

# Brokeback Mountain



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANNIE PROULX

Proulx was born in Connecticut in 1935. She is of English and French-Canadian ancestry. In 1969 she graduated *cum laude* from the University of Vermont, and earned an M.A. at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Canada. She lived in Vermont for more than 30 years before moving to Wyoming in 1994. She currently resides in Seattle. Proulx began her writing career as a journalist, but soon turned to fiction and published stories in publications like *Seventeen* and *Esquire*. Prior to “Brokeback Mountain,” she garnered significant critical praise for her novel *The Shipping News* (1993), including the Pulitzer Prize and U.S. National Book Award. She is the recipient of many other awards for her writing, such as the O. Henry Prize (won twice), National Book Foundation Medal (Lifetime Achievement), and PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy and lawyer Roy Cohn began a campaign to expose and expunge supposedly communist or communist-sympathetic people working in the U.S. government, which has been deemed the “Red Scare.” Less well known is the “Lavender Scare” that sought to persecute people accused of being homosexuals from working in government, schools, the military, and many other occupations. McCarthy and his supporters accused these “lavender lads” of being communist sympathizers who were open to blackmail. In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law Executive Order 10450, which barred “sexual perverts” from working for the government in any capacity. This ban led to over 5,000 firings and would have been in effect during the time of Ennis and Jack’s employment with the Forest Service, a government agency. More to the point, however, the “lavender scare” of the ‘50s is emblematic of the public’s perception of homosexuality as an abomination—a perception which gave helped give rise to the atmosphere of virulent homophobia in which Jack and Ennis lived.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 1999, Proulx published a collection of stories entitled *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. “Brokeback Mountain,” which had originally been published as a novella the year prior, was included in the collection. Each of the stories was inspired by Proulx’s years spent living in Wyoming, and focuses on protagonists, often with difficult lives, from the largely rural state. Proulx’s writing style has been compared to William

Faulkner, Theodore Dreiser, and Herman Melville, other “great American writers” whose work deals with nostalgia, morality, ambition, and desire. “Brokeback Mountain” joins a growing literary tradition of works that deal compassionately with the experiences of gay people. Other seminal works from (or set in) the same period include the plays *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman (also set in Wyoming) and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Brokeback Mountain
- **When Written:** 1990s
- **Where Written:** Saratoga, Wyoming
- **When Published:** 1997
- **Literary Period:** Late 20th century
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Wyoming, middle-to-late twentieth century
- **Climax:** Jack’s death
- **Antagonist:** Joe Aguirre, Homophobia
- **Point of View:** Third person, mostly limited to Ennis

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Silver Screen** “Brokeback Mountain” was adapted into a major motion picture in 2005. It won a BAFTA, an Academy Award, and a Golden Globe.

**Stage Production** In 2014, an opera based on “Brokeback Mountain” premiered in Madrid, with the libretto penned by Proulx.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are two poor boys born on small ranches in Wyoming around the time of the Second World War. Ennis’ parents died when he was young, so his older brother and sister raised him. Both boys dropped out of school in order to work, and meet for the first time in the summer of 1963 as ranch hands on **Brokeback Mountain**, before either of them is 20.

Their boss is Joe Aguirre, a cold man who doesn’t think much of the two boys when he meets them. Ennis is assigned the job of tender, and Jack is given the role of herder, for which Joe commands him to sleep far out in the wilderness to watch the sheep at night.

Jack has worked at the mountain before, and he gives Ennis

advice about working there. The two boys get to work, occasionally noticing each other across the natural beauty of the mountain.

As the summer wears on, they get to know each other well, exchanging stories about their families and backgrounds. Jack complains that he hates being so far away from the main camp, and Ennis offers to switch roles with him.

One night, after Ennis and Jack have been up late drinking and talking, Jack declares that it's too late for Ennis to go back out to the sheep, and that Ennis should stay with him. Soon they begin to have sex, an encounter that neither of them speak about but implicitly know will repeat itself through the rest of the summer.

In the wilderness and solitude of the mountain, Ennis and Jack feel free and alone in their intimacy. However, Joe Aguirre watches them have sex through binoculars, and treats Jack coldly when he delivers the news that his uncle is dying. There is a hailstorm, and the sheep from the Brokeback herd get mixed up with another. Ennis is unable to accurately pick them apart.

The summer finishes, and Jack and Ennis go their separate ways: Ennis to marry Alma Beers, and Jack back home to Lightning Flat. When they say goodbye, Ennis feels sick to his stomach.

Ennis marries Alma, and she quickly becomes pregnant, giving birth to a daughter they name Alma Jr. Ennis works a series of low-paying ranch jobs. He enjoys their itinerant lifestyle, but Alma hates it. Four years after the summer of 1963, Ennis receives a postcard from Jack, saying he'll be in town. When the men reunite, they kiss passionately, which Alma sees. They spend a few days together in a motel room, where they admit how much they had missed each other, and resolve to see each other more often. Jack wants them to get a ranch together, but Ennis thinks it would be too conspicuous. He tells Jack about Earl and Rich, two ranchers who lived together near Ennis when he was young. Earl was beaten to death with a **tire iron** and mutilated. Ennis' father made sure Ennis saw the corpse, and Ennis surmised that his father had something to do with the death.

As the years wear on, Jack and Ennis continue to steal time to see one another under the guise of "fishing trips." Alma and Ennis have another child that they name Francine, but their marriage eventually falls apart and Alma gets remarried to the local grocer. Ennis attends Thanksgiving at her new home with the grocer, where Alma accuses him of having a relationship with Jack. Ennis responds violently and doesn't see his children for many years after that.

Ennis continues to work low-paying, itinerant ranch jobs. Jack marries Lureen, a wealthy woman whose father runs a farm-machinery business. They continue to see each other over the years, and their desire does not wane, even as their bodies age.

In 1983, they spend several days together at a lake. Jack expresses his frustration that they don't see each other more often. Ennis replies that he has work responsibilities, and needs to pay child support. He is also still scared about their physical safety when they are together. They leave things unresolved.

Several months later, Ennis sends a postcard to Jack about arranging their next meeting. It is returned with the notice **DECEASED**. Jack calls Lureen, who tells Ennis that Jack died when a tire exploded while he was changing it. Ennis assumes that there is more to the story than this, and that Jack likely died in a manner similar to Earl.

Ennis visits Jack's family, and asks to scatter Jack's ashes on Brokeback Mountain, like Lureen mentioned he had wanted. Jack's father is cruel to him, and refuses, insinuating that he knows Jack and Ennis were lovers. In Jack's room, Ennis finds a shirt that Jack wore on the Mountain, and nested inside it, one of his own shirts that had gone missing. He takes these home with him and hangs them on the wall of his trailer alongside a postcard of Brokeback Mountain. He resigns himself to dreaming about what could have been between the two of them, and continues to live his life on the fringes of society.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Ennis del Mar** — Ennis was born in Wyoming, near the Utah border, around the time of World War II. Raised on a small ranch, his parents died when he was young, and his brother and sister raised him. He is described as being tall with a narrow face, and muscular with quick reflexes. When his truck breaks down and he doesn't have enough money to fix it, he can't get to school any longer, so he drops out of high school and goes in search of work. He meets Jack Twist during the summer of 1963 on **Brokeback Mountain**, when neither of them is yet 20 years old. He marries Alma Beers and has two daughters with her, Alma Jr. and Francine. They eventually divorce. For most of his life, he works a series of ranch jobs around the state of Wyoming. He carries on a secret affair with Jack for the better part of 20 years, and is left in deep mourning when Jack dies in 1983. Ennis, though often gruff on the outside, is revealed to have a tender side through his relationship with Jack. When Ennis and Jack part ways after their summer on Brokeback Mountain, Ennis feels so upset over losing Jack that he feels physically sick. This physical manifestation of his love for Jack resurfaces 20 years later, when the men are again faced with the prospect of a lasting separation—showing that Ennis's steely shell guards a vulnerable and emotional person. Ennis lives in a state of near constant fear that he and Jack could be physically harmed for their romance—a fear that originates in the fact that, when he was a child, his father showed him the mutilated body of a gay rancher. Much like Ennis's love for Jack,

this fear follows Ennis for years. When the story ends, it seems that Ennis is doomed to live alone with the painful truth that he was unable to achieve a sense of safety and belonging with the man he loved in a world where being openly gay is simply not an option.

**Jack Twist** – Jack was born in Lightning Flat, Wyoming, around the time of World War II. His parents are ranchers, and he worked on **Brokeback Mountain** one summer prior to meeting Ennis. Like Ennis, he had to drop out of high school to work. He is described as having curly hair and a buck-toothed grin. He eventually marries Lureen, the daughter of a wealthy farm-machinery businessman based in Texas, and they have one son. He dies in 1983, likely at the hands of a homophobic mob. Like Ennis, Jack carries a deep desire and longing for something he never quite achieves prior to his untimely death. However, he differs from Ennis in that he is more impulsive and promiscuous. He boasts of sleeping with many other women, and though he never discloses this to Ennis, he also sleeps with other men. Even so, Ennis remains Jack’s true love, and he desperately wants to find a way to see Ennis more often, preferably on a daily basis. Jack becomes a wealthy man thanks to Lureen’s inherited business, while Ennis continues to work low-paying ranch jobs. However, Ennis enjoys and takes pride in his work, while Jack is relegated to a “vague managerial title” and feels subordinate to his wife. Stealing time away from his home life in Texas to be with Ennis (and also, perhaps, other men) is one way Jack feels in control of his life. Ultimately, Ennis’s worst fears come true when Jack is murdered by a homophobic mob, likely due to his more frequent (and less careful) engagement in same-sex relationships.

**Joe Aguirre** – Joe Aguirre employs Jack and Ennis to work on **Brokeback Mountain** during the summer of 1963. He is a surly man, who looks down upon the young men who come and work for him. He watches Ennis and Jack have sex through binoculars, and though he doesn’t say anything to them directly, he treats them coldly after that. Later, when Jack tries to get a job from Joe in the summer of 1964, Joe turns Jack away and implies he knows the nature of Jack and Ennis’s relationship.

**Alma Beers** Alma marries Ennis del Mar during the fall of 1963. She gives birth to their first daughter, Alma Jr., and a few years later, to Francine. She dislikes Ennis’s predilection for low-paying ranch work with long hours, and wants to settle down somewhere to raise her family. She eventually gets a job at a grocery store in Riverton. Jack’s reunion with Ennis is the beginning of a gradual distancing between Alma and Ennis that eventually culminates in divorce. After Ennis’s weekend in a hotel room with Jack, he shows little interest in being intimate with Alma, and often takes time away from work and his family to go on “fishing trips” with Jack, which Alma knows are much more than just time spent by a lake. Alma eventually realizes her life with Ennis is going nowhere, which leads her to get a divorce. She then marries the Riverton grocer, taking her two

daughters with her, and is soon pregnant with a third child.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Alma Jr. and Francine** – Ennis and Alma’s two daughters.

**Lureen** – Jack’s wife, daughter of a wealthy farm-machinery businessman from Texas.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### DESIRE, REPRESSION, AND REGRET

In “Brokeback Mountain,” Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist fall in love while working as ranch hands on **Brokeback Mountain** in Wyoming. At the end of the summer, they part ways and attempt to start separate, conventional (i.e., heterosexual) lives, marrying women and having children. Four years later, when the two men meet again and still want each other more than anything, Jack raises the possibility that they could live together and start a business. Ennis, however, firmly rejects the idea—it’s the 1960s in Wyoming, and homosexuality is forbidden and dangerous. Besides, they have obligations to their wives and children, and Ennis doesn’t want to be a social outcast. Choosing a more conventional life over the life they both truly want could be seen as a rational decision, but it doesn’t lead them to happiness. Being unable to build a life together casts a long and dark shadow on their relationship, but their frustrated desire also prevents them from living and enjoying the lives they have chosen instead. Therefore, Proulx shows how rejecting the opportunity to fulfill a deep desire in favor of bending to social expectations leads to tragic results.

From the beginning of their love affair, Ennis and Jack try and fail to repress their desire for one another. For example, the first time the men part ways to return to their more conventional lives, Ennis feels a physical pain that he mistakes for food poisoning. His desire for Jack is so strong that it affects his mind and his body. Furthermore, when they finally see each other for the first time after four years, they embrace and, without thinking, kiss passionately, even though Ennis’s wife Alma is nearby. This flagrant display of affection catches them both by surprise, which shows that their desire is automatic and cannot be rationally controlled.

Despite their uncontrollable desire, Ennis’s decision to live separately from Jack is a deliberate and even rational choice in the sense that it prioritizes safety, family, and community.

When Ennis was a child, his father took him to see the mutilated corpse of a local gay man (one living in a thinly-veiled domestic partnership akin to the one Jack proposes), which made Ennis acutely aware that expressing homosexual desire could get him killed. Thus, Ennis's refusal to live with Jack can be seen as a fervent wish for their mutual safety. Furthermore, Ennis feels strongly about his obligation towards his wife and children. He has made a commitment to them and feels responsible for supporting them, so leaving his job and family to elope with Jack strikes Ennis as irresponsible and even immoral.

While Ennis's decision not to live with Jack can clearly be seen as both moral and rational, he comes to regret repressing his desire. This is, in part, due to the fact that the life he believed he was choosing—a life of family, community, and safety—proves unattainable as a direct consequence of his repressed desire, which destroys his marriage. Ennis and his wife divorce because she can tell that Ennis wants Jack more than her (he takes many trips with Jack, for example, but never takes his wife and children on holidays). Furthermore, Ennis and Jack are never really able to fit into society and find a community, even though they try to present themselves as “normal” and heterosexual. Ennis remains single and drifts from job to job, while Jack has extramarital affairs, a vague managerial role in his wife's company, and his father-in-law never accepts him. Thus, even though Ennis thinks he is sparing both of their lives by choosing not to live together as gay men, Jack is still murdered by homophobes and Ennis is left lonely and full of regret.

Ennis's reasons for choosing not to fulfill his deep desire to live with Jack are understandable and even sensible. And yet, after Jack's death, once the life they both wanted is no longer available to them, Ennis is filled with regret. He wishes he had taken risks to be with Jack, knowing that the life he chose instead has not been happy enough to outweigh the lost potential for a happy partnership with Jack. Ennis refuses to let his love for Jack die with his body, and continues to dream about him. He resigns himself to living with his pain and his memories of Jack—a better fate than never having met Jack at all, or banishing him from his thoughts forever.



## INTOLERANCE AND VIOLENCE

Intolerance, and the violence to which it can lead, are constant threats to Jack and Ennis's relationship. Proulx presents intolerance toward homosexuality as a pervasive characteristic in Jack and Ennis's society—not something specific to certain people or places. Earl and Jack's violent deaths, for instance, are attributed not to any one person, but rather to a generalized “them.” Jack and Ennis's fear of this pervasive violence and intolerance keeps them from being together, and for good reason: homophobic violence is ultimately what kills Jack and leaves Ennis alone with his regret.

While violence is the most clearly horrible outcome of widespread intolerance, Proulx also uses Ennis's thoughts and experiences to show that intolerance can lead to internal psychological effects that are nearly as devastating as outright violence. Ultimately, homophobia robs both men of their lives: Jack is murdered for his sexuality, while Ennis is stuck in limbo, unable to fulfill his desires or fit into a society that can't accept him the way he is.

Intolerance and hatred, both internalized and external, are present even in the remote hills of Brokeback Mountain. Throughout their first summer together, Jack and Ennis never discuss the nature of their relationship or their feelings for one another, which shows how ingrained homophobic norms are. Only once does Ennis voice that he “ain't no queer,” a sentiment Jack immediately agrees with. Though the two men are sexually intimate, they are afraid to label themselves as gay, since they have both internalized the notion that gay men are unnatural and they know that being outed can be a death sentence. While the two men do not experience outright violence that summer, they do face social consequences for their relationship. Their boss, Joe Aguirre, watches them have sex through binoculars. While he doesn't address their relationship explicitly, he treats both men coldly afterwards. He doesn't dismount his horse to deliver Jack the news that his uncle is dying, and he declines to offer them jobs again for next summer.

While Joe Aguirre's homophobia is expressed without outright violence, the threat of violence, and even death, is a very real possibility for Jack and Ennis should their relationship become public knowledge. This shapes both their choices and fates. The fear of violence drives Ennis, in particular, because his father took him as a child to see the mutilated corpse of a gay man (Earl) who was murdered as a punishment for his sexuality. As a result of this experience, Ennis will not entertain the possibility of living with Jack, even if that is what he wants most; when the two men kissed in front of Ennis's wife, Ennis tells Jack that if they do that again they will “be dead.” Jack does not have the same fear that Ennis does, and while it allows him to be more open to expressing and exploring his desires, his freer attitude towards his sexuality eventually leads him to be murdered by homophobes. The violence that has cast a pall over their relationship from the beginning is ultimately what brings it to a premature end.

While Ennis's internalization of the intolerance around him may save his life (as it leads him to be more careful with his behavior than Jack), this internalization of homophobia also leads Ennis to psychological distress. It's clear, for example, that Ennis is uncomfortable with his own sexuality because the only times in the story in which he is violent occur in response to others directly acknowledging his sexual desire. The first instance is at the end of their summer at **Brokeback Mountain**, when Ennis punches Jack hard for no apparent reason, although it seems that this unexpected violence is due to his own shame and

distress over having to leave the man he loves. This interpretation of Ennis's violence towards Jack gains credence when, years after Alma witnesses Jack and Ennis in a passionate embrace, she reveals to Ennis that she knew about Jack and Ennis's relationship and calls Jack "nasty." Ennis hurts Alma in a fit of violent rage and, as a result, he doesn't see her or his children for several years afterwards. This is seemingly the first time Ennis has been accused of being gay, and he uses violence to try and show Alma that she is wrong, as well as to intimidate her into not sharing what she knows with others.

Ennis's shame over his sexuality, which leads him to violence, shapes all of his choices and actions throughout the story. While Jack is open to the idea of being a social outcast in order to live with Ennis, Ennis does not entertain this possibility and, as a result, he loses his chance at the life he most wants. Although Ennis has not been physically touched by homophobic violence—he does not lose his life, as Jack does—he must live with the regret of not having fulfilled his deepest desires, which is a bitter and heartbreaking experience. Therefore, Ennis must live with the pain of losing the person he loved most, living a life on the fringe of society, and knowing that to live as his true self would be to die a violent death.



### MASCULINITY AND SEXUALITY

Jack and Ennis's homosexuality defies the masculine norms under which they have been raised, leaving them unable to reconcile their understanding of the lives they are *supposed* to lead as men with the relationships they want to pursue. Proulx explores the intersection of masculinity and homosexuality by illustrating the ways in which society sees any deviation from the very narrow traditional notions of masculinity as unnatural and deserving of punishment. Ultimately, this reveals the inherent flaws of narrowly defining how an entire gender must act and advocates for a more expansive definition of masculinity—one that includes non-heterosexual forms of sexual expression.

Jack and Ennis have both internalized homophobic concepts of masculinity that they learned from their fathers. When he was a young boy, for instance, Ennis's father took him to see the mutilated corpse of a gay man (Earl), and Ennis even surmises that his father may have been one of the men who killed Earl. This experience was clearly meant to impress upon Ennis that being gay was not acceptable. Likewise, Ennis recalls a story Jack told him about how his father once beat and urinated on him for not making it to the toilet in time, even though he was only three or four years old. Like Ennis's father "punishing" Earl for his homosexuality, Jack's father's punishment of Jack for soiling himself shows that masculine norms are often reinforced through violence and humiliation, no matter how minor or accidental the "transgression."

Traditional notions of masculinity prize heterosexual virility and

dominance, and for a time, it seems that both Jack and Ennis are able to fit into this narrow ideal. At first, both men appear to have picture-perfect families. Ennis and Alma marry and have two girls, whom Ennis adores. Ennis asserts dominance over Alma, dictating where they live, how much money they earn, and how they have sex. Likewise, Jack marries Lureen and moves to Texas, where he has a son. However, when Ennis and Jack reignite their affair, both men's façades of traditional masculinity begin to fall apart. Ennis loses interest in Alma, both emotionally and sexually, and she divorces him, taking the girls with her. Meanwhile, Jack has extramarital affairs with both men and women and is relegated to a vague managerial role when Lureen inherits her father's business, leaving him with less power than his wife. When Jack dies, Lureen tells Ennis it was due to an accident (which it most likely wasn't), revealing that she is ashamed of her late husband's sexuality.

Even though it was something of an open secret that Jack was gay, his family members attempt to masculinize him even after his death. When Ennis goes to visit Jack's family to get permission to scatter Jack's ashes over **Brokeback Mountain** as Jack had wanted, Jack's father refuses and insinuates that he knows Ennis and Jack were more than old ranching buddies. This implies that Jack's father's homophobia causes him to defy his son's own wishes for what would happen with his remains. Ultimately, Jack's family buries the rest of his ashes in an ancestral burial ground. This connects Jack to his family (and thus to his homophobic father) forevermore, rather than connecting him to Brokeback Mountain, a symbol of freedom and personal choice. Even in death, then, Jack is subjected to strict societal expectations about who he should be.

Every aspect of Ennis and Jack's life and identity is influenced by societal expectations of who they will be as men, and it's ironic that the masculine traits they wish to present to the world are also the traits that, in others, bring them the most misery. Ennis, for example, refuses to leave his life and move to a ranch with Jack due to his fear of masculine violence, but Ennis himself becomes violent in instances in which he feels that his sexual orientation is eclipsing his masculinity (such as when Alma insinuates that she knows he is sexually intimate with Jack). By punishing men who stray from tradition with violence and even death, men scare people like Ennis into denying themselves the lives they want to lead and encourage them to prove their masculinity through violence, thereby ensuring a self-perpetuating cycle of masculine violence. Therefore, traditional masculinity is shown to be anything but "natural"—rather, it is a violently-reinforced set of socially-constructed norms.



### HOME AND BELONGING

Jack and Ennis's difficult childhoods have shaped their adult lives. Because of this, they think often about what home means to them and they search

for a new concept of home that is more welcoming than the ones with which they grew up. Ennis seeks a sense of home by denying his desire for Jack and sticking to traditional notions of family and masculinity, while Jack searches for home in Ennis. He frequently asks to see Ennis more often, and repeatedly proposes that they run away together to start a ranch or go somewhere with less restrictive social norms. Ennis always refuses on the grounds of familial responsibility and physical safety, a choice that ultimately denies both of them their ideal concept of home. Home is a word that is traditionally associated with a sense of belonging, warmth, comfort, and happiness. In reality, however, home for both men proves to be more closely associated with restrictive social norms, expectations, and responsibilities than with belonging or happiness.

Jack and Ennis's childhood homes inform who they become and how they make decisions, which impacts their lives and relationships. While their childhoods had significant differences (Ennis's parents died when he was young, while Jack's parents outlive him), their early lives had significant parallels. Both grew up in Wyoming, and neither man finished high school or had lofty career ambitions. Both Jack and Ennis have also experienced abuse at the hands of their fathers. Ennis's father was a violent man who may have murdered a gay man (Earl), and Jack's father, who is similarly homophobic, once beat and urinated on Jack as a toddler. The abuse both men endured at the hands of their fathers impacts how they approach their taboo relationship. Ennis's homophobic father scares him into not wanting to live as a couple with Jack, for he fears for their physical safety, while Jack longs to fulfill his desires in spite of his upbringing and wants to live with Ennis on their own ranch. Ennis's concept of home is one of physical safety, whereas Jack's is one of emotional fulfillment.

For both men, the summer of 1963 on **Brokeback Mountain** is as close as they get to their concepts of home: they are secluded in the mountain, surrounded only by nature and one another, so they feel simultaneously physically safe and emotionally fulfilled. The beauty and solitude of the mountain is a memory that chases Jack and Ennis for the rest of their lives. They recall it as a time before the pressures of children and wives dominated their lives, and before they realized just how special it was that they had a place where they could be together, unafraid that they would be punished by society.

The two men strive repeatedly to recreate this environment by retreating into the wilderness for their affairs over the next twenty years, but they never come close to the purity and ease they achieved on the mountain. Ennis is never able to forget his responsibilities towards his work and his children. He's also never fully at ease, and worries that if they make a wrong move, or act suspiciously in the wrong place, they will be in danger of being beaten, or even being murdered. Jack longs to erase these responsibilities and fears, and to run away to Mexico with

Ennis. When they meet, they frequently argue about when and how they will see each other next, a concern that never came up on the mountain, where time and desire seemed endless and without limit.

When Jack dies, Ennis creates a shrine to his memory with a postcard of Brokeback Mountain and some of their old shirts. Brokeback Mountain is intimately tied to his memories of his lover, no matter how many years have passed since that first summer together. Despite Jack's violent murder, Ennis chooses to remember him the way he was on the mountain, before life and society kept them apart. Yet the two-dimensional postcard will never come close to their lost experience of feeling at home on the mountain, which underscores that feeling at home is a rarefied experience that must be cultivated and treasured.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

For both Ennis and Jack, Brokeback Mountain represents pure freedom of romantic and sexual expression, totally removed from the limitations of society. Unlike the impoverished ranches on which they grew up, Brokeback Mountain is filled with natural beauty, and provides them with the peace and solitude for their love to grow. The mountain lives on in their memories as an idyllic location and representation of what their love once was, and what it could be once more, if only they could escape judgment and fear.

And yet, even the Mountain was not perfect. The work they did there was hard and underpaid, and Joe Aguirre spied on them from a perch with binoculars. Joe even refuses to hire Jack for work the following summer due to his relationship with Ennis. Thus, even on the mountain they could not escape the judgment of society. The Brokeback Mountain that lives in Ennis and Jack's memory is one that is a more beautiful place than it was in reality. They must continue to conjure this image of the mountain because their lives depend on the dream that they will one day be reunited in the simple solitude they shared in the summer of 1963.

In the story, Brokeback Mountain is often invoked during the story's most difficult moments, such as when the two men are arguing over how and when they will next be with each other, or when Jack dies and Lureen mentions he wanted his ashes to be strewn there, or when Ennis, mourning Jack's death, hangs up a postcard of the mountain next to Jack's shirts. Brokeback Mountain represents a kind of salvation—a place to which Ennis and Jack can one day return once they have endured the torture of real life.



## TIRE IRON

Tire irons come to represent a physical and pervasive manifestation of homophobia throughout the story. Tire irons are used to beat Earl to death, and Ennis presumes that Jack died by being beaten with tire irons, too. At the end of the story, Proulx describes Ennis's dreams of Jack when he was young, eating beans out of a can with a spoon. She writes, "The spoon handle was the kind that could be used as a tire iron." Even when Ennis dreams of Jack when they were both young, in love, and carefree, the threat of judgment, hatred, and death tinges the memory. Thus the tire iron symbolizes the pervasive threat of violence that hangs over Ennis and Jack's whole relationship. At any moment, there could be a Joe Aguirre watching them, an Alma judging them, a nameless mob ready to beat them to death. Ennis's realization that the spoon handle could be used as a tire iron represents how everyday objects can be weaponized in order to punish people seen as "unnatural." Further, beating gay men with a traditionally masculine tool is another means of attempting to punish and coerce men who are seen as not fitting into the confines of societal ideals of masculinity.

into a stereotype of poor rancher boys from Wyoming, given their lack of education, family situations, and ways of life. By opening her story with a description of these two supposedly typical men, Proulx is setting up the later disclosure that there is something unusual about Jack and Ennis—something that breaks the conventionally masculine mold she describes here.

●● In 1963, when he met Jack Twist, Ennis was engaged to Alma Beers. Both Jack and Ennis claimed to be saving money for a small spread; in Ennis's case that meant a tobacco can with two five-dollar bills inside. That spring, hungry for any job, each had signed up with Farm and Ranch Employment—they came together on paper as herder and camp tender for the same sheep operation north of Signal.

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist, Alma Beers

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

When they meet on Brokeback Mountain in the summer of 1963, Jack and Ennis are still teenagers. And yet, they have been thrust into adulthood: they have both already been working for years, and Ennis is engaged to Alma Beers. Both men have "savings," which, as Proulx somewhat sarcastically points out, either don't really exist or amount to just ten dollars in a can. Thus both boys are as poor as the parents who raised them, and are desperate for work. The government Farm and Ranch Employment program assigns them to work on Brokeback Mountain, which is difficult and low-paying work, but it at least gives them food, shelter, and a small wage.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* published in 1999.

### Brokeback Mountain Quotes

●● They were raised on small, poor ranches in opposite corners of the state, Jack Twist in Lightning Flat, up on the Montana border, Ennis del Mar from around Sage, near the Utah line, both high-school drop-out country boys with no prospects, brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life.

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

The story begins with a comparison of its two main characters, Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar. They are both native to Wyoming—albeit from "opposite corners" of the state—and were brought up in rough households, where hard work and a lack of manners were the norm. The way Proulx writes this passage, it appears that Jack and Ennis fit

“Forest Service got designated campsites on the allotments. Them camps can be a couple a miles from where we pasture the sheep. Bad predator loss, nobody near lookin after em at night. What I want—camp tender in the main camp where the Forest Service says, but the *herder*”—pointing at Jack with a chop of his hand—“pitch a pup tent on the Q.T. with the sheep, out a sight, and he’s goin a *sleep* there. Eat supper, breakfast in camp, but *sleep with the sheep*, hundred percent, *no fire*, don’t leave *no sign*. Roll up that tent every mornin case Forest Service snoops around. Got the dogs, your .30-.30, sleep there. Last summer had goddam near twenty-five-percent loss. I don’t want that again. [...] Tomorrow mornin we’ll truck you up the jump-off.” Pair of deuces going nowhere.

**Related Characters:** Joe Aguirre (speaker), Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 6-7

### Explanation and Analysis

Joe Aguirre is an older gruff man who has been a rancher for a long time. He is jaded and unaccommodating of the younger ranch hands who come and go, and seems irritated by having to explain how the mountain works year after year. He does not believe he must abide by the Forest Service’s rules, and orders Jack to sleep where he’s not supposed to, which means he’s not allowed to light a campfire, even for warmth. Even though he likely has a background similar to the two men, he assumes (unfortunately correctly) that they are uneducated, and have no ambitions beyond the work that is set before them: two “deuces going nowhere.”

During the day Ennis looked across a great gulf and sometimes saw Jack, a small dot moving across a high meadow, as an insect moves across a tablecloth; Jack, in his dark camp, saw Ennis as night fire, a red spark on the huge black mass of mountain.

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

Though Joe Aguirre’s orders mean that Jack and Ennis do not work together most of the time, the two men begin to notice each other from across the Mountain. Ennis sees Jack herding the sheep during the day, and Jack, who must spend his nights alone and in darkness because a campfire would leave evidence he had slept outside of the designated campsite, sees Ennis burning a fire from far away. Though the two men’s relationship has not yet become friendly, let alone romantic, this quote shows that from the very beginning of their time on the mountain, Ennis and Jack are hyper-aware of and interested in one another—eager to learn more.

“Tell you what, you got a get up a dozen times in the night out there over them coyotes. Happy to switch but give you warnin I can’t cook worth a shit. Pretty good with a can opener.” “Can’t be no worse than me, then. Sure, I wouldn’t mind a do it.”

They fended off the night for an hour with the yellow kerosene lamp, and around ten Ennis rode Cigar Butt, a good night horse, through the glimmering frost back to the sheep, carrying leftover biscuits, a jar of jam, and a jar of coffee with him for the next day, saying he’d save a trip, stay out until supper.

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 10-11

### Explanation and Analysis

After some time on the mountain, Jack starts to chafe under Aguirre’s unreasonable orders. Sleeping out with the sheep means no campfire with which to cook food or keep warm at night, and he must commute long hours in order to move the sheep and pick up his supplies. He also must constantly get up at night to scare off coyotes that want to eat the sheep. Ennis, who has been assigned to the campsite, offers to switch with Jack to relieve him of these annoyances. Jack accepts the offer, and one hour later, Ennis rides one of the horses out to the sheep. Ennis’s offer is, in retrospect, yet another glimpse of the two men’s interest in each other. Though they don’t know each other well, this thoughtful exchange of tasks is the beginning of a close friendship that

will soon grow into more.

They were respectful of each other's opinions, each glad to have a companion where none had been expected. Ennis, riding against the wind back to the sheep in the treacherous, drunken light, thought he'd never had such a good time, felt he could paw the white out of the moon.

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

The day after Jack and Ennis switch jobs, Ennis stays late in the main campsite with Jack. They share whisky, cigarettes, and stories, and tell each other more about their pasts. The hour grows late without either of them realizing. After Ennis offered to take Jack's job, something shifted in their relationship. Now, rather than coworkers, they have become fast friends. As Ennis drunkenly rides out to the sheep, he feels delighted—he didn't expect to find such a good friend out on the isolated Brokeback Mountain, especially one who was so respectful of his opinions and fun to be around. Though the terrain Ennis rides on is treacherous, especially in his drunken state, he feels so connected to the Mountain that he thinks he could reach out and touch the moon. In other words, it seems that Ennis is love-struck.

Ennis woke in red dawn with his pants around his knees, a top-grade headache, and Jack butted against him; without saying anything about it, both knew how it would go for the rest of the summer, sheep be damned.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 14-15

### Explanation and Analysis

One night, Ennis stays up drinking and talking with Jack until late. It's too late and cold for him to ride back—plus, both men are very drunk—so Jack tells him he can sleep in his tent. The men soon become intimate and have sex. In the morning, Ennis wakes up next to Jack with his pants down. Neither of the men acknowledge what happened, but they both know that the rest of the summer will go like this: staying up, drinking, talking, and singing, and being sexually intimate. It is a testament to how close they've become in a short amount of time that they can begin such an unexpected and intimate relationship without even speaking about it. But their silence is also a testament to the taboo nature of their desire for one another.

There were only the two of them on the mountain, flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on the hawk's back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs and distant from tame ranch dogs barking in the dark hours. They believed themselves invisible, not knowing Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes one day, waiting until they'd buttoned up their jeans, waiting until Ennis rode back to the sheep, before bringing up the message that Jack's people had sent word that his uncle Harold was in the hospital with pneumonia and expected not to make it. Though he did, and Aguirre came up again to say so, fixing Jack with his bold stare, not bothering to dismount.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 15

### Explanation and Analysis

The mood on the mountain completely shifts once Jack and Ennis become intimate. Despite their workload, the men feel free, reveling in the beauty of the mountain and their desire for one another. Having been saddled with difficult work, abusive fathers, and poverty for their whole lives, they feel liberated by having found someone who cares about them so deeply. However, this quote foreshadows the troubles that are to come. Even though they feel alone in their intimacy, they are not: Joe Aguirre spies on them having sex. He doesn't immediately tell them that he knows they are lovers, but his "bold stare" as he delivers Jack the news that his uncle is dying shows his disdain for the two

men's actions. Here Joe Aguirre represents the judgment of society, which ultimately keeps the two men apart and leads to Jack's murder.

☞ Even when the numbers were right Ennis knew the sheep were mixed. In a disquieting way everything seemed mixed.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

A hailstorm comes to the mountain in August, which blows the sheep herd off course, mixing them up with another herd. Ennis and a Chilean herder who doesn't speak English spend five days attempting to separate them. Even when the herd has the right number of sheep, Ennis knows that some of them weren't originally in his herd. The mixed-up sheep seem to him to be a metaphor for the summer coming to an end. Soon, he and Jack will have to leave the mountain, and he'll go off to marry Alma Beers. Ennis's life, like the mixed-up flock of sheep, has taken a turn he never expected it to as he has found himself caught up in a relationship that he knows he won't want to untangle.

☞ "Right," said Jack, and they shook hands, hit each other on the shoulder; then there was forty feet of distance between them and nothing to do but drive away in opposite directions. Within a mile Ennis felt like someone was pulling his guts out hand over hand a yard at a time. He stopped at the side of the road and, in the whirling new snow, tried to puke but nothing came up. He felt about as bad as he ever had and it took a long time for the feeling to wear off.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 18

### Explanation and Analysis

When Jack and Ennis part at the end of the summer, they are forced to face the inevitable: it is time to return to their lives, and their relationship is effectively over. Without any concrete plans as to when they will see each other next, it feels to Ennis like they are saying good-bye forever. He feels so sick about leaving Jack that he tries to vomit, and the horrible feeling lingers. He feels sick to his stomach because he never truly confronted or acknowledged his feelings for Jack during the summer, and they affect him all at once as the two men ride farther and farther away from one another. Now Jack and Ennis must re-enter society, where a relationship like the one they had on the mountain is heavily stigmatized and even penalized with violence. Part of Ennis's sickness comes from the knowledge that what may have been the best period of his life has come to a resounding end.

☞ "Ennis, please, no more damn lonesome ranches for us," she said, sitting on his lap, wrapping her thin, freckled arms around him. "Let's get a place here in town."

"I guess," said Ennis... They stayed in the little apartment, which he favored because it could be left at any time.

**Related Characters:** Alma Beers, Ennis del Mar (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

Alma and Ennis have two children in the few years after Ennis's summer on Brokeback Mountain. Ennis moves the family around frequently in accordance with his ranch jobs. Alma objects to moving so often, particularly with two young daughters in tow. However, Ennis likes this way of life. Ranching is all he has ever known, and he has no desire to pursue any other career. He likes having a small apartment that he can move out of at a moment's notice. Besides being convenient for his ranching jobs, it also means that, should an opportunity arise for him to be closer to Jack, he would not have too much difficulty moving.

However, for all his wishes to have a carefree life that allows him to move as he pleases, Ennis is quite devoted to his family and his responsibilities. He has been raised to believe that men prove their manhood by marrying a woman and having children. To leave his family would be to place himself even farther out on the fringes of society. Even when he and Alma divorce, he remains committed to paying child support

and contributing to his daughters' upbringing.

They seized each other by the shoulders, hugged mightily, squeezing the breath out of each other, saying son of a bitch, son of a bitch; then, and as easily as the right key turns the lock tumblers, their mouths came together, and hard, Jack's big teeth bringing blood, his hat falling to the floor, stubble rasping, wet saliva welling, and the door opening and Alma looking out for a few seconds at Ennis's straining shoulders and shutting the door again and still they clinched, pressing chest and groin and thigh and leg together, treading on each other's toes until they pulled apart to breathe and Ennis, not big on endearments, said what he said to his horses and daughters, "Little darlin'."

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar (speaker), Jack Twist, Alma Beers

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

After four years apart from Ennis, Jack sends word that he'll be passing through Riverton. The two men make plans to meet. When they finally reunite, a warm embrace quickly turns passionate: the men kiss, and Alma witnesses their display of affection from the door. Even though Ennis has become used to his life with Alma and his daughters, seeing Jack again makes him realize how much his life has been missing without his old lover in it. Even though there is a risk Alma or his daughters might witness their embrace—and Alma does witness it—Ennis cannot help himself, and pours how much he has missed Jack over the last four years into this kiss. He uses his pet term of endearment, "Little darlin'," for Jack, showing that he feels love for Jack. It is in this moment of reunion that both men realize how difficult it has been to be apart, and how difficult it will be to say goodbye again.

"Friend," said Jack. "We got us a fuckin situation here. Got a figure out what to do."

"I doubt there's nothin now we can do," said Ennis. "What I'm sayin, Jack, I built a life up in them years. Love my little girls. Alma? It ain't her fault. You got your baby and wife, that place in Texas. You and me can't hardly be decent together if what happened back there"—he jerked his head in the direction of the apartment—"grabs" on us like that. We do that in the wrong place we'll be dead. There's no reins on this one. It scares the piss out a me."

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar, Jack Twist (speaker), Alma Jr. and Francine, Alma Beers

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 26-27

### Explanation and Analysis

When Jack and Ennis are in the motel room during their first reunion, they realize how badly they have missed one another. Jack wants them to figure out some way to be together, but Ennis tells him that's not possible. Besides the responsibilities he has at home, he knows that another passionate display like the one in front of Alma could lead to them being murdered if it happens in front of the wrong people. And yet, he acknowledges, "there's no reins on this one." In other words, just because they know their homosexuality is stigmatized by society doesn't mean they can stop feeling the way they do. But Ennis's fear of violence outweighs his desire to live with Jack as a couple.

"Dad made sure I seen it. Took me to see it. Me and K.E. Dad laughed about it. Hell, for all I know he done the job. If he was alive and was to put his head in that door right now you bet he'd go get his tire iron. Two guys livin together? No. All I can see is we get together once in a while way the hell out in the back a nowhere—"

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar (speaker), Jack Twist

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

Ennis tells Jack the story of Earl and Rich, two local

ranchers who lived together near Ennis when he was young. A gang of gay-hating men murdered Earl. He was beaten to death with a tire iron, and Ennis's father made sure his son saw the mutilated corpse. In this quote, Ennis surmises his father was likely one of the men that killed Earl. He even supposes that if his father saw Jack and Ennis together in the hotel room, that he would kill the two of them as well. He refuses Jack's suggestion that they live together because he is afraid they will end up like Earl and Rich. To preserve their physical safety and good standing in society, Ennis says that the only way he can see them being together is to spend time together every so often on trips away from their families. Though the two men desire each other, Ennis knows he has a responsibility to his family, and it would be no good if either of them were to die in pursuit of their love for each other.

Her resentment opened out a little every year: the embrace she had glimpsed, Ennis's fishing trips once or twice a year with Jack Twist and never a vacation with her and the girls, his disinclination to step out and have any fun, his yearning for low-paid, long-houred ranch work, his propensity to roll to the wall and sleep as soon as he hit the bed, his failure to look for a decent permanent job with the county or the power company put her in a long, slow dive, and when Alma, Jr., was nine and Francine seven she said, What am I doin, hangin around with him, divorced Ennis, and married the Riverton grocer.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar, Alma Beers

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 31-32

### Explanation and Analysis

There is a shift in Alma and Ennis's marriage once Jack comes back into Ennis' life. The passionate kiss she witnessed between them, coupled with the weeks he takes off to spend time with Jack, tips Alma off to the fact that Jack and Ennis are likely lovers. Further frustrated by his inclination for low-paying work that doesn't make ends meet, Alma decides that her life is going nowhere as long as she is married to Ennis. As her girls age, she decides she needs to make a better life for them, as well as for herself. Marrying the grocer gives her stability and a chance to start her life over with a new man who shows her more appreciation. Though Ennis is saddened over the loss of his children, in a way, his divorce frees him: he can work the

jobs he wants without guilt, and take more time away to be with Jack.

“Don't lie, don't try to fool me, Ennis. I know what it means. Jack Twist? Jack Nasty. You and him—”

She'd overstepped his line. He seized her wrist and twisted; tears sprang and rolled, a dish clattered.

“Shut up,” he said. “Mind your own business. You don't know nothin about it.”

**Related Characters:** Alma Beers, Ennis del Mar (speaker), Jack Twist

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

When Ennis attends a tense Thanksgiving dinner at Alma's home with her new husband, Alma accuses Ennis of being in a relationship with Jack. Ennis has never been accused of being gay or discussed his sexuality with anyone but Jack, and he becomes angry. This anger is the manifestation of his deep-seated fear of the physical violence he might be subjected to at the hands of homophobes, like Earl had been years before. Attempting to assert his dominance over his ex-wife, he hurts Alma. He does this to try to intimidate her out of mentioning anything to other people. As Ennis has recently lost his family, and still cannot live with Jack, he must cling to whatever relationship he has to society. If he were to be ostracized as a gay man, he would be vulnerable to violence, unemployment, and alienation from society.

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 whoreson bitch. I wish I knew how to quit you.”

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist (speaker), Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

In 1983, Jack and Ennis spend a few days at a lake. Here, they are discussing what to do about their relationship, a

perennial issue that they have not been able to fully solve for two decades. They both desire one another, but societal stigma and personal responsibilities have kept them apart, barring a few weeks a year that they are able to sneak away from their lives. In this quote, Jack explodes at Ennis—he hates that he can only see him a few times a year. To him, it seems that Ennis is OK with them spending most of their time apart, but Jack’s desire is such that it is killing him to be away from Ennis for so long. He wishes that he knew how to “quit” Ennis, or to stop loving him, but after two decades, he knows his love for Ennis will never go away. He hates how much he loves Ennis, and in a way, he hates Ennis for making life so difficult for him. But ultimately, his true desire is to be with Ennis in a couple, and to see him every day.

It was Lureen and she said who? who is this? and when he told her again she said in a level voice yes, Jack was pumping up a flat on the truck out on a back road when the tire blew up. The bead was damaged somehow and the force of the explosion slammed the rim into his face, broke his nose and jaw and knocked him unconscious on his back. By the time someone came along he had drowned in his own blood.

No, he thought, they got him with the tire iron.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Lureen, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 45

### Explanation and Analysis

Ennis is utterly shocked when he finds out Jack has died. As Lureen notes, she had no way of contacting Ennis immediately in the wake of the murder. Yet as he hears in her voice, he surmises that Lureen knew that the two were lovers, and was maybe less inclined, because of this, to tell Ennis what had happened even if she had known his contact information. Further, Ennis can tell from the tone of her voice that the story he tells her of Jack’s death is a fabricated one. The fact that she mentions a tire implies to Ennis that Jack died in a similar manner to Earl: he was murdered with a tire iron. In this passage, Ennis’s worst fears of violence have come true.

The old man spoke angrily. “I can’t get no help out here. Jack used a say, ‘Ennis del Mar,’ he used a say, ‘I’m goin a bring him up here one a these days and we’ll lick this damn ranch into shape.’ He had some half-baked idea the two a you was goin a move up here, build a log cabin, and help me run this ranch and bring it up. Then this spring he’s got another one’s goin a come up here with him and build a place and help run the ranch, some ranch neighbor a his from down in Texas. He’s goin a split up with his wife and come back here. So he says. But like most a Jack’s ideas it never come to pass.”

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 49

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote confirms for Ennis that Jack has likely been murdered with a tire iron for being gay. Jack’s father angrily reveals that Jack had spoken about Ennis for years, talking about the two of them moving into a ranch together. He even said that he was going to leave his wife to start this new life with Ennis. He implies that he knows Jack and Ennis were lovers, and Ennis can only assume that other people knew this, too, and that Jack may have even had other lovers, as his father implies here that he did. While Ennis was reserved in his homosexuality due to the trauma he had endured as a child when he saw Earl’s corpse, Jack did not have the same reservations and was freer in his sexuality. Though this made him braver and more true to who he was, it ultimately led to his death, and in a way, a part of Ennis died along with Jack.

He pressed his face into the fabric and breathed in slowly through his mouth and nose, hoping for the faintest smoke and mountain sage and salty sweet stink of Jack, but there was no real scent, only the memory of it, the imagined power of Brokeback Mountain of which nothing was left but what he held in his hands.

**Related Characters:** Jack Twist, Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 52

### Explanation and Analysis

Ennis is overcome with emotion when he finds the two shirts, one with Jack's blood, and the other which used to belong to Ennis. It shows to Ennis that Jack must have felt the same way that he did when they left the mountain after their summer together. He inhales the shirt with the hopes of being transported back to the mountain. However, he knows that all he has left of that summer and his love of Jack is held in his hands—and in his head, in the form of his memories. The shirts—which would be meaningless as symbols to anyone else—show Ennis how much Jack loved him.

●● There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it.

**Related Characters:** Ennis del Mar

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

Ennis resumes his solitary life, but dreams frequently about Jack. These dreams make him feel both aroused and miserable. They are all he has left of his love. As this quote shows, he still can't quite believe Jack is gone: if he hadn't received the news from Lureen, it might have been the same as if it was just a bit of time between their last meeting and their next. Yet as he knows from inhaling the smell of the shirts and trying to transport himself back to the mountain, time can't be turned back, and there's no use wishing about what could have been. All he can do is cherish his mementos and his memories, dust himself off, and live his life grieving for the man who died too young because of whom he loved.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are both born poor and raised on small ranches on opposite sides of Wyoming, sometime in the midst of the Second World War. Ennis's parents die when he's young, so his older brother and sister raise him. He wanted to finish high school, but when his pick-up truck breaks down and there's no money to fix it, he has no way to make it to school and has to drop out. Jack, too, drops out of school when he's young to work on his parents' ranch in Lightning Flat, Wyoming.

Jack and Ennis meet for the first time in the summer of 1963, before either of them has reached the age of 20. They have both signed up with Farm and Ranch Employment to work as herders and camp tenders on **Brokeback Mountain**. Jack worked on the mountain the summer prior; this summer is Ennis's first. When they meet, Ennis has recently been engaged to Alma Beers.

They are introduced in the presence of their boss, Joe Aguirre, who instructs Ennis to be the camp tender and Jack to be the herder. He tells Jack to go and sleep with the sheep to protect them from wolves and thieves at night. This is against the rules of the Forest Service, so he's not allowed to leave any trace of his presence, including remnants of any campfire. Joe is unimpressed with the two men, thinking to himself that they are a "pair of deuces going nowhere."

Jack and Ennis head to a bar, where they get to know each other. Jack tells Ennis about a lightning storm the summer prior that killed forty-two sheep. Jack is described as a small man with curly hair and buckteeth, who loved bull riding and was desperate to get away from his hometown of Lightning Flat. Ennis is described a tall, muscular man with a narrow face who has quick reflexes and is farsighted.

*Jack and Ennis are born to poor ranchers in Wyoming. The fact that neither boy receives a complete education means that they, like their parents, face lives of difficult, low-paying manual labor. Ennis once hoped to continue his education but had his hopes dashed, signaling how difficult it is to escape from rural poverty.*



*As neither Jack nor Ennis finished high school, both of them have been working ranching jobs around Wyoming for several years. They are still teenagers when they leave home to work on an isolated mountain with people they've never met in the summer of 1963. Even though they are both young, they have a lot of life under their belts: Jack has worked on the mountain already, and Ennis is engaged to be married.*



*Jack and Ennis are first introduced while receiving herding instructions from their boss, Joe Aguirre. Joe's orders (for Jack to sleep with the sheep) mean that the men will be working largely alone on an isolated mountain. Aguirre is an older, jaded rancher who thinks Jack and Ennis seem stupid and ambitionless.*



*As two inductees of the Mountain, Jack and Ennis get to know each other a bit before heading out to their respective campsites. Though the narrator initially described the men as having similar backgrounds, here readers learn more about their different physical appearances, inner traits, and desires.*



Jack provides Ennis with more tips for surviving the mountain, such as how to pack the mules, and to never order the soup. They collect their horses, dogs, and supplies and head out to the camps. Ordered by Aguirre to set up their camps in different locations to protect the sheep, Jack and Ennis watch each other as small, colorful dots from across the mountain.

*Jack is relatively more knowledgeable about the mountain, as he worked there the summer prior, and eagerly shares what he knows with Ennis, a newbie. The men won't get to know too much about each other for some time, as they work and sleep in separate parts of the mountain. However, the fact that they watch one another work shows that they're both interested in learning more.*



One day Jack complains about his four-hour commute to and from his campsite out with the sheep. Ennis offers to switch jobs with him, but Jack insists it's more about the principle—they both should be allowed to sleep at the main camp. Still, he allows Ennis to take his place that night.

*Jack clearly has the less desirable job; however, Ennis offers to take it off his hands in order to relieve Jack of some of its annoyances. This exchange of responsibilities show that Ennis feels kindly for Jack, and it is the beginning of a relationship that will develop quickly into a romance.*



The next day, the two men stay up late by the fire, drinking and getting to know one another—sharing stories about their families, ranches they've worked on, dogs they've owned, and experiences with the military. When Ennis finally rides out to the sheep, he realizes he's probably never had such a good time with someone else.

*Once Ennis takes over Jack's job and the men establish that they can be more than just coworkers, they become fast friends. Ennis stays at Jack's campsite until late into the night and the men bond over their pasts. Even where they differ, they are respectful of one another. Ennis has found companionship unlike he's ever had before.*



As the summer wears on, the men continue to spend time together late into the night, sharing a fire, songs, a flask of whiskey. One night, when they're both drunk, Jack says it's too late for Ennis to ride back out to sleep with the sheep. Ennis falls asleep on the floor, and Jack wakes up to his snoring, insisting he'll be quieter on the bedroll, which is big enough for the two of them. Almost as soon as the two men get into the bedroll together, they begin to have sex. Ennis wakes in the morning with his pants around his ankles, Jack sleeping up against him. Without exchanging any words, both men know that their emotional and sexual intimacy will continue through the rest of the summer.

*Jack and Ennis grow much closer as the summer wears on. Even though Ennis has taken up Jack's job out with the sheep, he frequently stays up late in the campsite in order to spend time with Jack. The fact that neither man feels the need to discuss their sexual encounter suggests that it seems to be the logical progression of their growing closeness. However, it also suggests that they perhaps feel unable to discuss what happened openly, as though even acknowledging their attraction to one another privately would be too taboo, and perhaps even endangering.*



The men commence their summer relationship. They feel safe in the solitude of the mountain. They never discuss their relationship, except for one brief exchange in which they both insist that they aren't "queers." One day, Joe Aguirre watches them have sex through binoculars. He subsequently treats Jack coldly when he delivers the news that Jack's uncle is dying.

*The mood of both men completely changes when they commence their relationship: they are buoyant, and the mountain has never been more beautiful. The men still don't discuss their relationship, partially due to the self-evident nature of their desire for one another, and partially because they fear the label "gay." Joe Aguirre spies on the men, foreshadowing the watchful judgement the men will face from society at large for the next 20 years.*



One night in August, Ennis spends the night with Jack in the main camp. A hailstorm sets the sheep off course and they get mixed up with another herd, and prove very difficult to separate. Snow arrives early on the mountain in mid-August, and Aguirre calls for them to bring the herd down. Aguirre pays the men for their summer work, noticing that some of the sheep are different.

When Jack and Ennis part ways after coming down from the mountain, they do not make plans to see each other again. Ennis is going off to marry Alma, and Jack may be pulled into the military draft. Ennis finds it hard to look at the bruise Jack has on his face from a punch he threw. When they say goodbye, Ennis is overcome with stomach pain so strong he thinks it is food poisoning. Soon he realizes that his agony is due to his sudden separation from Jack.

Ennis marries Alma in December, and she is pregnant by January. They name their daughter Alma Jr. Ennis works a series of ranch jobs, frequently moving his wife and daughter. After four summers away from the mountain, Ennis receives a telegram from Jack, postmarked from Texas. Jack says he has heard Ennis is in Riverton, and that he would be passing through and wanted to come say hello. Ennis replies, "you bet."

When Jack comes into town, Ennis is nervous and puts on his best clothes. When Jack arrives, the men embrace, and before they know what is happening, they are kissing passionately. Alma, standing in the doorway, sees the whole encounter. When Ennis finally turns to see her there, he makes no explanation, simply introducing her to Jack. Within twenty minutes, the two men find themselves in a local motel, where they spend the night together.

*Ennis and Jack continue their relationship throughout the summer. When the sheep become mixed up with another herd, it seems to be a metaphor for Ennis's life at the moment: everything is mixed up, and distinctions he once took for granted now seem impossible to draw.*



*Jack and Ennis never discussed their relationship, leaving the nature of their bond indeterminate. Thus, they part ways without making any plans to see each other again. Perhaps they sense that their relationship as they know it cannot continue in the "real world," both because they already have obligations and because it would be very dangerous. Ennis's sickness is a physical manifestation of his heartache over being separated from Jack.*



*After leaving the mountain, Ennis carries on with life just as planned: he has a wife, two children, and a variety of ranching jobs. This seems to be the only way of life available to Ennis. When Jack sends word that he'll be in town, Ennis jumps at the chance to see his old lover. Even though he has been somewhat fulfilled by Alma, Alma Jr., and Francine, Jack is the only person who has ever truly made Ennis happy.*



*Jack and Ennis waste no time having a passionate and intimate reunion. Though Ennis has felt secure in his family life for the past four years, seeing Jack makes him realize how much he has missed the passion that they shared on the mountain. Ennis knows Alma has seen him kiss Jack, but he does not attempt to make up an excuse, suggesting he feels little emotional responsibility to his wife. It is this moment that is the beginning of the end for Alma and Ennis's marriage, and it also marks the beginning of a 16-year sporadic affair between Jack and Ennis.*



The men catch up regarding the last four years. Jack had moved to Texas and married a wealthy woman, Lureen, whose father owned a farm machinery business. He competed in some rodeos, but had to quit due to injuries. Jack wants to find a way for them to see each other more often, but Ennis points out that he has responsibilities: to his work, to his daughter, to Alma. Further, he's scared that if the wrong people find out about their homosexual relationship, they'll be beaten, or even murdered. Jack declines to tell Ennis that Joe Aguirre revealed to him that he knew about their relationship, and refused to hire him for the following summer on **Brokeback Mountain**.

*Both Jack and Ennis have spent the last four years doing what society has told them men their age should do: find a woman, get married, have children, and get a job. Yet their passionate reunion shows them that something has been missing from their lives: passion, and arguably love. Their time together is bittersweet because they know it's fleeting. They both have responsibilities at home, and to be together in any official capacity would mean bearing the stigma associated with being gay in rural Wyoming. It could even get them killed.*



Jack proposes that the men start a ranch together. Ennis refuses, telling him the story of Earl and Rich. They were two men who lived on a ranch together near where Ennis grew up. Ennis's father often made disparaging comments about them, insinuating that it was presumed they were gay. One day, Earl was brutally murdered with a **tire iron** and mutilated, and Ennis's father took his young son to see the body as a way of teaching him a lesson. This memory has traumatized Ennis, and he doesn't want the same thing to happen to him and Jack. The men are left at a loss with what to do for their desire for each other, which stands in direct contrast to what society and their families expect of them. Jack finally convinces Ennis to take a few days away from home to spend time with him.

*Ennis' fear of being killed due to his homosexuality has been ingrained in him from a young age. His father was homophobic, and likely contributed to the murder of Earl. Jack and Ennis's love for each other is in direct conflict with what society expects of them, and what society will tolerate. They have no answers as to what to do with each other because their society has only provided them with one model for how to live. If they did want to live together, their only option would be to live like Earl and Rich, which could easily result in death. Ultimately, they make the decision that preserves their home lives and physical safety, while reconciling their desire by agreeing to meet a few times a year. This is how many gay men and women lived in this time, fulfilling their illicit desires furtively on the side while maintaining "normal" lives.*



As the years wear on, Alma and Ennis have another daughter. The couple begins to grow apart, as Ennis steals away for weeks at a time to be with Jack, while Alma is left wondering why he doesn't take her and the girls on vacation. She tires of his predilection to take work with long hours and low pay, and gets a job at the grocery store. Eventually, she divorces Ennis and marries the owner of the grocery store.

*Now that he has rekindled his love with Jack, Ennis is not as interested in intimacy with Alma. Alma puts two and two together, and reasons that Ennis is having a relationship with Jack when he goes on "fishing trips." Stuck in a dead-end grocery job with a husband who ignores her, Alma decides to take matters into her own hands by leaving Ennis, taking her daughters with her, and marrying the grocer. He gives her more stability, attention, and another child, allowing her to start her life afresh.*



At a Thanksgiving at the grocer's house, Ennis does his best to show that he isn't upset by the divorce or that his daughters live with Alma. But when he and Alma are alone and she accuses him of being in a relationship with Jack, he grabs her out of anger. He doesn't see Alma or his daughters for several years after that, though he continues to pay child support.

*Ennis is alarmed at being accused of homosexuality and reacts violently. He has never discussed his sexuality with anyone but Jack. His fear manifests as anger as he hurts Alma. He becomes so upset at these accusations that he walks out of his daughters' lives for years, demonstrating that he finds it difficult to confront the truth of his sexuality, perhaps because of the shame he carries as a result of internalized homophobia.*



Jack and Ennis continue to see each other over the years. They age, but their desire for each other is stronger than ever. In May 1983, 20 years after they first met on **Brokeback Mountain**, they spend a few days by a lake. They speak about women they are sleeping with and their concerns about their children. They both feel that they never have enough time together.

They fight over when they will see each other next; Jack had thought they would next be together in August, but Ennis says he can't get off work until November. Jack tries to convince Ennis to elope to Mexico with him, but Ennis cites his responsibilities towards work and child support. They are left without a resolution as to how to make their relationship work better. They hold each other through the night.

Months later, Ennis sends a postcard to Jack, and it is returned marked "DECEASED." Unable to believe it, Ennis calls Jack's wife, Lureen, who confirms that Jack was changing a tire when it blew up and hit him in the face. He drowned in his own blood before help arrived. Based on the tone of her voice, Ennis surmises that there is more to his death, and that it is likely he was murdered in a similar manner to Earl, with a **tire iron**. Lureen tells Ennis that Jack had always wanted his ashes to be scattered on **Brokeback Mountain**. When he died, she kept half of his ashes and gave the other half to his parents.

Ennis goes to visit Jack's parents in Lightning Flat, Wyoming. Jack's mother is kind to him, but his father is cruel, insinuating that he knew Ennis and Jack were lovers. He refuses to give Ennis the other half of the ashes, saying that they will be buried in an ancestral burial ground. Ennis recalls an anecdote Jack told him about his father. Once, when Jack was three or four, he didn't make it to the toilet in time, and Jack's father urinated on him in an attempt to both humiliate the little boy and teach him a lesson. Ennis looks around Jack's childhood bedroom, where he finds two shirts that Jack wore on **Brokeback Mountain**. One of these shirts has blood on it, from the last day on the mountain when Ennis hit Jack on the nose. Nested inside this shirt is another shirt: Ennis's. Ennis had lost the shirt long ago, and he now realizes Jack had taken it. Ennis takes both of the shirts home with him.

*Jack and Ennis make their relationship work, however fractured, by finding time when they can to see each other. They boast about women they are sleeping with, but the subtext of their conversations is that they really wish they were with each other more often. Here, as elsewhere in the story, displays of exaggerated heterosexual masculinity are shown to be attempts to cover up for a deficit of love or an unfulfilled longing.*



*The two men both want to be together, but Ennis continually pushes Jack away when Jack suggests they start a ranch together or elope to Mexico. He, unlike Jack, saw Earl's mutilated corpse: he knows all too well what kind of price they could pay if they were found out. Though they are both angry with one another for what has been said, they are more angry with the situation in which they find themselves, which neither of them can fully control, and take advantage of what little time they can spend together.*



*Ennis's worst fears come true when he learns that Jack has been murdered at the hands of homophobes in a manner similar to the murder of Earl. He surmises this from Lureen's story based on the tone of her voice. It is bittersweet that Jack wanted his ashes spread on Brokeback Mountain: it shows that it was as important a period in his life as it was for Ennis. To Ennis, of course, this news is nothing but tragic: even though he refused Jack's proposals that they live together for the last 20 years with the idea that they would be safer, Jack ended up being murdered in the same way Earl was anyway.*



*Though Ennis has known Jack for two decades, this is the first time he has met his parents. Jack's father is exactly as described: similar to Ennis's father in that he is hyper-masculine, abusive, and cruel. Ennis realizes that Jack's parents already know all about him, as Jack had been speaking to them about him for years. Jack's father's unkindness towards him confirms for Ennis that Jack was more open in his sexuality than Ennis was, and that this was what ultimately led to his murder. He feels overcome with emotion when he discovers his own shirt nested inside Jack's. He wants to use the shirts to transport him back to that summer, but it doesn't work. He must resign himself to loving Jack's memories and these mementos, and grieve for the loss of his life's great love.*



Ennis buys a postcard of Brokeback Mountain and pins it up in his trailer. He hangs the shirts up alongside the postcard. He frequently dreams about Jack, and resigns himself to mourning what could have been.

*Ennis resumes his quiet, solitary life as a rancher. He creates a kind of shrine for Jack, and is both pleased and tortured by seeing young Jack in his dreams. The ending is both beautiful and tragic: Ennis had the fortune of knowing deep love in his life, but he knows it is lost to him forever.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Munk, Olivia. "Brokeback Mountain." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 May 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Munk, Olivia. "Brokeback Mountain." LitCharts LLC, May 1, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/brokeback-mountain>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Brokeback Mountain* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Proulx, Annie. *Brokeback Mountain*. Scribner. 1999.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Proulx, Annie. *Brokeback Mountain*. New York: Scribner. 1999.