to a tree by ‘is ears, cut off ‘is nose for the scent of blood to draw the nippers and flies that devoured ‘im alive.” (139). Savage, violent people who followed their most basic instincts, who lived together, as a pack of wild animals, who procreated together and who did not belong to any other social group except their own; the Quoyles from *The Shipping News* resembled the equally wild Stones from Proulx’s “Stone City,” indeed. As if in any society the presence of such “natural” people were necessary; the symbol of what humans might become when basic community rules are not followed. Now, apart from Quoyle, aunt Agnis’s cousin Nolan was the only one still alive, an old, half-insane man who, in the end, needed from the disdained society so as not to starve in his filthy shack.

In the novel, there are some other characters who, instead of using their mind, acted on impulse. The case of the Melvilles demonstrates the strength of jealousy, the mortal rage of a woman hurt by a disloyal husband. What the owner of Hitler’s boat did, the readers presume, was to kill Mr. Melville and dismember his body; the head was found in a suitcase floating in the sea, and the rest on the seashore, five pieces of the body inserted in a suit. Bayonet Melville was “divided up like a pie” (217); a macabre and extremely sensationalistic story, one of many in the novel.

But probably the most naturalistic characters of *The Shipping News* would be the late spouses of Quoyle and Wavey, Petal and Herold, both

completely dominated by their sexual urges. Petal, “thin, moist, hot” (12), gave Quoyle “a month of fiery happiness. Then six kinked years of suffering” (13). She is described as

crosshatched with longings ... In another time, another sex, she would have been a Genghis Khan. When she needed burning cities, the stumbling babble of captives ... she had only petty triumphs of sexual encounter.

... at night, became a woman who could not be held back from strangers' rooms or mop cupboards. She went anywhere with unknown men. Flew tonighclubs in distant cities. Made a pornographic video while wearing a mask from a potato chip bag. (13-14)

It seems that the only feature of her husband Petal actually appreciated was his penis, “the biggest one yet” (13); her misfortune was the impossibility to enjoy it without the rest of the body: “She could not bear his hot back, the bulk of him in the bed. The part of Quoyle that was wonderful was, unfortunately, attached to the rest of him.” (14). Quoyle’s misfortune was being unable to stop loving her; even after the night she brought a stranger home and had sex on the hide-a-bed in their living room. The interesting characteristic of Petal was that she lacked maternal instinct. Her only achievement was to actually stay pregnant and give birth to two healthy daughters, Bunny and Sunshine, although “through her pregnancy with Sunshine ..., fumed until the alien left her body” (14). Once the girls were born, she left them with a lazy baby-sitter and Quoyle, who desperately tried to take care of them while working and cleaning their filthy

home. And just a day before her and her lover's death in a car accident, she sold her children to a pedophile, caught with his video camera ready to record and the girls undressed. Petal simply "didn't feel like being a mama to anybody" (21). She was created to conquest, not to nourish, as if she truly was born into the female sex by mistake.

As to Herold Prowse, who never actually appears in the novel in person, for he had been lost at sea years before Quoye's arrival, he was "the tomcat type of feller" (304). Wavey's uncle Yark recalls that Herold "sprinkled his bastards up and down the coast the coast from St. John's to Go Around" and then "rubbed her [Wavey's] nose in it" (304). The widow tried to keep her son's father's memory pure, but in the end she confessed to Quoye that Herold "was a womanizer. He treated me body like a trough. Come and swill and slobber in me after them. I felt like he was casting vomit in me when he come to his climax." (307-308).

The theme of sex, not as a beautiful link between a loving couple, but in all its perverted varieties, is recurrent in Proulx's novel. According to Agnis's words about the Quoye family, incest and an extremely early sexual initiation were not surprising among the locals. Regarding Quoye's doubts as to his grandfather's age the moment of his death, the aunt said:

Ah, you don't know Newfoundlanders. For all he was twelve, he was your father's father. But not mine. My mother – your grandmother –that was Sian's sister Addy, and after Sian drowned she took up with Turvey, the other brother. Then when *he* drowned, she married Cokey Hamm, that was my father. (25)

Rape seemed to be a part of the everyday life in the Quoyles family as well – Agnis was probably not the only girl raped by her brother in childhood. Finally, the last living cousin, the last representative of the old Newfoundland Quoyles clan, was Nolan. The reputation this member of the Quoyles possessed in the town was, indeed, more taboo-breaking than any other: “They say there’s a smell that comes off him like rot and cold clay. They say he slept with his wife when she was dead and you smell the desecration coming off him.” (162).

But the Quoyles, as aforementioned, were not the only Newfoundlanders whose life was sensationalized, especially with reference to their sexuality. Macabre deaths, such as those of Mr. Melville, that of Petal in the car accident, Agnis’s father years back, his spine crushed by a barrel, dying slowly, or the miserable Home boys, tortured and starved to death by their Canadian “owners,” seem somehow less horrible when compared to the misery of the numerous children sexually abused daily in Newfoundland. Priests abusing the orphans, doctors assaulting their female patients, a choirmaster molesting more than a hundred boys... and then some more “intimate,” “domestic” cases:

‘here in Killick-Claw a loving dad is charged with sexually assaulting two of his sons and his teenage daughter in innumerable incidents between 1962 and the present. Buggery, indecent assault and sexual intercourse. Here’s another family lover, big strapping thirty-five-year-old fisherman spends his hours ashore teaching his little four-year-old daughter to perform oral sex and masturbate him’. (218)

Another recurrent theme in the novel, though treated rather incidentally, is the one of eating, and therefore, intimately related to the importance of the human senses. Interestingly, the action of cooking and eating is presented from two angles, both natural (somehow too literal and disgusting), and the poetic and attractive one. Quoye and the old Nolan are examples of the creatures which eat led by their instinct, eat because they are hungry and need to fill their stomach in order to survive. Quoye, since early childhood and wherever he went to, “ate profigiously” (1), the food was what he constantly thought about, it was the remedy for all his ills. Oddly enough, in the end, his passion for the Newfoundland meals somehow united him with the region and with his new community. As to the old cousin Nolan, the day Quoye and Dennis visited him at Christmas time, instead of a human creature, they saw “a skeleton [that] trembled before them” (282). Nolan’s shack is described naturalistically: “The stink was gagging. The old man too weak or befuddled to get to the outhouse” (282), and so is his manner of devouring the food they gave him: “He [Dennis] drew the bread out of the carrier bag. The sweet, homely perfume of bread. The skeleton was upon it, crushing the loaf into his mouth, a muffled howling coming out of the twitching crust.” (282). The smells play an important role in this picture, indeed.

As to the almost poetic treatment of food, at least two characters will have to be highlighted: Partridge and Nutbeem. The first one made the protagonist enjoy his miserable life for the very first time, enjoy their afternoon meetings, chatting, always cooking together and then savoring; new tastes and new smells every time they met. Quoye first impression: Partridge’s homemade

bread was tasty, “was good, made without yeast, risen on its own fermenting flesh and baked in Partridge’s outdoor oven. Partridge’s yard smelled of burnt cornmeal, grass clippings, bread steam.” (3). Nutbeem, on the other hand, is presented as the exotic cuisine enthusiast, but only in theory; he never actually cooks. When planning his removal to Brazil, he reveals his surprising knowledge of the local specialties in a very picturesque manner, which makes Quoye’s mouth watering:

There’s this very simple local sauce ... just squeeze a cup of lime juice, put in a good pinch of salt and let it stand for a few weeks, then you strain it and put it in a corked bottle and use it. It smells rather strange but has a wonderful taste. ... And Cuban Green Sauce – lime and garlic and watercress and Tabasco and sour cream and lobster coral. And I make a curry, a conch curry, simmered in coconut milk and served with slivers sailfish that is, is I do say so, heaven on a place. (269)

But what made Billy call Nutbeema significant name of “a poet with the food” (269), was his romantic-naturalistic description of “the bloody stone crabs” (269):

Stone crabs, the glorious imperial yellow, scarlet and ebony exaltations of all the crabs of all the seven seas, the epicure’s hour of glory, the Moment of Truth at the table. I like them with drawn butter to which I add a dash of the sour lime sauce and a few drops of walnut pickle liquor, maybe a fleck of garlic. (269)

As far as the naturalistic features of *The Shipping News* are concerned, some other elements should eventually be mentioned. The theme of the primitive force of nature, impossible to bridle, is touched upon several times in the novel. The harbormaster, who had been through innumerable sea storms, describes them as something that “never leaves you. You never hear the wind after that without you remember that banshee moan, remember the watery mountains, crests torn into foam” (83). And the impression of the insignificance of human beings in light of such a natural strength:

A chemical tanker lost its bridge and the captain went with it. A cargo ship loaded with iron ore went down and all the crew with it. A Bulgarian stern trawler broke in half, all hands lost. Ships in harbor dragged their anchors and slammed into each other. A bad place. There was no safe place. (84)

A similar phenomenon, the coast-destroying and ship-breaking storm, is depicted at the end of the novel; it starts during aunt Agnis’s welcome party and makes all the guests leave early and shelter safely in their homes. The narrator’s reflection as to the bellowing wind’s global relations is significant, for this is the way for readers to realize that Newfoundland is not the only place on earth dominated by boisterous forces of nature; men cannot stand against nature anywhere, they had always lost and they will always lose against it:

A wind related to the Blue Norther, the frigid Blaast and the Landlash. A cousin to the Bull's-eye squall that started in a small cloud with a ruddy center, mother-in-law to the Vinds-gnyr of the Norse sagas, the three-day Nor'easters of maritime New England. An uncle wind to the Alaskan Williwaw and Ireland's wild Doinionn. Stepsister to the Koshava that assaults the Yugoslavian plains with Russian snow, the Steppenwind, and the violent Buran from the great open steppes of central Asia ... This nameless wind scraping the Rock with an edge like steel. (318)

Finally, it is important to point out the author's detailed depictions of everything related to boats and ships. Sometimes, the terms used in order to reflect the artisanal ways of boat building are, some might consider, excessively specialized; Proulx meticulously describes the process of Yark's constructions, Nutbeem's passion for building his own sailboat or Billy's and Jack's love for all related to boats and ships. And for the majority of these descriptions highly technical vocabulary is employed. On one hand, making use of such a literary device is probably a consequence of the author's earlier non-fiction works. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it demonstrates her commitment to the writings appropriate for the realism/naturalism movements.

To conclude the present chapter, *The Shipping News* is a novel which incorporates both truthful, realistic or even naturalistic elements proper for the narrative first instituted by the French novelist Émile Zola, and the rather idealized descriptions of landscape, characters and the rural life in general, derived from the pastoral tradition. The landscape, its untamed and primitive beauty, is clearly cherished by the author; it seems as if she were under spell of

the Newfoundland nature. On the other hand, the region's ferocious and unpredictable climate, as well as the land and the sea's dangers and inhospitality are reflected in many of the novel's sober descriptions. Killick-Claw is an idealized place, its image built on the mythic picture of the "typical" Newfoundland outport villages, rather than on a solid foundation of scientific, unemotional observation. The inhabitants of such a place, in its majority, are represented as archetypal; in Quoy's nearest surroundings old and noble fishermen abound, his neighbors are helpful and caring, the whole community united and respectful. Notwithstanding, when taking a closer look, many of these Newfoundlanders prove surprising: apparently simple female characters turn out to hold dark secrets or to possess some unexpected talents; kind and peaceful men are discovered as perverts, sex abusers or adulterers, incapable of dealing with their natural urges; a few yards from the watchful society lives a half-starved man, lying in his own excrements. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice how most of the region's residents adapted to their milieu. Many of deaths, ugliness and the body's natural needs and processes' depictions are reflected in a naturalistic manner; the general atmosphere of sensationalism is easily detected. Nevertheless, such incidents as Jack Buggit's sudden "resurrection" puzzle the reader and bring the novel close to the magical realism genre. With all that, the socio-political and economic background of *The Shipping News* cannot be overlooked; Proulx masterly reflects the difficulties the Newfoundland coastal villages have been forced to deal with over the last decades, she portrays some crucial moments in this society's fight for survival, indeed. Eventually, the question of the novel's ending (happy ending?) should

be considered. As the writer confessed in “Documentary: Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*:

I wrote an earlier novel called *Postcards* which was described uniformly and vigorously as dark, dark as the kiss of death, nobody’s ever going to read anything as dark. And I got very tired of hearing that, and I said, “oh, my God; I’m going to write a happy one, you want a happy ending, I’ll give them a happy ending.” ... And in the end Quoye achieves a happiness, but it’s a rather poor happiness, if you stop and think about it; it’s the absence of pain, and so what looks like a happy ending in nothing more than the absence of pain. (4)

Certainly, the ending, though not strictly proper for the naturalistic narrative, cannot be objectively considered “happy,” though, indeed, satisfying for such a mediocre protagonist as Quoye.

The Shipping News’ settings, Newfoundland, though visited by Proulx several times, was not her place of residence; she was only a guest there (a tourist?). Is this the reason her novel combines both features appropriate for naturalism and those resulting from the influence of its artificial and idealistic image, the island’s mythology consolidated in numerous Newfoundland (and foreign) works over the last two centuries? The difficulty in answering such a question is obvious. What I believe needs to be underlined is the difference between this novel and Annie Proulx’s New England short stories, analyzed previously, and her Wyoming texts, examined in the next chapter – the key seems to be that she actually knew the settings of these two American regions

first hand as a long-term resident. In my view, Proulx's Newfoundland seems to be grounded in her knowledge of texts by others, in literary, historical, geographical, tourist and popular representations of this place. With all that, her representation is different, indeed; her frequent constructions and the following deconstructions, and her realistic/naturalistic method make *The Shipping News* an interesting and an unconventional example of the literary regionalism.

CHAPTER IV: THE AMERICAN WEST

Images of the American West and western Americans, Indian and white, are easy to conjure up; they come to us through the simplifications of pop culture but also in not-necessarily-pop art, literature and history.

Martha Viehmann

The important distinction is whether the West is created and shaped primarily by the forces of American history both from within the region and from without, or whether the history of the West is what shaped the history of the United States.

Clyde A. Milner II

The simple fact is that the West is no longer unknown, no longer protected by remoteness or any sort of difficult access: it is simply another region where the exploding human populations wants to move, and where the insatiable global economy finds whatever material it needs. The bloom is long gone; the specialness and remoteness are long gone.

Thomas J. Lyon

1. Regional Identity of the American West

It is not an easy task to define the exact geographic location of the area known as the American West. Nicolas S. Witschi in "Imagining the West" says: "Its outlines are roughly demarcated in the east by the line of aridity indicated by the 98th meridian and in the west by the Pacific Ocean, while its northern and southern reaches are defined by the nation's borders with Canada and Mexico" (4). Nonetheless, the scholar points out that the exact outer boundaries of the American West have long been debated and contested, and so nowadays this place is often described as a dynamic region of ever-shifting demographic, geographic, and cultural indicators (4). Mockingly, Witschi adds most people

would recognize the West when looking at a map of the United States pointing “those portions generally found on the left side” (4).

“Aridity, and aridity alone, makes the various Wests one” (8) wrote Wallace Stegner in his *The American West as Living Space*. The idea of aridity as the main and unifying feature of the American West has been followed by numerous scholars; it was indicated by Rick Bass, too, in “Foreword: The West as Generator of Spirit.” There is an interesting remark this scholar makes: in spite of the fact that these lands had been moisture-limited for thousands of years, right from the beginning “a national folly would take hold ... American and Americans were perceived as a chosen nation, and it was assumed that the religiosity of their fervor, and the fervor of their religiosity, would trump geology and geography” (iii). According to Bass, other necessary elements to define the West are “the sheer and basic spaciousness and newness of the region,” apart from “a quality of spirit” (iv), the feature which will be further commented down below.

Eventually, Clyde A. Milner II argues that the location of the American West, just like its residents, has changed over time: “One generation’s West became another generation’s Midwest or Upper South” (1). As explained by Milner, the seventh president of the United States, Andrew Jackson, called himself a “westerner,” given his Tennessee residence; by the late decades of the twentieth century the western identity had to be related to cowboys of the open range. The president who then fit the image was Ronald Reagan, previously a governor of California, which had not even been part of the United States during Jackson’s lifetime. But, Milner insists, the story of change as a result of the nation’s expansion westward apart, there is the story formed

around the idea of place – “a West firmly located beyond the Mississippi River ... a terrain containing many discrete locations, separate voices, and diverse ideas” (2). The West’s story has many beginnings (the native people’s origin tales versus the European tales of exploration); the West has no fixed geographic or cultural unity, no fixed set of external boundaries:

The *eastern* boundary takes from beyond the Mississippi River where the aridity of the Great Plains is clearly established, such as along the ninety-eight meridian, which roughly coincides with the isohyetal line of less than twenty inches annual rainfall. The *western* boundary extends beyond the coast of the Pacific Ocean to the Aleutian Islands of Alaska and to the chain of islands, atolls, and reefs that make up the state of Hawai`i. (Milner II 2)

The scholar concludes saying that the West is a complex and puzzling place, and that “the clearest boundaries may be those delineated by the people within the region” (2). Milner agrees with the historian Martin Ridge that the residents think of themselves as being westerners, because they feel the psychological fault line that separate regions (2). And so do the travelers: “Somewhere beyond the Mississippi, the horizon is more distant, the land more open, the sky much larger. Well before they reach the Rocky Mountains, they know they have reached West” (Milner II 2).

It is also pivotal to underline the fact that the West was not only reachable by crossing the plains, like the Anglo-European settlers did, in pursuit of a promised land. As Witschi observes, “equally compelling are the patterns of

movement prompted by the idea of Gold Mountain, the legendary icon that drew travelers from China to the shores of California and British Columbia and propelled them not westward but eastward across the continent” (5). Furthermore, “the promise of El Norte has for several centuries drawn people on a northbound trajectory, starting with the Spanish conquistadors who ranged from Mexico as far as central Kansas in search of Quivira” (Witschi 5). Finally, as for the Native Americans and their settlement pattern, “the movement was not and is not a matter of immigration so much as fundamentally one of maintaining a rich tradition of local habitation” (Witschi 5). “Did either group know that they were *in* the West?,” Milner asks; and then he answers: “Of course not” (2).

Another noteworthy fact which contradicts the popular impression of the American West is that, as Witschi points out, 86 percent of its population could be found in the region’s urban centers. And then the critic adds:

To be sure, vast stretches of land do remain sparsely populated in the extreme, giving the overall region a population density that is still lower than, for example, that of the Northeast. But the growth of western urban culture betokens a multiplicity that is not easily understood, or explained away, by a critical or historical focus on a single direction of travel or a single idea about a place. (5)

With all these geographic, historic and social complexities, the American West has often been called more an idea than an actual place or, to put it another way, a concept, even a myth, that became a place. In Amaia

Ibarraran's words, "The history of the American West is the history of the construction and exportation of an idea, as well as of its assimilation and perpetuation through time and location" (xv). This undoubtedly powerful idea developed over centuries in books, movies and paintings; this idea "shimmers with abstractions such as frontier, opportunity, honor, individualism, and justice, and it is often ... recognized by visual cues" (Witschi 4), cues generally related to cowboy items. In addition to such abstract features, scholars talk about "spirit" or "essence" of the West, "a quality of spirit that existed not only in the hearts of the immigrants, but in the land itself" (Bass iv). This quality, Bass asserts, "this electrical current coming from the land, the electrical current coming from the humans ... upon the land – and then, most ineffable, the wavering electrical current or braid that exists between those humans and the land" (v) cannot be seen, nor proven. But, according to Bass, it can be felt through art, and particularly, by literature, which "surely comes closest to traversing these invisible paths, traveling these currents like fluffs of cottonwood or dandelion seed spinning on the surface of the river" (v). Annie Proulx's Wyoming stories and the Texas Panhandle novel undoubtedly count among literary works in which the "essence" of the West is clearly palpable, although sometimes twisted, the stereotypes mocked. Proulx seems to be playing with this powerful idea of the region, playing with the literary tradition that developed the widely known images. It is important to underline that what is offered hereunder is not intended to present a comprehensive approach to the issue of the Western literature, but only a brief and general survey in order to contextualize Proulx's texts.

However, before moving to the complex topic of the actual literature of the region, it is important to touch upon the figure of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" gave the foundations to the approach associating the region with a certain set of values, pointing to the West as "a site of meaning for the nation" (Viehmann 394) and exhibiting a perspective clearly traceable in the majority of the western literary canon. In his famous frontier thesis, which emphasizes the crucial moment of the encounter and interaction between the wildlife and the Native Americans culture, and the "civilization" embodied by the explorers and pioneers, Turner announced not only the closing of the frontier line, defined by the census bureau as "the outer margin of non-Indian settlement with a density of two persons per square mile" (qtd. in Milner II 3). What the young historian did was to explain the whole American development, the American democracy and character by the advance of the settlers westward. By focusing on change over time, he described "the history of the US as a succession of frontiers that differed in character" (Viehmann 395). Moreover, according to Viehmann, he established an ahistorical mythology:

Turner proposed that American look to the West for a unifying national history that would finally heal the sectional wounds of the Civil War. The common history he proposed was the transformation of Europeans into Americans through contact with the environment and the original Indian inhabitants. It makes of US history a tale of pioneering white men with Indians playing supporting roles ... (395)

Indeed, Turner's thesis, from today's perspective, appears as clearly ethnocentric. The scholar did not include other races than English, German and some other Europeans in the crucible of the Americanized immigrants. The role of African-Americans, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, Asians or, evidently, Native Americans, is completely ignored. So is the importance of women. Turner's thesis, as Ibarra put it, "along with other texts in the same vein, gave way to the propagation of the idea of the West as a void, uncivilized *terra nullis*, whose humanization and civilization was essential for the development of democracy" (xvi). Nevertheless, Frederick Jackson's frontier thesis, which by now has undergone complex and extensive scholarly revisions, will always be drawn on by the intellectuals interested in the significance of the West.

As far as the literary West is concerned, the complexity of the topic, again, makes its analysis problematic. As Thomas J. Lyon put it: "Mapping the western literary range might seem to be a simple job: draw a line down the Mississippi River, and everything west of that is 'western.' But start talking to with critics of western literature, and soon the goof feeling of geographical neatness dwindles." ("The Literary" 707). The critic explains that there are doubts among scholars whether, for example, some "elegant detective" novels, such as those by Ross Macdonald and Raymond Chandler, especially given their urban settings, are properly western. Is there a proper geographic setting for "western" literature? Furthermore, "the literary map also needs to account for time and change" (Lyon, "The Literary" 708); as Lyon points out, James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales," four of which take place in eighteenth-century New York State, are seen by many critics as thematically western. But the nineteenth-century colonization of the West was really the one

to give “a durable pattern of romance and myth and a set of images that permeate the broader national culture” (Lyon, “The Literary” 708). In the overview of the major western texts offered below (which I consider crucial in order to properly contextualize and interpret the texts by Annie Proulx), both those corresponding the frontier ethos, the popular one, and those called “postfrontier,” reflective and analytic, I will mainly follow Thomas J. Lyon’s article “The Literary West.”

The travel accounts were the earliest significant writings in English (one shall not fail to remember earlier travel accounts in Spanish, primarily Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s journals) produced in the West. The journals by Meriwether Lewis, describing the Lewis and Clark expedition, with his personal reflections and with his sensitive response to the Edenic landscape, became the first texts verged on literary territory. Lewis’s and Clark’s picturesque descriptions, its vast extension and its fauna’s and flora’s abundance, and the confirmed existence of human life “have contributed to the propagation of the mythical, imagined and dreamed literary chronotope of the West as a land of freedom and opportunity” (Ibarraran xvi). Some years afterwards, the naturalist Thomas Nuttall in his *Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory, during the Year 1819* (1821) displayed a comparable, but more advanced than the Lewis’s one, literary effort in recording and reflecting over a landscape described as a “magnificent garden.” But who helped solidify the romantic image of the West were Washington Irving and Francis Parkman, both inheritors of an eastern sensibility. The first one, in such western histories as *Astoria* (1836) and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.* (1837), by his depictions of the mountain men and some Indian tribes, he contributed to “codify the untamed

West under the rubric of a received aesthetic convention” (Lyon, “The Literary” 709). The second one’s *The Oregon Trail* (1849) appears just as conventional and hyperbolic in its picture of the untamed nature. Finally, the journals of Warren Ferris (*Life in the Rocky Mountains* 1842) and Osborne Russell (*Journal of a Trapper* 1914) “describe enough solitude, rugged scenery, clear air, and high adventure to justify as romantic an attitude as might be wished” (Lyon 711). The breaking point in this romantic idyl was the publishing of Marc Twain’s *Roughing It* (1872) and his not so perfect picture of Goshute Indians; as the scholar indicates, “*Roughing It* was an early sign that the romantic western mythos would not, henceforth, reign unchallenged” (Lyon 711).

Over the last five decades of the nineteenth century, the urban-industrial America embraced the myths of open land, freedom and individuality with enthusiasm. Thomas J. Lyon indicates that “a resolutely frontier-minded body of popular literature began to flourish as early as 1860 and continued to hold sway in the mass imagination for many decades, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the actualities of history” (“The Literary” 712). The “dime novels” proved extremely successful; they developed as a distinctive genre and showed some very consistent elements. These elements, in its majority, coincide with the formulas already established by James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823); according to J. Bakker,

The stock plot has been and still is the story of lawlessness threatening to upset life in a primitive frontier community. Set against the Western landscape as romantic backdrop it involves plenty of action, gunplay, and a love story (sentimental in the commercial Western). The stock of

characters, following a sharp division between heroes and villains, have been and still are the staples of the popular Western, just as the moral issues of frontier violence have been and still are distinctive features of the serious hardback. (158)

The Last of the Mohicans (1826), the best known of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, follows this formula, too. Interestingly, its protagonist, the frontiersman Hawkeye, is sometimes considered the forefather of every fictional cowboy, the first literary archetype to represent the American myth.

What can be added, is that in dime novels "emphasis was laid on the utter self-reliance and individuality of the hero," a hero which "supported civilization, dramatizing a faith in progress" (Lyon, "The Literary" 712). With William F. Cody, glamorized by the writer Edward Judson as "Buffalo Bill," this kind of literature found its most representative icon.

But the most excellent image of the cowboy, although originally arrived with the dime-novels, was achieved by Owen Wister in his *The Virginian* (1902). Oddly enough, the key importance of James Fenimore Cooper's literature must be stressed here again; with reference to cowboys, their predecessors should not be omitted. According to Bakker, it was precisely Cooper's achievement to conceive "the avatar of the American hero". This hero in the nineteenth century was hunter, scout, trapper and mountainman, and, obviously, presented as a counterforce to the villain, always ready to disrupt the order of the new and noble Western society. A remarkable parallel is observed between Cooper and Wister; in *The Virginian* Owen Wister introduced the hunter's twentieth-century successor and, since then, the Western hero: the cowboy.

Wister's novel "drew all the elements of the mythic West together into an artistic whole, which in turn became definite for the Westerns of the new century" (Lyon, "The Literary" 712). The idealized cowboy-gentleman, seems to represent a perfect synthesis between the East and the West. As the critic put it, "The hero of the West is seen, in the end, to be a hero of America, bringing his vitality, beauty, and natural morality to bear in the universal movement of progress" (Lyon, "The Literary" 714).

There were innumerable western romances imitating Wister's masterpiece afterwards. But only Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) could rival *The Virginian* for popularity. Also, what Wister and Grey had in common, was their origin – they had both grown up in accommodated families in the East and were enthusiasts of the West; in Gray's case, the wilderness, the landscape was what had a special impact on him and on his narrative.

As Lyon observes, the western themes continued developing with little fundamental change in both novels and short fiction well into the late twentieth century. "Pulp" magazines devoted to the genre, for example *Western Story*, flourished. Notably, with writers such as Ernest Haycox or Eugene Manlove Rhodes, greater realism of historical and social detail was introduced. Louis L'Amour should be emphasized as the author whose sensitivity to Native and Hispanic Americans, together with his ecological evaluation of nature (*Hondo* 1953) marked him as a maker of modern Westerns. Eventually, the extremely popular *Shane* (1949) by Jack Schaefer is worth underlying, for it "presents western movement, and the mythically important role of the hero, in perhaps the clearest, most elegant version yet" (Lyon, "The Literary" 716). It is a perfect "ritual drama in which 'civilization and savagery' are fruitfully blended ... and in

which violence is vindicated" (Lyon, "The Literary" 715). Obviously, impeccable in its structure it is, *Shane* was not the final Western; the "traditional" western romances are still being successfully sold, while contemporary mutations, parodies included, are still being created (Annie Proulx's works, for instance). As the critic concludes, "a century after the much-cited closing of the frontier, only a brave critic indeed would predict the demise of the Western anytime soon" (Lyon, "The Literary" 716).

Thomas J. Lyon notes that, together with the transition to a postfrontier outlook, a more mature and subtle literature, which involves "an opening of perception as a whole, so that a relation-seeing and complex view of existence replaces a simplistic or romantically abstract attention" ("The Literary" 716) emerged. John Muir was the first writer to study the land, to open the relational-complex, the ecological mode of consciousness. He elaborated numerous studies on nature, which were published in influential magazine. As Lyon put it, "Muir helped to legitimize a nonconsumptive, conservation-minded, postfrontier view of the West" ("The Literary" 718). John Charles Van Dyke, though less influential than Muir, in such books as *The Desert* (1901) or *The Mountain* (1916), focused on the western landscape, and especially on its aesthetic aspects, as well. The same primary importance to the instructiveness of nature and landscape studies is shown in Mary Austin's work (*The Land of Little Rain* 1903, *The Land of Journey's Ending* 1924). For Austin the culture should not be based on exploiting resources or heightening the standard of living; she believed that "adjustment to ecological reality, and attention to the momentous potential in any experience of nature, constituted the true human hope" (Lyon, "The Literary" 721).

Thomas J. Lyon draws the readers' attention to the fact that approximately with Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) the western fiction matured, and the romance gave way to the novel. This maturation, as the scholar indicates, "is marked by increasing subtlety and complexity of characterization and a diminishment in the weight of plot and ideology;" ("The Literary" 721) also, the writers started to perceive the American expansion into the West with a more analytic and critical eye. Bret Harte and Mark Twain, when the growing city of San Francisco became a literary center, moved from the romantic image of the West too; their works belonged to the "local color" fiction, which later developed in realism. It is interesting to observe that Stephen Crane (*The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* 1897), Frank Norris (*McTeague* 1899, *The Octopus* 1901), and Jack London (*The Call of the Wild* 1903, *The Valley of the Moon* 1913), are not only considered representatives of the American naturalism, but also as exhibiting a realistic view of the West in some of their novels. To be more precise, Crane "draws on the old, romantic images strictly for comic and ironic effects," Norris "helped move western fiction into the new area of urban life," and London, who "certainly gave expression to the romance of the frontier in several of his stories," managed to include "elements of both rational skepticism and mystical confidence" (Lyon, "The Literary" 722-723) in his most interesting fiction. A similar equilibrium as London's, according to Lyon, between "giving equal voice both to the western-agrarian urge and to a sober recognition of its incompleteness as a philosophy for a whole life" ("The Literary" 723), is distinguished in Willa Carter's novels (*O Pioneers!* 1913, *My Antonia* 1918). In Carter's novel *The Professor's House* (1925) are found, as Lyon

indicates, “the most elemental and stirring evocations of place in all of western literature” (726).

The group of writers born between 1890 and 1912 continued this line of significant western fiction. These writers (Harvey Fergusson, John Steinbeck or Wallace Stagner, to name just a few), as we read in “The Literary West,” “have attempted an illusionless point of view and a description of a historical West that plausibly connects with the mixed and real present” (Lyon 727). As to the succeeding generation of western novelists, such a preoccupation with the myth/realism dichotomy is vanished. In the critic’s words, “it is as if the revolution has been secured, and now a writer is simply free – as any writer normally should be – to write about anything he or she pleases” (Lyon, “The Literary” 728). The Texan Larry McMurtry, with his prolific and difficult to categorize narrative (*Leaving Cheyenne* 1963, *Moving On* 1970, *Lonesome Dove* 1985, or *Anything for Billy* 1988), is probably the best example of an artist mixing the weight of the western legacy and a modern, innovative and unrestrained approach.

With reference to the western poetry, I will only mention its major representatives, given the fact that this genre is not essential for the contextualization of Annie Proulx’s works. Although poetry in general tends toward universal themes, according to Lyon,

a distinctive western poetic temper does exist and can be seen in critical retrospect of western poets – their broad-gauge critique of expansionist culture’s way in the world – in their willingness to describe

transcendental experience of nature, and finally, in their strong allegiance to place. ("The Literary" 729)

The first poets whose work contains these defining elements were John G. Neihardt (1881-1973) and Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962). As to the most significant contemporary western poets, Gary Snyder and William Stafford should be highlighted.

With reference to the native American literature in the West, in spite of its unquestionable relevance (as Lyon rightly put it: "Perhaps no more thoroughly revisionist standpoint could be achieved, vis-à-vis the popular image of the West, than to credit the Native American literature of the region with real worth and standing," "The Literary" 732-733), I will also only briefly comment on its most renowned representatives. First of all, it is important to indicate that the highly elaborated oral literature of all the tribes projects "a different life, and a different concept of human personality, than the atomization and 'individualism' that have been the condition and perhaps the pride of the European-American and 'frontier' mind" (Lyon, "The Literary" 733). From late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth, the first written or dictated biographies of the Native Americans, focused on analyzing Indian-White relations, were published. Sara Winnemucca, Francis LaFlesche and Charles Eastman belong to this first group of authors. John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) was the first novel issued by a Native American; the first native woman to publish her novel titled *Co-ge-we-a* (1927) was Mourning Dove (Cristal McLeod Galler). But a true renaissance in Native American writing, as Lyon observes, came with the turmoil decades of 1960s

and 1970s. In the West, such writers as N. Scott Momaday (*House Made of Dawn* 1968), Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony* 1977) or James Welch (*Winter in the Blood* 1974) are “widely regarded as important contributors to the new abundance and quality of Indian literature” (Lyon, “The Literary” 735). There are also two historical novels by Welch told from Native perspective (it was not always the case earlier, since, as Martha Viehmann points out: “Growing up with these and other erasures of Indian presence, Native Americans have cheered on the white hero who kills the Indian in popular movies.” 403), worth underlining: *Fools Crow* (1986) and *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000). Moreover, interesting works challenging images of epic heroism of white western men were published from the 1980’s onward by such author as, to name just a few, Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene) and Louise Erdrich (Anishinabe or Ojibway).

The last decades of the twentieth and the first of the twentieth-first century have not only been “something like a creative explosion ... bringing the literary West surely into the modern times” (Lyon, “The Literary” 737), but it has also been a period which brought “a reassessment of literature of the West and its relationship to the people and history of the region and the nation” (Viehmann 394). As to the literary works, Lyon indicates that a general and positive release from old western stereotypes occurred; writings have been released by, apart from the Native Americans, such minority groups as Mexican Americans (the largest and the most prolific), African Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans; the number of books written by women writers in the West increased as well. More importantly,

“Western writes work now as if on liberated terrain” (Lyon, “The Literary” 737).

In Amaia Ibarra's words,

Basques, Mormons, other Europeans and women – along with other silenced communities – are similarly shaping the era of postfrontier history and literature, as well as providing the West with a less mythical, romantic and more real, even painful color, both in the domestic and international domain. (xvii)

With all that, in his “Introduction. Reconsidering Western Writing Beyond the Regional Imaginary and its Mythic Borders” David Rio draws attention to the fact that

Although postfrontier writing tends to challenge traditional mythology and to reinterpret traditional Anglo-male visions of the West, the interdependency between mythic frameworks and the historic West is still notoriously alive in contemporary western writing as well as in other artistic representations of the region. (xv)

As this scholar indicates, for numerous Americans, as well as for an international audience, classical notions of the West and associated images, symbols, and values still retain their appeal (“Introduction” xiv). Simplistic binary oppositions between myth and reality are increasingly oftentimes being rejected, in favor of understanding the West as “a complex, interrelated, unfinished, and plural space, consisting of multiple meanings and often

intercultural experiences and identities” (Rio, “Introduction” xv). Moreover, Rio asserts that from the late 1960s American literary West, in spite of the traditional prejudice against it in certain academic circles, is flowering, and he lists a dozen renamed western writers; apart from Annie Proulx, there are such names as: Larry McMurtry, Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Wallace Stegner (all of them already mentioned before), or Cormac McCarthy, Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Marilynne Robinson, Amy Tan, Barbara Kingsolver, and Rudolfo Anaya.

On the subject of the western criticism, it too has undergone a significant change. At first, as Martha Viehmann indicates, scholars interested in the significance of the West or of the frontier in US culture draw directly or indirectly on Turner’s work; “In this scholarship [for example in Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol as Myth* 1959], we see evidence that Turner’s emphasis on the encounter with the landscape as a defining characteristic of American and western experience remains potent” (395). Furthermore, works stressing contact between the migrating Europeans and the Native people, describing the western hero or the relationship between the individual and the environment (such as R.W.B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* 1955) were being published. Nevertheless, over the years, such ideas have been challenged and, although the myth of the frontier still captivated the front-line scholars, Richard Slotkin being the best example, the approach evolved; in *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) “the broad historical scope and wide range of texts that Slotkin includes reflect the elasticity of the term ‘western literature’” (Viehmann 396). Another interesting interdisciplinary approach was that of

Annette Kolodny expressed in *The Lay of the Land* (1975), her feminist analysis of the writing of white men still influential nowadays. This importance of the land, emphasized by Slotkin and Kolodny, was fundamental in developing more approaches, equally important, such as ecocriticism. The insights of ecocriticism and transnational environmental movements, as Susan Kollin observes,

complicated notions of regions and other local terrain as bounded space, with factors such as global climate change, struggles over land use, species extinction, and concerns about toxic landscapes decidedly ignoring the borders of local spaces as defined by human populations.
(515)

Kollin draws attention to the fact that, as ecocritics and activists have noted, there are no places that escape the impact of global ecological developments, and so a significant body of literature examining the relation between local communities in the American West and larger global environmental developments has recently emerged; the fiction of Karen Tei Yamashira, Ana Castillo, Leslie Marmon Silko and Ruth Ozeki would be just some examples.

In his “Epilogue: What Is Happening in the West Today, and What It Might Mean” Thomas J. Lyon states that the new revisionist western writing, together with such analyses as feminist criticism, ecocriticism and multicultural perspectives, have become part of the new West’s understanding of itself. The scholar adds that “the common denominator in the new western writing and the new, revisionist western criticism is that an alternative to the frontier mentality is

finally beginning to be created” (963); the movement toward postfrontier maturity is a majority phenomenon today.

Furthermore, it is relevant to note that “as a popular construct in the dominant national imagination, the American West has typically functioned as a meaningful geography ... because it was somehow positioned off the map” (Kollin 515). The result of such an image was the West imagined as an edenic space, a land outside time, as Kollin points out, a terrain that somehow escapes historical changes. But now the scholars have located “new routes of inquiry for conceptualizing the region, and in doing so have placed the US West back at the center of national and world maps” (Kollin 515).

The American West, or the multiply inflected Wests for, as the critic insists, its identity changed depending on the location of the observer, “might be better understood as the very product of a larger history and culture of modernization that is transnational and global in scope” (Kollin 515). Ultimately and in Neil Campbell’s words, although it is possible to talk about the West as an area defined by state and national borders, it is to say from the geographic point of view, the American West “has never been simply a geographical region ... it is instead a complex construction, an architecture, designed and built by the intersection of discourses from many interested parties, refracted through time, space, and nations” (qtd. in Kollin 42).

The texts to be analyzed below are interesting examples of the postfrontier writing, the approach toward the traditional western mythology adopted by Annie Proulx uncommon and noteworthy. On the one hand, the writer resorts to the classical images and symbols, such as the untamed landscape or the archetypal cowboys; on the other, she almost immediately crashes their

idealized essence, unmasking their superficiality. The naturalistic features found in her narrative add to the originality of her western writing.

2. Wyoming Stories and That Old Ace in the Hole

2.1. Introduction

The shortest and the best summary of the three collections of *Wyoming Stories* by Proulx, *Close Range*, *Bad Dirt* and *Fine Just the Way it is*, would probably be: “Welcome to the wide-open spaces of God’s country – Wyoming” (D’Souza). The landscape, beautiful but extremely harsh, cannot be overlooked when analyzing the texts. Together with the particular geographical, social and historical features of such a place as Wyoming, the landscape is undoubtedly the strongest influence in sculpting the characters’ personalities and lifestyles. And Proulx is clear about it:

Everything comes from landscape. Every single thing I write, I start with the landscape. I start with the climate, the description. Only when that is done – the particular place that affects what food people eat, how they make their livings and so forth – and the story rolls out of landscape. (WLR)

Close Range: Wyoming Stories (1999) is composed of eleven stories. Some of them are longer and considered masterpieces (John Updike included “Half-Skinner Steer” in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* and “Brokeback Mountain” may be found in *The O. Henry Awards*, 1998), some others, like “The Blood Bay” and “55 Miles to the Gas Pump,” according to Rita D. Jakobs, function more as anecdotes than stories. Although Jakobs describes

the stories as “uneven,” she observes that “when they work, they are wondrous, with characters so alive and touching that the reader feels the ache of loss as the final page is turned.” D’Souza underlines the choice of Proulx’s characters: they are neither rich nor famous, driven by passions out of control when drunk, jealous or angry. For D’Souza, one of the best features of the collection is its authenticity, both in the author’s ironic rhythms of speech, as in the perfect choosing of the real life pieces of contemporary life at its best and worst. The critic appreciates the details in scenery and description and considers the stories “exquisite,” “gut wrenching,” “dynamic” and “memorable.” The words Sybil S. Steinberg uses in her critique of *Close Range* for *Publishers Weekly* seem to summarize this first collection in a perfect way: “In the close range of a distinctive landscape, Proulx encapsulates the wide range of human experience: loss, longing and the spartan determination to go on from day to day.” Charlotte L. Glover adds to these generally very positive reviews and says: “Proving that the Pulitzer Prize for *The Shipping News* was no fluke, Proulx once again demonstrates her creative mastery of the English language.”

Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2 was published five years later and because of that and because there is only half a page of acknowledgements (they normally occupy around three pages), some critics consider, mockingly, that “Proulx’s knowledge of the state has become so extensive that it wasn’t necessary, or even possible, to learn anything more” (Skidelsky). Again, there are eleven stories in this collection and, if one can talk about a unifying theme, the landscape of Wyoming and its people could be labeled as such. According to John Freeman, there is no other American writer that knows these independent and stubborn people so well; he specifies: “It’s an eerie

performance, this drag-show act Proulx has perfected in the past five years, during which she has come to know not just this man's walk and his talk, but the float and drift of his thoughts, the logic of his emotions." She, although an outsider, did understand Wyoming; the couple of married New Yorkers, the protagonists of one of the best stories in the collection "Man Crawling in the Trees" did not, definitely. What the Easterners thought Wyoming and its nature were was mere illusion, just a first impression. In order to survive and enjoy living in this harsh area it is necessary to understand the land, attach to it and receive all it offers with pleasure. One of the characters from "Man Crawling" is unable to do that, returns to the city and, as Skidelsky points out, due to this indifference she is diminished and denied dignity. Proulx, on the other hand, immersed herself in Wyoming to such an extent that "it's not clear if the landscape shaped Proulx or she the landscape, but it seems she has found her spiritual equal in Wyoming's unforgiving terrain." (Freeman). The reception of this second collection was generally positive, although not so enthusiastic as in the case of *Close Range*. Joanne Wilkinson wrote, praising the author, that "it's somewhat difficult to fathom the full nature of Proulx's popularity given her implacable vision of human nature as deeply flawed," and that "it may be that her odd, vivid language and her idiosyncratic plotting are entertaining enough to distract readers from the bleak subtext." According to Jeff Zaleski, more moderate in his compliments,

while none of the stories in this collection approaches the sweep and wholeness of "Brokeback Mountain" and other pieces are little more than

whimsical sketches (sometimes with a touch of the magical), they paint a rich, colorful picture of local life. (Review of "Bad Dirt")

The last collection, *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3*, came out in 2008. It contains nine stories, a couple of them set in hell, everything but realistic and probably written just for the author's amusement (in Ron Carlson words: "Proulx has a little fun featuring Satan at work remodeling his domain."). Apart from these ("I've Always Loved This Place" and "Swamp Mischief"), there are two other ventures into magical realism: one narrative about prehistoric bison hunting ("Deep-Blood-Greasy-Bowl") and "Sagebrush Kid," which seems to be about the frontier life, but it turns out that its protagonist is a mutant, a serial-killer tree. The rest of them reflect the West Proulx's readers are already familiar with: "a world in which the natural elements are murderous and folks aren't much better" (Carlson) and critics agree the author is a marvelous writer when she sticks to this field of ordinary life. And not necessarily the contemporaneous life; there are some stories in this collection that picture the nineteenth century Wyoming; "Them Old Cowboy Songs" is one of them. No reader will remain indifferent with this tender love story of Archie and Rose, and with its heartbreaking and atrocious ending. For Ron Carlson "Them Old Cowboy Songs" is a perfect example of Annie Proulx's style and so he uses it as a guide in the path to comprehension of all the three collections. The reviewer observes that the peaceful and pleasing beginning of the story "would seem to suggest that time might shed its blessings on the rancher and his wife," but... nothing farther from the truth, the writer misleads her readers again. Carlson regards that each of the collections "bears Proulx's brand of hard

drama, hard irony, hard weather, and hard and soft characters blown about and many times destroyed by the powerful mix.” And he concludes: “She has nicely disrupted the mythology of the Old West.” Nevertheless, one of the more cautious critics states in *Kirkus Reviews* that “it would be unfair to expect any of these stories to match the provocative power of the first volume’s “Brokeback Mountain;” and then explains:

one senses that Wyoming has played itself out for the author, at least as an inspiration for her fiction. If she has another novel in her as ambitious as *The Shipping News* (1992), which employed a very different setting as practically a protagonist, she may need to seek inspiration elsewhere. Maybe a third of these nine stories rank with her best; the slightest seem like filler. (“Fine”)

In *That Old Ace in the Hole* instead of the pattern observed in *Wyoming Stories*, where the ideal ends up as grotesque and hopeless, a certain turnaround may be observed. Characters traditionally presented as predictable, such as cattle farmers, cowboys or monks turn out being passionate activists. In addition, the main character, anticipated as a weak and irresolute antihero, transforms when finally encountering his place, his home. This protagonist, Bob Dollar, was raised in Denver, and so does not seem to know anything about either the Texas Panhandle history, or its present situation. But he learns fast; thanks to his peculiar landlady LaVon and the diary of a 19th century explorer, Lieutenant Abert, Bob finds out everything about the local people’s history. Because of the bad reputation of hog farms in the region, Bob Dollar’s intention

of searching for new terrains suitable for this purpose have to be concealed and so he works pretending to be someone else. Not surprisingly, his irresolute efforts bring no fruitful results. The real protagonists of the novel seem to be a group of local inhabitants with strong, environmentally orientated beliefs. The strength of their convictions and the herolike attraction they emanate cause the main character to gradually let his own convictions fade and his pernicious purposes die out.

The reception of *That Old Ace* was on the whole positive, although some flaws did not get unnoticed. Jeff Zaleski observed that the novel, “loops ahead and back again in a series of lusty anecdotes, doesn't engage the emotions with the same immediacy as did *Postcards* and *The Shipping News*” (Review of “That Old Ace”). And concluded: “Readers must settle here for a good story steeped in atmosphere, but not a compelling one.” Similarly, some other critics highlighted that Proulx’s text is “less a cohesive tale than a collection of fascinating intersecting personal histories” (Lord) and that it is “a strange hybrid ... more a series of short stories than a novel” (Moore). Barbara Hoffert added that “through these interlocked histories we get an awful lot of detail about windmills, barbed wire, fences, oil, the consequences of being passed up by the railroad, and how much smarter bison are than cows.”

Another characteristic some scholars perceives as the novel’s weakness, is Proulx’s insistence on the ecological aspects. According to Donna Seaman, the writer’s “laudable outrage over environmental abuses overshadows literary nuance.” Likewise, Moore observed that the Proulx’s “infectious fascination with the quirks of the history and ecology of the locality here sometimes shades into

didacticism,” and that the characters are sometimes introduced with an exaggeratedly clear black-and-white goal:

Bob’s company, Global Pork Rind, is rather simplistically evil. Even as a pig-lover (who will buy only freerange, properly slow-grown, antibiotic-free pork from an excellent local butcher) I felt that Proulx’s version verged upon Disneyesque propaganda. Global Pork Rind operations manager, Ribeye Cluke, with his moustache like ‘a strip of porcupine’, is just waiting to be turned into a film caricature. (Moore)

All in all, *That Old Ace in the Hole*, as Caroline Moore concluded in her review in *The Spectator*, though “immensely readable, fusing sentiment and bleakness with Proulx’s customary wit and irresistible relish for the quirky, some may find the whole ensemble less than a fully fledged work of fiction.”

My aim in this chapter is to examine Proulx’s western fiction, her Wyoming short stories and her Panhandle novel, considering closely those features related to the region. A particular attention will be paid to the landscape and the characteristics of the area’s inhabitants. Due to an exceptionally powerful cultural impact related to the region of the American West, when analyzing Proulx’s characters the myths of the West cannot be omitted; therefore, a subchapter on such an influence will be developed. As far as the literary naturalism is concerned, its treatment will vary from the one applied in two previous chapters; although I start with a subchapter dedicated exclusively to the influence of the genre when different aspects of the landscape are involved, in nearly all of the remaining parts characteristics of naturalism will be

indicated as well. The reason of such an alteration is due to the difficulty in separating the naturalistic features in particular from the global content. As will be displayed, especially in case of *Wyoming Stories*, Proulx's western fiction and the literary naturalism seem indivisible; everything and everyone seem to be determined by the landscape and human natural urges.

2.2. Wyoming and Texas Panhandle Landscape: Its Naturalistic Features

According to O. Alan Weltzien, with whom I fully agree, Annie Proulx's *Close Range* and *Bad Dirt*, and, as Aitor Ibarrola observed, also *Fine Just the Way It Is* ("Re-writing"), reveals her writing belongs to the critical category of landscape fiction, recently recognizable under the term ecofiction, and it overlaps "considerably but not completely" (Weltzien 99) with the trend of neo-regionalism (or new-regionalism). According to Weltzien, Wyoming itself emerges as the protagonist in Proulx's stories. Having said that, the scholar remarks:

If Wyoming is protagonist in the *Wyoming Stories*, one could claim Proulx has resuscitated a style of fiction prevalent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Many of her stories inscribe what could be called a neo-Naturalism, wherein environmental forces (landscape and weather) larger than individuals trace the trajectories of their lives, marking and reducing their choices. (101)

Yes, landscape and weather will play a crucial and, in a great majority of cases, determining (like in naturalistic works) role in Proulx's three collections'

of characters' lives. In Wyoming, these two natural forces are so powerful that they make living and staying alive (or as one of the characters, old Red, puts it "staying power") a real achievement. That is at least for the best part of the population; there will also be some scarce examples of highly successful characters who manage "staying power" not by fighting and taming nature, but by fusing with the environment.

As to *That Old Ace in the Hole*, the landscape of the Texas Panhandle can also be considered crucial in the development of the novel; the natural characteristics of the prairie, such as its plainness and agricultural difficulties resulting from the poor condition of its soil, have been the main reasons of the area's depopulation. While most of the examples concerning the aesthetical and geological features of the Panhandle terrain will be pointed out in the following subchapter, the importance of the weather, unpredictable and harsh, will be examined below.

The misleading landscape and the hazardous weather are pivotal in the opening story of *Close Range*, "The Half-Skinned Steer;" to a certain extent, they are the reasons for the protagonist's sad end. Or is it Mero's arrogance towards Wyoming nature, acquired due to many years living in a city, far from his homeland? What the character should have remembered is that even his father, after decades of struggle, had to surrender to this inhospitable land:

They called it a ranch and it had been, but one day the old man said it was impossible to run cows in such tough country where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sinkholes, gave up large numbers of calves to marauding lions, where hay couldn't grow but leafy spurge and Canada

thistle throve, and the wind packed enough sand to scour windshields opaque. (21)

Indeed, the piece of land Mero's family owned was inhospitable and "taugh," inhabitable even for the cattle and any nutritious vegetation. As if only the autochthonous fauna and flora were able to survive. What is interesting, the ranch was sold in the end to a rich Australian businessman and an animal theme park for tourists was opened; emus were brought and Rollo, Mero's brother, became the manager. But the emus, obviously, are not native Wyoming animals. As a matter of fact, they are not even American specie; their natural surrounding is Australia, where these large birds inhabit. In my view, Rollo's ridiculous death ("one of them [emus] turned on a dime and came right for him with its big razor claws. Emus is bad for claws" 23) may be interpreted as a sort of revenge of nature, as if it were a natural and expectable consequence of this breeding experiment. On one side, the emus exercising their right to defense, to live their life free and nomadic, just like they do in Australia. On the other, the land of Wyoming, outraged with its lot, with its conversion into a place where emus, there absurdly unsuited animals, took over. A punishment could not be avoided.

As to the protagonist, he sinned against one of the most powerful forces of Wyoming, the weather, for he disregarded its strength. When on his way to Rollo's funeral, Mero self-confidence and arrogance, acquired over many years of city life, turned out his damnation; he ignored some clear signs of an imminent blinding blizzard. His nonchalant way to deal with such danger, to stay

safe, was to simply “keep an eye on it” (31). He challenged the weather and he lost the duel.

Moreover, Mero’s vanity of mind made him believe that, in spite of his long absence and of his advanced age, he could still perfectly identify the landscape: “How could he not recognize the turnoff to the ranch? It was so clear and sharp in his mind: the dusty crimp of the corner, the low section where the snow drifted, the run where willows slapped the side of the truck” (35). He “felt” he was on the ranch. He trusted his instinct, but it betrayed him... Why? Was it because he had spent too much time away and somehow lost the natural bonds with the land? Was it because he, in a way, betrayed his native environment (Weltzien points out that “the narrator measures Mero’s betrayal through his usual breakfast (‘two glasses of mineral water, six cloves of garlic, [and a pear]’ and his Cadillac)? Or was his failure due to human arrogance, a naïve belief that men can always subdue nature, will always succeed? “The Half-Skinned Steer” is just the first proof that, in Wyoming, it is quite the opposite. As Weltzien observed, “the spring snowstorm punishes the prodigal son for his desertion. Having turned his back on home, he has lost his way back.” (103).

And this is only the beginning of a wide range of tragedies being caused, or simply being ignored by the Wyoming landscape. As stated in the opening paragraph of “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” (*Close Range*), Wyoming is a “Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere.” (99). The following description of the Wyoming panorama (a very interesting one, indeed, since it depicts a variety of Wyoming faces) makes the

reader aware of the insignificance, the ephemerality of its residents and their afflictions, by comparing it with the everlasting and indifferent rhythm of nature:

No past slaughter nor cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at the isolate crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen, or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns delays the flood of morning light. Fences, cattle, roads, refineries, mines, gravel pits, traffic lights, graffiti'd celebration of athletic victory on bridge overpass, crust of blood on the Wal-Mart loading dock, the sun-faded wreaths of plastic flowers marking death on the highway are ephemeral.
(99)

The paragraph continues; it ends with a reminder and a reflection. The reminder can be read as: be careful, people of the twenty-first century, you are neither safe nor significant, so do not make yourself too comfortable; there were many like you here before and now they are gone, forgotten. The reflection has to do, again, with the immutable natural order, and with the doubt in God's power...or rather God's interest towards the humankind: "Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter. Only the endlessly repeated flood of morning light. You begin to see that God does not owe us much beyond that." (99).

"The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," the following story in *Close Range*, is one of many that starts with a description of the setting, of the landscape; there will be numerous more in the three collections. It seems that the stories are structured this way not only for the reader to create a mental picture of the

place and to visualize where the action develops, but that it is a naturalistic resource of using the environment as a main influence in its inhabitants' personalities. Also, given the tough picture of the setting, it already advances the characters' ability of endurance and possible survival:

The country appeared as empty ground, big sagebrush, rabbitbrush, intricate sky, flocks of small birds like packs of cards thrown up in the air, and a faint track drifting towards the red-walled horizon. Graves were unmarked, fallen house timbers and corrals burned up in old campfires. Nothing much but weather and distance, the distance punctuated once in a while by ranch gates, and to the north the endless murmur and sun-flash of semis rolling along the interstate. (121)

This hostile landscape turns out to be addictive; once you grow up in such a place, you cannot live in any other. The main character of "The Bunchgrass," the old Red, exemplifies such dependence. Years ago he "headed away from the drought burning the west, drilled wells, prodded cattle in railroad stockyards, pasted up handbills, cobbled a life a though hammering two-bys." (121). Nevertheless, after some years in New York, "homesick for hard, dry landscape (122) the man he turned west again; he found a wife and they settled in Wyoming. Red's family succeeded, because they adapted to the environment; they became accustomed to the Wyoming wind, which "isolated them from the world" (122) and they did not fight against nature's natural periodicity: "Time counted out in calving; first grass; branding; rainfall; clouds; roundup; ... shipping; early snow; late blizzard." (125).

Notwithstanding, sometimes, as Proulx demonstrates in “Pair of Spurs” (*Close Range*) this periodicity of nature, this natural rhythm fails, too. Sometimes the awaited change of seasons does not arrive “on time” (read: when men expect it), and the weather does not allow truce. And this is something that provokes despair among even those most adjusted to Wyoming’s natural difficulties, like Car Scrope and his neighbor ranchers:

It was a bitter winter and a late spring ... Ten days before June a blizzard caromed over the plains, drifting house-high on lee slopes, dragging a train of arctic air that froze the wet snow, encased new calves in icy shells. For a week the cold held under glassy sky, snow-scald burning the cows’ udders; it broke in minutes under the chinook’s hot breath. Meltwater streamed over the frozen ground. The bodies of dead stock emerged from fading drifts ... Scrope’s yard flooded, a mile of highway disappeared under a foot of water while they held his mail at the post office, but before it ebbed another storm staggered in from the west and shucked out six inches of pea hail, a roaring burst that metamorphosed into a downpour switched back to hail and finally made a foot of coarse-grained snow. Two days later the first tornado of the season unscrewed a few grain elevators from the ground. (152)

The above lengthy quotation, indeed, if taken out of a story set in Wyoming, could probably resemble the beginning of a description of Armageddon. It seems hard to believe that the Wyoming ranchers from the story do not consider moving out to a friendlier land and climate. And there is

more; Inez Muddyman (a native Wyomingite, “on a horse from breakfast to bed” 156) refused to abandon her homeland even after her death, as she was found with her neck broken and “her teeth dug into the state of Wyoming” (173). Once they take the decision to leave, however, just like Inez’s widower, they realize they “should a moved a Oregon twenty years ago. No wind, plenty a rain, nice neighbors for a change, grass to yer ass” (177). When the perspective inverted, from the outsiders’ point of view, Wyoming seems even more unfavorable. One of the Texas cowboys paid dearly for his lack of knowledge as to specificities of the Wyoming rivers when drowned in the waters of Bad Girl (a better and more ironic name for this treacherous creek impossible to imagine).

Although floods, as described above, are one of the Wyoming most terrible natural disasters, droughts are so even more and much more often. There are several stories where the theme of a drought is explored: in *Close Range* “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” (“the droughty depression of the 1930” 103) and “A Lonely Coast” (“August was hot and droughty, a hell of grasshoppers and dried-up creeks. They said this part of the state was a disaster area.” 197); in *Bad Dirt* “The Trickle Down Effect” (“Wyoming had been dry as a quart of sand for three years and Elk Tooth was in the heart of the drought disaster zone” 50) and “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?.” In this last one, apart from the ubiquitous and crop-destroying grasshoppers, some other devastating consequences of a drought in landscape are described:

It kept getting drier and drier ... The grass cracked like eggshells under his [the protagonist’s] feet. There was no color in the landscape, the alkali dust muting sage, grass, stones, the earth itself. When a vehicle

passed along the road a fine cloud spread out and slowly settled. The air was baked of scent except for the chalky dust with its faint odor of old cardboard. (67-68)

Of course, the Wyomingites were perfectly aware of this major feature of their homeland, the drought, and none of them would complain excessively if it were not because they actually saw the countryside changing for good. This is how one of the most Wyoming land-loving characters of Proulx's stories, Gilbert Wolfscale ("What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?"), perceives it:

It had always been dry country, and no one born there expected more than a foot of annual rainfall in a good year. The drought halved that, and he could see the metamorphosis of grazing land into dessert. The country wanted to go to sand dunes and rattlesnakes, wanted to scrape off its human ticks. (68)

A similar picture of the area, as a desolate and a depressing land, is given in "The Wamsutter Wolf" (*Bad Dirt*). Situated on the edge of the Red Desert, Wamsutter was "a desperate place" (148); some miles out of town, already in the Red Desert, was where the main character, Buddy Millar, rented a wrecked trailer. What is interesting, inside it Buddy found an old newspaper and an article about several families who bought some land near Wamsutter years ago and hoped to succeed ranching. Their confident and proud statements were quoted: "This is our dream come true, to own our own ranch. We're the new pioneers." (150). Millar realized the trailer he rented might have

once belonged to the author of these words. He did not know how the story ended, but in the newspaper there was quoted a comment of someone from the town saying that the “pioneers’ (mockingly) would never make it through a single winter and no crops would grow in the desert.” (150). It must have happened that way; there was nothing but sand and trash around the trailer.

There is one more story that shortly mentions the bleak Wyoming plains: “Brokeback Mountain” (*Close Range*). Its bleakness is stressed by the comparison with a brimming with vitality mountain landscape of the region. Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, when together and in love, for years

worked their way through the high meadows and mountains drainages, horse-packing into the Big Horns, Medicine Bows, south end of the Gallatins, Absarokas ... into the Wind Rivers over and again, the Sierra madres, Gros Ventres, the Washakies, Laramies ... (273)

In all these places, Brokeback Mountain included, of course, they breathed “the air scented with resinous lodgepole, the dry needle duff and hot rock, bitter juniper crushed beneath the horses’ hooves.” (274). They enjoyed the view of the “tea-colored river ran fast with snowmelt, a scarf of bubbles at every high rock, pools and setback streaming” (275). They camped where the “ochre-branched willows swayed stiffly, pollened catkins like yellow thumbprints” (275). Clearly, a romanticized image of the place they relished their forbidden love. Also, a completely different part of Wyoming than the one Jack’s parents lived in; this is what Ennis saw on his way to Jack’s “folks”: “The road to Lightning Flat went through desolate country past a dozen abandoned ranches distributed

over the plain at eight-and ten-miles intervals, houses sitting blank-eyed in the weeds, corral fences down.” (281). The impression given, the way I see it, is that just like Ennis, the Lightning Flat plain appeared abandoned and mourning, mourning for the loss of someone with whom used to share the happy days.

A romanticized image of nature may also be found in the opening story of *Bad Dirt*, “The Hellhole.” Creel Zmundzinski, a dedicated Game and Fish warden, truly cared about the fauna he protected. Creel’s childhood, up to the age of fourteen, was spent quite miserably, in an orphanage. But then warden Orion Horncracle appeared and realized that only by waking up the naughty orphan boys’ interest towards their marvelous wild Wyoming surrounding would it be possible to straighten their behavior. And so, he started by making them understand they were neither alone nor abandoned, that they were an important part of the Wyoming nature, and that they had to be proud of it: “I’m here because I want to tell you that you’re not as much orphans as you think. You was born in a wonderful, wild place and I think that if you let Wyoming, your home state, and its wildlife stand in for your human parents you will do pretty good.” (6). Instinctively, by romanticizing the wildlife, Horncracle managed to impregnate them with a powerful feeling for the Wyoming landscape and its animals. He told them about Yellowstone Park, and about such animals as pronghorns, mountain lions, the great elks, badgers, prairie dogs, eagles, hawks, and meadowlarks. He gave them the best present of their short lives: a field guide *Mammals of Wyoming* and love for its nature.

Nonetheless, in spite of this part of the story which I interpret as presenting a romantic concept of nature (and in spite of a latter element of magical realism), the very beginning of it is clearly naturalistic: a minister, with

no hunting license, is caught by the warden when burying a cow moose's "guts." At this point, suddenly, the reader realizes that the Wyoming forests, with their beautiful fauna and flora, are a place where its inhabitants fight for survival in every moment, and that the orphan calf (Creel could hear it bawling) will probably not make it "in a world of predators and severe weather" (4).

In Proulx's Wyoming fiction, characters that tend to romanticize the Western landscape and its wildlife, at least at first, are generally the outsiders. The author demonstrates that in one of the most frequently reviewed stories from *Bad Dirt*, "Man Crawling Out of Trees." The protagonists, a married couple from New York, at the beginning seemed delighted, did not even mind the harsh weather. Mitchell Fair, the husband, with time, managed to understand his new environment and roughly adjust to it. Eugene, on the contrary, never achieved any of it; she remained ignorant, observing nature from an artificial and exclusively aesthetic point of view.

The story, interestingly enough, starts when the couple drives through New England, where they had spent their whole life. To his surprise, the protagonist discovers, while watching attentively the panorama, he does not like it anymore and that he longs for...Wyoming:

It had been a shock to Mitchell, after several years in Wyoming, to see New England again – its maddening choked roads, tangled brush, the trees absorbing light, all drenched in shadow. The tepid air, unmoved by wind, seemed stifling.

This landscape was no longer big enough for him. The long sight lines and rearing mountains of Wyoming had got into his bones. (97)

But it is also true that Mitchell thought of Wyoming as a special and a beautiful place from the very beginning. Somehow, he was moved by this overwhelming space, with its amazing natural sculpture and colorful rocks, by its primitive charm, by its rare flora, and by its wide, breathless panorama. Obviously, the image the New Englander conceived, in spite of the strength of these first feelings, was necessarily quite a naïve and romanticized (through abundant metaphors) picture. He was

stunned by the beauty of the place, not the overphotographed jags of the Grand Tetons, but the high prairie and the luminous yellow distance, which pleased his sense of spatial arrangement. He felt as though he had stumbled into a landscape never before seen on the earth and at the time that he had been transported to the *ur*-landscape before human beginnings ... His heart squeezed in, and he wished for a celestial eraser to remove the fences, the crude houses, the one he bought included, from this place. (107)

Over time, Mitchell will not only grow in ecological consciousness, but will also progress in understanding Wyoming wildlife and the Wyomingites themselves. As to the wildlife, to Eugenie's surprise and disgust, after some weeks of feeding deer in winter Mitchell started to think about hunting them, not for pleasure, but for practical reasons. On the other hand, he would never use a rifle against a pronghorn. Inexplicably, he deeply (and romantically) "fell in love"

with “those supreme athletes of the animal world which had evolved on the high plains over 20 million years along with wolves and bison.” (109).

But apart from such a romantic fancy, Mitchell was learning fast, taking their neighbors as examples. Eugene’s case was different. From the beginning there were some features of Wyoming that irritated her. She found its climate, the strong wind and severe winters, especially difficult to endure. Last winter in Wyoming

The wind exhausted her. Dry and bitterly cold wind built the snow into small private dunes on the lee side of each sage plant, polished the remaining snow into tight, glossy sculptures ...The wind set its teeth into the heavy log house and shook it with terrific gusts. In the early morning it ceased for a few hours, then as the sun climbed over the aspen, it returned, brutal and avid, sweeping into the air what little loose snow remained. It never really stopped. (116)

This is the way Eugene perceived the harsh Wyoming weather; by personifying the wind it seemed an unusually threatening natural force. But also, there were many winter days she was “not displeased” with. These were the times when “The air was clear and the sunlight so fierce that the subtle colors of lichen and rock, of dusty sage leaf burned with an intensity the clouded east could never know” (113). She even described it as “beautiful” when “came ten days of flawless clarity, radiantly golden days in the shimmering aspen groves” and when “from the lodgepole pine on the slopes above twisted ribbons of resinous scent” (113). To celebrate it, though, Eugene did something

unreasonable, something reckless, that once again confirmed she did not belong there; while enjoying the landscape, walking carelessly along a forest trail near their house, she bumped into a hunter; she could have been killed by mistake because of not wearing an orange vest.

Eventually, the weather was a trigger for Mitchell and Eugene's marital problems. On one occasion, because of a spring blizzard, they had to stay home, just the two of them "housebound" together for several hours. The day before

The wind changed to a warm Chinook. The meadows trickled with sheets of water from melting snowdrifts. The thermometer touched seventy. Overnight this balmy weather swallowed its own tail and the temperature fell as though drop-kicked off a cliff. The next morning a black roll cloud crushed the landscape and blasted the icy prairie with billows of snow.

(120)

They did not withstand the pressure, they burst with mutual reproaches; it was clear one of them wanted to leave, return to New York, and the other one wished to stay. For Eugene, the Wyoming landscape and its wildlife were never more than "a decorative novelty" (she was a kitchen and bath designer), she was only able to enjoy them from the prettifying point of view. And although at the end of the story it seems that she eventually goes beyond this shallow aesthetic category and that the superb Wyoming panorama finally makes her reflect over life, over humans' insignificance, she rapidly shifts back to her future

professional plans. What she saw in that very moment, from the leaving plain, is one of Proulx's best descriptions of the Wyoming landscape:

The black mountain ranges capped and splotched with snow, roads like crimped lengths of yarn from unraveled knitting. From on high it seemed human geometry had barely scratched the land. There were a few roads, an occasional dammed lake. But most of what lay below was great brown and red curves, scooped cirques, rived canyons with unsteady water in the depths, scalloped rocks whose paler resembled lace, eroded slopes that seemed clawed by some monstrous garden tool. On a string-like road below, the few vehicles were the size of pinheads, crawling fleas. Was this what Mitchell saw when he went on those long drives, the diminution of self, a physical reduction to a single gnat isolated from the greater swarm of gnats? The absurdity of living one's life? (124)

As said above, this splendid reflection did not lead Eugene to any spiritual enrichment, to any deeper understanding of the planet's natural order: humans as just other insignificant creatures. Instead, it gave her two splendid ideas: "a cowboy kitchen for urban bachelors and a kind of ranch kitchen with crossed branding irons over the raised hearth to replace the ultramodern German style" (124). She was going back to New York, the urban jungle; from the naturalistic point of view, what she was doing was the best for her in order to survive and succeed. She was perfectly adapted to her New York environment.

In one of the stories from the collection *Fine Just the Way It Is*, “Testimony of the Donkey,” a completely different case of an outsider is presented: Marc, an excellent skier, superb rock climber and a real admirer of the Western landscape. In a relationship with a Westerner Catlin, a native inhabitant, he found a perfect person with whom he could enjoy the “remnants of the vanishing wild” (155). Wilderness travel was what united them; “The rough country was their emotional center” (155). In spite of having seen and admired innumerable magnificent landscapes, it was impossible for them not to be thrilled again, and again. When on her solitary hiking trip (with fatal consequences), Catlin could not notice when the trail she was on “broke into an explosion of wildflowers – columbine, penstemon, beautiful Clarkia, chickweed and Indian paintbrush” (164). She felt “delighted by the alpine meadow and a few banks of snow packed into clefts on the north sides of slopes” (165). There was no doubt: “The scene was exquisitely beautiful.” (165).

The Wyoming Mountains were, indeed, beautiful, but they were also dangerous. Apart from the tragic event at the end where Catlin, all alone, is trapped by a rock, the story also mentions an avalanche. Again, the Wyoming weather and human arrogance, or maybe “just” carelessness, led someone to death: a thoughtless adult and four young boys.

Last but not least, the most bloodcurdling tragedy must be pointed out: Archie and Rose McLaverty’s sad story presented in “Them Old Cowboy Songs” (*Fine Just the Way It Is*). The misleading tenderness of the first paragraphs may truly deceive the reader: “There is no happiness like that of a young couple in a little house they have built themselves in a place of beauty and solitude.” (50). Indeed, the place they chose to set their homestead was

charming, with the Little Weed coming “rattling down from Sierra Madre, water named not for miniature and obnoxious flora but for P.H. Weed, a gold seeker who had starved near its source” (47) (a hint foreshadowing the unlikelihood of a happy ending?). But it was also very solitary, especially in 1885, when the government was still giving away public land for homestead. With just one neighbor with a summer shack up on the mountain, Rose had no chance to be saved.

What happened to the female protagonist was that she was left in such a hostile place all alone being pregnant; the baby, though expected in early autumn, arrived two months ahead. Just a day before the pains started, the weather changes made her sweat with scorching heat and tremble with freezing cold; her precipitated childbirth was probably the consequence of these alterations. This is how Proulx describes this (un)natural phenomena:

July was hot, the air vibrating, the dry land like a scraped sheep hoof.

There was a dark cloud to the south and she was glad to hear the distant rumble of thunder ... The advanced wind came in, thrashing tree branches and ripping leaves ... Lightning danced on the crest of Barrel Mountain, and then a burst of hail swallowed up the landscape in a chattering, roaring sweep ... Almost as quickly as it had started the rain stopped, a few last hailstones fell and against the moving cloud the arc of a double rainbow promised everything [Another trick to momentarily mislead the reader or rather a bitter irony?] ...

The next morning it was cold and sleety and her back ached. (65)

Rose did not survive. Her little, very young body, after three days of torture (a very naturalistic description, no details spared) finally managed to expel a tiny corpse. In spite of a strong hemorrhage, her ancient instinct made her crawl outside to bury her infant, wrapped in a sheet. She somehow made it back to the cabin and the last thing she saw, “struggling through the syrup of subconsciousness,” was “Barrel Mountain, bringing darkness, squashed its bulk against the window and owls crashed through, wings like iron bars” (66). Aitor Ibarrola’s interpretation of Rose’s act of burying her child is that it expresses Proulx’s belief in human resistance and the worth of attitudes and behaviors “even when the surrounding reality places serious constraints on human volition” (“Re-writing” 135). And although, as Ibarrola puts it, “it could be argued that only a mother would spend the last drops of her blood in such a futile enterprise,” a completely insignificant enterprise in the face of a natural environment, “yet the whole scene is suggestive of her extreme care and her resistance to give in easily to her and her baby’s fate” (“Re-writing” 135).

Archie’s lot, miles away, was no better, although he outlived his wife several months. But in January, “cold enough to freeze flying birds” (68) his body surrendered, exposed to slave-like work and extreme weather conditions. Sent to “gather any bovine wanderers he could find in a certain washout area, swampy in June, but now hundreds of deep holes and snaky little streams smoothly covered with snow” (69), after two days of toiling wet and freezing he fell ill with pneumonia. A friend decided to help him; the only way was to take the boy to a nearer town. While he was dragging Archie on a primitive travois, “The snow began, increasing in intensity until they were traveling blind” (71).

The only reasonable thing to do was to shelter in a nearby shack, and spend a night there. But the weather surprised with its strength again:

A serious blizzard and fatal cold began to slide down from the Canadian plains that night, and when it broke twelve days later the herds were decimated, cows packed ten deep against barbwire fences, pronghorn congealed into statues, trains stalled for three weeks by forty-foot drifts and two cowpunchers in a line shack frozen together in a buffalo robe. (73)

Rose and Archie's nearest neighbor, Tom Ackler, had a cat named Gold Dust. Tom did not spend the winter in his cabin, but Gold Dust stayed. It turned out she made it through perfectly, her fur thicker than before; she had probably even mated with a bobcat. Tom also noticed when he went to check on the McLaverties, that a weasel was using their cabin as its den. When Tom saw the animal, and "it was the largest, handsomest weasel he had ever seen, shining eyes and a lustrous coat," he thought that "wild creatures managed well through the winter" (74). He had a similar reflection after founding Rose's remains and after understanding there was no way to discover what had happened to her and her missing husband: "He thought about Gold Dust's rampant vigor and rich fur, about the sleek weasel at the McLaverty cabin. Some lives and some died, and that's how it was" (77).

In *That Old Ace* the weather conditions can be hard and surprising as well, but they never lead to such horrible consequences as those described above. The protagonist, a young city dweller Bob Dollar, the very moment of

crossing into Texas is welcomed by its fierce wind, a wind that “banged at the car with irregular bursts and slams” (43), a wind responsible for moving all kinds of trash (hung later “picturesquely” on barbwire fences), a wind strong enough to hit Bob’s car windshield with a big tumbleweed and leave an arched crack across the glass. Also, Bob realized that “the smell and an immediate choking sensation in his throat as he drove past an enormous feedlot, the cows obscured by the manure dust that loaded the wind” (43) was clearly the source of the cloud he had earlier attributed to fire. Such a discovery “introduced him to the infamous brown days of Texas panhandle, wind-borne dust he later heard called ‘Oklahoma rain’” (43).

Oddly enough, the day when Bob experienced the worst, the most dangerous climatic conditions in his life, was when he learnt that he was actually lucky to stay in the part of the Texas Panhandle he had chosen for his scouting job, for just a few miles away a violent tornado was provoking considerable damages. Bob learnt that the windshield of his car “crazed in a dozen places,” the vehicle itself “ruined, pocked with ice pellet dings” (224), was the very least that could happen to him. However, for this Colorado city dweller, what he experienced that day was horrifying:

Hail and rain mixed, the hail increasing in size, smacking the car, the road, and rebounding with dull purple flashes. The lightning shot around him in blinding streamers. ... The wind was terrific and frightening. ... He could just make out hailstones the size of walnuts lashing the stream into froth. ... A brown wave swept down the Saddle Blanket, no longer pencil-size, but a snarling river. He watched in

horrified amazement as the water swelled out of its banks and began spreading over the road behind him, then, with thin, watery fingers, crept over the bridge roadway.

Slewing and skidding he fought his way through the wet detritus on the road. ... A piece of metal roofing hurled past and tumbled end over end across the prairie. ... A large dark hump in the road turned into a dead cow and somehow he steered around it. (224)

The reflection Bob Dollar was overrun with in that moment is signifying, indeed: “No wonder, he thought, that panhandle people were a godly lot, for they lived in a sudden, violent atmospheres. Weather kept them humble.” (224). Surprisingly enough, just a few miles from his landlady’s ranch, where he sheltered from what seemed to be an Armageddon, he found “the sun shining and the roads dry and pale as powdered milk” (226). As an old panhandle inhabitant explained it: “you get used to a rapid weather change. It’s part a the character a the place” (226).

As if confirming Bob’s consideration as to the extraordinary endurance of the local people, his landlady LaVon, when talking about the history of her region, was confident describing the panhandle as the most complicated part of North America to be inhabited, and it was because of its “light soil, drought, bad wind, terrible heat, tornadoes and blue northers” (102). As the woman stated pointedly: “It’s a weather place” (102). The clearest consequences of such constant adversities and unexpected dangers, of “the remote and level land, tempestuous blasts, tornadoes drilling down from super cells and the peculiar

configuration of territory,” were the leaving of those who found it impossible to adjust, and the staying of the fittest, the natural selection of the settlers.

Furthermore, as far as the naturally adapted to the prairie creatures are concerned, the buffaloes have to be mentioned. Supplanted by the cows over a century before, their unequalled characteristics only understood and appreciated by a few recently; in the novel, Brother Mesquite and Ace Crouch appear as spokesmen for these animals. The cows’ inferiority seems to be obvious; first of all, they are too selective: “They’ll eat all the creampuff grasses and plants so you have to keep moving them after a few days to another pasture unless you like to see bare dirt” (247). Also, they need someone to provide them with weather. Finally, they act foolishly, as if not following their instinct, in case of a storm: “Poor old cow moves with it, stays in the bad weather movin along with the storm until she drops or comes up against a fence and there she freezes” (275). The superiority of the bisons, according to Brother Mesquite’s words, becomes evident, for “they evolved on the plains with the plants – the two grew up together, they *belong* together in this place, this landscape. The bison and the native plant species have a *relationship*.” (274). And so the buffaloes will never expect the rancher to provide them with food or with water, in case of a blizzard “they head *into* the storm, so they get out a the bad weather quicker” (275). Indeed, one cannot reject Brother Mesquite’s conclusion stating: “The bison is self-reliant and belongs to this country. The cow, bred to be placid and sluggish and easy to handle, is an interloper.” (275).

Proulx, when touching upon the theme of the first settlers in the West, pretends to deconstruct the myth of their conquest, generally understood as a successful process. In the epigraph to “Them Old Cowboy Songs” Proulx wrote:

“There is a belief that pioneers came into the country, homesteaded, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded ranch dynasties. Some did. But many more had short runs and were quickly forgotten.” (47). Some, like the ones referred to in *That Old Ace*, found it impossible to endure the extreme and unpredictable climatic conditions, and abandoned. Many, like Archie and Rose, though tried hard, did not manage to survive. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, merely staying alive on the difficult Wyoming ground should be considered an achievement. As seen above, the same rule could be applied when referring to the panhandle. The landscape and the weather determine one’s life in most cases. The proud octogenarian Mero’s failure was a result of his belittling the Wyoming winter; Archie McLaverty ended defeated by the extreme cold too. Car Scope’s, Gilbert Wolfscale’s and other ranchers’ miseries resulted from such phenomena as floods and droughts. The “pioneers” from Wamsutter could not progress because of the severe growing conditions in the desert. Beautiful mountains and forests with its luxuriant flora were highly significant in Jack Twist’s, Ennis del Mar’s and Creel Zmudzinski’s lives. Some of the characters, the fittest, succeeded because of their union with the environment; for the others, the unable to adjust, the unpredictable weather and the burdensome landscape were too much to handle, they were determined to fail. As O. Alan Weltzien put it in his essay:

Landscape fiction demonstrates, before and during the twentieth century, a *range* of human responses, of accommodations and resistances, to the power of physical setting and weather. The *Wyoming Stories*, which foreground weather, suggest in variable measure the futility or doom of

resistance. Setting's foreground status relegates characters to a background in their own destinies. (100)

Solitary and arid plains, rocky mountains, sharp cliffs, treacherous sinkholes, mountain lions, wolves, flood, droughts, burning heat, gelid cold, maddening wind, hail, tornados, snow storms... The romantic concept of the balance of nature now seems more absurd than ever. Those who adjust best to their constantly changing environment, and sometimes those who are simply lucky to stay alive, survive. As one of the characters in "The Wamsutter Wolf", a wildlife biologist, acutely remarked:

Nothing is really *balanced*. Try to think of it as an ongoing poker game, say five-card draw, but everything constantly changes – the money, the card suits, the players, even the table, and everything is affected by the weather, and you're playing in a room where the house around you is being demolished. (144)

Weltzien's comment to the above quotation is noteworthy, indeed: "In her [Proulx's] endorsement of a geographical determinism, landscape and its weathers always hold the better hand. Given their losing hand, the interest becomes how they hold their heads up – or how quickly they fold." (104).

The following chapter will give another turn of the screw to the concept of balance; while the "ongoing poker game" is being played, "the house around you," is actually crushing. What I mean is that when to the "natural" problems of Wyoming and the Texas Panhandle – its climate and its landscape –

environmental issues are added, a catastrophe must be expected. When the land is exploited with no respect to its renewal but considering only the economic profit, the risk is run of not only losing the “unbalanced” game, but the actual *place* of the game being played.

2.3. Wyoming and Texas Panhandle in Proulx’s Texts:

The Region’s Environmental and Economic Situation

The contemporary economic situation is always one of the strongest influences both in a nation’s and particular citizens’ lot. As said before, Donald Pizer observed that a modern naturalistic work responds to the preoccupations of particular moments of modern American life. Therefore, economic and ecological problems characterizing the American West today could not be overlooked. Also, according to Richard Lehan, the power of money is an important aspect of the historical process of all social changes. That is why, although the nature is probably the most determining factor in characters’ environment, Proulx’s western narrative describes the economic and the social conditions of the Westerners’ lives as well.

It is impossible to talk about the Wyoming and Texas Panhandle economy, which is always directly related to land, and omit the issue of ecology; it is impossible to analyze Proulx’s western texts without relating to ecocriticism. But even before actually reading her writings, one may presume the possibility of the ecocritical perspective to be applied: because they belong to the western American literature and because of their realistic style. The importance of the

first reason is stressed by Glen A. Love in her essay included in *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

... I will be turning increasingly to that nature-oriented literature in which most of us [scholars] spend much of our professional life, western American literature ... Fred Erisman made the point over ten years ago in an essay entitled "Western Fiction as Ecological Parable," that much western American literature is an implicit plea for ecological awareness and activism. Even earlier, Thomas J. Lyon had posited hopefully that "the West's great contribution to American culture will be in codifying and directing the natural drive toward ecological thought, a flowering of regional literature into literally world-wide attention and relevance" (118). I think that many of us have found ourselves drawn to western literature by such a sense of its significance. (230)

The second reason is precisely mentioned in the last sentence of the above quotation: ecocriticism will turn to the literature that faithfully reflects the real world. The literary critic who as one of the first proposed the return to realism to examine nature writing was Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*. According to Andrea Campell's accurate summary of Buell's work,

Frustrated with the parameters of literary theory, Buell asks, "Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?" (II). He laments the relegation of the environment as "setting" that is used metaphorically, rather than as a "place of literal reference or as an object

of retrieval or contemplation for its own sake” (85). ... he proposes more attention to environmental nonfiction and its admirable attempts to portray nature realistically. Although he complicates the notion of “classical realism,” Buell points to realism as a way to move the environment to the forefront of literary discussions, decenter the human character, and reconnect readers with their natural environment.

One of Proulx’s most often used resources when it comes to the description of settings, which in Wyoming and in the Texas Panhandle generally implies nature, is “to portray nature realistically” (or even naturalistically). Also, when analyzing her western works it is inevitable to “move the environment to the forefront of literary discussions.” Therefore, I consider that *Wyoming Stories* and *That Old Ace* should also be examined from the ecocritical point of view. Furthermore, I agree with Aitor Ibarrola when he affirms that

if we decided to speak of a “naturalist ethos” in Proulx’s Wyoming fiction, we would need to update the meaning of that phrase, since it is clear that recent developments in environmental and ecocritical approaches would demand a rather different take on the role assigned to nature by contemporary author (see Glotfelty). As I see it, part of Proulx’s revised naturalist ethos derives precisely from her attempt to substitute a more ecocentric paradigm that endows nature with a more prominent role in the future of the planet for the traditional worldview that restricted agency and values almost exclusively to human beings. (“Considering” 131)

In the majority of Proulx's stories ecology and economy go hand in hand. In "Pair a Spurs" (*Close Range*) the very first sentence explains one aspect of this relation: the Western ranchers' finances depend on what the rest of the country at a given time fancy as "eco-friendly," "green," "healthy," etc. The protagonist and the other ranchers called these new fanciful habits a deep "malaise."

... all over the country men who once ate blood-rare prime, women who once cooked pot roast for Sunday dinner turned to soy curd and greens, warding off hardened arteries, *E. coli*-tainted hamburger, the cold shakes of undulant fever. They shied from overseas reports of "mad cow" disease. And who would display evidence of gross carnivorous appetite in times of heightened vegetarian sensibility? (151)

This is why, apart from the disastrous weather conditions, Car's ranch was going through a very hard times. But he did not want render yet, unlike some of his neighbors who opted for dude ranching. This was the Muddymans' case; although they "weren't suited to the constant company of urban strangers, it paid the bills" (156). This was what had to be done in order to keep the land, to economically stay afloat. But eventually, their ranch has to be sold. First, it passed through the hands of an actor who had an "original" idea of keeping bison (explored thoroughly in the Texas Panhandle novel). But a specialist from the university, after asking skeptically: "That right, Mr. Fane wants to keep on with the cutting horse operation and run bison?" (183) explained the economic and environmental conditions for breeding the animals:

'It's good move to go to bison, twice the profit, half the work. Labor costs are low because they only need a third a the feed the cow does. Rustle their own grass right through the snow, bring a beautiful \$2.35 a pound. However. They need room. Big room. Which you don't got'. (183)

At the end, what happened with the property is meaningful, indeed, given that it confirms the global fashionable trends in feeding green and in growing ecologically. It was sold to "a breakfast food mogul sworn to organically grown grains who said he wanted nothing more than to let the ranch 'revert to a state of nature'" (185).

The story where the dream of the "reverting to a state of nature" is especially acutely expressed is "The Governors of Wyoming" (*Close Range*). One of the main characters, Wade Walls, seemed to be obsessed with the environmental problems. This is how he describes his vision of the perfect Wyoming land:

'I want to be like it was, all the fences and cows gone. I want the native grasses to come back, the wildflowers. I want the dried-up streams to run clear, the springs to flow again and the big rivers run hard. I want the water table restored. I want the antelope and the elk and the bison and the mountain sheep and the wolves to reclaim the country. I want the ranchers and feedlot operators and processors and meat distributors to go down the greased pole straight to hell. If I ran the west I'd sweep

them all away, leave the wind and the grasses to the hands of the gods.
Let it be the empty place.’ (220)

Wonderful, yes, but an extremely radical dream it was. But that was Wade, very radical in his opinions and beliefs; cows, these “stinking, fly-covered, shit-smearing, disease-spreading brutes” (224) were the creatures he loathed with all his heart, mind and soul. Walls believed that “the domestication of livestock was the single most terrible act the human species ever perpetrated” (219). Of course, ranchers, as being the ones responsible for breeding cattle, and all of those somehow linked to the “infernal” animals, shared with them his enmity.

Interestingly enough, when read out of the story’s context, many environmentally conscious readers would support Wade’s views. Also, those who instead of ranches inhabit trailers, the economically disadvantaged ones, would surely applaud some of his opinions:

‘These subsidized ranchers and their gas-bag cows destroying public range, riparian habitat, wiping out rare plants, trampling stream banks, creating ozone-destroying methane gas, ruining the National Forests that belong to the people, to all of us, stinking, polluting, stupid, world-destroying cows – and for what? A pitiful three percent of this state’s gross income. So a few can live a nineteenth-century lifestyle’. (218)

Now, what is truly thought-provoking in “The Governors” is that the author did not leave the reader with just this one subjective point of view with respect to the land-destroying cattle and the demonized ranchers. The other

side of the coin is represented precisely by a family of ranchers, the respected Birch brothers. According to their own words, the Birches were thinking about the “long run” (231), not just about the quick profit. They were taking a very special care of their land, leaving piles of hay in “places where that hard old alkali ground’s been bare since Birches come into the territory” (231), to make it new grass, softer and mellow. They wanted to heal the soil. And although their mother thought that “long run” was a luxury their neighbors would never even consider, they knew what they were talking about:

‘Hulse and me come to feel the long run is the only thing that matters. Times change. You know better than anybody what a hard business this is, workin with a fingernail profit margin. We can’t afford a let out range run down no more. We got a do something. They are cutting back our allotment, that federal rangeland reform is comin, we got irrigation problems.’ (232)

They recognized things had been done badly in previous generations (“I don’t want to say anything against Dad, but the things he done and his father way back when, drives what Hulse and me do now” 232). They did not want to follow their ancestors’ steps, even if it meant to earn less and not right away. As opposed to the general belief, they had to struggle day by day with serious economic difficulties. They scuffled with the harsh climate, “government rules and dense bankers,” “the quixotic beef market,” and “ornery fellow ranchers” (235). But worst of all, they had to watch their back and protect their ranch against the most powerful enemy: the corporations. One of the brothers

complained that what the corporations did was to buy ranches for less than they were worth and, on top of that, “Goddamn pirates’re subdividing, stockin ‘the common land’ with tame elk” (236). For the Birch family the hated New West meant people who instead of breeding cattle were “drinkin cappuccino while watch the elk” (236), or those who did not actually *live* there, the telecommuters. (Ironically, the very same telecommuters “watching the elk” seem to be the perfect and the most ecologically friendly residents to occupy the Texas Panhandle, as we will learn in the following paragraphs, when analyzing *That Old Ace in the Hole*.) Moreover, the Birches were seriously concerned about unfair competition¹: “there is a conspiracy. There is a powerful international group of men who want to control the ranches and the farmers – to control the food supply of the world” (236).

An, apparently, fervent environmentalist and a decent family of modern and environmentally friendly ranchers; between two such noble views consensus should be possible (as opposed to the case of corporations). The problem was that the supposed preservationist Wade Walls was in reality the insane, the traumatized in his childhood Wade Walasiewicz, “charged with the rush of destruction” (245), described by Proulx naturalistically as

avenging son of an assembly line butcher, his father the head boner inserting his knife in the mouth cavity, trimming ropy veins and bruises from the stidd tongue, cleaving the skull to remove brain and pituitary, shearing the horns away and dead at forty-two from some malignant infection. (245)

¹ The idea of unfair competition is repeated in “A Lonely Coast” (*Close Range*), where an example of cutting fences by a big corporation’s hirelings is found.

With all that, regardless Wall's hypocrisy, his description of Wyoming as an ecologically ruined area is worth quoting, since the theme of those responsible for such a state will be recurring. Also, the aspect of newcomers and the harm they were causing, in the Wyomingites' belief, to the local economy will return in other stories:

But he knew all about this place, the fiery column of the Cave Gulch flare-off in its vast junkyard field, refineries, disturbed land, uranium mines, coal mines, trona mines, pump jacks and drilling rigs, clear-cuts, tank farms, contaminated rivers, pipelines, methanol-processing plants, ruinous dams, the Amoco mess, railroads, all disguised by the deceptively empty landscape ... He knew about the state's lie-back-and-take-it income from federal mineral royalties, severance and ad valorem taxes, the old ranches bought up by country music stars and assorted billionaires acting roles in some imaginary cowboy revue, the bleed-out of brains and talent, and for common people no jobs and a tough life in a trailer house. (213)

Yes, these "new money suitcase ranchers" were a real nuisance for the "old" Wyomingites. In "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?" Gilbert Wolfscale had a doubtful, in his view, pleasure to treat with them. He suspected that the "ex-California real estate agents, fabulous doctors, and retired cola executives" (68), when noticing his sloppy yard (According to Weltzien, "the 'skanky, run down outfit' others see represents every overgrazed operation in

the late twentieth-century's increasingly environmentalist West" 108), believed his ranch could be a bargain; in disdain, "he could see in their eyes how they planned to bulldoze the house and build mansions with guest cottages." (68). He hated the mere idea of such a change.

Moreover, what Gilbert truly abhorred were the new trends concerning land and animals, and that some of this trend followers dared to admonish him. For example, "a Game & Fish biologist nagged him about fences that blocked antelope passage"² and a "busybody woman straight out of agricultural school came from the Extension Service one day and lectured him about protecting stream banks from cow-hoof erosion, about pasture rotation to prevent overgrazing" (69). His reaction to this last recommendation was as straightforward and definite as may be expected from "the real traditional Wyoming rancher": "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 doin it for a while. Guess I know something about it." (69).

Oddly enough, in the end he found himself in a situation in which "ecological conservationists and crusty ranchers" had to fight hand-in-hand against the state and federal government. The state betrayed him by doing something highly harmful to HIS land. The issue was very serious: the saline wastewater laden with mineral toxins coming from a coal bed methane on an adjacent land was seeping into his irrigation ditches. His alfalfa and even his household water were being poisoned. He had to admit it was a disaster for the

² The protagonist of "Man Crawling Out of Trees" Mitchell, also "had learned that [his ranch] was encroached on an ancient elk, deer, and pronghorn migration corridor and that the animals now had to thread their way through a maze of towns, ranches, fences, and roads to reach their traditional summer grazing range" (115). But Mitchell, unlike Gilbert, felt guilty about it.

ranch, although “he had always voted Republican and supported energy development as the best way to make jobs in the rural hinterlands” (80).

So now, together with the ecologists, Gilbert had to fight against the coal bed methane drilling. Now, on one hand, the good change was that he did not consider them ecology “freaks” anymore, and on the other, the ecologists recognized that ranchers were a strong counterforce against developers subdividing the land, that they “kept the old west alive” (80). They fought, but they did not succeed. The degradation of Wyoming continued. Nevertheless, I believe the way Proulx presents this issue – involving a pig-headed rancher, a devoted Republican, and a group of ecologists fighting together against the powerful extractive industries – is a potent picture to argue with. And if ever the corporations and the energy industries are to be fought, it will probably be due to such united forces, unimaginable to ally for anything but mere survival. And I agree with Weltzien when he says that “this story’s solidity derives from its environmental critique and its reminder of new modes of habitation, particularly recreation, in the West. A ranch is not necessarily an operation running as many cattle as possible.” (108).

With reference to the mineral boom in Wyoming, when it first broke out decades ago, all assumed it would provide its inhabitants with a happy and wealthy future. As a matter a fact, not only inhabitants of Wyoming were going to be the direct beneficiaries; people from all over the country would come, enjoy the abundance of natural resources and create new settlements. One of such places was Wamsutter, described in “The Wamsutter Wolf” (*Bad Dirt*); nevertheless, instead of emanating opulence, it reflected desperation and misery. More than a town, it resembled a trailer park, almost no real houses

built. “The migrant gypsies of gas and oil fields” (148) coming from Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Nebraska and California, were Wamsutter’s temporary inhabitants. Buddy Millar, the protagonist, thought that this was the picture of “the real Wyoming – full of poor, hardworking transients, tough as nails and restless, going where the dollar grew” (148).

Furthermore, the energy boom, as explained in the closing story of *Fine Just the Way It Is*, “Tits-Up in a Ditch,” apart from causing land damage, implied demographic problems: suddenly, there were no Wyoming boys to work on the Wyoming ranches. Oil companies offered them unusually high wages that no rich cattleman could ever pay. When the boom was over, they did not come back either: “the hands, after their taste of roustabout money, had fallowed the dollar away from Wyoming” (181).

In *That Old Ace*, the agriculture together with the water and oil extraction industry seemed to be the reason of the highly alternated landscape in Texas as well. Bob’s first impression was that “nothing of the original prairie remained” (1). What the protagonist observed, when examining the horizon, were grain elevators (“many peeling and shabby...,some surfaced with asbestos shingles, a few with rusted metal loosened by the wind” 2), water towers, nodding pump jacks, pivot irrigation rigs, condensation tanks and complex assemblies of pipes and gauges. Furthermore, as if advancing the principal themes of the novel, Bob observed “brightly painted V-8 diesel engines, ... pumping up water from the Ogallala aquifer below” and “scores of anonymous, low, grey buildings with enormous fans at their ends set back from the road and surrounded by chain-link fence,” the hog farms (2). The narrator’s short comment on the ecological value of such a place is signifying, indeed:

Bob Dollar had no idea he was driving into a region of immeasurable natural complexity that some believed abused beyond saving. He saw only what others had seen – the bigness, pump jacks nodding pterodactyl heads, road alligators cast off from the big semi tires. ... he was not so much in a place as confronting the raw material of human use. (3)

As far as the agriculture is concerned, Bob rapidly realized this industry's golden years were gone. The fields were scattered with pieces of abandoned farm machinery; just next to his rented bunkhouse he counted "five rusted wheat combines, three pickup trucks, four old tractors, various harrows and rakes, all sinking into the earth" (67). After some weeks spent in the region, the protagonist was finally able to understand the difficult situation of the local farmers, as well as the change of growing's priorities:

... he learned from men sprawled and akimbo, like abandoned machinery, that a center-pivot irrigation system could cost as much as \$100,000 per quarter section; that the region was too cold for cotton, but grew staggering amounts of wheat, milo sorghum, alfalfa, corn and soybeans for domestic and overseas markets and to feed the hundreds of thousands of feedlot cattle and bunkered hogs that gave the panhandle its distinctive odor. (109)

But clearly, the two main industries in the Texas Panhandle were oil extraction and the hog farms, developed already and still growing. With reference to the first one, there are several examples in the novel of the residents lucky enough to find oil on their ranches. Most of them went insane, spending money everywhere and endlessly, changing cars and changing wives. Some, the moment their luck abandoned them, lost all their ridiculously luxurious properties and were forced to start all over again, humbly. Others, like Jim Skin, while still lucky, embraced the eco style of life, following the environmentalists' advices as to the buffaloes breeding. Habakuk Van Melkebeek (whom the reader gets to know by means of the flash-backs, for he is no longer alive when Bob settles in the Woolybucket, an outsider coming from Holland) seems to be the only one smart enough to keep investing after his first lucky strike, becoming a petrodollar billionaire in the end. It is interesting to underline the way some residents still remembered those first years of the oil boom; although their complains are not actually directly related to the highly pernicious effect the industry had on the environment, as if not conscious yet of the ecological damage, their focus is principally on the aesthetical and moral one:

... the awl workers, gamblers and bank robbers and murderers and bootleggers, all mixed together, a regular Sin City. ... I remember how greasy and everything was. You'd pick up a plate – greasy; doorknobs – greasy; the car windshield – greasy. And that smell a sulfur and awl and garbage and likker just everywhere. ... Just turned into a rag town. (178)

The main problems of the oil industry, both moral and aesthetical, seems to end up somehow controlled; now the hog farms became the main obstacle for many locals, obstacle for to living their lives comfortable and in health. The inconveniences related to the hog industry were more than just that; as a matter of fact, both short and long run consequences proved disastrous for the health of the panhandle inhabitants. The stink, undoubtedly, was the worst immediate effect; the nearest neighbors of the hog facilities found it impossible to breathe normally. The first time Bob experienced the unbearable smell, he nearly vomited, such a horrible flavor it was: “a huge fetid stink like ten thousand rotten socks, like decaying flesh, like stale urine and swamp gas, like sour vomit and liquid manure, a ghastly palpable stench that made him retch” (135). He understood the burden of the hog farms’ neighbors even better when living next to one of these stinky buildings for some time, renting an apartment: “He woke with a headache, his ears ringing, his red eyes itching. He felt dizzy and disoriented as though he were coming down with the flu. ... It [the smell] permeated everything. His clothes reeked, his mouth seemed filled with manure and mud” (321-322).

As to the health problems resulting from working on or living by the hog farms, some were potentially lethal. A constant and irritating cough of Jim Skin, a secondary character, was a direct reaction of his body after only some days working on one of the farms’ lagoons “haulin waste” (112). Jerky Shattle, Bob’s second landlord and another farm’s nearest neighbor, had some very serious lung problems that, according to his doctors, would shortly kill him. In addition, the Shattles’ little grandson could no longer visit them, for he got convulsions

when smelling the infernal odor. Living in the facilities' vicinity proved simply impossible.

But the consequences of having the hog farms all over the panhandle were, for a long run, dangerous for all its inhabitants. Ace Crouch, when explaining the matter to Bob, had no doubts the waste ponds were polluting the water table and leaking into the Ogallala Aquifer. In addition, the overload of manure spread on the fields supposed another danger:

A little bit a manure in one thing, but when it's a foot deep year after year the excess nitrogen has to go somewhere. And if you think the lagoons and exhaust fans make a stink, wait until you get a whiff of a field fresh spread with hog pops. The ammonia will burn your eyes out a your head. Your hair will fall out. (113)

On the top of that, some of the hog farms' problems might have been avoided, but the corporations' financial profits would not be high enough: "They could make the stink better by coverin over the waste ponds or aeratin, but that costs money. Cheaper to just let it sit there" (113). Moreover, it seemed that these environmental atrocities were being done with the consent of the authorities ("the state don't care" 113) and with nearly no help to the local economy: "One hog farm site makes a very few jobs at minimum wage. ... The corporations don't buy locally. ... The hog farms come in, they look like they're bringin money into the region so some a the locals just lap it up. Give them tax breaks." (113). Ace's conclusion is summarized in Brother Mesquite's concept of the "moral geography," which is explained as follows:

In the old days you had no hog factory farms. Maybe fifty, sixty farmers and ranchers raise a few pigs the traditional way. Each one of their families bought local. The kids went to school local. People got together for dances and dinners, they banked local and the money enriched the region. (114)

Clearly, the local environmentalists' and the huge hog corporations' view on what was good for the region, and what was a fair thing to do with the land, were diametrically different. While Ace and Brother Mesquite considered they had the right or even the obligation to protect their home land, the corporations' executives believed "what rules the world is utility – general usefulness" and that "what serves the greater good will prevail" (302).

Eventually, the idea as to the hogs themselves, as living creatures, the conflict parties professed could not have been more opposed. Bob's bosses' beliefs were expressed by his direct supervisor, Ribeye Cluke: "We don't think of hogs as 'animals,' ... not in the same way as cats and dogs and deer and squirrels. We say 'pork units.' What they are ... is 'pork units' – a crop, like corn or beans." (302). But in Ace's opinion, the hogs, animals as they were, had to have their rights, just like the pigs raised locally, with no antibiotics, no growth stimulants or hormones. While those pigs bred by some neighbors "live outside and ... go in the sun or the shade as they want," the factory hogs are confined in small cages and their skin is

‘as thin as tissue paper. Try to get em in the truck, just touch em and they bleed. An some a those hogs is so weighty their legs snap like sticks. Pigs twitch their head and rub themselves raw on pen wire. Of all the creatures’ lives on God’s earth, for downright pure-dee hell the life of a hog farm pig has got a be the worst.’ (335)

As Wes Berry points out,

a lingering issue throughout the novel is whether or not Woolybucket, Texas will ultimately be destroyed by global economics, represented by the absentee corporation that pollutes the place and drains the water, and also by fossil-fuel industries and the dependence on these industries by the people who live there. (178)

An unexpected answer, as a matter of fact almost too luckily to believe its plausibility, is given in the last chapters of the novel; the problem of the Texas Panhandle contaminated by the pernicious hog farms seems possible to resolve. An unimaginable amount of money Habakuk van Melkebeek earned during his lifetime is inherited by Ace, making him a petrodollar billionaire. And so now, with the support of some of the local activists, Ace Crouch plans to “buy up al the farms and ranches and the hog places he can, and politicians, too ... take down fences and open her back up, run bison in the panhandle” (340). Moreover, a part of this idealistic plan is the foundation of Prairie Restoration Homesteads: nice and comfortable houses for nature admirers, people who wish to live observing the prairie restoring. As explained by Brother Mesquite,

Each one a the home sites would have a covenant – the buyer would have to agree to maintain habitat for prairie species – prairie dogs and burrowin owls, prairie chickens, antelope or Bairds’s sparrow, the ferruginous hawk or native prairie plants or whatever. ... Ace thinks there’s people out there would be proud a get into such a way a livin, kind of experiment in community habitat restoration. (356)

The reader does not know if such a utopic plan has a chance to succeed, for the novel ends at this very point, with this beautiful prospect of saving the panhandle advanced. Bob seems to be the voice of this doubt when he reflects over “naïveté” of the project’s designers: “he wanted to tell them that nothing worked out for the best, that ruined places could not be restored, that some aquifers could not recharge” (358). On the other hand, deep inside, his romantic self desired the Prairie Restoration project to work, and he secretly wished to be a part of it.

Bob’s reflections over the panhandle land, founded on what he learnt while living in Woolybucket and on what could he observed as an outsider, are meaningful, indeed, for they summarize ages of this area’s history and the humans’ pragmatic attitude toward it:

In his mind’s eye he saw the panhandle earth immemorially used and tumbled by probing grass roots, the cutting hooves of bison, scratchings of ancient turkeys, horses shod and unshod pounding along, the cut of iron-rimmed wheels, the slicing plow and pulverizing harrow, drumming

hail, the vast scuffins of trailed cattle herds, the gouge of drills bits and scrape of bulldozers, inundations of chemicals. What was left was a kind of worn, neutral stuff, a brownish dust possessing only utility. This ghost ground, ephemeral yet enduring, was what it came down to. (358-359)

It is important to mention the way Alex Hunt understands Ace's plan for his region; Hunt interprets it as the third narrative strand (after two previous patterns: "paradise found," exemplified by the parallel between Lieutenant Abert's and Bob's exploration of the area, and "paradise lost," based on numerous allusions to "Genesis"): "paradise regained." According to the scholar and his understanding of what he calls "narrative ecology" ("the very real relationship between our stories and our landscape" 184), Proulx is doing "important cultural work, turning regional landscape narratives upon themselves, revising them into environmentally sustainable stories for the Southern Great Plains bioregion" (186). The writer "must create a hopeful narrative that is responsive to the region's environmental and cultural history but which looks forward to a pragmatic plan" (191). Such a "narrative of ecological restoration" gives hope: "Yet land that has been damaged through generations of human use can be rehabilitated if narratives of ecological recovery can be introduced into the regional system of stories" (191).

Ironically, in Proulx's Wyoming stories the only force capable of detaining the exploitation and destruction of the prairie, of stopping the harmful extraction industries, was a magical sagebrush. As narrated in "The Sagebrush Kid" (*Fine Just the Way It Is*), when a multinational methane company came to the Wyoming prairie it discovered "a vast deposit of coal gas. Workers from out of

state rushed to the bonanza. A pipeline had to go in and more workers came” (88). Nevertheless, each time one of them napped in the shadow of the sagebrush, he was never seen again... It seems that the environmentally pernicious and economically ruthless corporations and companies may only be defeated in stories belonging, instead of the naturalism, to the magical realism. The way I understand it is that Proulx’s irony comes into service of the ecological issues as the best weapon to battle the influential destructive forces. The author uses her sharp sense of humor with a particular aim; she, to a certain point, acts like jesters in the medieval courts, exercising the concealed power of irony.

Wyoming’s environmental condition presented in *Wyoming Stories* is extremely depressing. Unlike in the case of *That Old Ace*, there are no ardent ecologists capable to influence the Wyomingites and their way of life, no audacious ideas, no idyllic designs. The reader’s reception is that it will not be long until all the area’s creeks and groundwaters end up contaminated, its prairies and its desert drilled and polluted, its land subdivided and sold to real estate sharks. Also, the conclusion is that the ranchers with their “methane-bags,” the cows, even in spite of their ubiquitous fences, are actually the only hope to preserve the relatively balanced situation. But the cattlemen will survive only if the rest of the country let the fanciful green food... Again, the relations of dependency in the stories are wonderfully ironic.

As to the economic conditions in the characters’ lives, the impression is that the only truly wealthy ones are, in case of the novel the petrodollar millionaires or, as in the Wyoming stories’ case, the newcomers. Not all of newcomers, of course, only the nouveau—riche. The rest, as those described in

“The Wamsutter Wolf,” were the poorest of all, simple and desperate breadwinners. The ranchers are not the privileged social group anymore (with only some few exceptions), in spite of their envied subsidies. That is the end of the Old West and the beginning of the New West and its new inhabitants, the telecommuters.

Probably the most memorable description of the Wyoming environmental condition because of the usage of a very vulgar and shocking, but accurate, metaphor is the one found in “Man Crawling Out of Trees.” It is expressed by an old Wyomingite as the answer to Mitchell’s question of what “a filthy yellow haze lying over the Wind River range” (120) could be. Mitchell found the image drawn by the answer “raw and offensive and consoled himself with the belief that the old man, out in the middle of nowhere, didn’t know what the yellow haze was and seized on a scapegoat” (120). But in the end he had to face the painful truth and accept the explanation as reflecting the sad reality:

‘Pollution. It’s smog. Comes from that goddamn Jonah infill methane gas project. One well ever ten acres. Never seen that smog before in Wyoming. You’re seein her start to die. The whoremasters got ahold on her. They got her down on her knees and any tinhorn with five bucks in his jeans comes by the put the prod pole to her and say, ‘suck his dick.’
(120)

Yes, the reality of the western landscape, such as presented by Proulx, is shocking and unpleasant. The environmental problems resulted from badly planned and administrated local economy have been annihilating the land for

decades, if not centuries. But the West, not many years ago, was a synonym of a natural paradise; its virgin forests, its impenetrable mountains, its luxuriant flora and its abundant Red Desert wildlife were the features the western states were famous for. As a matter of fact, this idealized image is what the majority of outsiders still keeps in their minds and refuse to abandon. Just as they refuse to let go the iconic image of Wyoming and Texas as the states where the myth of the West is fulfilled. Also, the Wyomingites and the Texans, according to most of the outsiders, but interestingly – and this is what is going to be analyzed in the following subchapter – according to themselves, should reflect all the characteristics the archetypical Westerner is supposed to possess. Ideally, a Westerner should equal a brave and honorable cowboy. Consequences of such ambitious expectations for common inhabitants, the characters of Proulx's fiction, are to be seen below.

2.4. The Western Society in *Wyoming Stories* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*

2.4.1. The Influence of the Myth of the West

Amaia Ibarra starts her "Introduction. The Cowboy Was Never Alone" with the following words:

No place has probably been more fantasized and imagined than the American West. No territory has been probably more essentialized and generally defined than the American West. No people have probably been more (mis)represented and stereotyped than the American

Westerners. No “state of mind” has probably been more shared and acknowledged than that of the American West. (xv)

Proulx starts her *Close Range* with the epigraph: “Reality’s never been of much use out here;” indeed, it seems that, until recently, the American West has only been described in the framework of fantasy. Stereotypes and preconceived images of the landscape, its people and, no need to outline, its heroes, found an extremely fertile ground to take root in the American culture and in the Americans’ minds. In her *Wyoming Stories* Annie Proulx confronts the mythic, heroic West with the down-to-earth everyday life the Westerners lead in Wyoming, the least populous of all states, the “Cowboy State.” The realistic characters the author creates are often tricked and usually end badly when under influence of the pernicious myth of the west. As a matter of fact, the validity of such a myth, and especially its influence on both the Westerners and the outsiders, will have to be reviewed when analyzing some of Proulx’ stories. To confront the imagined West with the naturalistic West by Proulx will be an interesting task; some will find the result disappointing, but this is how the reality generally turns out to be.

As to the novel, in *That Old Ace* the cowboy figure is present as well, indeed. But it is a different, a less overwhelming presence. The reader is not informed as to the lot of contemporary cowboys, their labor conditions and their expectations (physical or psychological) in the Texas Panhandle; Rope Butt, an ancient cowhand, is the only character with whom the theme of a “classical” cowboy is somehow brought out. Apart from that, it seems that the only aspect resisting the change of the panhandle inhabitants’ lifestyle is the fashion; such

items as the cowboy boots are considered indispensable for all panhandle residents.

Interestingly, the reader of the novel does learn plenty about the former times in the region, the times of the first settlers, the first ranchers (both individual and huge corporations, such as Xit) and cowboys. LaVon Fronk's ancestors' life stories and other residents' relatives' trajectories serve as examples in the history of populating the area. Some of the characters, such as Martin Merton Fronk, the son of a German immigrant watchmaker, came to the panhandle for unusual reasons (health problems, for example) but it did not took them long to imagine themselves as wealthy ranch owners. Fronk's case is especially meaningful, for the young man had no idea whatsoever in the matter of the land or the cattle breeding, yet, encouraged by "an occasional illustrated paper of incendiary political views and attractive engravings of little-known foreign regions, a class in which Martin mentally placed Texas" (74) he confidently assumed his professional carrier would be in stock-driving business. However, the very first days in the region Fronk was taught a life lesson: after a very unpleasant ingestion toxicity (described with all naturalistic details), rescued by two down to earth settlers, Martin discovered his ambitious plans sounded ridiculous, for he was mocked by the locals with no mercy:

You idiot, ... making it in the stock-driving business, you got to know cows like you know your own tweedle-dee. You got to have cowboyed, got to know the markets and men. You have to sweettalk crazy farmers and handle Indians. ... Stampedes, Indan troubles, blueburning Kansas farmers... (81)

Eventually, Martin Merton Fronk ended up running a local store, his transient dream of becoming a rancher forgotten quickly and with no regret.

But there are also some nineteenth-century stories of those who arrived in the panhandle dreaming about succeeding in the cattle business and actually achieved it. Moises Harsberger's case, who was LaVon's grandfather, proves that a hard-working cowboy, after some difficult but profitable interstate journeys with cattle, was able to earn just enough to purchase a ranch land. Nevertheless, it also shows the futility of men's luck, for after a few years of prosperity Harsberger's animals fell ill and started to die, and the survived cattle perished as a result of a harsh drought, severe winter and extremely rainy spring, with millions of flies driving the cows into treacherous bogs. As LaVon concluded: "It had took him ten years to build up his life to where he got his own place and in one year he went from sitting pretty to flat broke." (87).

Fortunately, judging from the manner Proulx describes them in the novel, it seems that these failed cowboys/ranchers were capable to endure hardship with dignity and go on with their lives engaging in different occupations. It will not be the case of the Wyoming stories' characters.

With reference to the twentieth-century cowboys in the novel, Rope Butt and Cy Frease might be interesting examples of two dissimilar attitudes toward the "cowboy baggage." They both dedicated their youth to a hard and passionate cowboy life, but at some point Rope went on with it and Cy took a surprising decision of a radical change.

The reader meets Rope at the end of his hard and exciting cowboy path, in his nineties; nevertheless, the old man "believed himself to be the only living

cowhand of proficiency still alive in the panhandle ... for what he lacked in strength he made up for with experience and cow sense” (137). When younger, Butt might be considered quite a “typical” representative of his profession; he preferred working on the plains than staying indoors, he “could not abide correction or gainsaying,” anything could cause him to quit and move on to another outfit” (137). But now, in his old days and, as the narrator specifies, “in these days of health plans and litigations” (137), he was nearly never hired anymore. And so, given a considerable amount of free time to his disposition, Rope Butt turned into an interesting example of an original cowboy figure. What I believe is worth highlighting, is that he developed particularly strong enthusiasm for cowboy poetry, as if discovering beds of sensitivity inside him. He felt fulfilled when creating his lines. Moreover, Rope’s tolerance seems unusual, for, in spite of his manly, rude manners, “he didn’t care much for the two nancy boys who had lately come up from Dallas ... he was willing to live and let live, for certain bunkhouse friendships [!] were not unknown, though little talked about” (138). Nevertheless, sometimes, when reflecting upon his lot, Rope Butt could not avoid the overwhelming feeling of despair, probably shared by the whole community of ancient and solitary cowboys, could not avoid asking himself “why the Dutchman had fallen into the land of plenty while he, Rope Butt, had nothing but a few roosters and arthritis” (150).

As to Cy Frease, though not an example of an extremely successful businessman when the reader meets him, he somehow knew how to revert his cowboy lot and turn into his real interests. After “cowboying” for years, “he tired of what he called ‘the pukiest shit-fire-and-save-the-matches goddam grub this a the devil’s table,’ said if he couldn’t cook better than that he’d drown himself in

his grandma's chamber pot, drew his pay, picked up his saddle and walked" (105). After some years (probably collecting more money), he reappeared again, said: "Cowboys deserve to eat wholesome too" (107) and opened a restaurant where he served "green", whole-wheat cuisine. Such a cowboy, constructed as a stereotype-free figure and ready to take his own choices, regardless any possible society's pressure, is an oddity in Proulx's fiction.

With all that, as LaVon stated, Texas "was the original cow and cowboy country and it still is the most cow of anywhere" (103). And there is no doubt that Proulx's Texas Panhandle is a place where cowboys have always been and still are highly respected and seen as herolike figures. And they have earned such a repute by their truly hard lives; Bob, after just some time listening to the regional talk about panhandle life, could not avoid shuddering when the conversation turned to "fractures, lacerations, concussions, deathly falls, maimings and fatalities"; it seemed that "every man, young and old ... had scars to show" (110). Old Freda Beautyrooms' words, when recalling her childhood on a ranch, and particularly a place called "sickroom," confirmed the daily dangers awaiting these tough boys were ubiquitous: "It's a wonder those fellows lived as long as they did, foolhardy, messin with guns and around half-broke horses" (185).

Eventually, it is important to underline that in *That Old Ace* the image of a cowboy is, to a certain extent, practical and down-to-earth. Rather than cowboys' mythical status, their hard work is emphasized. Even such a meaningful sport as the rodeo in Woolybucket is not what one expects; the one Bob Dollar witnessed during the Barbwire Festival, for example, was of a special kind, indeed:

Bob had been to many rodeos, but never a ranch rodeo. ... His program told him that the competitors were restricted to cowboys who worked local ranches, no professionals allowed. Three of the traditional events had been dropped – bull riding ... and barrel racing ... The unfamiliar events were four-man penning, old-timer's bronc riding, double mugging, a feed sack race, a cutting horse contest and, as the last event, wild cow milking. (348)

During their embroidery meeting in LaVon's house, the elderly ladies recalled some extraordinary stories from their youth, the majority of them with cowboys as central masculine characters. Those cowboys have a special place in the collective memory of the Texas Panhandle society, but their nostalgic image belongs to the past. And it does not seem to affect the present, the contemporary young men, at least not excessively. The case of Proulx's short stories will prove diametrically different.

As far as the Wyoming stories are concerned, there are several examples of characters that, in pursuit of fame and recognition as manly and estimable heirs of the mythic cowboys, turn the aforementioned Western mythical sport, to bullriding, to rodeos. Diamond Felts, the protagonist of "The Mud Below" (*Close Range*) is one of them. Diamond, also called Half-Pint, Baby Boy, Shorty, Kid, Tiny, Little Guy, Sawed-Off (one of the reason of his low self-esteem), did not grow up in a ranch; he and his younger brother Pearl (the unsuitability of names is one of Proulx's greatest ironic resources) were raised in town by their mother. Interestingly, the mother's job had nothing to do with a

ranchwork either: she was a manager in a tourist store, where she was selling items associated with the Old West. She is just the first of several other characters in the stories who knew how to take the economic advantage of the myth, selling its commercialized vision.

But when this practical woman's son discovered the powerful sensation one felt when riding a bull, he resolved to dedicate his life to a bullriding career. His mother, an extremely reasonable character in the story, could not accept that; in her rational view, it was a huge step backward in the western social class ladder:

I worked like a fool to bring you boys up in town, get you out of the mud, give you a chance to make something out of yourself. You're just going to throw everything away to be a rodeo bum? (51)

Don't you get it, rodeo's for ranch boys who don't have the good opportunities you do? The stupidest ones are the bullriders. We get them in the shop every week trying to sell us those pot-metal buckles or their dirty chaps. (51-52)

She raised their sons to become everything her family was not (poor ranchers, with no perspectives for a better future). She even took care of the correctness of their speech; no "ain't", no low-down grammar when she was around. When she saw that Diamond, after the first two years bullriding (his ligaments and cartilage damaged), did not abandon the idea of being a rodeo star, she resolved to show him what she wanted to protect him from. She needed Diamond to meet someone; this is how the reader meets Hondo, a

minor character in the text. With Hondo's extremely lousy physical condition Proulx crashes the image of a rodeo rider as an indomitable and everlasting Western star atrociously. The man, who years ago was a rodeo star, his photo in a fancy magazine cover, was now deaf, mute and almost sightless, incapable to have neither personal nor professional life. A miserable image, indeed, especially taking into account the story of his life:

He was a hot saddle bronc rider on his way to the top. Took the money two years runnin Cheyenne. Then, some dinky little rodeo up around Meeteetse, his horse threw a fit in the chute, went over backwards, Hondo went down, got his head stepped on. Oh, 1961, and he been cleaning saddles ... since then. Thirty-seven years. That's a long time, long time. He was twenty-six when it happened. Smart as anybody. Well, you rodeo, you're a rooster on Tuesday, feather duster on Wednesday. (62)

But Diamond knew better. He enjoyed his new life; he loved what he was doing, he loved being admired, and he "dived headlong into the easy girls, making up for the years of nothing" (64). As Marc Asquith observed, following anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence's theory, "brutal sexuality is never far from the performance of rodeo. The riders continually associate women with animals, there to be ridden and left before they dilute the sexual male through the process of domestication" (114). According to Asquith, "The Mud Below" is only one out of several stories which are concerned with a certain distortion ([Hugh] "Hefner-like distortion," as Asquith puts it after William Savage Jr) of

male sexuality: “It is literal in the outward disfigurement and sexual exhibitionism of Rasmussen Tinsley in ‘People in Hell’ (*CR*), but internalized in the bestial sexual attitudes of the rodeo rider Diamont Felts in ‘The Mud Below’ (*CR*)” (109-110).

Diamond’s philosophy was:

You’re somebody, right? Here’s to it. Rodeo. They say we’re dumb but they don’t say we’re cowards. Here’s to big money for short rides, here’s to busted spines and pulled groins, empty pockets, damn all-night driving, chance to buck out – if you got good medicine, happens to somebody else. (74)

As expected, it was not long until something happened to him. The accident, when bullriding, could have been much worse; it “only” ended with a dislocated shoulder (which implied: “injured ligaments, internal bleeding, swelling, pain, could be some nerve or blood vessel damage” 76). But the harsh reality finally struck him: the audience did not care, his travel-buddy did not care, even the doctor, or rather the “local sawbones” (“No sports medicine team here” 75), did not care too much. At the end it seems that he eventually understood his lesson: “It was all a hard, fast ride that ended in the mud.” (80).

Throughout the three collections there are several other examples that prove the existence of the myth of the West in the consciousness, or (even more often) sub-consciousness of the Wyomingites and the outsiders.

In “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” the author winks at the reader when she mentions that old Red usually “stayed in his room chewing tabacco,

reading Zane Grey in large-print editions, his curved fingernail creasing the page under every line.” (129).

There is also a paragraph in which a hired boy is briefly described:

the semiliterate, off-again, on-again hired man, Hal Bloom, tall legs, like chopsticks, T-shirt emblazoned *Aggressive by Nature, Cowboy by Choice*. He worked ... in short bursts between rodeo roping, could not often be pried off his horse (for he cherished a vision of himself as an 1870s cowboy just in from an Oregon cattle drive). (130)

A poor ranch boy desperately trying to look like his Western heroes, pursuing his “cowboy dream;” Proulx will often play with such a theme.

“Brokeback Mountain” is probably the best known example of shattered lives as a result of the burden of the cowboy myth. It closes the collection *Close Range*, and it is a memorable and daring closure. Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist will completely shake up the collective imagination.

From the very beginning it seems obvious that Ennis and Jack are determined to lead archetypically western way of life. Their looks and their interests match the stereotype: Ennis, apart from his stoic air, possess a muscular and supple body, physical characteristics any cowboy could be described with. Jack’s physical appearance was not so John Wayne or Clint Eastwood-like; he was too small and too cheerful. But he was “infatuated with the rodeo life”, the most western and manly of all sports.

Their American dream was to own a piece of their own land, but though they claimed they were saving money, “in Ennis’s case that meant a tobacco

can with two five-dollar bills inside” (256). Jack’s savings were similar; this is why they took the job as herder and camp tender on the mountain to pasture sheep in the summer. Their boss was Joe Aguirre, an example of a successful Basque descending immigrant; they were nothing yet.³

As I see it, the reason of what happens with their relationship, is that they lack one of the crucial features of a hero: courage. Ennis, traumatized by the slaughter of a homosexual couple he witnessed when just a small child, was not brave enough to challenge the Wyoming society and to be with a person he loved and cared for:

Jack, I don’t want a be like them guys you see around sometimes. And I don’t want a be dead. There was these two old guys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich – Dad would pass a remark when he seen them. They was a joke even though they was pretty tough old birds. I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in a irrigation ditch. They’d took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp. What the tire iron done looked like

³ The situation Proulx describes, two white American cowboys working for a Basque sheepherder (or for a descendant of Basque immigrants), leads to a reversal of roles that has to be emphasized. Conflicts between sheepmen and cattlemen, even armed conflicts as in the case of Sheep and Cattle Wars (1870-1920), belong to the history of the American West. Generally, sheepherders were considered as the antagonists, the weaker and despicable; cowboys were seen as archetypal American heroes and were influential in local governments. As presented in Robert Laxalt’s *Sweet Promised Land*, the Basque sheepherders were in a particularly difficult position; being desperate outsiders, with no English language knowledge, they were discriminated and had to work too hard and earn too little. Nevertheless, they finally started to appear as literary characters. As David Rio points out in “Challenging Conventional Recreations of the Western Past: Frank Bergon’s *Shoshone Mike*,” such novels as Laxalt’s or Bergon’s exemplify the increasing visibility of Basque immigrants and their descendants in contemporary western writing. Bergon uses one of the protagonists who is a Basque American “to illustrate the extension of prejudice and discrimination against the Basques in the American West in the early twentieth century.” (Rio, “Challenging” 77). In “Brokeback Mountain,” according to Rio, “Proulx deconstructs traditional depictions of Basque sheepherders dealing with discrimination and prejudice or with conflicts with cowboys;” and then the scholar explains: “Her story instead places the Basque sheep owner in a position of power over the cowboys, who, out of economic necessity, are forced to work not only for a Basque immigrant but also as sheepherders, a shameful occupation for a cowboy” (“Far from the Pastoral Myth” 258).

pieces a burned tomatoes all over him, nose tore down from skiddin on gravel. (270)

Instead of confronting his trauma, Ennis resolved by uttering his stoic motto: “if you can’t fix it you got a stand it” (271). Jack did not try too hard to convince him either; he believes that what happens to them can maybe happen and be accepted (to a certain point) in Denver, but never in rural Wyoming. Both the local society and Jack and Ennis themselves sealed their doom. Not only the Wyoming close-minded rural neighbors are to be blamed; these two ranch boys were completely unprepared and incapable of recognizing their sexual orientation. In Marc Asquith’s words, “in ‘Brokeback Mountain’ (*CR*) the internal distortion derives not from the homosexuality of the central characters, but from their attempts to reconcile their sexuality with their perception of themselves as cowboys” (110). Cowboys, and that is who they aspired to be considered, are always straight; the concept of a gay cowboy has no right to exist neither for them nor for anybody belonging to their western rural society.

In “The Governors of Wyoming” the perspective and the attitude towards the cowboy myth changes. The protagonist’s wife Roany, majored in business at the University of Wyoming, quickly realized “there was money in Western goods” (221). Cynically, she knew how to play with the romantic image of “cowboys and Indians” and she quickly figured out how to use it for her own benefit. She opened a store and, just like Dimaond Felt’s mother, she started to sell the myth.

Shy Hamp, her husband (according to his wife: “champion of nothing, a kind of tame cowboy without the horse sweat and grit” 221), could not

understand the successful development of his wife's iconoclastic business, especially while his horse insurance failed. He simply "couldn't believe there were that many women anxious to spend good money on potions and pony-skin vests, that many cowboys who needed three-hundred-dollar shirt" (227). The problem was, the way I interpret it, Shy could not follow Roany's pragmatic attitude to something he was part of, the myth. He was unable to accept her smart way of doing business; it was against his moral code, against... cowboy values. His noble methods were clearly too naïve in the twentieth, nearly twenty-first century West: "He took his customers at their word on the health, ancestry, value and prowess of their horses and steadily lost money. In a world of liars and cheats he believed in handshakes" (227).

Indeed, Shy's values in business were western noble; his physical appearance, too, could be described as "classic western good looks; long-legged, with a sharp-beaked, handsome face, a mask of reddish stubble" (238). Nevertheless, "he was himself an advanced dissembler with a vile and criminal habit" (227). This "habit" had to do with his uncontrollable desire of passing time with very young (about thirteen years old) girls, sexually. And since with a white girl it proved impossible, he made an agreement with an Indian girl's brother. He paid them; in the end, they were poor, they were Indians. And although he felt ashamed, he knew he would do it again; "There was no repellent that could keep him off her" (239). If this, some would say, "repellent habit" came to light, his wife would probably never think of him as "a kind of tame cowboy" again.

In "Florida Rental" (*Bad Dirt*) the stereotypical western physical appearance is touched upon again; the story of a minor character, a cowboy named June Bidstrup, is briefly presented and it is probably the cruelest of all

examples of the cowboy grotesque Proulx offers in her *Wyoming Stories*. In this case it is the Hollywood industry's influence what breaks young June's spirit. "Discovered" by a Los Angeles talent agency as corresponding ideally to the cowboy's image, June made a mistake of placing too much trust in representatives of the fake-idolizing Hollywood world:

... June Bidstrup's photograph had appeared on the cover of *Western Cowboy*. He was a rider in the reenactment of an old trail drive. A secretary at the Guy March Talent Agency in Los Angeles, which specialized in raw western talent, saw the picture of the trim, twenty-year-old June togged out in shotgun chaps, a calfskin vest, and an azure wild rag that picked up the color of his eyes; she caught her breath and showed the cover to Guy March, who immediately saw a new Robert Redford. (211)

When the sly agent realizes "his tough little prize did not entirely fit the current ideal of masculine beauty" (211) just because June's mouth is somehow too thin, he does not hesitate to solve the problem drastically and convinces the naïve cowboy to take some augmentative collagen injections. But something went wrong and "the youngest Bidstrup ended up with a mouth that resembled two short night crawlers jockeying for position on his face, which now appeared pouty and deformed." (211).

The end of this unfortunate adventure, of this story of a real cowboy removed from his natural environment to adjust to what in the collective imagination signified "the cowboy," is sad, indeed. But the image of a cowboy

with his lips augmented and deformed as a result of collagen treatment is perfect in its grotesqueness.

Oddly enough, June's Hollywood experience may also be seen as the best lesson in the process of achieving the proverbial "stoic calm." Because of the hardship he had to endure, any hypothetical future ambitions were out of the question. And since, according to Epictetus, "freedom is secured not by the fulfilling of men's desires, but by the removal of desire" (IV.1.175), the distance separating June from reaching the perfect stoic emotional immunity narrowed considerably.

June's archetypical look of a tough cowboy was not what characterized the protagonist of "Them Old Cowboy Songs," Archie McLaverty:

Archie had a face as smooth as a skinned aspen, his lips barely incised on the surface as though scratched in with a knife [he shared this feature with June]. All his natural decoration was in his red cheeks and the springy waves of auburn hair that seemed charged with voltage. (47)

The talent he stood out with was neither typical nor (apparently) useful for a cowboy either; while his companions were known because of having "a way with the Utes," shooting "both pistol and carbine accurately from the waist" or possessing "a nose for gold," Archie "had a singing voice that once heard was never forgotten" (49). But although the extremely useful skill of shooting faultlessly would surely be much more convenient in the Wyoming of the last decades of the nineteenth century, Archie's gift was actually not as disdainful among the other cowboys as some could presuppose. Yes, these hard men

were closemouthed and laconic, but their inside lives were just as rich as anybody else's and Archie's voice had a powerful particularity: "Sad and flat and without ornamentation, it expressed things felt but unsayable" (49).

But apart from this rather romantic and pleasant aspect of Archie's everyday life, apart from celebrating his little achievements and consoling misfortunes singing, he had to endure the same hard toil as all "ranch hands." Because, this is what he was, a ranch hand (although he proudly called himself a cowboy); and so, he was used to "the usual ranch hand's luck – hard, dirty, long and dull. There was no time for anything but saddle up, ride, rope, cut, herd, unsaddle, eat, sleep and do it again." (63). As long as he could earn a living laboring outdoors Archie did not mind such a hard work. The only job he definitely turned down was the one in mines; the mere idea was unthinkable. To his wife's desperate suggestion he reacted resolutely: "Missus McLaverty, I wouldn't work in no mine. You married you a cowboy." (57). This stubbornness and pride will add to the tragic end of the protagonist.

Who had no choice but to endure the depressing experience of working in a mine was the protagonist of "The Great Divide" (*Fine Just the Way It Is*), Hi Alcorn. Although he did not actually consider himself a cowboy, he definitely felt a pioneer. Somewhat late, true, since the story starts in the 1920, but Hi did not care, he had a dream: "He wanted a frontier, though it seemed to him that the frontiers had all disappeared in his grandfather's time." (104). Twenty years later he found himself working in a mine and he realized "the coal mines were hard for a man who'd once owned his place and work all his life outdoors." (114) He missed

riding through the chill high desert, the grey-green sage and greasewood, the salt sage sheltering sage hens, pronghorn, occasional elk, riding up on ridges and mesas to spy out bands of wild horses, plodding through the sand dunes, seeing burrowing owls in a prairie dog town, wheeling ferruginous hawks and eagles, a solitary magpie flying across the quilted sky like a driven needle, the occasional rattlesnake ribboning away. (114)

As Aitor Ibarrola points out, “in a way, we come to realize the profound misery that Hi feels in the coal town only when we hear the long list of things that he misses” (“Considering”). And then the scholar adds: “Even if the reader has never seen salt sage, pronghorn or a prairie-dog, there is a certain pleasure in the very names of those things from an alien world that we know have left an indelible mark on the mind of the character.” (“Considering”).

The way I see it, Hi may not have known how to express his feelings, how to utter what he longed for, but he sensed it had to do with nature and with “the pull of the wild desert” (114). Instead, every day he began by going down “in a metal cage with men in a stinking garments unchanged for weeks or months, to work bent over in a cramped space in a dim light” (114). The mine was grime and stench, it was a dungeon; the prairie, on the contrary, was purity and freedom.

Freedom, precisely, was what all Westerners, “old” residents and “new” settlers, desired. Even at the end of the twentieth century, such a sophisticated man of the world as Marc, the protagonist of “Testimony of the Donkey” explained his moving to Idaho by the irresistible desire to... be a cowboy! What

made his dream even more absurd was the fact has never been seen near a horse or a ranch... Probably what he really wanted was to live with no bounds, live freely and independently.

In the last story from the last collection, "Tits-Up in a Ditch," Proulx brings out again the theme of young Westerners greatly fond of rodeo. In "The Mud Below" the reader observes the beginnings of a bullrider (and an extremely bitter end of a bronco rider); here a case of a "retired" rodeo rider, Verl Lister, is presented. Verl was relatively lucky: he stayed alive and with no serious injuries. But, in the end, he was "a bareback rider who suffered falls, hyperextensions and breaks that had bloomed into arthritis and aches as he aged. A trampling had broken his pelvis and legs so that now he walked with the slinking crouch of a bagpipe player" (181). He suffered pain everyday and did not doubt to complain about it.

It is interesting to outline the character's wife's reaction to her husband's condition. In my view, Proulx plays with some of the stereotypes referring to the masculinity as understood by both Western men and women. First of all, the author seems to imply that rodeo riders truly are seen as outstandingly attractive. Bonita, Verl's wife, remembers him as such. And secondly, that for a Western man there is no other alternative but to be tough; according to Bonita, a man "was supposed to endure pain silently, cowboy up and not bitch about it all day long" (181). The expression she applies, to "cowboy up", is meaningful, indeed. This is the model of the "real man" the Westerners absorbed since childhood; this is what is coded in their mentality: a respectable man's duty is to equal a cowboy. Meanwhile Bonita, a woman, also aged and in bad health condition, was the one that "suffered in silence" and bravely confronted

hardships. The theme of women's doom in the West will be touched upon more specifically below.

The mythical West, although only loosely tangible in *That Old Ace*, is definitely found in Proulx's Wyoming stories. But it is found mocked and its heroes are rather antiheroes stripped of its romantic aura. The West was conquered over an age ago; there is no frontier to cross and to dare one's fate; this fact is frustrating enough. But it seems as if the Westerners somehow felt an additional pressure. Sometimes this pressure may be caused by the non-Western world that expects them to resemble the stereotyped heroes, such as cowboys or rodeo riders. The consequences of trying to reach this ideal are generally disastrous, just like in cases of Diamond Felts, the old Hondo or Verl Lister. The outsiders when visiting the West expect to see the models they know from the *Leatherstocking Tales* or from the Westerns. Smart Westerners know how to exploit it: like Diamond's mother or Roany Hamp, they open stores with fancy clothes and useless items which are supposed to symbolize the West the society imagined. But in most cases the Westerners themselves are the ones to put the burden of living according to the western norms and idols on their shoulders. Generally unconsciously, young boys and mature men try to follow the traditional values of courage, honor and manliness. They need to be daring and they need to be... straight. Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz stated that

For much of the twentieth century the West was also perceived as a place free of rigid sexual categories, a place that allowed men the freedom to engage in "untraditional" forms of labor and "untraditional" sexual partners. Thus, just since some have viewed the West as the land

of economic opportunity, it has also been seen, for many others, as a land for social and sexual opportunities. For some gay men, the West was (and for many, still is) a place where one can make a new start and live life outside of society's suffocating boundaries. (171)

It seems that this West as a place of sexual opportunities does exist, but only as the underworld, making the most of its solitary prairies and unfrequented mountains.

The Wyomingites from Proulx's stories are stuck in the land that is already discovered and conquered; instead of experimenting rebirth and regeneration, improving attitudes and overcoming weaknesses, they often cannot even cope with their vices. Instead of promising perspectives and the comforting hope for better future, the characters of Proulx's stories simply bury their heads in the sand as if adopting Ennis del Mar's philosophy: "if you can't fix it you got a stand it."

Oddly enough, even the two stories that to some point resemble the old good *Leatherstocking Tales*, "The Great Divide" and "Them Old Cowboy Songs," do not follow the formula entirely. The first one finishes with a meaningless death of the protagonist; there cannot be any doubts his end is unheroic and inappropriate for an ambitious pioneer. In the second case, the young adorable couple of brave pioneers simply vanishes. Their death may be described as meaningless and mundane, and there will never be anybody to tell their story, weep for them and follow their dream, the American Dream, the dream of fulfilling the myth of the west.

But is Wyoming today all about the myth? What else may be said about the Wyomingites and the Texans presented in Proulx's fiction? Are they united by any particular identity? Do they share any virtues or vices? The confusion when trying to answer these questions results from the fact that there are at least two sources of information, somehow contradictory: the Westerners themselves and the newcomers. What is going to be discussed in the last part of this dissertation is the way Proulx presents the society of the West. Sometimes the perspective applied is internal; the characters comment on their collective features. Sometimes it will be external, probably more objective, but possibly not deep enough. In the end, they will both add to the picture of the West of the twenty-first century.

2.4.2. The Westerners Described:

Their Features and Their Identities

The question of identity in the United States of America is, and has always been, a particularly difficult and delicate topic, obviously; plenty of different races and ethnic groups with a wide variety of extremely rich cultural backgrounds. At the beginning, the seemingly helpful concept of the "melting pot" made the future unity and sameness appear reachable. The main obstacles that somehow impeded the American society from finally achieving this cultural equality were diverse. Firstly and obviously, the immigration from literally all the continents to the United States has never ceased: it is a phenomenon that somehow "identifies" America. Secondly, five ages of history may not be enough to feel truly integrated (especially for non-Anglo-Saxon

groups). But most importantly, last decades have shown a tendency to recover one's ethnic roots; instead of the "melting pot" scholars talk about the "salad bowl" or the "pizza."

Precisely because of the above reasons, but also due to the enormous influence of the possible high or missed expectations placed upon one group by the other, the following words by Stuart Hall may be considered the core of the issue:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we come from," so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how it bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (4)

Therefore, identity may be seen as a constantly changing process (similarly to the never-ending formation of the American identity) and as a consequence of the way a chosen individual or a group is represented or wish to be represented.

In the previous subchapter various examples of Wyomingites who tried hard to adjust to roles they were expected to fulfill are examined. The reality did not matter; what mattered was the dreamt image they desired to emanate. They were born in Wyoming and they felt they had to aspire to the model of a mythical tough cowboy. Proulx ruthlessly strips this illusion out of both the

characters and the readers; no mythical protagonists but the down-to-earth protagonists in her naturalistic stories and in a constantly changing social reality of Wyoming.

What is to be examined in this chapter is not linked to the myth, but it also refers to the identity of the Westerners. Throughout the three collections characters (and sometimes the narrator herself) express their opinions as to the region they inhabit and its people. Sometimes it means talking about themselves or the nearest neighbors; sometimes it is a judgmental remark of an outsiders or a fresh newcomer. These beliefs concern a wide variety of aspects, but all of them add to question of the identity of the West and the Westerners. Some of the characters' features I consider clearly naturalistic, generally those related to their natural urges, will also be touched upon.

With reference to the short stories, the author does not let the reader forget that the area known today as the state of Wyoming is where once different cultures inhabited. Remains of these cultures may still be found and, to some point, they had to influence those in contact with the land. In "The Half-Skinned Steer" near the protagonist's ranch, in caves, "them Indan drawings" (27) could be found. Surely, one day the residents of the area came to appreciate the enormous richness of culture located just next to their homes; in Mero's childhood only anthropologists, only strangers cared for the priceless paintings that reflected, in such a picturesque way, the everyday life of former inhabitants of Wyoming:

... bison skulls, a line of mountain sheep, warriors carrying lances, a turkey stepping into a snare, a stick man upside down dead and falling,

red ochre hands, violent figures with rakes on their heads that he [the anthropologist] ... said were feathers headdresses, a great red bear dancing forward on its hind legs, concentric circles and crosses and latticework. (27)

Mero was a very young boy when he went to the caves with the anthropologist and so did not know the cultural value of the paintings. But there was an image that influenced him in a very special way: he discovered a symbol of a vulva. This is how he entered in the period of sexual consciousness, with the image engraved in his mind forever, “and no fleshy examples ever conquered his belief in the subterranean stony structure of female genitalia” (28) (although his father’s girlfriend’s horse-like charm stimulated his teenage sexual imagination enormously). Also, the scientist’s words: “the Indians did it just like anybody else” (28) are a perfect reflection of a naturalistic approach to the topic of sex.

A story where culture, but especially history of Wyoming is solemnly emphasized is “The Governors of Wyoming.” It is an excellent example of how the identity and this special feeling of belonging to a place and being proud of it may be shaped since childhood. Interestingly, the very same day time Shy was taken to a history exploring excursion, he had his first and precocious sexual experience, linking in a way both occurrences together. The grandfather of Shy Hamp’s friend (a special friend, Nikole Angermiller, a thirteen years old girls responsible for his first orgasm) was the one who dedicated time to make the children aware of the importance of their homestate, upset by their reaction of disappointment when given the assignment linked to the “boring” Wyoming.

Shy's picture of Wyoming condensed in one short sentence: "The same grassy shadows, the same long wind, everlasting fence" (229). The grandfather's reaction was quick: "Kid, let me tell you. Goddamn important things happened in this place" (229).

Indeed, the friend's grandfather was a conscious citizen, a proud Wyomingite. And he wanted to spread this local historical consciousness. But, as mentioned above, one of his main characteristics was reasonability; he could not overpass the occasion to criticize the latest fashion of reminding citizens constantly everything that could somehow refer to their land (and therefore form their identity). After the excursion to Fort Laramie he remarked sarcastically:

'Christ, they got all kinds a monuments ... Peace pipes, dude ranches, rocks, coal mines, sundials, dead ranchers, vigilante hangins, Masonic lodges, Indian, tiehacks, firefighters, bath houses and little chickadees. There's Babe, the Little Sweetheart of the Prairie, oldest horse in the world. Died when she was fifty years old'. (229)

It was also thanks to this old man that Shy became interested in the photographs his grandfather collected; there were many of them hanging on the ranch's walls. Now he knew: they were the governors of Wyoming. And Shy finally bothered to find out who they actually represented, what they stood for and what role they played in the history of his state. He became conscious of his identity, he eventually felt he truly belonged to the land of his ancestors.

"What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick" also contains a brief historical perspective, though an ironic one. The story starts with a history of the

beginnings of the Wolfscale family in Wyoming. I deduce Proulx suggests that most Wyoming ranchers had a very similar past: they found this place by chance and they did not need much to feel an important part of the Wyoming society, it is to say, proud ranchers. As the narrator explains, the protagonist's grandfather was a telegraph clerk traveling from Missouri to Montana in the "gold rush." He stopped for a supper, liked the place and "staked a homestead claim" (61). After building a humble cabin he married "one of the girls from a distant Ham's Fork whorehouse, and naming the ranch after the harp his mother had played, though himself a Wyoming rancher. He wasn't that, but his sons and grandsons were" (61). One could ironically comment: there it is, the history of one of the most important Wyoming social groups. But it does not seem the author's desire was to mock the ranchers, as much as rather to describe their real, very often extremely humble, and not the romanticized roots.

The protagonist, Gilbert Wolfscale, is an interesting case of an old fashioned and a very stubborn rancher (a typical Wyoming rancher?). In spite of having some serious financial problems, he would not even hear of selling HIS land. He grieved his two sons (one of them gay, to top it all) did not share these strong feelings; after their mother divorced him they moved to town and only from time to time "let themselves be dragged out for a weekend then, sulky and grudging" (71). Gilbert was seriously worried that "at his death they would sell the place as fast as they could" (71). This prospect seemed almost unbearable, for he and his ranch were one, for by losing his land he would also lose his identity, his passion and the only thing worth living. I believe the description of Gilbert's sensations makes the reader understand the complicated situation of this social group and their difficulties in giving away their ranches and adjusting

to the new reality. Also, it pictures the typically American attachment to one's property; a very powerful, sometimes even blinding feature, indeed:

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. And although the margins of Bull Jump Creek had been trampled bare and muddy by generations of cows, although there were only one or two places along it still flushed with green willows, the destruction has happened so gradually he had not noticed, for he thought of the ranch as timeless and unchanging in its beauty. (72)

The story ends with the Fourth of July parade Gilbert witnessed in town. What he observed reflects to perfection the identity, the identities of Wyoming. But... does it? It definitely pictures its history, cultural and demographic changes, as well as the selective memory of this society. What Gilbert saw first was the high school band, with many of its members obese; the comparison was instantaneous: "He remembered schoolmates in his own childhood, skinny quick ranch kids, no one fat and sweaty" (85). Right after them, leading the other groups, teenage boys dressed as Indians were marching; apparently, there were no Indians available and willing to take part in the parade, since the boys' "skins had been darkened with some streaky substance" (85). Then, two men "slouched along in buckskin suits and fur hats, carrying antique flintlock" (85): trappers. Fulfilling the Wild West theme Gilbert contemplated children dressed as cowboys, stock outlaw, a sheriff's posse and "half the town's women

and small children in pioneer regalia – long dresses of calico, aprons and sunbonnets” (85). Also, some trick riders in neon satin showed off and finally “a CPC pickup, three hard-hatted methane gas workers sitting in back smoking cigarettes and joking with one another” (86).

After the parade, when the road was eventually clear and Gilbert free to go back to his ranch, he suddenly felt he could not move; “there had been something wrong with the parade, something seriously wrong, but he couldn’t think of what” (86). It struck him when he was already out of town: “there had been no ranchers in the parade – it was all pioneers, outlaws, Indians, and gas” (86). It was as if his whole life, the sense of it, were suddenly burlesqued and his identity erased from the history and culture of his homestate. A painful conclusion, indeed.

What Gilbert did not realize is that his situation resembled the sad lot of his homosexual son; they both belonged to groups excluded from the main stream of their society. The father because of being too stubborn and out-of-date to adjust to the new way of ranching (or simply giving the ranching up); and the son because of liking “a different kind of stuff than most people come from Wyoming” (84) and because of being unable to adjust to the Wyoming strict and antiquated moral code.

Similarly unadapted to the modern city life character, but much younger, was the protagonist of “The Wamsutter Wolf” (*Bad Dirt*). His perspective meaningful; it is as if the reader were observing the Denver of today with a young villager’s eyes. First, we find out that the most dangerous and low-paid jobs are typically given to “Latinas;” Buddy was unable to endure the extremely difficult conditions he met with in factories (the volatile solvents “have him bad

headaches” 144). He was more and more depressed in the place that, though western, nowadays was loosely related to the concept of the West he was instilled. For a villager like him there were too many people around: “Denver, especially Sixteenth Street, was a freak parade of half-boiled Indians in stacked jeans, women the hundred colors from charcoal to cheese” (144). He could not accept and truly disliked

mulleheads in suits and skinheads in waddle-shorts, waiters out on the street for a smoke break, a lesbian couple sharing a caramel apple, a black man sweating in a mink coat in the September heat, caps emblazoned Avalanches, Rockies, Broncos, people cruising, hanging out, waiting for whatever came next, all cranking along against the western flash of mountains. (145)

What particularly stands out in this picture of the western city of today is the wide range of very different human types and races. Judging by Buddy’s parents’ reaction to a suggestion that their house might have been robbed by “maybe Mexican, maybe part Indian. Maybe a Arab,” other ethnic groups were still considered as possibly dangerous in western villages. Particularly suspicious was such an exotic group as Arabs, since they had already got used to the view of Mexicans and Indians: “That made them sit up, the idea of an Arab creeping around Wyoming, breaking into houses” (146).

Buddy’s reflection as to people visiting Denver is also worth mentioning:

There were tourists asking one another for directions. When all they found were fast food and sleazy T-shirt shops, and, down near Market Street, a demented sculpture project of metal buffalos with human knees, they got that look on their faces that said, "Why did I come here?" (145)

According to this picture, there was nothing to see in a western city and those coming from different parts of the country had to leave disappointed. He as a Westerner also thought the modern urban West was an ugly, uninteresting and a very depressing place unworthy visiting.

In Proulx's stories there are more examples of highly pessimistic assumptions concerning Wyoming and the West in general. In the last paragraph of "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water" (*Close Range*) this is how the narrator concludes the abhorrent event of cutting Ras's genitalia (a highly naturalistic image): "That was all sixty years ago and more. Those hard days are finished ... We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen ... If you believe in that you'll believe anything" (117). This extremely bitter conclusion implies that Wyoming is still a cruel land of cold-blooded people and atrocious events. It suggests that anything can occur there, anything but a tolerant treatment of those somehow "different". And that mercy cannot be expected; in the narrator's words, "You begin to see that God does not owe us much" (99).

The tragedy described in "People in Hell," indeed, makes the reader doubt in God's protection. But also, the story somehow confirms the superiority of those perfectly adapted to their environment over the ones who, though trying, found it unreachable; the perfect fulfillment of the principal naturalistic

rule. The first ones were the members of the Dunmire family, all nine of them, all men. In the first decade of the twentieth century the father, Ice, arrived in Laramie “on the run from Texas drought and duster” (100) (Texas; a land even harsher than Wyoming!). Owing to his slave-like job, saving, and his ability as a poacher, he managed to buy a piece of land on the Laramie plain and he “declared himself a rancher” (100). He rapidly made his wife pregnant, and then again and again; after some years of this miserable life she finally left him with nine boys. The abandoned husband could not have been happier, since “boys were money in the bank in that country and Ice brought them up to fill his labor needs” (101). They grew in unity with nature, its natural forces and the landscape:

What they learned was livestock and ranchwork. When they were still young buttons they could sleep out on the plain, knees raftered up in the rain, tarp drawn over their heads listening to the water trickle past their ears. In the autumn, after fall roundup, they went up to Jelm Mountain and hunted, not for sport but for meat. They grew into bone-seasoned, tireless workers accustomed to discomfort ... They were brass-nutted boys, sinewy and tall, nothing they liked better than to kick the frost out of a horse in early mornings. (101)

With time, they became authorities and examples for their neighbors to follow. The Dunmire brothers

were in everything that happened, their opinions based on deep experience. They had seen it all: prairie fire, flood, blizzard, dust storms, injury, sliding beef prices, grasshoppers and Mormon cricket plagues, rustlers, scours, bad horses ... The country, its horses and cattle, suited them and if they loved anything that was it, and they run that country ... But there builds up in men who work livestock in big territories a kind of contempt for those who do not. (103)

The Dunmires disdained those who did not lead their lives their way and the Tinsleys, one of the neighborhood families, were a completely different kind. First of all, they were not native Wyomingites; hoping for a quick success they came from St. Louis. Horn Tinsley, the father, had absolutely no idea about the matters truly important in Wyoming, that is, all those naturally dominated by the Dunmires. He had no useful skills and no instinct; he was unable to read the nature's signs:

On the rich Laramie plain he ended up with a patch of poor land just east of the rain, dry and sandy range with sparse grass, and he could not seem to get ahead, trying horses, cattle, sheep in succession. Every change of season took him by surprise. Although he could tell snow from sunshine he wasn't much at reading weather. He took an interest in his spread but it was skewed to a taste for a noble rock or other trifling scenic vantage. (104)

Mrs. Tinsley's case was even worse; she was "sensitive and abhorring marital nakedness" (an extremely antinaturalistic feature) and she "suffered from nerves" (104). Years ago, on their way to Laramie, crossing a creek, Mrs. Tinsley had a nervous breakdown and hurled one of her crying infants into the water. For healthy Wyoming people, this incomprehensible act was always remembered in their society as unnatural and unforgiving.

As a consequence of her infanticide, she raised her other two children in an overprotective manner, isolating them from their natural ranch environment, "from trampling horses and biting dogs, the yellow Wyandottes who pecked, from the sound of thunder and the sight of lightning" (105). One of the unfortunate effects of such an upbringing was their son Rasmussen's lack of interest in the ranch and most proximate landscape; instead, he was fascinated with travelling and faraway places. And so he left the ranch; for several years nothing was known about him. Finally, he came back; seriously injured in a car accident, deformed and brain damaged. His life on the ranch changed completely, his attitude towards the environment evolved; now he adored "galloping long miles on the dry, dusty grass, sleeping in willows and nests of weeds, a half-wild man with no talk and who knew what thoughts" (110). To a certain extent, he was now more a Dunmire than a Tinsley. But the new Ras's natural urges turned out to be uncontrollable, his interest for women indomitable. Though he finally lived in union with nature, adapted to the landscape, he broke one of the main moral rules of the Wyoming society code and he had to be punished. Of course, the cruel punishment, his genitals cut off with a dirty knife, was exercised by the Dunmires, the natural authorities of the Wyoming plain, the "real" Western men.

A very unfavorable opinion respecting Wyoming men, this time contemporary men, is found in "A Lonely Coast." It is the only story from the collection *Close Range* with the first-person narrator; who expresses this judgment, thus, is a Wyoming woman. And she knows what she is talking about; her husband shamelessly cheated on her with a teenager and now she was witnessing all kind of embarrassing men-women behaviors when working in a bar. Her observations may be considered as based on the first-hand experience and a valuable voice in determining a part of the collective Wyomingites' features. Also, what has to be underlined as especially interesting from the naturalistic perspective is the explanation for men's behavior the women suggests: for those who live and work with livestock it is natural to treat all creatures, even the humans, the same way:

Wyos are touchers, hot-blooded and quick, and physically yearning. Maybe it's because they spend so much time handling livestock, but people here are always handshaking, patting, smoothing, caressing, enfolding. This instinct extends to anger, the lightning backhand slap, the hip-shot to throw you off balance, the elbow, a jerk and wrench, the swat, and then the serious stuff that's meant to kill and sometimes does. (195)

Now, the outsiders,' or rather the new residents' reception of Wyoming and its people tend to be much more positive, at least at the beginning of their stay. When examining this theme what has to be born in mind is the observation by Stuart Hall:

Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the “positive” meaning of any term – and thus its “identity” – can be constructed ... (4-5)

In *Wyoming Stories* there are several examples of outsiders who settled in Wyoming. Probably the clearest case of clash of cultures is the one presented in “Man Crawling Out of Trees” (*Bad Dirt*). The New Yorkers Mitchell and Eugene Fair chose Wyoming for their early retirement because, according to what Mitchell once had read, it was a state “with low property taxes and no income tax at all” (106). Moreover, “it seemed a safe haven as well – an unlikely target as the state’s entire population could fit into a phone booth” (106).

While looking for a house to buy they realized that “Wyoming easy taxes were almost negated by the extraordinary high prices for property” (107). Also, during this frustrating searching process Mitchell observed an interesting and somehow sad change in the Wyoming traditional holding on to the land:

Mitchell began to think of these properties as widow’s windfalls. He imagined poor old ranchers working themselves into early graves holding in to their places. And when they died the widows dumped the cows and called up the real estate brokers, who sketched out thirty-five-acre

ranchettes. The widows then hightailed it to condos in Boca Raton – with the exception of Eleonora Figg. (107)

Yes, in spite of all, there were still some “real” Wyomingites that when compared to the “real” New Yorkers, to the “Other,” made clear the difference between the two identities:

She [Eleonora Figg] was an elderly widow rancher in her mid-seventies of the classic Republican, conservative, art-hating, right-wing, outspoken, flint-faced type. She ran both cattle and some sheep, drove an ancient black Jeep. She loathed environmentalists and people from somewhere else. Mitchell understood the bumper sticker on her Jeep – SHOOT, SHOVEL, AND SHUT UP – to express her opinions on wolves. She had taken one look at the Fairs’ Infiniti and recognized them as sybarites who dined on camel heels and foreign olives. She herself lived on home-killed beef, boiled potatoes, and black coffee. She was always dressed in jeans, manure-caked boots, and a ragged barn coat. (111)

Regarding the Wyomingites, their neighbors, at first Mitchell’s place among them was that of a disabled person; he was completely helpless in the face of natural difficulties (such as driving local roads in winter). Condor Figg was the person that saved him when he needed help. It did not mean any warmer feelings towards Mitchell and Eugene from behalf of the Figgs, Condor was just giving aid to a person who needed it, in compliance with the cardinal rule of the country. This Wyoming family was a perfect product of their harsh

environment. Because of their ideal adaptation, the Figgs's importance was comparable with the authority of the Dunmires ("People in Hell"); as a woman at the post office once told Mitchell, they were believed to "just about run this place" (111).

As to the newcomers, the incident corroborating Eugene's complete lack of adaptation to Wyoming and its rules, the decisive one, happened in winter; it was the day she saw through her living room window "a man crawling out of trees". She panicked; her fear and imagination did not let her think sensibly. Apart from calling the sheriff, she did nothing; it turned out that she did not help an injured skier. Her last chance to ever be accepted in Wyoming faded.

Eventually, there cannot be overlooked Fairs' signifying reception of what for the Wyomingites was bread-and-butter. The quotation below is crucial to understand the two worlds: the "civilized" world of the Easterners and the "bloody," almost directly related to the Wild West world of the Wyomingites:

Wyoming had seemed civilized when they first moved out, but gradually evidence appeared that forced them to recognize that they were in a place people in the east would regard as peripheral to the real world. There were disturbing proofs that the weight of a harsh past still bore down with force. Every few months something inexplicably rural happened: on a back road one man shot another with his great-grandfather's 45.70 vintage buffalo gun; a newcomer from Iowa set out for an afternoon hike, and fell off a cliff as she descended Wringer Mountain. Black bears came down in September and smashed Eugenie's bird feeders. (100)

More equally bloodcurdling and absurd examples follow the above ones, proving the Wyoming otherness. The paragraph finishes with a pessimistic conclusion: "Everything seemed to end in blood." (110).

A different case of an outsider is presented in "Tits-Up in a Ditch" (*Fine Just the Way It Is*). The character referred was Carol Shovel, the second wife of a wealthy rancher, a Californian. She did not look like a Wyomingite "with red eyebrows and foxy hair, clothed in revealing dresses and garnished clanking bracelets" (188). She did not act like one either: "She considered herself an authority on everything. She was a smart-mouth." (188). The majority of the neighbors truly hated her "endless recipes for Wyoming's betterment; bring back the train or start up a bus line for public transportation, invite black people and Asians to move in and improve ethnic diversity," (188) and some other suggestions of the same kind, which must have seem absolutely insane in any Wyoming village. But the worst of all was that this hated, boastful outsider dared to judge the Wyomingites and call them...lazy. The rancher who felt particularly deeply offended was Verl Lister (whose "dilapidated place," according to Carol's husband, "gave Wyoming ranchers a slob name" 187). His indignation was extraordinary and his arguments when defending the honors of the Wyomingites confirm the great difference in how one sees himself/herself and how he/she is seen by others. The picture he born in his heart was ridiculously idealized, especially taking into account his argumentation:

The whole world, except this Californian bitch, knew that there were no more frugal, thrifty and hardworking people on the face of the earth than

those in Wyoming. Work was almost holy, good physical labor done cheerfully and for its own sake, the center of each day, the node of Wyoming life. That and toughing it out when adversity struck, accepting that it was necessary to wear a seat belt because when it was time for you to go, you went. Not being constrained by a seat belt was the pioneer spirit of freedom. (189)

The reader may laugh at Verl's words, but the truth was that his ranch, although he himself was avoiding hard work due to his supposed illness, was relatively clean and taking care of. The one responsible for it was his wife, Bonita. But her effort was never rewarded; as the protagonist, Bonita's granddaughter, observed:

On the ranches the wives held everything together – cooking for big crowds, nursing the sick and injured, cleaning, raising children and driving them to rodeo practice, keeping the books and paying the bills, making mail runs and picking up feed at the farm supply, taking the dogs in for their shots, and often riding with the men at branding and shipping times, and in mountainous country helping with the annual shove up and shove down shifting cattle to and from pasturage leased from the Forest Service, and were treated with little more regard than the beef they helped produce. (205)

This bitter conclusion of the miserable situation of women in the second half of the twentieth century may only be compared to even sourer women's

doom almost a century earlier. In “Them Old Cowboy Songs” (*Fine Just the Way It Is*) the protagonist’s end was tragic and painful precisely and only because she was a woman. And because she had not thought it through that her passionate feeling for Archie, when she was still a very young girl, could put her life in danger. As the narrator stated: “She seemed unaware that she lived in a time when love killed women.” (55). Love and natural human urges, for her body failed at the moment it was supposed to endure the most important consequence of the couple’s physical love.

Now, as far as the inhabitants of the Texas Panhandle are concerned, the identity they seem to project is diametrically different. Yes, they are Westerners, many of their ancestors fulfilled the myth of the West, others failed. Some stayed, founding dynasties of the panhandle residents, and some did not overcome the extreme climate and the poor soil, and ran away in search of a more hospitable place. The final picture of the Texas Panhandle in general, and of Wollybucket County in particular, is interesting to examine but, probably, not so much to accept it and live among its serene and generally peaceful inhabitants if one wants to live a dreamt, passionate and full of challenges “western” life. The way I interpret it, Bob is fascinated by Lieutenant James William Albert’s adventures described in *Expedition to the Southwest, An 1845 Reconnaissance of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma*, precisely because of what such a feat represented: the “conquest” of the West, the first encounters with the Indians, the untamed and uncontaminated nature, the mapping, etc. The Texas he “discovered” was a very different place - steady and conventional.

However, the naturalistic factors determining, to a certain point, the characters' lives, as the readers rapidly realizes, are still an important part of the narrative, despite the Woollybucket's general conservatism. And although sex, together with other body needs and processes, seems to be a taboo subject, in some cases it rules a character's whole existence. The town's sheriff, Hugh Dough, may be an excellent example: although efficient, even successful in his professional life, his personal sphere was completely conditioned by two very naturalistic factors: being a bed wetter and having an incestuous long-term relationship with his sister. As to this first ailment, it is explained that "he had been a bed wetter all his life and no longer cared that he couldn't stop. There was a rubber sheet on the bed and a washing machine in the adjacent bathroom" (49). And then the short but meaningful sentence: "He had never married because the thought of explaining the situation was unbearable" (49). As to his sexual life, his sister was enough to satisfy the sheriffs' needs; their "particular relationship" (50) began in adolescence and then followed, even the day of Opal's wedding and every year at Thanksgiving and Christmas, during their family gathering.

As far as the sexual aspects of a whole family are concerned, and where the heredity factor is clearly emphasized, the women belonging to the Eckenstein family seem the best example; they appear as creatures moved by a particularly strong sexual instincts. First Ace met Vollie Eckenstein, who he would eventually married, and after some time dating, he was introduced to the rest of the family: an amicable German father, who "greeted Ace with a kind of jovial relief" (162) (which might be read as a hint of what awaits the suitor in future), his faded wife and Vollie's three sisters. The provenance of the toddler,

a little girl named Emily, was unclear at the beginning; “It was only after he and Vollie were married ... that she told him her sister Maxine was the baby’s mother, the baby an unplanned accident” (163). As it turned out, Ace’s and Vollie’s only child, a daughter named Phyllis, continued with this “family tradition,” leaving her parents another extramarital baby to raise. And although these dedicated grandparents managed to give their granddaughter some excellent moral values, she seemed determined to repeat her mother’s lot. Moreover, Vollie herself, if it were not because the attractive Ruby Loving’s restraint, would have surely followed her instincts as well; the day she met her husband’s employee, she thought “he was the most beautiful human she had ever seen, the right one for her” (165). When close to Ruby, “she wanted badly to touch the wet throat hollow, wanted badly to say, ‘Wait, it’s all been a mistake, I didn’t know you were coming, please touch me, please look at me.’” (165). As a matter of fact, the second time they met, she did touch him; the description of that scene clearly bears naturalistic features: “She did it without thinking. An animal urgency seized her in its jaws for a few minutes, shook her wits loose. She stepped forward and lightly pressed the palm of her hot hand into his inner thigh, against the long shape of his sex.” (167). Another naturalistic picture worth highlighting refers to Phyllis and her promiscuous, alcohol-dependent life; only nineteenth years old, in a motel “of last resort” (170), with a random man, not sure what happened between them but feeling “wet down there” (170), with her car eventually stolen by the scoundrel that used her... the solution: to call her father. And then the paragraph closing the chapter:

There would be more phone calls over the years and Ace always came to bring her back home to Vollie and the child, Dawn. He thought to himself, remembering Vollie's sister Maxine, that getting in the family way ran in the Eskenstein blood. (170)

Turning now to the general image of the Texas Panhandle society, the reader cannot ignore the influence of the Christian religion. For an outsider visiting the region, such as Bob Dollar, one of the most striking features was the ubiquitous presence of extremely numerous, always Christian, temples. His very first days in the village of Cowboy Rose Bob counted over twenty different churches! When already installed in LaVon's, he understood that the religion was an extraordinary force, that it indicated the area's inhabitants their values, their ways, their customs and their opinions about nearly everything. To start with, Woollybucket County was a dry zone, no alcohol to be purchased there. Secondly, the music played in local radios, as Bob once complained, generally came down to hymns, no "good Texas music" available. His landlady's answer was decisive: "We grew up with hymns. That's part a our lives. It's like the air we breathe!" (101). Furthermore, this is when LaVon exploited the situation and gave her tenant the first hint of what it meant – in her, one of the most dedicated, generations-long resident's view – to be from the panhandle:

people here work hard, they're honest, they hold a high moral conduct and the most a them are Christians. At the same time, there's men talks hot and mean and will hurt anybody gits in their way. There's backbitin women with tongues like knives. In fact, about the only thing draws folks

together these days is a funeral or a tornado. ... Anymore, you can here fiddle music at the dances and clubs. ... There's plenty a Texas music. It's still here. You don't need the radio to hear it neither. (100-101)

The deep faith the inhabitants, especially women, seemed to profess was probably the reason of their radical views concerning ideological issues. The women's opinions on contraception or abortion expressed during the embroidery meeting can only be called extremely radical, indeed, if not resulting from certain rural superstitions. For instance, one of the ladies claimed that "these abortion parlors, they take the poor little babies and ... *cut them up!* They sell the body parts to godless scientists. Evolutionists." (184); another lady added: "I heard that in Washington, D.C., the abortionist doctors cut up the babies, cut off the identifiable parts and *sell the rest to Chinese restaurants.*" (184). A terrifying perspective, indeed, contradicted only by the oldest and the most respectable member of the embroidery circle.

Shockingly for Bob, even such a repulsive (for him) organization as the Ku Klux Klan, turned out to be remembered by the locals in a very positive light. LaVon saw it "not as a bunch of crazy supremacist but decent men who was strong Christians, very patriotic and chivalrous" (200). She claimed "it was a community organization dedicated to decent Christian behavior" and she "personally" thought "the panhandle is a better place because of them" (201). As she remembered, "it's true they didn't care about Nigroes, but no more than they didn't care for Catholics and Jews. And that wasn't the point, anyway. They wanted to see people behave decent" (200). The whole reason of the Klan, it seemed, was to improve the resident's lives:

They'd get the men to build onto them two-room, shacks so they could separate out the boys and girls. They talked a the mothers. The girls that was in trouble, why they carried them to the Unwed Mothers' Home. They kept their eyes open and they could tell if a girl was *that way* before she knew it herself. At Christmas the packed up baskets a food for poor families, called it a present from 'Santa Klaus.' (200-201)

LaVon's and some other devoted residents' of Woolybucket beliefs concerning their home region were fairly idealistic, indeed, sometimes even romantic. Mrs. Fronk claimed that her town's inhabitants were "like a family out here. Everybody knows everybody and has for a long time," and she sentenced with superiority: "What we got here that don't exist in the big cities in a sense a community." (98). And then the narrator explains: "For LaVon ... believed in the idea of harmonious rurality, where outlying farmers and ranchers and the people of the small town were linked not only through living in a common geographical region but through kind intentioned and neighborly interests" (98).

That was also the main reason of the locals' mistrust towards outsiders and newcomers. Not only was it difficult to integrate for someone born outside the area, even with his/her best intentions in accepting all the local social rules, like Janine Huske (she was still reminded that she "had only lived in Woolybucket County for sixteen years and regarded as a newcomer" 183), but the outsiders were directly thought of as insolent and suspicious. Francis Scott Keister, one of the most polemic characters of the novel, demanded the sheriff to investigate Bob's presence in Woolybucket, for he was not "a Texas native,"

like him. For Keister felt enormously proud he was born “right here in the panhandle” and he boasted:

Us native panhandle Texans don't wine and bitch about wind and dust and hard times – we just get through it. We work hard. We're good neighbors. We raise our kids in clean air. We got a healthy appreciation for the outdoors. We pray and strive to remain here forever. We are Christians. We are bound to the panhandle like in a marriage. (198)

From the naturalistic point of view, the reader understands Keister somehow felt shaped by his surroundings, although his words seemed rather naïve and discriminating:

Livin here makes us tough, hard and strong. The women are tough too ... This is a horse and cow country and ever dollar you squeeze out a the place, by God you've earned it. This jerk [Bob] came in here and starts snooping around. Let him haul his sorry ass back to Denver. (198)

Nonetheless, taking into account the character's behavior at the end of the novel, his adultery and his willingness to sell himself out to the abhorred hog farms industry, reveals such an attitude's falsity.

Also, with reference to double standards in judging individuals by the locals, especially when seen by the eyes of an outsider, some interesting contradictions are noticed. Bob rapidly realized that “if the terrain was level and flat, the characters of the people were not, for eccentricities were valued and

cultivated, as long as they were not too peculiar” (102). It meant that “crusty old ranchers who worked an embroidery hoop,” “a pair of alcoholic septuagenarian twin sisters” or “the rancher who constructed a half-size replica of Stonehenge” were “not only tolerated but admired” (102). However, “dark skin color, strange accent or manifestations of homosexuality and blatant liberalism were unbearable” (102). Moreover, the sheriff was bothered particularly often by bizarre phone calls concerning activities that simply

needed reporting: jogging, old clothing, unusual vehicles, out-of-state license plates, dark skin, children unattended or quarreling, loose dogs, large house cats (invariably reported as ‘panthers’), people with flat tires or engine trouble who might be escaped convict decoys. Yet dead cows lay sometimes for weeks in the ditches waiting for the rendering truck. (121)

In conclusion, the majority of the Texas Panhandle characters, such as presented in the novel, rather than “western,” exciting, seem to project a highly moderate and serene image. Yes, the West imagined by literature persists in the history of the region, as if the inhabitants’ ancestors, by their hard and adventurous lives, exhausted its mythic charm. And although some examples of iconic cowboys, such as Rope Butt, can still be observed, instead of emanate pride and self-fulfillment, they rather reflect bitterness and disappointment. As a counterbalance to the extremely religious, close-minded society that some of the examined above characters represent, the group of fervent environmentalists emerge. Oddly enough, in some cases the radical

conservatives simultaneously are the most dedicated eco-activists (LaVon, Tazzy Keister). But the pivotal characters to initiate the recovery of the Texas Panhandle prairie are Ace, Brother Mesquite and the young Coolbroth, LaVon's son; they manage to project their excitement and their faith in victory onto the main part of the local society and, to some point, onto the reader. The way I see it, the environmentalists do not need to cling to the past and desperately hold on to the idea of the cowboy as the only American hero; they have their own territory to conquer, or rather, to re-conquer. They are the new western heroes and they fight for the future of the region in the name of the whole local society.

The question of identity, as already mentioned, is a complex concept. It depends on the constantly changing environment, cultural and social milieu. What once was clearly identified as characterizing a group today may be considered outdated and ridiculous. This is what generally happens in America; it occurs in New York, in New England, even in California. This is also what generally happens in cities, even some of the western ones. But is the West, particularly its rather isolated spots, changing so quickly and radically? The above examples do not seem to confirm that. Especially in contact with the "Other" the differences in traditions, views and ways of life stand out.

Of course, the West of today is not the Wild West the Westerners would sometimes wish to go back to. It is also clear that the Wyomingites, in this case, have their faults and weaknesses which they tend not to notice. Some of them simply cannot recognize their defects, their understandable and human defects, because they are too influenced by the representation they, as part of a group, received throughout years. Verl Lister, Eleonora Figg or Gilbert Wolfscale are the characters that best illustrate this old-fashioned group. They hold to the

supposed image of them and their homeland, with the whole cultural baggage it implies, and refuse to accept any changes. Tolerance, open-mindedness, ethnic diversity, progress... No, thank you, this is Wyoming. And Wyoming, even with “touchers” and with disappointed tourists, “is fine just the way it is” (“Tits-Up in a Ditch” 189).

CONCLUSIONS

In the “Introduction” to this dissertation I suggested that literary naturalism continues to live in Annie Proulx’s fiction; now I believe the expression should rather be: it is alive and kicking. Also, I assume that the validity of the genre Proulx adapts in her narrative, the genre which I recognize as the twenty-first century variety of naturalism, has been proved. In the majority of cases the stories are built on a naturalistic approach to the forces of nature as determining the character’s lot, although the factor of contingency in their lives is present as well. The importance of the environment, of the surrounding society’s collective characteristics and the historical context its members happened to live in, taking into account the contemporary socio-economic situation, are crucial and inestimable for the above analyzed texts’ plots.

Émile Zola’s theory states that man is a product of his struggle for existence, remodeled by time and his surroundings. Some of the characters Proulx introduces, such as the Dunmires, the Figgs, or the Stones are clearly products of their milieu; they struggle to survive and they succeed. But it was not because they confronted the natural forces and the unforgiving landscape that surrounds them, but because they adapted to them. They allowed their environment to model their lives, as opposed to such characters as the Tinsleys or the Fairs, who clung to civilization excessively. These city slickers did not let their new “wild” surrounding re-shape them, did not try hard enough to succeed *there and then, at that* particular time. Now, some of the families of newcomers would surely contrive and outlive more than any of their rural neighbors in the

jungle of a big city; but this was not the place their lives were set against at that precise moment.

Most of the above examples illustrate that struggling to win against nature is useless. A landscape that misleads, a hazardous climate or wild animals are deadly factors. The dispassionate relationship between man and nature is a fact; in Proulx's words, against dangerous and indifferent ground personal tragedies count for nothing. The writer's truthful and complete testimony of many of these tragedies confirms her naturalistic inclination. In her stories a creature's survival is simply down to their more successful adaptation, regardless of whether it be a cat, a weasel or a human being; we are all equal in nature's eyes.

It is also true that some, though not too many, romanticized images of nature may be found in the stories. A number of these are transmitted by the native inhabitants committed to their milieu, such as Ace or Jack Buggit; moved by their feelings, by their sentimental attachment to the land, the image they hold is sometimes distorted. In some other cases, such idealized pictures are created in order to emphasize a sharp contrast between the imagined and the real, real and cruel, which immediately follows. Generally, those who tend to create romantic pictures of the New England, Newfoundland or Wyoming/Texas countrysides are the non-locals, the outsiders. But they too, sooner or later, understand these rural/island settings are not places for romantics.

As to the importance of the moment, of the times the characters' lives develop in, it is defined by the socio-economic conditions they are forced to deal with. The economic situation of the region is what Proulx studies in depth; she considers it a fundamental factor in determining a whole society's lot. In the

New England narrative, small dairy farm owners cannot run their businesses anymore; profits are scarce, they can no longer raise crops, their soil is poor and it proves impossible to compete with the industrial-scale farming out west. Hence, they are forced to sell; and they sell, but the purchasers are city dwellers, people unable to understand the local ways. This is how the balance of the region is altered; this is how rural Vermont is transforming into a place of summer residences and the locals into their new neighbors' domestic servants. In the Wyoming stories the situation is similar; the ranchers' contemporaneous status is examined, their choices when facing financial difficulties are: dude ranching or subdividing and selling the land. The powerful corporations and their cold-blooded methods are described as the ranchers' greatest enemy. Some of the new owners, the "suitcase ranchers," do not even bother to move. Others, the "telecommuters," enjoy living on a ranch, but instead of engaging in ranching, they daily drive to their "fancy" and clean city jobs. All of them are becoming part of the New West. Ironically, in *That Old Ace in the Hole* the same telecommuters seem to be the best option for the desperate inhabitants of the Texas Panhandle. Otherwise, the fetid and highly polluting hog farms will take over the whole area, rendering the land uninhabitable. In *The Shipping News* it is not the land but the sea that has always provided a livelihood to the islanders; unfortunately, there too economic issues take a toll on the Newfoundlanders' lot. Given the overfishing policy of the last few decades, the coastal towns have become places with unbearably high unemployment rates, and as a consequence have become depopulated. On the other hand, the oil extraction industries, though creating jobs, are a threat to coastal fishing. There seems to

be no easy solutions for Proulx's characters; they simply have to adjust and live their lives the best they can.

Furthermore, these are hard times for nature itself; times of refineries, uranium, coal and trona mines, pump jacks and drilling rigs, polluted rivers, pipelines, methane-processing plants, hog farms, etc. New England is no longer a green oasis, with its crystal waters and abundance of game and fish. Newfoundland is no longer a place with an extraordinary bounty of cod along its fruitful shores. The Texas Panhandle no longer boasts an endless and pure Ogallala aquifer. As to Wyoming, some decades after its mineral boom, the environment is destroyed and the well-being of its inhabitants and hardworking transients are just a pipe-dream.

The treatment of these issues - of environmental problems as consequences of extremely poor control over the extractive industries and government negligence - reveals an extraordinary importance of ecology in Proulx's narrative. This is not a path traditionally exercised in the critique of naturalistic works, but ecological issues, I believe, are at their heart naturalistic. As I see it, by introducing such a strong emphasis on contemporary environmental problems the writer formulates a new variety of naturalism - twenty-first century naturalism where nature, economy and ecology, necessarily and unfortunately, are indivisible themes. Proulx's latest novel, *Barkskins*, confirms this extraordinary importance the writer places on the environmental issues; as a matter of fact, a further research of Annie Proulx's texts with a particular focus on ecocritical approaches may be an interesting future project.

As far as the people of the three regions are concerned, I believe the portraits Proulx draws characterize them as a group, as a particular society in a

particular place at a particular time. The author portrays their attitudes, their virtues and defects. Sometimes, the weight of the myths, of their supposed archetypes, turns out to be too heavy a burden for many of them. Most of the inhabitants of rural Vermont, living in their generally shabby, junk-filled and run-down dwellings, are presented as hopeless and morally questionable. No virtuous and resourceful Yankees here!. While those belonging to the group of newcomers are ridiculed for their naivety and ignorance - their money being able to bail them out of any trouble, though - the locals seem predestined to fail in their life prospects. As far as the Newfoundlanders are concerned, some of Killick-Claw's inhabitants seem to reflect almost to perfection the "typical" Newfoundlanders an outsider would expect: they are good-hearted fishermen, upright citizens and old fashioned patriots. Their women are deeply involved in the town's social life and actively support elderly or disadvantaged neighbors. Nevertheless, their little community is not free from cheaters, criminals and sex offenders; as a matter of fact, and what provides a certain balance to such a perfect image, there appears to be more low-lifers than in other regions of Canada. As to the burden of the myth of the West, its weight is particularly strong; it should not be forgotten that until a few decades ago Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis was indisputable. And so, the identities of the Westerners traditionally have depended on it. There are, of course, some characters conscious of the unreal status of these stereotypes; some even manage to exploit the archetypal image of their region by literally "selling" it to outsiders. But the great majority still dreams of conquest (which in the post-frontier era is a frustrating desire), of freedom, of "rebirth" and "regeneration," of resembling the last romantic hero - the cowboy - and of a type of success that is

only possible in the West, where everything can happen, because... there has always been hope for a better future in the West.

Although, as said above, I believe it is possible to characterize New Englanders, Newfoundlanders and Wyomingites/Texans as a group, by pointing to the features they have in common, it is also a part of my analysis to indicate their individual struggles. These will be determined by their environment, but I consider O. Alan Weltzien's interpretation stating that "environmental forces (landscape and weather) larger than individuals trace the trajectories of their lives, marking and reducing their choices" (100) may be arguable. I do not believe that Proulx's characters (not only her Wyoming characters analyzed by Weltzien, but any of them) can be reduced to caricature, nor that, as the critic puts it, can they be belittled. My view is that each of the three regions can be considered a protagonist of the narrative exclusively when understood as a complex unit composed of not only powerful natural forces, but society, which in turn is formed by individuals. And these individuals (and here I coincide with Aitor Ibarrola) cannot be treated as caricature, given the psychological insight Proulx delivers. Furthermore, because of their highly developed identities, they starkly and clearly stand out. Another argument Ibarrola gives, again, at variance with Weltzien's view of the characters is that "the author also reveals sympathy for those victims whose lives are unsparingly wasted" ("Re-writing" 133). This is my perception, too. And although such an approach would seem incompatible with naturalistic philosophy, for, according to the theory, an exemplary naturalistic writer should neither satirize nor preach, such a design could never be strictly followed, not even by Zola. The social injustice, despair or hopelessness transmitted by the first naturalists through their novels, did not

allow them a “vivisectionist’s” attitude. It seems that there was always a purpose in bringing to light the violence that frequently burst forth from injustice (or social determinism), and all the disgusting details of vice and its consequences. Therefore, Proulx’s sympathy towards her characters, which is sometimes palpable in her depiction of their tragedies, may be compared to the indignation of nineteenth century authors.

With reference to the strictly naturalistic features of the characters, there cannot be any doubt that most of them are led, or rather misled, by their own instincts, impulses and vices. Rational and serene decision-making is not what characterizes the protagonists of the author’s New England and Wyoming fiction either. Sexual urges turn out to be just as strong as any other vital necessity such as thirst or hunger, and these urges are often improper and accompanied by violence. Violence itself seems to be the natural consequence of a wide range of feelings: rage, hatred, humiliation, jealousy, or deception. Vices, generally alcohol, make the characters waste their chance for a better future, a decent life, and valuable relationships, as well as bringing moral sloth and brutality. To a certain extent, heredity is a factor that influences some of the figures; determinism and fatalism are observed in some cases.

In *The Shipping News*, on the contrary, the majority of the characters might at first be considered as rather archetypal; in the immediate surrounding of Quoyle old and noble fishermen abound, neighbors are helpful and caring, the whole community united and respectful. Notwithstanding this, upon taking a closer look, many of these Newfoundlanders prove to be not so conventional – or perhaps more naturalistic: ostensibly simple female characters turn out to hold dark secrets; kind and peaceful men are revealed as perverts, sex abusers

or adulterers, incapable of dealing with their natural urges; a few yards from watchful, caring society lives a half-starved man, lying in his own excrement. In addition, most of the region's residents seem perfectly adapted to their demanding milieu.

When conducting this study of Annie Proulx's fiction as inscribed in the genre of naturalism, I adopted both a "conventional" and a more innovative approach. As to the first one, I often searched for features, both ideological and stylistic, corresponding to the definition of the nineteenth-century movement (indicated extensively by Åhnebrink). As to the second approach, I agree with Pizer and follow his thesis which states that no *neat* definition can really be applied to American naturalism: "naturalistic fiction usually unites detailed documentation of the more sensationalistic aspects of experience with heavily ideological themes, whose burden demonstrates that man is more circumscribed than ordinarily assumed" (Pizer, Preface xi). Zola's impulse toward depicting truthfully all ranges of life, according to the scholar, was the source of the strength and persistence of naturalism in America. Proulx's fiction, as I believe is evidenced in this dissertation, meets all the characteristics pointed out as quintessential for the genre.

Moreover, as for the tragic themes in Proulx's texts, these too match those indicated by Donald Pizer as recurrent in works of American naturalists. Firstly, the naturalistic tragic hero who, because of the circumstances of life, fails to develop his/her, sometimes evident, individual potential, is reflected in the majority of Proulx's characters, no matter his/her regional identity. Similarly, the reader of Proulx's narrative finds the second theme which, as Pizer puts it, arises from the failure of undistinguished characters, who before may have led

relatively “successful,” though plain lives, but in the end prove unable to maintain this stability and fall, not from a high point, but from midway. As to the third naturalistic theme, related to the problem of knowledge, Proulx’s protagonists are also “alone and doubtful in an unknown world of struggle” (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* 7) and generally unable to discover their true condition: who they are and who caused their fall.

Annie Proulx’s New England and Wyoming works are written following the documentary method and they feature concreteness, circumstantiality and sensationalism, clearly naturalistic qualities. They are filled with examples of landscapes and characters that are nothing like those conventionally associated with each region’s identity, and even less with their mythic images. It seems that Proulx dealt with “preassigned” images and responded by (here I fully agree with Michael Kowalewski) deliberate deflation of all mythic presuppositions.

Notwithstanding the above, again, the case of *The Shipping News* is different; in my view, it combines both features appropriate for naturalism and those resulting from the influence of its artificial and idealistic image, the island’s mythology consolidated in numerous works over the last two centuries. As to these latter, the descriptions of landscape and rural life often appear rather idealized, as if derived from the pastoral tradition; the image of Killick-Claw seems built on the mythic picture of the “typical” Newfoundland outport village, rather than on a solid foundation of scientific, unemotional observation. My supposition, as already mentioned, is that such dissimilarity is due to Proulx status of guest, of tourist, in the island of Newfoundland.

Michael Kowalewski said that “the best American regional writing tends to be less about a place than of it, with a writer’s central nervous system

immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given location” (“Contemporary” 7). He evoked the term coined by D. H. Lawrence - a “spirit of place” - which “in literature springs from a sense of belonging and human attachment” (“Contemporary” 7), and highlights superiority and the extraordinary importance of direct and intimate experience in the works of regional writers. I believe that Annie Proulx’s narrative is a good example of such writing; while conducting her naturalistic data collection, her central nervous system immersed entirely in the totality of local aspects, she attempted (in general successfully) to reach and reflect the “spirit of place”. Such writing, I am convinced, is the only way of writing about place, any place.

Works Cited

Åhnebrink, Lars. *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction: A Study of the Works of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris with Special Reference to Some European Influences, 1891-1903*. Lundequistska bokhandeln, 1950.

Allen, Kimberly G. Review of *Heart Songs and Other Stories* by Annie Proulx. *Library Journal*, 1 March 1995, pp. 105.

Asquith, Mark. *The Lost Frontier: Reading Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

"Author Biography. Annie Proulx". *Reading Group Guides. The Online Community for Reading Groups*.
www.readinggroupguides.com/authors/annie-proulx. Accessed 15 June 2013.

Bakker, J. *The Role of the Mythic West in Some Representative Examples of Classic and Modern American Literature: The Shaping Force of the American Frontier*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1991.

Bass, Rick. "Foreword: The West as Generator of Spirit." *A Contested West: New readings of Place in Western American Literature*, edited by Martin Simonson, David Rio and Amaia Ibarra, Portal Education, 2013, pp. ii-vi.

Berry, Wes. "Capitalism vs. Localism: Economies of Scale in Annie Proulx's *Postcards and That Old Ace in the Hole*." *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx. Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 169-182.

- “Brief Reviews – *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx.” *The Atlantic*, vol. 271, no. 4, 1993, search.proquest.com/docview/223104534?accountid=17248. Accessed 20 Nov. 2015.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Busby, Mark. “‘I Don’t Know but I Ain’t lost:’ Defining the Southwest.” *Regionalism and the Humanities*, edited by Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz, University of Nebraska Press, 2008, pp. 43-55.
- Campbell, Andrea. “Reading Beyond a Universal Nature: My Hopes for the Future of Ecocriticism.” *Schuylkill “Ecocriticism,”* vol. 8, no.1, 2010, pp. 1-22.
- Campbell, Donna. “Realism and Regionalism.” *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, edited by Charles L. Crow, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 92-110.
- Campbell, Neil. *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*. University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
- Carlson, Ron. “True Grit.” *New York Times Book Review*, Sep 07 2008, pp. 7-BR.7. *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/217348849?accountid=17248. Accessed 10 Aug. 2016.
- Chafe, Paul. “‘All the qualities o’ th’ isle:’ *The Shippings News* as Island Myth.” *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 87-98.

- Ceballos-Muñoz, Alfonso. "Playing Tough, Queering the Myth: Cowboy Imagery in American Gay Culture and Drama." *The Neglected West: Contemporary Approaches to Western American Literature*, edited by Amaia Ibarra, Martin Simonson, and David Rio, Portal Editions, 2012, pp. 169-187.
- Comer, Krista. "Introduction: Assessing the Postwestern." *Western American Literature*, Spring and Summer 2013, vol. 48, no. 1&2, pp. 3-16.
- Conforti, Joseph A. *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-twentieth Century*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Cowley, Malcolm. "Naturalism in American Literature." *American Naturalism*, edited by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, 2004, pp. 49-79.
- Cox, Christopher. "Annie Proulx: The Art of Fiction No. 199" *The Paris Review*, no. 188, spring 2009, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5901/annie-proulx-the-art-of-fiction-no-199-annie-proulx. Accessed 2 Nov. 2015.
- Crimmel, Hal. "Born Under a Bad Sign: The Question of Geographical Determinism in the Hardscrabble Northern Borderlands of *Heart Songs and Other Stories*." *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 63-72.
- Cumming, Laura. "Chopping and Unchanging." *TLS, The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4532, 1990, pp. 148.
- Delisle, Jennifer Bowering. *The Newfoundland Diaspora: Mapping the Literature of Out-Migration*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

- “Documentary: Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*.” *Prime Time News – CBC Television*, 1994,
search.proquest.com/docview/190767080?accountid=17248. Accessed
 18 March 2015.
- Doten, Patti. “Postcards from the Solitary Life Writer Annie Proulx enjoys
 Success and Independence.” *Boston Globe*, 26 May 1992, *Research
 Library: Literature & Language*,
search.proquest.com/docview/294654211?ccountid=17248. Accessed 4
 Oct. 2015.
- D’Souza, Irene. “Close Range: Wyoming Stories by Annie Proulx.” *Herizons*,
 vol. 14, no. 1, Summer 2000, pp. 32.
- Durrans, Stéphanie. “The Influence of the Annales School on Annie Proulx’s
 Geographical Imagination.” *The Geographical Imagination of Annie
 Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books,
 2009, pp. 11-23.
- Earle, Neil. “Survival as a Lively Art: The Newfoundland and Labrador
 Experience in Anniversary Retrospective”. *Journal of Canadian Studies*,
 vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 88-107, *Research Library: Literature & Language*,
search.proquest.com/docview/203516042?accountid=17248. Accessed
 3 Nov. 2015.
- Epictetus. *The Discourses and Manual, Together With Fragments of his
 Writings*. Translated by P. E. Matheson, Vol. 2, Clarendon Press, 1916.
- “Fine Just the Way It Is.” Review of *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3*.

- Kirkus Reviews*, no. 10, 2008. *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/917356467?accountid=17248. Accessed 3 Sep. 2016.
- Foote, Stephanie. "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism." *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, edited by Charles L. Crow, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 25-41.
- Fowler, Adrian. "Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails* and the Myth of the Old Outport." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 82, 2004, pp. 71-92.
- Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance." *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, Pluto Press, 1985, pp. 16-30.
- Freeman, Jon. "High and Dry. Annie Proulx Goes Back to the Soil." *Missoula Independent. Western Montana Weekly Journal of People, Politics and Culture*, Dec. 9 2004, missoulanews.bigskypress.com/missoula/high-and-dry/Content?oid=1136110. Accessed 6 Sep. 2015.
- Fuller, Danielle. "Strange Terrain: Reproducing and Resisting Place-Myths in Two Contemporary Fictions of Newfoundland." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 82, 2004, pp. 21-50.
- Gardam, Jane. "Rather Ordinary Horror and Hatred: *Heart Songs* by E. Annie Proulx." *The Spectator*, vol. 274, no. 8698, Mar 25, 1995, pp. 33.
- Glover, Charlotte L. Review of *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* by Annie Proulx. *Library Journal*, vol. 124, no. 8, 1999., pp. 115, *Research Library: Literature & Language*,

search.proquest.com/docview/196788933?accountid=17248. Accessed 9 Aug. 2016.

Greenwood, Rob. "Rural Newfoundland and Labrador: The Personal and the Political in Sustaining Choices and Sustaining Communities." *Rural Transformation and Newfoundland and Labrador Diaspora: Grandparents, Grandparenting, Community and School Relations*, edited by A. Singh and M. Devine, Sense Publishers, 2013, pp. 43-54.

Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity?'" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Hall Stuart and Paul du Gay, Sage, 2005, pp. 1-17.

Hebert, Ernest. "People of Kinship." *The Kinship: With a New Essay*, University Press of New England, 1993, pp. 1-22.

Hummelsund Voie, Christian. "Drinking the Elixir of Ownership: Pilgrims and Improvers in the Landscapes of Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* and *The Shipping News*." *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx. Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp.39-50.

Hunt, Alex. "The Ecology of Narrative: Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* as Critical Regionalist Fiction." *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx. Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 183-196.

---. "Introduction: The Insistence of Geography in the Writing of Annie Proulx." *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx. Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 1-9.

Hoffert, Barbara. "Panhandle." *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 290, no. 5, 12 2002,

pp. 148-149. *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/223096339?accountid=17248. Accessed 1 June 2016.

Hooper, Brad. "Fine Just the Way It Was: Wyoming Stories 3." *The Booklist*, vol. 104, no. 17, 2008., pp. 5-6, *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/235556933?accountid=17248. Accessed 5 Sep. 2016.

Howard, June. Preface. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* by Howard, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, pp. i-iv.

Ibarraran, Amaia. "Introduction: The Cowboy was Never Alone." *The Neglected West: Contemporary Approaches to American Literature*, edited by Amaia Ibarraran, Martin Simonson and David Rio, Portal Education, 2012, pp. xv-xxii.

Ibarrola-Armendariz, Aitor. "Considering the Naturalist Ethos in Annie Proulx's Fine the Way It Is." *A Contested West: New Readings of Place in Western American Literature*, edited by Martin Simonson, David Rio, and Amaia Ibarraran, Portal Editions, 2013, pp. 127-155.

---. "Re-writing the American Naturalist Short Story: Annie Proulx's *Fine Just the Way It Is*." *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*, edited by Sara Martín Alegre, Melissa Moyer, Elisabet Pladevallm and Susagna Tubau, Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012, pp. 132-137.

"Imagination is Everything: A Conversation with E. Annie Proulx." *The Atlantic*

- Online*, November 12, 1997,
www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/factfict/eapint.htm. Accessed
 12 Oct. 2013.
- “An Interview with Annie Proulx.” *Missouri Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999,
 pp. 79-90.
- Jacobs, Rita D. Review of "Close Range: Wyoming Stories." *World Literature
 Today*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2000, pp. 369 *Research Library: Literature &
 Language*,
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/209410566?accountid=17248>.
 Accessed 13 Nov. 2016.
- Katz, Wendy J. and Mahoney, Timothy R. “Introduction: Regionalism and the
 Humanities: Decline or Revival?” *Regionalism and the Humanities*,
 edited by Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz, University of
 Nebraska Press, 2008, pp. ix-xxviii.
- Klinkenborg, Verlyn. “The Princess of Tides – *The Shipping News* by E. Annie
 Proulx.” *The New Republic*, vol. 210, no. 22, 1994, *Research Library:
 Literature & Language*,
search.proquest.com/docview/212803781?accountid=17248. Accessed
 6 Jan. 2016.
- Kollin, Susan. “The Global West: Temporality, Spatial Politics, and Literary
 Production.” *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American
 West*, edited by Nicolas S. Witchi, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 514-527.
- Kowalewski, Michael. “Contemporary Regionalism.” *A Companion to the
 Regional Literatures of America*. Ed. Charles L. Crow. Malden, MA:
 Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 7-24.

- . "Introduction" to *Reading the West. New Essays on the Literature of the American West*, edited by Michael Kowalewski, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 1-18.
- . "Losing Our Place." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. XL, no. 1: *Remaining Place*, 2001, hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0040.137. Accessed 1 Sep. 2016.
- Leader, Zachary. "Beyond the Farm." *TLS, the Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4692, 1993, pp. 21, *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/234444058?accountid=17248. Accessed 17 Sep. 2015.
- Lehan, Richard. "American Literary Naturalism: The French Connection." *American Naturalism*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 2004, pp. 177-201.
- . "The European Background." *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, edited by Donald Pizer, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 47-73.
- Lopez, Barry. "The American Geographies." *Openings: Original Essays by Contemporary Soviet and American Writers*, edited by Robert Atwan and Valeri Vinokurov, University of Washington Press, 1990, pp. 55-69.
- Lord, Douglas C. Review of "That Old Ace in the Hole." *Library Journal*, vol. 128, no. 17, 2003., pp. 115 *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/196812319?accountid=17248. Accessed 15 Sept. 2016.
- Love, Barbara. Review of *Postcards* by Annie Proulx. *Library Journal*, vol. 116, no. 21, 1991, pp. 198. *Research Library: Literature & Language*,

- search.proquest.com/docview/196704096?accountid=17248. Accessed 1 Aug. 2015.
- Love, Glen A. "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Lyon, Thomas L. "Epilogue: What is Happening in the West Today and What It Might Mean." *Updating the Literary West*, edited by Thomas J. Lyon et al., Texas Christian University Press, 1997, pp. 962-963.
- . "The Literary West." *The Oxford History of the American West*, edited by Clyde A. Milner II, Carol O'Connor and Martha Sandweiss, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 707-742.
- Mathews, Lawrence. "Report from the Country of No Country." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 82, 2004, pp. 1-20.
- Maguire, James H. "Encountering the West." *Updating the Literary West*, edited by Thomas J. Lyon et al., Texas Christian University Press, 1997, pp. 73-81.
- Milner II, Clyde A. "Introduction: America Only More So." *The Oxford History of the American West*, edited by Clyde A. Milner II, Carol O'Connor and Martha Sandweiss, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 1-7.
- Moore, Caroline. "High Prairie, Low Life." *The Spectator*, vol. 291, no. 9100, Jan 04 2003, pp. 25-26. *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/201149401?accountid=17248. Accessed 15 Sept. 2016.
- Moss, Maria. "The Search for Sanctuary: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

and E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*." *American Studies*, vol. 49, no.1, 2004, pp. 79-90.

Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism. www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/.

Accessed 3 Oct. 2015.

Nissenbaum, Stephen. "New England as Region and Nation." *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, edited by Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf, Johns Hopkins university Press, 1996.

O'Dea, Shane. "Culture and Country: The Role of the Arts and Heritage in the Nationalist Revival in Newfoundland." *Newfoundland Studies*, vol.19, no. 2, 2003, pp. 378-386.

O'Flaherty, Patrick. *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland*, University of Toronto Press, 1979.

Pierson, Stuart. Review of *The Shipping News*. *Newfoundland Studies*, vol.11, no. 1, 1995, pp. 151-153.

Pizer, Donald. "Contemporary Literary Naturalism." *American Naturalism*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 2004, pp. 255-272.

---. Preface. *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism. An Interpretation*, by Pizer, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, pp. ix-xiii.

---. *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1993.

---. *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism. An Interpretation*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1982.

"Postcards." Review of *Postcards*, by Annie Proulx. *Kirkus Reviews*, no. 21, 1 Nov. 1991,

search.proquest.com/docview/917179387?accountid=17248. Accessed
1 June 2015.

Proulx, Annie. *Bad Dirt. Wyoming Stories 2*. Scribner, 2004.

---. *Bird Cloud: A Memoir*. Scribner, 2011.

---. *Close Range. Wyoming Stories*. Scribner, 1999.

---. *Fine Just the Way It Is. Wyoming Stories 3*. Fourth Estate, 2009.

---. *Postcards*. Harper Perennial, 2006.

---. *The Shipping News*. Fourth Estate, 1993.

---. *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Harper Perennial. 2004.

Pryse, Marjorie. "Writing Out of the Gap: Regionalism, Resistance, and
Relational Reading." *A Sense of Place: Re-evaluating Regionalism in
Canadian and American Writing*, edited by Christian Riegel and Herb
Wyle, The University of Alberta Press, 1997, pp. 19-34.

Rackstraw, Loree. "Painful Resolution." Review of *Heart Songs and Other
Stories* by Annie Proulx. *The North American Review*, vol. 274, no. 3, 1
Sep. 1989, pp. 66.

Reichert Powell, Douglas. *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture
in the American Landscape*. The University of North Carolina Press,
2007.

Rio, David. "Challenging Conventional Recreations of the Western Past: Frank
Bergon's *Shoshone Mike*." *The International Fiction Review*, vol. 34, no.
1&2, 2007, pp. 69-78,
journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/4226. Accessed 5 Aug.
2016.

---. "Introduction: Reconsidering Western Writing beyond Regional

- Imaginary and its Mythic Borders.” *Beyond the Myth: New Perspectives on Western Texts*, edited by David Rio, Amaia Ibarra, Martin Simonson, Portal Education, 2011, pp. xiii-xxiii.
- . and Øyunn Hestetun. “Introduction. Storying the West in Postfrontier Literature.” *European Journal of American Studies. Special Issue: Postfrontier Writing*, vol.6, no. 3, 2011, ejas.revues.org/9249. Accessed 5 Aug. 2016.
- . “Far from the Pastoral Myth: Basque Shepherders in Contemporary Western American Fiction.” *Western American Literature*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2014, pp. 239-265.
- . *New Literary Portraits of the American West*. Peter Lang, 2014.
- Rood, Karen L. *Understanding Annie Proulx*. University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
- Ryan, Jennifer Denise. “Landed Bodies: Geography and Disability in The Shipping News.” *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx. Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 127-140.
- Ryden, C. Kent. “New England Literature and Regional Identity.” *A Companion to The Regional Literatures of America*, edited by Charles L. Crow, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 195-212.
- . “Region, Place, and Resistance in Northern New England Writing.” *Colby Quarterly*, vol.39, no.1, March 2003, pp. 109-120.
- Seaman, Donna. Review of *That Old Ace in the Hole*. *The Booklist*, vol. 99, no.

- 3, 2002, pp. 276, *Research Library: Literature & Language*,
search.proquest.com/docview/235537077?accountid=17248. Accessed
 5 Aug. 2016.
- Seiffert, Rachel. "Inarticulacy, Identity and Silence: Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*." *Textual Practice*, vol.16, no.3, 2002, pp. 511-525.
- Skidelsky, William. "Out of Range." *New Statesman*, vol. 18, no. 841, Jan 10
 2005, pp. 56. *Research Library: Literature & Language*,
search.proquest.com/docview/224346619?accountid=17248. Accessed
 10 Sept. 2016.
- St Andrews, B.A. Review of *The Shipping News* by Annie Proulx. *World
 Literature Today*, vol. 69, no.2, 1995, p. 363,
search.proquest.com/docview/209414039?accountid=17248. Accessed
 12 March 2015.
- Steinbach, Alice. "E. Annie Proulx's Novel Journey to Literary Celebrity Status
 American Original." *The Sun*, 15 May 1994,
Search.proquest.com/docview/406856053?accountid=17248. Accessed
 4 Oct. 2015.
- Steinberg, Sybil S. Review of *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. *Publishers
 Weekly*, vol. 246, no. 13, 1999, pp. 91, *Research Library: Literature &
 Language*,
search.proquest.com/docview/197056730?accountid=17248. Accessed
 5 Aug. 2016.
- . "E. Annie Proulx: An American Odyssey." *Publishers Weekly*,
 vol. 243, no. 23, 1996, pp. 57-58, *Research Library: Literature &
 Language*,

- search.proquest.com/docview/196990095?accountid=17248. Accessed 3 Nov. 2015.
- . "Fiction: *Postcards* by E. Annie Proulx." *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 238, no. 48, 1991, p. 72, *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/196962650?accountid=17248. Accessed 3 Aug. 2015.
- Stegner, Wallace. *The American West as Living Space*. University of Michigan Press, 1987.
- Steward, Robert Scott. "Tayloring the Self: Identity, Articulation and Community in Proulx's *The Shipping News* False." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1998, pp. 49-70.
- Streitfeld, David. "For the First Time, PEN Picks a Woman; E. Annie Proulx's *Postcards* Gets Fiction Prize." *The Washington Post*, 21 Apr. 1993, pp. B01.
- Testa, Matthew. "Exclusive PJH Interview: At close range with Annie Proulx." *Planet Jackson Hole*, 7 Dec. 2005, planetjh.com/2005/12/07/exclusive-pjh-interview-at-close-range-with-annie-proulx. Accessed 15 May 2013.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Viehmann, Martha. "Wests, Westerns, Westerners." *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*, edited by Paul Lauter, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 394-409.
- Vollmann, William. "'Barkskins,' by Annie Proulx." *The New York Times*, 17 June 2016,

- www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/books/review/barkskins-by-annie-proulx.html?_r=0. Accessed 10 March 2017.
- Walcutt, Charles Child. *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream*. Minnesota Archive Editions, 2001.
- Wells, Jeremy. "The Arrival of Regions: The Blackwell Companion to the Regional Literatures of America." *Western American Literature* vol. 41. no. 2, 2006, pp. 202–211.
- Weltzien, Alan O. "Annie Proulx's Wyoming: Geographical Determinism, Landscape, and Caricature." *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx. Rethinking Regionalism*, edited by Alex Hunt, Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 99-112.
- Whalen, Tracy. "'Camping' with Annie Proulx: *The Shipping News* and Tourist Desire." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 82, spring 2004, pp. 51-70.
- Wilkinson, Joanne. Review of *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2*. *The Booklist*, vol. 101, no. 3, 2004., pp. 283 *Research Library: Literature & Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/235545191?accountid=17248. Accessed 10 Sept. 2016.
- Witschi, Nicolas S. "Imagining the West." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, edited by Nicolas S. Witchi, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 3-9.
- Wyoming Library Roundup (WLR): "More Reader than Writer: A Conversation with Annie Proulx." *Wyoming Library Roundup*, 2005, pp. 5-8.
- Zaleski, Jeff. Review of *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2* by Annie Proulx. *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 251, no. 40, 2004., pp. 67-68 *Research Library: Literature & Language*,

search.proquest.com/docview/197079953?accountid=17248. Accessed
17 Sep. 2016.

Zaleski, Jeff. Review of *That Old Ace in the Hole* by Annie Proulx. *Publishers
Weekly*, vol. 249, no. 41, 2002., pp. 63 *Research Library: Literature &
Language*, search.proquest.com/docview/197066352?accountid=17248.
Accessed 18 Sep. 2016.