

**The Queer West:**

**Homophobia in**

*The Power of the Dog*

**and**

**‘Brokeback Mountain’**

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## **Abstract**

The cinematographic success of the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* and the 2021 film *The Power of the Dog* symbolises the public's interest in LGBTQ+ stories about the American West and the need for appreciation and exploration of homosexual narratives. The paper aims to explore the interconnection between queerness, cowboy hypermasculinity and homophobia within the Western genre in Thomas Savage's 1967 novel *The Power of the Dog* and Annie Proulx's 1997 short story 'Brokeback Mountain', on which both prizewinning films are based on. The literary works are analysed focusing on the representation of male gender roles and the ideal of manhood in the context of the American West, paying special attention to affective-sexual relationships between men, the self-perception of these homosexual characters, and the homophobic social repression they endure. The main critical frameworks used to analyse this correlation will be cultural and gender studies. The first part of the paper consists of a brief analysis of the authors' personal life and writing intentions concerning the topic of cowboy literature and homosexuality. This introduction is followed by an overview of terms regarding masculinity, the historical review of the origins and sustainment of the social idealisation associated with the figure of the cowboy as a symbol of manhood and the examination of the queer reality of the twentieth-century American West's rural world, focusing on the homosexual relationships between men. After this contextualisation, the representation of homophobia in both literary works is analysed. Firstly, the issues homosexual characters have with socially imposed cowboy masculinity and their resulting attitudes towards femininity are analysed. Secondly, the ways in which repressed homosexuality displays itself in the form of homophobia are examined, focusing on the complex relationship homosexual characters have with nudity and sex. This exploration is followed by an observation of the social repression homosexual characters endure both from the community and from their own families. The paper is concluded with an evaluation of the analysis conducted.

**Keywords:** Homophobia, homosexuality, American West, cowboy literature, masculinity, hypermasculinity, sexual repression.

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## 1. Introduction

The vast success of the 2021 film *The Power of the Dog* makes us reminisce about the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, as both Oscar-winning films brought visibility to the scarcely discussed topic of homosexuality and homophobia in the Western genre (Vognar). Despite this recognition, the works were subject to criticism because they challenge the notions of American masculinity aligned with the cowboy myth. The sole suggestion of the existence of queer cowboys in the American West directly puts into question the preservation of the hypermasculine figure of the mythologised cowboy, a symbol of the ideal man for American society. The films increased awareness and public acclaim for the original works, as both motion pictures were based on literary works that address the topic of homosexuality in the context of the twentieth-century American West (Weltzien, *'Power of the Dog'*). More specifically, they represent homosexual male characters battling to reconcile their identities with unaccepting homophobic societies.

Savage's 1967 novel *The Power of the Dog* is set in 1924 Montana during the final years of the American frontier, while Proulx's 1997 short story begins in the summer of 1963 in Wyoming and continues over the course of two decades. Therefore, in order to understand better the depth of the particularities and implications of homosexual relationships between cowboys and the perception of homosexuality in the rural American West of the twentieth century, it is essential to consider the social background and gender ideals surrounding the figure of the mythologised cowboy, a fabricated symbol sustained in the course of history since Manifest Destiny to modern days. Thus, the paper will include background information about the labels and concepts regarding cowboy masculinity. This contextualisation is crucial for understanding the homophobia present in both literary works, as negative perceptions towards homosexuality and femininity stem from socially enforced hypermasculinity (Benson 2). Equally, the paper will contextualise the reality of homosexuality among cowboys in the American West, arguing that homosexual conduct has always been commonplace ("Paradise of Bachelors").

Considering the above information, this essay aims to analyse the homophobia represented in both literary works by examining the impact of the socially established standard of cowboy hypermasculinity and its resulting repression enforced on homosexual characters. The comparative analysis is carried out considering cultural

studies, with an emphasis on the American West and its mythology, and gender studies, with special attention being paid to the interconnection between masculinity and homophobia. In the first section of the paper Thomas Savage's and Annie Proulx's personal lives concerning the topic of homosexuality and homophobia are examined. This contextualisation is followed by a broader dissection of the concept of masculinity and the figure of the cowboy as an ideal of manhood for American society, emphasising the reality of the true sexual diversity of the rural American West. Next, the representation of homophobia as a direct consequence of the socially expected cowboy hypermasculinity is analysed by examining the homosexual characters' complex relationship with masculinity and femininity. This analysis is followed by a discussion of how repressed homosexuality displays itself as homophobia. In connection with self-repression, the paper will explore the relationship these homosexual characters have with nudity and their sexual facet, considering themes such as physical intimacy, self-pleasure, and sexual intercourses. Furthermore, the essay will consider the homophobic social repression these characters endure, paying special attention to their family relationships. The last part of the paper offers an insight into the interconnection between homosexuality, homophobia, and cowboy hypermasculinity showcased in both literary works.

## **2. About the Authors**

Before analysing their works, it is of crucial importance to consider the authors' connection with the literary genre of the Western and the themes concerning homosexuality and homophobia.

### **2.1. Thomas Savage**

Savage claimed that, instead of doing research, he drew on his own life experience and memories in his writing career (Savage 271). In fact, he represents his own life as a fictional parallel life story in *The Power of the Dog*. Growing up in the rural American West, he endured "family complexity" and the "rough and masculine ethos" of Montana (Savage 271, 267). Savage belonged to a powerful sheep-and cattle-ranching family with whom he experienced the cowboy lifestyle, as he worked breaking horses and herding sheep in Montana and Idaho before majoring in English at the age of twenty-one (Savage 268). According to Professor Alan Weltzien,

Savage knew all along the gap between romantic and realistic life in the saddle and on the ranch. ... His canon consistently calls out bullshit on not only pop westerns but many literary representations of life in the Intermountain West in the twentieth century's first half. (*Savage West* 218).

Savage married his wife in 1939, with whom he had three children, and the marriage endured until she died in 1988 (Savage 270). However, despite having married a woman, it is important to acknowledge that Savage himself belonged to the LGBTQ+ community. Savage was a homosexual man from the American West, who repressed his homosexuality by masking himself as a heterosexual family man while simultaneously having extramarital homosexual relationships (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 4). Even though he claimed to be happily married to a woman, he rejected the bisexual label (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 7). However, he displayed his true sexuality through the self-criticism present in his deeply autobiographical literary work (Weltzien, *'Power of the Dog'*). Weltzien claims that this veiled criticism "it also means endorsing the reality that the rural West sometimes destroys rather than fosters people, particularly sexual minorities." (*Savage West* 218). This distinctiveness adds to the representation of homosexual characters in his novel as it serves the purpose of representing his own experiences as both a queer ranchman and a repressed homosexual man family man.

The topic of "repressed homosexuality displayed as homophobia in the masculine ranch world" was rarely discussed when the book was published in 1967, as these ideas of repression and queerness were deemed revolutionary at the time (Savage 264). Same-sex romantic tales were not popular at the time, because, the market, a precise gauge of social tolerances, was still not sufficiently open. (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 8). Such was the literary censorship enforced on Savage that, according to critic Karl Olson, Savage purposefully presented that "homosexuality inevitably leads to disaster" as a form of implicit protest (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 4). Additionally, despite the critical praise that the novel earned, some critics even claimed that the book was "the year's best novel", most of the reviewers avoided the subject of homosexuality in their reviews (Savage 266).

The work has remained virtually unknown to both Western literary critics and the general reading public until its recent comeback with the release of the homonymous film in 2021, and only lately has the queer sexuality of his own life or literary work been the focus of that criticism (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 3).

## 2.2. Annie Proulx

As a writer that studied history, Proulx claims that she has a special interest in the relationship between the regional landscapes and the socioeconomic change in rural communities and how this connection shapes the community's mentality ("Getting Movied" 129). She found the need to explore and bring to light the lives and relationships of homosexual men living in the rural West and how their physical and social environment conditioned them. Although she states that she wanted to delve into a long-lasting gay love story which was "loaded with taboos," she also stresses that "homophobic antipathy and denial" are the most central elements of this "story of destructive rural homophobia." (Proulx, "Getting Movied" 130).

As an ageing female writer, Annie Proulx needed to take inspiration from gay men for the construction of the characters (Hart 210). Although some of the influence came from her own friends, she also was inspired by older homosexual ranch hands' life experiences to ensure that the story she wrote was historically accurate (Proulx, "Getting Movied" 133). An older tough ranch hand that attentively observed young cowboys that were playing pool was her source of inspiration, as he led Proulx to consider that he could be gay and made her imagine what rural homosexual men's life stories could be like living in the countryside of the American West, where homophobia was expected (Proulx, "Getting Movied" 129).

Regarding the link between the authors and their works, Proulx herself "considered Savage a personal friend and literary model" and acknowledged Savage's influence in her work in the afterword she wrote for *The Power of the Dog's* republication in 2001 (Weltzien, *Savage West* 100). Proulx's short story was published on October 13, 1997, in *The New Yorker*, 30 years after Savage's novel was published. And, although society evolved in that period, and there were gay men in the West that lived amicably with the community, homophobia was still latent in American society (Proulx, "Getting Movied" 130).

In fact, a year after the story was published, Matthew Shephard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, was beaten, tortured, and left to die tied to a buck fence, similar to how Jack is murdered in the story. (Vognar). Shephard's murder moved national public opinion as it was a brutal example of homophobic hate (Proulx, "Getting Movied" 130).

Moreover, we must note that the state of Wyoming had “the highest suicide rate in the country, and that the preponderance of those people who kill themselves were elderly single men.” (Proulx, “Getting Movied” 130). Therefore, homophobia remained a reality in the American West in the twentieth century.

‘Brokeback Mountain’ received critical praise as it won the National Magazine Award for Fiction in 1998 and a third place of the O. Henry Award in 1998 (“Annie Proulx.”). Additionally, the story was also published in Proulx's 1999 collection of short stories, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, which was a finalist for the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. (“The 2000 Pulitzer Prize Finalist in Fiction”). Moreover, it “became a cultural icon, a space in which people celebrated, raged, grieved, and found company.” (Keller and Jones, 21). However, despite the hate, Proulx also received letters from men, many from ranch hands and cowboys living in the West, thanking her for telling their life stories or helping them understand what their sons were experiencing living their lives as homosexual men (Proulx, “Getting Movied” 133).

### **3. Queerness and Masculinity in the American West**

Westerns have represented the figure of the cowboy through stoic characters that represent hypermasculinity. Moreover, the Western is a traditionally archetypal genre in which queerness is often disregarded, although queer people and relationships have always been commonplace in the American West. Accordingly, through the popularity of the Western, the concept of cowboy masculinity spread, becoming a model for American society (Benson 2).

#### **3.1. Definitions**

Before analysing the ways in which homophobia is represented in *The Power of the Dog* and ‘Brokeback Mountain’, it is of utmost importance that the terms masculinity, hypermasculinity and hegemonic masculinity are defined for the intended adequate comprehension of the paper, as we must note that these concepts have various definitions.

Oxford’s Dictionary of Gender Studies defines masculinity as the set of

“Traits and qualities conventionally associated with boys and men. These may be physiologically defined in terms of physical appearance and biological properties, but more commonly masculinity is considered as socially constructed and hence



circumscribed by the norms applied to boys and men in a given culture.” (Griffin "masculinity").

Accordingly, the concept of hypermasculinity refers to “the exaggeration of masculine stereotypes such as aggression, dominance, strength, and physical prowess.” and is used to describe men “who conduct themselves and are regarded as dominant in their context” (Griffin "hyper-masculinity").

And, concerning these last definitions, we must acknowledge the view Hugh Campbell proposes in which he claims that the current hegemonic perception of “masculinity is, in considerable measure, constructed out of rural masculinity” (Benson 2). Along with this, according to sociologist Raewyn Connell’s gender order theory, hegemonic masculinity refers to a form of masculinity enacted by men that reproduce traditional hypermasculinity and legitimise their dominant social roles over others (Ravenhill and de Visser 2).

### **3.2. The Cowboy as the Hypermasculine Symbol of Manhood**

These ideas of hypermasculinity have been sustained and transmitted by mainstream American society and culture. This is the reason why the idealised symbol of the American cowboy remains one of the most significant emblems of U.S. hypermasculinity (Benson 6). Therefore, as the literary works to be analysed were written and published in the twentieth century, in the following lines, it is worth revising where this ideal of cowboy masculinity stems from and its evolution throughout the century.

The nineteenth-century myth of Manifest Destiny, associated with the westward territorial expansion of the United States, which held that Americans had a divine right to all territory west of the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean, gave rise to the generalised idealised perception of the hypermasculine androcentric rural cowboy in the United States (Benson 2). This stereotypical heterosexual cowboy was depicted as “a wandering, strong, brave, and adventurous man, who lives according to his own principles of justice and integrity and who is often incapable of loving” (Blanco-Herrero 6). Accordingly, as homosexuality was associated with traditionally female attributes, it was perceived as an automatic weakness in men, a tendency to reject, because the homosexual cowboy discredits the myth of the American cowboy (Blanco-Herrero 6).

Whether it be politicians, advertisers, or entertainers, the iconography used by those who trafficked in the fiction of the West seems to have nothing to do with the reality of the cowboy's experience. However, despite the inaccuracy of this representation of the figure of the cowboy, historian William Savage, Jr. claimed that:

No other group of westerners has received so much notoriety nor been commemorated to the extent that cowboys have; novels, movies, and television shows, popular poetry and music, advertisements for cigarettes and salsa, museums and halls of fame, and even an entire professional sport have capitalized on the cowboy-as-cultural icon phenomenon (qtd. in Kersting 17).

Considering the uncertainty of the century, the symbol of the cowboy served to reminisce about the idealised times of the frontier, making the cowboy “the predominant figure in American mythology” (Kersting 18). Even President Theodore Roosevelt, an extremely popular figure in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America, was one of the original supporters of cowboy masculinity. Cowboys played a crucial role in Roosevelt's vision of pacifying the frontier, and the stars of such a frontier were the tough men who paved the way for settlement and profitable growth, which Roosevelt considered to be the ideal prototype of an American man (Kersting 18-20). He adopted the cowboy aesthetic and iconography and paired the figure of the cowboy with a desirable form of masculinity “If a cowboy could be the president, he must certainly be part of an exceptional class of men.” (Kersting 21). This mythologised cowboy was characterised by his forthright masculinity, despite real-life cowboys’ struggles with changing gender norms and sexual identity (Kersting 43).

After World War II, humanity's ability to destroy itself manifested, and hopelessness permeated the American psyche. Under this social circumstance, Hollywood benefited from America's unease by presenting an idealised pre-World War II reconstruction of the world based on mythologised ideas of the American West (Benson 2). Hollywood cowboys advocated for and protected some of America's most valued ideas, such as individualism and a commitment to justice, and they used force to maintain those beliefs when they were threatened (Kersting 25). Consequently, the mythologised symbol of the hypermasculine cowboy, as well as the historically altered fictional West from which he allegedly emerged, were adopted as a desirable role model by the American public (Benson 2).

The popular perception of the American West had a tremendous influence on the nation's identity. Therefore, the symbol of the cowboy, a fabricated icon of individuality, masculinity, democracy, and liberty, represented all that American men sought to be. Hence, despite the social progression of the late twentieth century regarding masculinity, the mythologised West remains a pillar of American identity, and the cowboy has become its chosen hero (Kersting 26-27).

### **3.3. The Queer West**

Weltzien claims that “for most of American history, the heterosexual majority has sustained that closeted ‘shame’ of being a sexual minority, as though equivalent to weak or shameful secrets we carefully keep out of public view.” (Weltzien, *Savage West* 103). However, regarding the existence of queer cowboys, and despite the lack of representation in literature and media, queer people and relationships were commonplace in the American West, as homosexual cowboys were present since the earliest expansion to the West. First, we must note that occupations such as cattle herding attracted a substantial number of unmarried men because the job was physically demanding and required living in basic temporary settlements, a lifestyle deemed inadequate or even potentially hazardous for women (“Paradise of Bachelors”).

Thus, as the process of westward expansion resulted in isolating social configurations in which men commonly lived without women, men became interdependent on other men for household amenities, economic assistance, and company (“Paradise of Bachelors”). Therefore, according to Bommersbach, the circumstance of men living in isolating rural scenarios allowed them to break traditional gender roles and take those that were deemed feminine in addition to the masculine ones. As traditional ideas of socially established gender roles were questioned and agitated, men were able to explore their sexuality and gender expressions. Therefore, the ever-shifting line differentiating the homosocial from the gay became even more unclear in the absence of women. Consequently, this setting allowed men to express their erotic feelings towards other men in both discreet and overt ways (Bommersbach).

Instances of homosexual conduct were more common in distant and rural areas where boys and men spent the majority of their time with other guys, and relationships between men and women were strictly controlled. This background fosters the belief that sex is

sex, regardless of the gender of the person with whom the relationship is shared. Therefore, the specific nature of the relationships between men remained ambiguous. (Kersting 58).

In his 1948 work *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Alfred C. Kinsey claims that rural areas in some of the most isolated parts of the country have recorded some of the highest homosexuality frequency rates ever recorded anywhere. He notes that:

There is a fair amount of sexual contact among the older males in Western rural areas. It is a type of homosexuality which was probably among pioneers and outdoor men in general. Today it is found among ranchmen, cattle men, prospectors, lumbermen, and farming groups in general—among groups that are virile, physically active. (Bommersbach).

History Department Chairman Peter Boag from the University of Colorado states that “In all-men societies, it was not unusual for same sex relationships, and it was just an acceptable thing to do. People engaged in same sex activities weren’t seen as homosexuals.” In fact, regarding the homosexual label, we must consider the newness of the word, as “Society didn’t really designate people as homosexual or heterosexual through most of the 19th century; it was not really until the 20th century that those identities crystallized.” (Bommersbach).

Homoerotic relationships in this isolating context also stemmed from the practical need of experiencing sexual pleasure while retaining an independent lifestyle, which is to say, without committing to familial ties, without having children or without having to experience domesticity. However, it must be noted that some cowboys had heterosexual families while secretly practising homosexual or bisexual tendencies (Proulx, “Getting Movied” 132). Thus, some men would still have heterosexual sexual encounters when women were accessible and homosexual ones with other men when being isolated into strictly male groups. (Kersting 58).

According to historian Patricia Nell Warren, same-sex relationships between cowboys were generally permitted in the early days of the West, owing to the scarcity of workers, which made it not feasible for landowners to be demanding about whom they hired. However, the initial tolerant views shifted with the emergence of mechanised agriculture, which made human labour less valuable (Ng).

Taking the above information into consideration, it may be argued that queerness was and remains a reality in the rural American West. Moreover, the social perception of homosexuality in the American West has undergone a shift towards a more open view due to LGBTQ+ activism. In fact, as a result of studies supporting the views of gay liberationists, the American Psychiatric Association excluded homosexuality from its list of pathologies in 1973 (Keller and Jones 24). However, despite this progress, homophobic views persist in many rural regions of the United States to this day (Blanco-Herrero 6).

#### **4. Homophobia in *The Power of the Dog* and 'Brokeback Mountain'**

In order to examine the representation of homophobia in both literary works, several aspects must be considered, the two main ones being the toxicity of cowboy hypermasculinity and the repression society imposes on the characters.

##### **4.1. Masculinity as the Rule**

Homosexual relationships pose a direct threat to masculine authority and control. Because, if homosexuality denotes equality between two men, it automatically jeopardises masculinity's established power hierarchy of dominance (Ravenhill and de Visser 3). Accordingly, femininity in a man is perceived as an opposition to socially expected masculinity and therefore is a menace to the idealised concept of manhood and manliness. Consequently, as femininity has been linked to the homosexual community, having a hypermasculine demeanour conceals being perceived as homosexual. According to Kimmel, "homophobia, the fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity" (67). This view correlates to Connell's description of hegemonic masculinity traits, in which he claims that to be a socially accepted man, one must explicitly be homophobic and express disapproval about homosexual people (736).

In the context of the rural American West, men and female are bound to specific gender roles too, and breaking such rules challenges the established order. Regarding *The Power of the Dog*, and, according to Weltzien, these gender-limited social rules are purposefully displayed in the novel as a form of veiled but overt criticism: "clearly, consistently, too much has been ruled out as taboo in rural western masculinity. Savage, who knew those rules intimately, could hardly protest more plainly" (*Thomas Savage* 7). An example of his critique is portrayed through Peter's character and the homophobic

treatment he suffers because of his femininity as opposed to Phil's aim to reproduce an idealised cowboy hypermasculinity.

Peter does not abide by the rules of masculinity. A masculine man should be strong, but Peter is of slender build, "his arms and legs nothing but the merest crust of bone around the vulnerable marrow." (Savage 27). Furthermore, he works as a server, which is perceived as a woman's job considering Proulx's claims that "In the rural division of labor, ranch work is man's work." (Savage 275). Moreover, the villagers perceive Peter's skill of making artificial crepe paper flowers as feminine, and, therefore, an automatic weakness for a man, "but I wonder what young lady made these pretty posies?" (Savage 57). Consequently, being perceived as weak and not masculine enough, he is bullied by the gender-rule-conforming community.

A way in which they bully Peter is by calling him sissy, "so at school was Peter hazed, taunted and named a sissy – the hiss of the word was everywhere.", and feminine names such as Miss Nancy,

For it was as Miss Nancy that Phil spoke of Peter to the men in the bunkhouse, and they had a good laugh, and among themselves they called him the same thing, ... Why wouldn't they laugh at him? He looked like no ranch boy; he was prissy clean, and lisped. (Savage 30, 161)

The online dictionary Merriam-Webster defines the term "sissy" as an informal and disparaging noun to describe "an effeminate man or boy" or "a timid, weak, or cowardly person" ("sissy"). The definitions themselves link femininity with weakness. Despite the suffering, in the novel Pete pretends not to remember this abuse, to appear braver and less weak, more masculine, and less feminine: "'I don't remember,' he said He did, of course – remembered the panic that pressed up like a lump in his throat when someone shouted sissy ... Once he'd been afraid to enter a room, or to leave it." (Savage 223).

This character is presented in direct contrast with the hypermasculine and homophobic one of Phil Burbank, who is a misogynistic repressed homosexual rural man (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 5). He criticises progress over the perception of masculinity and longs for a hypermasculine past: "But this is the world we live in. It was you who left the other world. I never figured out why." (Savage 130) and does not perceive effeminate men as real men "Don't ever let your maw make a sissy of you. There were real men in

those days.” (Savage 224). According to Kimmel, “the fear ...that others might perceive us as homosexual propels men to enact all manner of exaggerated masculine behaviors and attitudes to make sure that no one could possibly get the wrong idea about us.” (67). Accordingly, Phil makes a conscious effort to be perceived as hypermasculine, and, therefore, the opposite of effeminate: “No one could mistake rough, stinking Phil for a sissy.” (Savage 277). Moreover, he is particularly homophobic towards men whom he perceives as sissies: “Now, some people can get along with them ... But Phil couldn’t abide them. He didn’t know why, but they made him uncomfortable, right down to his guts. Why in hell didn’t they snap out of it and get human?” (Savage 56).

Nevertheless, despite openly hating Peter’s display of femininity, Phil credits his masculine traits. He acknowledges Peter’s bravery in being true to himself and not kneeling after being mocked for making paper flowers: “It surprised him that the boy didn’t color.” (Savage 57) or for wearing new clothes: “He neither paused nor faltered in running that strange gauntlet before the open tents. He seemed not to even hear ... Now, Phil always gave credit where credit was due. The kid had an uncommon kind of guts.” (Savage 216). He also appreciates his violence for killing animals ruthlessly: “Phil couldn’t help but admire – he’d never seen anything quite like it.” (Savage 246).

The different attitudes that male characters show towards masculinity represent the progression of the standards of masculinity towards a less toxic canon. The figure of the late Bronco Henry represents the mythologised cowboy hypermasculinity of the past that Phil idolises, “a man’s job, like in the days of Bronco Henry.” (Savage 173). Phil aspires to reach this level of hypermasculinity in the present by admiring and imitating his idol but fails in the attempt due to his repressed homosexuality. And, conversely, younger characters such as George, who is masculine but not in a toxic way, and Peter, who is overtly feminine, represent the arrival of a progressive future of the rural man that is more open to other forms of masculinity. Phil despises these new non-traditional cowboys: “They didn’t know what the hell they were anymore, ... so-called cowboys” (Savage 173).

In Annie Proulx’s short story, however, the representation of homosexuality is different because the homosexual character’s masculinity is never doubted, as the main characters do not conceal alternate identities with masculine behaviour (Keller and Jones 25). Ennis’ and Jack’s excessive masculinity, which was cultivated and displayed in a

variety of hypermasculine contexts and highlighted at numerous crucial times in 'Brokeback Mountain', provides a welcome, anti-stereotypical picture of homosexual and/or bisexual men (Hart 213). This is significant since male homosexuality has frequently been linked with "traditionally female characteristics: less strength, effeminacy in manners, interest in activities typically associated to women." (Blanco-Herrero 6). The short story not only breaks the cliché of cowboy heterosexuality, but also of gay femininity, enabling two purely archetypal cowboys, to transcend the sexual constraints of the genre (Blanco-Herrero 7). Therefore, Proulx's story broadens the notions about conventional cowboy masculinity while challenging gay stereotypes (Keller and Jones 33).

However, despite being two men, the protagonists of Proulx's story reproduce the heterosexual hegemonic hierarchy, as Ennis takes the alpha role while Jack subordinates and is the one that takes the tasks that are deemed feminine such as cooking: "'Shot a coyote just first light,' he told Jack the next evening, ... while Jack peeled potatoes." (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 5) However, Jack expresses his discomfort with this subordination: "'Measure the fucking short leash you keep me on'" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 21).

## **4.2. Repression**

Repression is a key element in both of the literary works. We can find examples of self-repressed homosexuality, which reflects itself through homophobia and suppressive attitudes towards intimacy. Additionally, the social repression present both in the novel and in the story exposes the bigotry that societal gender standards sustain and enforce on the community.

### **4.2.1. Repressed Homosexuality**

In *The Power of the Dog*, we can observe how repressed homosexuality is displayed through homophobic attitudes and actions. Phil's character epitomises the old inclination to conceal gayness via overt homophobic attitudes (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 5). That is to say, Phil resorts to homophobia before suffering the same homophobic hate towards himself: "But Phil knew, God knows he knew, what it was to be a pariah, and he had loathed the world, should it loathe him first." (Savage 251). And he makes sure to keep his homosexual nature a secret from the rest of the community. Indeed, Phil drinks



extremely rarely out of concern about what he could say in an uncontrolled moment: “God damn it – sometimes he longed to tell the whole story. One reason he hated booze, he was afraid of it, afraid of what he might tell.” (Savage 15).

This action of masking his true identity is, the major key to Phil’s complex personality because Phil’s desire of wanting to touch Bronco Henry forces him to acknowledge and face the overwhelming reality of his own repressed homosexuality: “Phil, at that moment in that place smelled of years felt in his throat what he’d felt once before and dear God knows never expected nor wanted to feel again, for the loss of it breaks your heart.” (Savage 250). His knowledge of this aspect of himself, which is dreadful in his community, becomes his own hindrance and he reinvents himself as a masculine, homophobic rancher, keeping with the Western ethos (Savage 277).

The symbolism of the opening lines of the novel should be considered, as the castration described serves the purpose of anticipating Phil’s metaphoric emasculation: “Phil always did the castrating” (Savage 1). This represents that cowboys were “metaphorically castrated when they were cut off from society, isolated from women and families, and forced to live with other single men on ranches out West.” (Allmendinger 10). Moreover, the act of castration deprives an animal of its sexual organs, making it distinct from the other reproductive cattle in the herd “with pain, to join the herd” (Savage 153). This action alludes to Phil’s struggles with his repressed homosexuality to fit in the heterosexual environment he lives in (Allmendinger 10).

Similarly, in ‘Brokeback Mountain’ Jack and Ennis have internalised their culture’s most ingrained stereotypes against homosexuality and homosexuals, despite their own inclinations (Keller and Jones 24). Jack and Ennis are faithful to one another in a way that resembles a traditional relationship between a husband and a wife. Jack recognises and expresses his complex homosexual feelings towards Ennis while at the same time noting that he should not love him. The tone of these compliments suggests the existence of a deeper romantic connection between them, a connection they have to suppress:

We could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn’t do it, Ennis, so what we got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that. It’s all we got, boy, fuckin all. . . . You got no fuckin idea how bad it gets. I’m not you. I can’t make it on a couple a high-altitude fucks once or twice a year. You’re too much for me,

Ennis, you son of a whore-son bitch. I wish I knew how to quit you. (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 21)

Even after admitting their love for one another, neither Jack nor Ennis embraces their sexual orientation. Ennis decides to suppress his feelings and live as a heterosexual guy in order to avoid being an outlier: "I know I ain't [queer]. ... It ain't goin a be that way. We can't. I'm stuck with what I got, caught in my own loop. Can't get out of it. Jack, I don't want a be like them guys you see around sometimes" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 13-14). They are unable to accept the label of homosexual or queer because they are unable to align gay male stereotypes with their ideologies and way of life (Keller and Jones 28).

The expression "being in the closet" is a metaphor used to refer to repressed homosexuality (Griffin "closet"). Therefore, we must consider the symbolic relevance of the ending scene, where Ennis is literally in Jack's closet, referencing their homosexuality (Keller and Jones 28). The shirts hidden in the closet represent Jack's feelings for Ennis, which must be kept tucked away, a secret, "his dirty shirt, the pocket ripped, buttons missing, stolen by Jack and hidden here inside Jack's own shirt the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 26). Therefore, they remain closeted "But if you can't fix it you got a stand it.", and frustrated over the lack of homosexual visibility: "This happen to other people? What the hell do they do?" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 15).

Another way in which internalised homophobia and self-repression manifest in both Savage's novel and in Proulx's story is through homosexual characters' attitudes towards nudity, masturbation, and sexual intercourse, both heterosexual and homosexual, and how they are conditioned by the social standards of masculinity. Regarding nudity: "On the early frontier, homosexual men were seldom acknowledged to live and work in these same-sex environments, and depictions of the naked male body were considered taboo." (Allmendinger 14). This view is apparent in Savage's characters' attitudes towards nakedness: "Never had the brothers appeared naked before each other; before they undressed at night they snapped off the electric lights." (Savage 5-6). Phil is so modest that he bathes naked in a deep watering hole in the creek where he finds there is "a sense of innocence and purity" far from everyone: "The spot was precious, and must never be

profaned by another human presence. ... In all the world, only this spot was Phil's alone.” (Savage 162).

However, the place becomes a place of humiliation for Phil when Peter surprises Phil naked and disturbs this secret previously pure space (Allmendinger 15). Becoming vulnerable, he must “hide his nakedness.” (Savage 163) On the contrary, nudity is not shameful in ‘Brokeback Mountain’. In fact, Jack’s attraction to Ennis is revealed when Jack secretly watches Ennis get dressed and notices his nakedness: “pulling off his shirt and jeans (no drawers, no socks, Jack noticed)” (Hart 211).

Concerning homosexual intercourse, we must consider that the sexual role that homosexual men generally take during anal sex may affect how other people perceive them as being more or less masculine. The penetrative role is crucial in sexual dominance, as the dominant individual is perceived as masculine while the receptive one is viewed as feminine (Ravenhill and de Visser 4). These roles are perceptible in ‘Brokeback Mountain’, Ennis takes the dominant role while Jack remains submissive, their sexual roles becoming correlated to the heteronormative standard. Thus, Ennis is effeminizing Jack, subjugating him to his overpowering, hegemonic masculinity (Hart 212).

Ennis jerked his hand away as though he'd touched fire, got to his knees, unbuckled his belt, shoved his pants down, hauled Jack onto all fours and, with the help of the clear slick and a little spit, entered him, nothing he'd done before but no instruction manual needed. (Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain” 7)

The sexual relationship between Jack and Ennis is depicted in ways that stress the masculine. In contrast to the conventional homosexual romance, which uses emotion to categorise males as weak, Jack and Ennis' initial encounter is hypermasculine (Keller and Jones 26).

They scarcely discuss their sexual encounters or the feelings that emerge from them. According to Keller and Jones, this silence, along with aggressiveness, is used to masculinise their sexual intercourse (26). Moreover, both men reject admitting the fact that they are having sex with another man (Hart 212).

They went at it in silence except for a few sharp intakes of breath and Jack's choked ‘gun's goi off,’ then out, down and asleep. without saying anything about it ... They

never talked about the sex, let it happen ... saying not a goddamn word except once Ennis said, 'I'm not queer.' And Jack jumped in with 'Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours. (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 7)

They cannot even look at each other not to admit the reality: "Nothing marred it, even the knowledge that Ennis would not then embrace him face to face because he did not want to see nor feel that it was Jack he held" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 22). Moreover, regarding self-pleasure, both Ennis and Jack masturbate thinking of each other. This symbolises, therefore, that their relationship is not circumscribed by their momentary sexual encounters: "I sure wrang it out a hundred times thinking about you" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 13).

As opposed to 'Brokeback Mountain', *The Power of the Dog* has less sexual content. However, references to sex are made when Phil uses the term "silver anniversary", an expression currently used to refer to marriage, to reminisce about the last time he rode with Bronco Henry: "Twenty-five years since he'd ridden side by side with Bronco Henry.", alluding through that double entendre to the last time they had sexual intercourse (Savage 15).

Moreover, although Phil and Peter do not have explicit sexual intercourse, there is a connection between the characters after Peter sees Phil naked: "In a way, he and Phil had a kind of bond" (Savage 180). Phil sees his young self in Peter, a young man who intends to be like his idol: "The boy wanted to become him, to merge with him as Phil had only once before wanted to become one with someone" (Savage 250). Along with Phil's attitude shift towards Peter, there is a growing sensuality that is reinforced when Phil, who never touches anybody, wraps his arm over the boy's shoulders: "That's damned kind of you, Pete,' and he slid his long arm about the boy's shoulders. Once before that day, he'd been tempted, and desisted, because he'd always sworn out of that old loyalty never again to make that move." (Savage 251). Phil's sudden vulnerability represents the waning power of his self-repression (Weltzien, *Thomas Savage* 6).

Regarding heterosexual sex, Phil is disgusted by it: "He judged that was all they thought about, and what did it get them? ... It beat him how people could destroy themselves over a piece of tail, themselves and the lives of everybody else." (Savage 155-156). And, although "sometimes Phil chose to ignore these things." (Savage 155), the

possibility of his brother being sexual with a woman revolts him: “Damned if he could imagine George touching and fondling a woman. ... The idea of such a thing made Phil wince.” (Savage 61). Conversely, although Ennis and Jack both have spouses and children, and are intimate with their wives and other women, they express their preference for homosexual sex (Hart 212). Ennis acknowledges this reality: “ I mean here we both got wives and kids, right? I like doin it with women, yeah, but Jesus H., ain’t nothin like this” (Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain” 13).

#### **4.2.2. Social Repression**

According to Professor of Gender Studies Beth Loffreda, “homophobia works not just through the viciousness of physical violence but also through the daily erosion of selfhood by the friction of the widespread, casually expressed hatred.” (Weltzien, *Savage West* 105). Therefore, breaking from the heteronormative norm makes these characters appear gay to society, which would put them at a higher risk of encountering social repression such as hate crimes. This fear of the possible social repression is visible in Proulx’s story: “We do that in the wrong place we’ll be dead. ... It scares the piss out a me. ... I don’t want a be like them guys you see around sometimes. And I don’t want a be dead” (Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain” 14). This ingrained trauma is linked to the homophobic attitudes and homophobic hate crimes they are surrounded with (Blanco-Herrero 7).

Homophobic fathers are prominently portrayed in the short story because they stand for both the oppressive patriarchal social structure of the rural Wyoming setting in general and Ennis and Jack’s internalised versions of its oppressive and patriarchal social expectations in particular (Hart 218). Ennis was brought up by a homophobic father that constantly made homophobic comments, and even coerced Ennis, into seeing the dead and brutally beaten body of a homosexual man, a man Ennis suspected his father murdered (Hart 217). Ennis thinks his father exposed him to the horrific image to discourage him from engaging in same-sex relationships (Keller and Jones 31).

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 pieces a burned

tomatoes all over him, nose tore down from skiddin on gravel. . . . Dad made sure I seen it. Took me to see it. . . . Dad laughed about it. Hell, for all I know he done the job. (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 14-15)

Similarly, Jack becomes a victim of a homophobic hate crime (Hart 213). He is beaten to death, and to hide the true reason for his murder, Jack's homophobic father fabricates a story about a roadside accident. However, after discovering that Jack's homophobic parents found out that Jack intended to leave his family with another man, Ennis believes that Jack was actually murdered for being homosexual: "No, he thought, they got him with the tire iron. . . . So now he knew it had been the tire iron" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 23 - 25).

Another form of social repression is that of the socially expected heterosexual marriage. In 'Brokeback Mountain', homosexual men marry women and even have children with the purpose of covering up their true homosexual inclinations. These are marriages of convenience as they allow them to fit in a society that will not question their sexuality for not being married. Therefore, out of fear of possible social repression, both men put on a façade of social normalcy while secretly maintaining their homosexual relationship, and, in this way, they are using their heterosexual performativity as a defence (Hart 212).

Although they are married, their wives do not accept their husbands' homosexual affairs. Alma, Ennis' wife is aware of Ennis' homosexual inclinations and confronts him: "what you like to do don't make too many babies. . . . Don't lie, don't try to fool me, Ennis. I know what it means. Jack Twist? Jack Nasty. You and him—" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 16-17). Ennis reacts violently to the homophobic charge of the accusation, exhibiting macho conduct that is in line with the social norms of rural Americans in those decades, because her confrontation challenges his authority: "She'd overstepped his line" (Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" 17). By engaging in violence towards Alma, he intends to defend his masculinity and demonstrate his control over her and stop her from revealing his sexuality to others (Blanco-Herrero 7). According to Kimmel, "violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood," therefore, Ennis' aggressive response to Alma is an effort to reassert his superiority in the gender hierarchy and maintain his masculinity as "by suppressing them, men can stake a claim for their own manhood." (67).

In *The Power of the Dog*, adding to the bullying Peter receives from both young classmates and adult villagers described in the previous section, there is a relevant instance of social repression, in which Phil's sexuality is questioned. As opposed to the main characters in 'Brokeback Mountain', Phil does not marry a woman to fit societal expectations. We can observe that a ranch hand finds it strange that a powerful and prosperous man such as Phil Burbank does not interact with women or does not show interest in discussions about them like the rest of the hands do: "He ignored the young ladies" (Savage 98). Accordingly, he openly describes Phil as odd in front of other ranch hands to differentiate him from the rest: "Hey – he's sort of a lonely cuss, ain't he? Like about what we was saying before he come in, do you guess anybody ever loved him? Or maybe he ever loved anybody?" (Savage 9). But the oldest man in the bunkhouse considers it offensive to ambiguously imply that Phil, a powerful man in the community, is strange or gay: "What had love to do with Phil? ... I wouldn't want to be saying nothing about him and love. ... You got an awful lot to learn about love." (Savage 10). All of these repressive actions are the result of the expectations of the pervasive heteronormativity and homophobia that prevails in the rural society around them.

## **5. Conclusion**

Society has continually repressed queerness, but with the inclusion of cowboy narratives dealing with the interconnection of themes such as hypermasculinity, homosexuality and homophobia in the American West, an alternative to the stereotypically masculine Western is presented. Thus, through both of these literary works, Savage and Proulx give visibility to the life stories and relationships of queer rural people from the twentieth-century American West while criticising the oppressiveness of the established societal expectations of masculinity. Therefore, by giving representation to queer identities, these authors broaden the spectrum of the Western genre while simultaneously criticising the toxicity of the cowboy hypermasculinity imposed on these men.

The main aim of this paper was to analyse the correlation between homophobia, the socially imposed rules of hypermasculinity, and repression that affect rural homosexual men from the American West represented in *The Power of the Dog* and 'Brokeback Mountain'. The initial introduction to the definitions of cowboy masculinity, the figure of the cowboy as an idealised symbol of manhood, and the real queer history of the rural

American West have served the purpose of a background for the subsequent analysis of the topic of the paper. In the analysis, we can observe the struggles homosexual men have to endure in concealing their true identity by obeying gender norms and repressing their homosexual tendencies with a hypermasculine façade. From this analysis, it may be concluded that although *The Power of the Dog* and 'Brokeback Mountain' deal with themes such as homosexual sex in different ways, the essence, which is the homophobia that stems from a socially enforced cowboy hypersexuality, as well as the repression it entails, is shared by both literary works.

Traditionally, the figure of the cowboy has been represented as a hypermasculine heterosexual hero, an icon to be followed. These works, however, challenge this perception. Hence, the dominance of the stereotypical cowboy is threatened, proving that this genre has room for characters that do not necessarily adhere to the archetypal depiction of masculinity. Ultimately, these stories illustrate that there is a need for a more diverse representation of the rural American West, in which a broader sexual range is considered and depicted in depth.



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