

Philip French, "Brokeback Mountain," *The Guardian/The Observer*, Jan. 7, 2006
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jan/08/review.features>

The homoeroticism underlying the western has hardly gone unnoticed and was a particular concern of literary critic Leslie Fiedler. In his 1959 classic, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, he called the friendship between Indian Chingachgook and pioneer Natty Bumppo in Fenimore Cooper's seminal novels 'an archetypal relationship which haunts the American psyche', in which 'two lonely men bend together over a carefully guarded fire in the virgin heart of the American wilderness'. 'They have forsaken all others for the sake of the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love that binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilisation.'

In *The Return of the Vanishing American*, Fiedler remarked that Cooper's 'peculiar brand of sentimentality ... underlies all genuinely mythic descriptions of the West, all true westerns - a kind of Higher Masculine Sentimentality utterly remote from all fables whose Happy End Is Marriage.'

Annie Proulx's 1997 short story, "Brokeback Mountain," took these themes and made the homosexual aspect explicit in a realistic modern setting that surprised and, in some cases, shocked readers of the *New Yorker*. After having been ill-served by the team that filmed *The Shipping News*, she has had the good fortune to have her tale somewhat expanded by Ang Lee, the versatile Taiwanese director, whose films include the delightful gay comedy, *The Wedding Banquet*, and the traditional western, *Ride with the Devil*, and have it co-scripted (with Diana Ossana) by Larry McMurtry, who has no current peer as a writer on the West and the way its present relates to its mythic past.

Their fine film centres on two excellent, complementary performances by Jack Gyllenhaal as the charming, outgoing Jack Twist, and Heath Ledger as the laconic, withdrawn Ennis del Mar, two cowboys aged around 20, who meet up in the summer of 1963 when they're hired to mind a large flock of sheep on the remote Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming. The weather is extreme, the food terrible, the pay poor. But they've grown up in the school of hard knocks, Jack on his parents' impoverished ranch, Ennis as an orphan raised by an elder brother, and they love the sense of freedom they find in this beautiful, austere place. Though they ride horses, they're tending sheep, which, in eastern movie terms, is a slightly comic thing to do, less manly than herding cattle.

One night, after downing a deal of whiskey, they suddenly find expression for what they cannot articulate about their surroundings and the feelings they share, and they have sex. It's presented neither romantically nor especially tenderly, and is followed the next morning by a neat piece of symbolism that involves both work and religion - Ennis discovering a dead sheep, the result of both his sin and his neglect. The relationship continues all summer and might have ended there as they go their different ways, Jack to try his hand at rodeoing down in Texas, Ennis to continue cowboying in Wyoming and to marry his teenage sweetheart.

But four years later, Jack sends Ennis a card suggesting a reunion and they renew their close, loving relationship and continue to meet once or twice a year over the next couple of decades for visits into the wilderness to rediscover the epiphanic, transcendental rapture they found on Brokeback Mountain.

Nothing spectacular happens to either in their daily lives. Ennis has two daughters, tries to settle in town before becoming a ranch hand again, then gets divorced. Jack fails as a rodeo performer, marries the daughter of a rich, farm- equipment dealer, has a son and becomes a moderately successful salesman for his patronising father-in-law's firm. They live for their meetings, but these encounters bring only temporary satisfaction. Jack wants them to settle down together with their own modest spread. Ennis, more conscious of the bitter homophobia of their world, remains in a state of denial about his bisexuality.

The film is extremely moving, tragic even, and sensitive towards the feelings of the simple wives who attempt to understand their troubled husbands. The passage of time is subtly handled without resorting to the old device of evoking momentous political events in the world outside as milestones, and the dual narrative of their lives apart is adroitly managed. In a funny, revealing sequence at Thanksgiving 1977, the movie cuts between a power struggle at Jack's home in Texas when he turns on his overbearing father-in-law and takes over the carving of the turkey, and a dinner at Ennis's ex-wife's new home where he watches her prim new husband use an electric carver on the turkey.

Brokeback Mountain is a western in which only two shots are fired (one missing a wolf, the other hitting an elk). There are a mere three fist fights, all of them designed to embarrass the viewer, and two acts of major violence, brief flashbacks experienced by Ennis dealing with the consequences of homophobia. None the less, the film is a major contribution to our understanding of the western genre. To call it a gay movie would be, if not necessarily misleading, a wholly inadequate way of describing the way it strikes a straight audience. It concludes with a beautifully understated coda followed by Willie Nelson performing Bob Dylan's 'He Was a Friend of Mine' over the final credits. The result is affecting, satisfying, and way this side of conventional sentimentality.