55 Miles to the Gas Pump

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANNIE PROULX

Born in 1935 to the vice president of a textile company and a painter, Annie Proulx grew up in Connecticut with four younger sisters and briefly attended Maine's Colby College before leaving school to work odd jobs. Proulx published her first short story, "The Customs Lounge," in 1963 and graduated from the University of Vermont in 1969. She completed a Master's degree at Sir George Williams (Concordia) University and began a Ph.D., but abandoned it in 1975, the same year her third marriage ended, and moved back to Vermont with her three sons. While working as a freelance journalist, she published several instructional books as well as a short-lived newspaper and more short stories. In 1988, she published her first collection of short fiction, *Heart Songs and Other Stories*, and in 1992 her first novel, *Postcards*, at the age of 56. Her first book to garner widespread recognition was *The Shipping News* (1993), which won the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and the National Book Award. She moved to Saratoga, Wyoming in 1994, which became the setting for her next three collections of short fiction. Since then, she has published two collections of short fiction, three novels, and a memoir about her Wyoming ranch, *Bird Cloud*. She moved to Port Townsend, Washington after selling her ranch in 2014 and published her most recent book, *Barkskins*, two years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are two dimensions of historical context for "55 Miles to the Gas Pump": the context of its source, "Bluebeard," and the context in which it was written—American rural life in the 1990s. "Bluebeard" seems to have originated in France in the 14th or 15th century, and the most famous version of the story was recorded by French folklorist Charles Perrault in 1697. It may have been based on the life of the Breton serial killer Gilles de Rais, who was burned for murder and witchcraft after being convicted of the torture and mass murder of young children. Notably, "Bluebeard" was a popular subject for English-language retellings in the later decades of the 20th century (including Angela Carter's story "The Bloody Chamber" in 1979, Margaret Atwood's story "Bluebeard's Egg" in 1983, Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard*, and Joyce Carol Oates' story "Blue-Bearded Lover" in 1987). This perghaps reflected a moment in the late 20th century when domestic violence—particularly violence against women—took on meaningful legal significance and was widely recognized as a punishable crime. For instance, "domestic violence" as we know the term was first used in 1973 during an address to the Parliament of the United Kingdom, and the United Nations defined domestic violence and judged it a criminal act in a 1993 resource manual. Other types of violence in the national consciousness during the late 20th century are also echoed in "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," specifically rural violence, serial killing, and necrophilia. One example of rural violence Proulx almost certainly had in mind was the 1998 murder of college student Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, where Shepard was battered and tortured before being left for dead in a remote area outside Laramie. Given that Shepard's murder was a homophobic hate crime, and "Brokeback Mountain"—the story that follows "55 Miles to the Gas Pump" in the collection *Close Range*—addresses the issue of violence against gay men in Wyoming, it seems likely that the circumstances of Shepard's death had an impact on Proulx's depiction of rural violence and morality. It's also worth noting the prevalence of serial killings of women, often accompanied by necrophilia, in the American zeitgeist during the 1980s and 1990s. Ted Bundy, one of the most famous serial killers and necrophiles in history, was executed in 1989, and the novel *Silence of the Lambs*—based on the body-snatcher and necrophile Ed Gein—was published in 1988, followed by the now-classic film adaptation in 1991. In addition, the '80s and '90s were the heyday of Gary Ridgway, known as the Green River Killer, who was responsible for a spate of murders of teenage girls and women in Washington. Proulx, who now lives in Port Townsend, Washington and has a son living in Seattle, might very well have been aware of the Green River killings while writing "55 Miles to the Gas Pump.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Proulx's vivid depictions of the landscape and lifestyle of rural Wyoming, as well as the experiences of working-class and struggling Midwesterners, can be categorized as regionalist writing, meaning that Proulx focuses on one specific geographical region and its unique aspects. Her first editor has said that her fiction is often compared to the work of Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck—all classic regionalist authors with an interest in the lives of the working class and rural communities. Her style and subject matter have also been likened to the short fiction of Raymond Carver, who wrote frequently about the experiences of laborers and small towns from a regionalist perspective (focused on the Pacific Northwest), and the novels of Louise Erdrich, which also explore the loneliness and violence of rural life in the Midwest (particularly Minnesota and North Dakota). "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," however, is not only a regionalist story but also a retelling of the folktale "Bluebeard," which crops up again and again in popular culture. Other contemporary "Bluebeard"

retellings that subvert the straightforward moral lesson of the original include Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg," Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," and John Updike's "Bluebeard in Ireland."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** 55 Miles to the Gas Pump
- **When Written:** Between 1997 and 1999
- **Where Written:** Saratoga, Wyoming
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** realism, regionalism, micro-fiction
- **Setting:** a ranch in rural Wyoming
- **Climax:** Mrs. Croom's discovery of the bodies of women her husband has killed
- **Antagonist:** the rural landscape, the human psyche
- **Point of View:** omniscient 3rd person

EXTRA CREDIT

"Brokeback Mountain." Proulx is probably most well known for her short story "Brokeback Mountain," which follows "55 Miles to the Gas Pump" in *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, and was adapted as the now-classic Ang Lee film *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005. The movie adaptation, starring Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal as two cowboys in rural Wyoming who develop a complex emotional and sexual relationship, is the most recent film to have been chosen for inclusion in the Library of Congress' National Film Registry for its "cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance."

Proulx's Pen Name. Proulx has said in interviews that her first stories were published under the pen name "E.A. Proulx" because magazine editors didn't want to make their male readers aware that the author was a woman. However, by the time her first novel, *Postcards*, was published in 1992, she had decided to go by the pen name E. Annie Proulx, establishing herself as a successful woman writer. She has added that "finally [she] got sick of writing E," and has written since *Close Range* in 1999 simply as Annie Proulx.

PLOT SUMMARY

Rancher Croom is a cattleman in an area so rural that he brews his own beer and makes his own boots. His story begins mid-action as he rides across the Wyoming plains, where he stops at the edge of a canyon, dismounts his horse, and then—after a pause, with a ferocious cry—leaps from the cliff.

Meanwhile, his wife, Mrs. Croom, is on the roof of their farmhouse, sawing her way into the attic, which she has been forbidden to enter for twelve years. With the saw and a hammer and chisel, she is able to cut a hole in the roof and look inside, where she discovers the corpses of women Rancher Croom has abducted and killed. Some of the bodies date to "years ago" and are aged and decayed, suggesting that Rancher Croom has been killing women for a long time, and it is also strongly implied that he has been using the corpses sexually. Proulx ends the story with a standalone sentence: "When you live a long way out you make your own fun."

CHARACTERS

Rancher Croom – Rancher Croom is Mrs. Croom's husband, a cattleman on a rural Wyoming farm who is described initially as a "warm-handed, quick-foot dancer" who brews his own beer. However, this pleasant, unassuming description is at odds with both his violent suicide—a leap from a nearby cliff—and the revelation that he is a serial killer of women who stores corpses in his attic and uses them sexually. He is powerful, brutal, and almost animal in certain moments—"parting the air with his last roar" when he jumps from the cliff—but, although the reader learns little about his inner life, his suicide suggests a more complex emotional experience than is apparent from Proulx's description. In Proulx's loose retelling of the "Bluebeard" folktale, he is the Bluebeard figure, killing women without reason, forbidding his wife to enter the room full of bodies, and ultimately suffering a deadly fate.

Mrs. Croom – Mrs. Croom is the wife of Rancher Croom. They live alone on their Wyoming farm, which is very remote, and, after her husband's death, Mrs. Croom discovers the bodies of other women he has been storing in the attic. Mrs. Croom is analogous to the heroine of "Bluebeard," a folktale in which a young wife enters a forbidden room, finds the corpses of her husband's victims, and is able to escape from and punish him when he attempts to kill her. However, in "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," Mrs. Croom is less innocent and heroic. Proulx implies that she has been aware of her husband's killings for some time (when she discovers the bodies her response is "just as she thought"), and, in not informing the police or making any effort to exact justice for his crimes, she has become complicit in them. Moreover, she seems to be fascinated by the bodies: her feelings about the corpses are described as "desire," and her description of the bodies is not condemnatory, but fascinating and even provocative.

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.

ISOLATION AND RURAL LIFE

The title of Annie Proulx's "55 Miles to the Gas Pump" introduces the story's primary theme: the isolation of rural life and the impact it has on people's sanity. In this three-paragraph work of microfiction, Rancher Croom kills himself by jumping from a cliff, and then his wife, Mrs. Croom, discovers the bodies of dead women—his victims and "paramours"—in their attic. By emphasizing the couple's solitude and the absence of law and society in the rural landscape, Proulx suggests that it is the Crooms' isolation that drives their immorality—and that anyone in their position would do the same.

In the first of the story's three paragraphs, Proulx establishes Rancher Croom's seclusion, giving the reader a sense of how isolation affects his behavior. She describes Rancher Croom as a "walleyed cattleman" in "[a] filthy hat" and with "stray hairs," suggesting a person in a lonely, rural setting who has no need to concern himself with how other people might see him. Two key details—Croom's "handmade boots" and "bottles of his own strange beer"—tell the reader the extent of his isolation: his ranch is so far from a town or a city, and so difficult to get to, that he makes his own beer and boots rather than buying them. The fact that Proulx describes the beer as "strange" is the reader's first indication that something about this man's rural life is mysterious, uncanny, and possibly wrong. The reader then learns exactly how strange and twisted Croom's rural life is when he dies by suicide, after "galloping drunk over the dark plain," "turning off … at a canyon brink," and "[looking] down on tumbled rock" before he "steps out." His death is associated with the loneliness and danger of the rural Wyoming landscape, which he uses as a weapon against himself. Proulx's suggestion to the reader is clear: the landscape was not only the physical cause of Rancher Croom's death (landing on the rocks), but also the emotional cause of his suicidal mentality.

In the second paragraph, when Mrs. Croom cuts into the attic of their farmhouse to find the corpses of women her husband has killed, Proulx demonstrates that isolation has made this couple monstrous. The impact of social and geographic isolation on Mrs. Croom is more subtle than on her husband, but it's still clear that isolation affects her. For instance, the reader learns that "she has not been [in the attic] for twelve years thanks to old Croom's padlocks and warnings"—she has obeyed her husband and accepted whatever frightening secret he is keeping, perhaps because she has nowhere to go and no one to rely on within their solitary and distant life, except him. Furthermore, when she discovers the corpses in the attic, Proulx indicates that they do not come as a shock to her—instead, they are "just as she thought." She has known or suspected that her husband has been killing women and allowed it to continue, which demonstrates the lack of morality that her distance from "civilized" people and behavior has produced. The visual details of this paragraph also emphasize the risks of rural life and the ways in which isolation enables violence and secrecy. Mrs. Croom "recognizes [the corpses] from their photographs in the **paper**," implying that people made an effort to search for the missing women and were unsuccessful—perhaps because the Croom ranch is so far away from civilization that there would be no one nearby to notice anything amiss. Similarly, the corpses are "desiccated as jerky" and "bright blue with … paint used on the shutters years ago," indicating to the reader that Rancher Croom has been killing for a long time without being noticed or caught.

Rancher Croom and his wife strike the reader initially as outliers and outcasts, as dangerous and remote as the landscape where they live. In other words, they seem fundamentally different from the kinds of people who live and participate in urbanized society and adhere to a moral code. However, the use of "you" in the final sentence ("When you live a long way out you make your own fun") groups the reader collectively with the couple, implying that anyone who is living a long way out and isolated from society might come to "make their own fun"—or disregard the law and commit similar acts of horror. To Proulx, this couple is not unique; all of us, left wholly to ourselves, have the potential to lose our humanity.

VIOLENCE, PLEASURE, AND DESIRE

Violence and destruction pervade "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," from major events (such as Rancher Croom's suicide) to atmospheric details, like the descriptions of "splintery boards." Throughout the story, however, Proulx associates violence more with pleasure than with pain or horror—her descriptions of Rancher Croom's murder victims are sensual, Rancher Croom's suicide seems almost joyful, and, of course, the story's final line suggests that violence is a kind of "fun." Proulx's evocative descriptions put readers in the position of *enjoying* the story's grisly acts (suicide, murder, and necrophilia), which mirrors the pleasure that the Crooms take in violence. By leading the reader to have fun with descriptions of violence, Proulx suggests that all people—not just the Crooms—have a latent capacity to take pleasure in things we find morally horrific.

In the first paragraph of the story, Proulx describes Rancher Croom—a suicidal serial killer—in joyful terms. The reader is first introduced to Croom as a "warm-handed, quick-foot dancer" with "stray hairs like the curling fiddle string ends" whose homemade beer "[bursts] out in garlands of foam." This warm, pleasant language evokes an event like a party, with music, dancing, and decoration. In addition, far from expressing fear or even resignation at the prospect of suicide, Rancher Croom approaches it eagerly and forcefully, "galloping" to the canyon brink and waiting only a moment before "[stepping] out," which implies that violence and death are not only routine

for him (needing no hesitation) but also perhaps enjoyable. Furthermore, after he jumps, Proulx describes him with language that evokes buoyancy and lightness ("parting the air," "surging up," and "windmill arms"). These descriptions seem at odds with the severity of the situation, evoking joy and vibrant energy instead of describing suicide as a violent death of despair. The conclusion of the paragraph—"before he hits he rises again to the top of the cliff like a cork in a bucket of milk"—underscores this odd juxtaposition between pleasure and violent death. The notion of him rising again after jumping to his death is reminiscent of a carnival ride, where he might simply be able to jump and rise again and again without consequence.

The story's second paragraph blends pleasure and violence even more explicitly, both through the revelation of Rancher Croom's necrophilia and through the sexualized language surrounding Mrs. Croom's discovery of the bodies. This combination of violence and desire is most literal when Rancher Croom's necrophilia is spelled out: the bodies of the women he has murdered and hidden in the attic are "used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels." It is clear that Croom has been abusing these corpses for years, which the reader will presumably find disturbing. Mrs. Croom, however, does not seem particularly disturbed by it—in fact, her experience of discovering the corpses seems to be one of pleasure more than of fear or revulsion. Proulx describes Mr. Croom's "padlocks and warnings," which have kept Mrs. Croom out of the attic until now, as "whets to her desire." The most straightforward reading of this phrasing suggests that her husband's secrecy only makes her more eager to know what's in the attic, but given the context of Rancher Croom's own necrophilia and the implication that Mrs. Croom already knew what was going on, Proulx implies that Mrs. Croom might also get a sexual thrill from the corpses. This interpretation gains traction later in the paragraph with the sexualized language that describes a corpse as wrapped in **newspaper** from "nipple to knee," a deliberately provocative choice (as opposed to a more neutral word like "chest"). Furthermore, the fact that Mrs. Croom "recognizes the corpses from their photographs in the paper" might also be suggestive—how long would she have needed to look at those photographs to recognize the women, particularly as decomposed as they are?

The final sentence of the story—"When you live a long way out you make your own fun"—efficiently sums up what Proulx has suggested throughout the previous two paragraphs: that Mr. and Mrs. Croom seek out and revel in violence, cruelty, and destruction, finding pleasure in it that is both emotional and sexual. While the reader is likely disturbed by the final sentence, Proulx's sensuous depiction of violence throughout the story makes familiar the notion that violence is fun—after all, she has encouraged readers to appreciate her depictions of Rancher Croom rising "like a cork in a bucket of milk" after he jumps to his death, or in the "bright blue" paint covering some of the corpses. To read the final line after having taken some pleasure in the story's grisly descriptions undermines the reader's ability to judge the Crooms. While one might not *want* to take pleasure in violence, the story demonstrates that it's uncomfortably easy to do so.

GOOD, EVIL, AND MORALITY

"55 Miles to the Gas Pump" is a loose retelling of the folktale "Bluebeard," which begins when the heroine's new husband forbids her to enter a certain room in his house. While he's away, she enters the forbidden room and discovers the mutilated corpses of his previous six wives, after which she or one of her relatives (depending on the tale) usually kills him. Though "55 Miles to the Gas Pump" preserves the format of a folktale (brief, action-focused, ending with a pithy "moral"), it deliberately subverts the black-and-white morality that readers expect from folktales. Instead of judging and punishing the murderous, necrophiliac, and suicidal Crooms (and thereby upholding conventional morality), Proulx suggests that good and evil are inextricable, and that the simplistic morality of folktales is a lie.

By conventional moral standards, Rancher Croom is the story's villain; after all, he is the analogue to Bluebeard. However, Proulx defies the folktale convention that Croom's death will be a punishment for his sins. First of all, his suicide occurs at the beginning of the story, before the "big reveal" of the corpses in the attic. Since readers haven't yet learned about the corpses, they will initially interpret his death as irrational and inexplicable, rather than a product of remorse for his behavior or some kind of karmic punishment. Because he is already dead once the reader discovers his crimes, his death cannot follow the discovery in order to neatly conclude the story by demonstrating that villains always get their just desserts. Indeed, rather than Rancher Croom meeting the gory, violent fate of many folktale villains, his suicide ends with him "[rising] again like a cork in a bucket of milk." This comic, oddly triumphant description means that his death, far from being a punishment for his behavior, strikes the reader as more similar to a resurrection—a Christlike fate associated with heroes, not villains. Combining this with the fact that the violence and brutality of Croom's death is deliberately downplayed (the details are cartoonish: "windmill arms, jeans riding over boot tops"), the reader feels that Rancher Croom's death is unserious and triumphant, rather than tragic or deserved. In this context, it's difficult for the reader to derive any moral significance from the suicide at all.

Just as Proulx doesn't depict Rancher Croom as a classic folktale villain, she refuses to make Mrs. Croom the heroine. In traditional renderings of "Bluebeard," the wife is kind, heroic, and eventually rewarded for her virtue, but Mrs. Croom is not morally pure and does not earn a reward. The most obvious

instance of her immorality is the implication that she has been aware all along that her husband is a serial killer. When she finds the corpses in the attic, she is neither shocked nor frightened; the situation is, rather, "just as she thought." By allowing her husband to kill women without interfering, she has become his accomplice. As opposed to the innocent young wife of Bluebeard, Mrs. Croom is a woman driven to look inside the forbidden room less by idle curiosity than by what she already suspects—and perhaps what she actively wants to see.

In addition to rejecting conventional heroines and villains, Proulx subverts the moralism of folktales through her language. One way in which she does this is by lingering within evocative, sensuous descriptions of horrific acts without passing judgment. For example, this is her description of the bodies in the attic: "some desiccated as jerky, some moldy … covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels … some bright blue with remnants of paint … one wrapped in **newspaper** nipple to knee." Neither Mrs. Croom nor the narrator of the story expresses any repulsion or moral objection; instead, they seem to take a creative, almost indulgent pleasure in observing carefully, which is apparent in the use of language that invokes all five senses and imagery that is surprising and even delightful (such as the "bright blue" paint). This enjoyment of the gruesome contrasts with the stringently moral world of the traditional folktale, in which description is often meant to reinforce moral codes (good people are beautiful and bad people are ugly, for instance). Furthermore, Proulx subverts the language of folktales by ending with a sentence that summarizes the story's "moral"—but which is an explicit rejection of the traditional logic of good and evil. The story's message, as summed up in the final line, is not that readers should be virtuous or that evil should be punished; it's that you "make your own fun" (or begin to find pleasure in violence) when you live in isolation. In other words, the "moral" of this story suggests that morality doesn't exist at all.

SYMBOLS

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

NEWSPAPER

In "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," newspapers represent Rancher Croom and Mrs. Croom abandoning the ethics of civilized life. The story's two mentions of newspapers seem to be the only hint of a connection between the Crooms and society at large—after all, the newspaper is a tool of social cohesion and information sharing, an institution that bonds a community. That the Crooms have access to the newspaper suggests a possible connection to others, but the contexts in which Proulx mentions the newspaper make clear that this connection does nothing to temper their immorality. When Mrs. Croom first sees the corpses of her husband's victims, "she recognizes them from their photographs in the paper: MISSING WOMAN," and then goes on to contrast those photographs with a vivid description of the state of their decaying corpses. Here, the aside about the photographs chillingly suggests that society and civilization are no match for the immorality of isolated life: after all, none of the "missing women" were ever found and Rancher Croom was never punished. Furthermore, there's a possibility that Mrs. Croom's engagement with the newspaper was itself perverse: she suspected that her husband was killing these women, and it seems she stared at their pictures for a long time (how else could she recognize their decayed corpses?). Whether this looking was sexually-tinged or not, to look so long at their faces in the newspaper and not act on her suspicions that her husband had murdered these women shows that Mrs. Croom has totally abandoned the morality of civilized society. Proulx's next mention of newspaper underscores this reading: Mrs. Croom looks at one of the corpses, who has been "wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee" as well as "used hard." The combination of the word "nipple" (rather than a more neutral word like "chest") and the oblique reference to necrophilia gives this description a distinctly sexual tone. The newspaper, then, becomes like lingerie on the corpse, turning a symbol of civilization (the newspaper) into a tool for a violent, uncivilized kind of desire. These two mentions of newspaper both demonstrate that the morality of civilized society is absent in the rural lives of the Crooms.

QUOTES

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

55 Miles to the Gas Pump Quotes

❝ Rancher Croom in handmade boots and filthy hat, that walleyed cattleman, stray hairs like the curling fiddle string ends, that warm-handed, quick-foot dancer on splintery boards or down the cellar stairs to a rack of bottles of his own strange beer, yeasty, cloudy, bursting out in garlands of foam…

Related Characters: Rancher Croom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator introduces Rancher Croom to the reader with warm—although slightly alarming—language. Rancher Croom's "filthy hat" and "stray hairs" seem to paint a picture of someone who is unkempt, perhaps in a threatening way. However, the surrounding description softens this impression: he is "warm-handed" and a "quick foot dancer," which suggests someone pleasant, energetic, and even affectionate. Furthermore, Proulx uses language that evokes a party: she conjures music by referencing fiddle strings, suggests decorations by using the word "garlands," and explicitly mentions dancing and beer. In combination, this language makes the reader imagine someone who is perhaps eccentric (due to his unkempt appearance), but essentially benign and fun-loving, a character readers will like.

This descriptive passage makes Rancher Croom's later suicide—and the revelation that he is a serial killer—all the more unexpected and surprising, since instead of being the benevolent character readers expect, he turns out to be a depraved monster. Perhaps Proulx deliberately uses this description as a bait-and-switch so that readers are unsettled by learning that their intuitions about Rancher Croom's character are incorrect. If so, this parallels the reader's likely surprise when they arrive at the story's ending to be told that they themselves would also resort to violence for pleasure were they in Rancher Croom's situation. Throughout the story, Proulx tries to unsettle the reader by suggesting that their intuitions and assumptions are—sometimes lethally—false.

This passage also subtly references the rural isolation that will come to play such a significant part in the events of the story: Rancher Croom wears "handmade boots," indicating that he makes his own boots because of the difficulty of buying them, and a "filthy hat," indicating that, because of the absence of other people, he has no need to be concerned about his appearance.

❝ … then steps out, parting the air with his last roar, sleeves surging up, windmill arms, jeans riding over boot tops, but before he hits he rises again to the top of the cliff like a cork in a bucket of milk.

Related Characters: Rancher Croom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is a description of Rancher Croom's suicide at the end of the first paragraph of the story, when he jumps from the edge of a canyon and dies on the rocks below. Nothing about the passage suggests a violent or gruesome death (as readers might expect from a suicide, especially one this brutal). Instead, Proulx uses language that is associated with floating and triumph: "parting the air," "surging up," "rises again." There's also something cartoonish and entertaining about the description of his "last roar" and his "windmill arms," which adds a levity and humor that one would likely never expect in a description of suicide.

Throughout the story, Proulx unsettles readers' expectations, and this passage does so in two ways. First, while Proulx set Rancher Croom up to be a benevolent and fun-loving person, here she reveals that he is, in fact, violently suicidal. Second, by using language that suggests a triumphant and exuberant death, Proulx unsettles the reader's expectation that suicide would be somber and violent. In this passage, Proulx also establishes an expectation that she will later upend: when she describes Croom rising again "like a cork in a bucket of milk" after jumping to his death, she evokes the resurrection of Christ, seemingly implying that Croom is a good person who might even benefit humankind. When she later reveals him to have been a necrophile serial killer, this image of resurrection seems perverse.

The beauty of Proulx's descriptive language throughout this passage puts readers in a position of enjoying a description of a horrifying and violent death, which underscores a central theme of the story: anyone is capable of taking pleasure in violence, even the reader.

❝ Mrs. Croom on the roof with a saw cutting a hole into the attic where she has not been for twelve years thanks to old Croom's padlocks and warnings, whets to her desire …

Related Characters: Mrs. Croom, Rancher Croom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the reader is introduced to Mrs. Croom, Rancher Croom's wife and the story's other named character. This immediately gives the reader insight into the inner workings of the Crooms' marriage: Mr. Croom has been domineering and threatening, barring Mrs. Croom for

more than a decade from a room in their own home. Mrs. Croom has so far obeyed her husband's warnings, although the fact that she is entering the attic by brute force after her husband's death suggests that she has not obeyed him for lack of curiosity—perhaps it was fear. Moreover, this passage provides some description of Mrs. Croom's character, suggesting that, like her husband, she is physically powerful and energetic, but also that she is cunning and has chosen her timing deliberately—taking advantage of his death to learn his secret.

In this passage, Proulx introduces an ambiguity about the nature of Mrs. Croom's desire. Proulx says here that Rancher Croom's "warnings and padlocks" "whet" (or increase) Mrs. Croom's desire. It's not clear whether this simply means her desire to know what's in the attic (in other words, that the more secretive Rancher Croom was, the more Mrs. Croom wanted to know), or whether this is invoking sexual desire. Perhaps Mrs. Croom was somewhat titillated by Rancher Croom's secrecy and threats—and it also might be darker than this, as the next passage implies that Mrs. Croom has known for a long time (at least on some level) that her husband had bodies in the attic and was sexually abusing them. Perhaps Mrs. Croom, like her husband, finds some sexual excitement from the violence the attic evokes, and this is the "desire" that the attic "whets." The ambiguity of Proulx's language leaves all of these possibilities open, but she is certainly raising the specter of sexuality, which the next passage will more concretely invoke.

Finally, this passage establishes the parallel to Bluebeard, a folktale in which a young wife has been barred from a room in her house by her husband. When he's away, she enters the room to discover the bodies of his previous wives. Generally, the wife is the hero: having had no idea what he was up to, she kills the murderous husband and lives happily ever after. Proulx invokes this folktale—setting up the reader's expectation that Mrs. Croom will be the story's hero—and then, in the next passage, turns it on its head.

❝ … she can see inside: just as she thought: the corpses of Mr. Croom's paramours – she recognizes them from their photographs in the paper: MISSING WOMAN …

Related Characters: Mrs. Croom, Rancher Croom

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Croom discovers the bodies of Rancher Croom's victims: women her husband had been having affairs with, murdering, and then having sex with their corpses. This passage provides one of the clearest examples of Proulx's subversion of morality, especially the traditional black-and-white morality of folktales: rather than being shocked or horrified by the corpses, as the reader would expect her to be, Mrs. Croom seems to have suspected that her husband was keeping bodies in the attic (the sight of the corpses was "just as she thought"). Unlike the heroine of Bluebeard who is ignorant of her husband's evil and who kills him as soon as she knows, Mrs. Croom isn't innocent or heroic: she knew her husband was doing this and didn't intervene, and she herself seems to take some pleasure in the corpses.

In addition, Proulx introduces the symbol of newspaper here. That the Crooms have newspapers—which bond societies and uphold conventional morality by exposing evildoers—is surprising, since otherwise they seem totally isolated. While one could imagine newspapers as a moderating force for the Crooms (one that might tame their immorality and make them empathize with others), this passage suggests just the opposite: *they* are the evildoers that society is calling out, and they seem not to care at all—or they maybe even find pleasure in it. This passage also subtly suggests Mrs. Croom's own sexual desire (how long would she have looked at the women's photographs in the paper to be able to recognize their decaying corpses?), which further shows how the Crooms get perverse pleasure from defying conventional morality.

❝ …some desiccated as jerky and much the same color, some moldy from lying beneath roof leaks, and, all of them used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels, some bright blue with remnants of paint used on the shutters years ago, one wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee.

Related Characters: Mrs. Croom, Rancher Croom

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows Mrs. Croom's discovery of the corpses of her husband's victims, as she is looking at them through the hole in the attic. By saying that the corpses are "used hard" and covered in the prints of hands and boots, Proulx is implying that Rancher Croom has been sexually abusing the corpses. In other words, this is a scene not just of murder, but also of necrophilia—two of society's strongest moral taboos.

While readers might expect a description of sexually abused corpses to be serious and horrifying, Proulx uses pleasant and evocative language here (as she did in describing Rancher Croom's suicide). Her language engages several of the senses: sight ("bright blue"), touch ("tarry handprints"), taste ("jerky"), smell ("mold"), and even perhaps hearing, if one thinks about the drip of the leaky roof. By using sensuous and evocative descriptions, Proulx places readers in this horrifying world but also gives them pleasure—after all, part of the pleasure of reading is encountering evocative language and surprising descriptions, and this passage leans hard into both.

This convergence of the pleasurable and the gruesome develops the theme of violence and desire that appears throughout "55 Miles to the Gas Pump"—even as the reader is unnerved and distressed by the image of the corpses, they can also delight in Proulx's lavish description. That convergence also brings to mind the lack of, or subversion of, morality that Proulx explores: Mrs. Croom is not frightened or upset by the bodies, but instead, based on the vivid description, seems to find pleasure and fascination in looking at them.

Finally, the symbol of newspaper recurs in this quotation, again as an emblem of finding twisted pleasure in defying conventional morality. After all, the newspaper—instead of making the Crooms more moral and civilized—is wrapped around a corpse like lingerie, a sexualization that is explicitly invoked with the word "nipple."

> When you live a long way out you make your own fun.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation, the final sentence of the story, concisely summarizes Proulx's approach to the three main themes of "55 Miles to the Gas Pump": isolation and rural life, violence and desire, and the subversion of folktale morality. Proulx suggests that "living a long way out" (or being isolated in the desolate rural landscape) can lead anyone—including "you," the reader—to develop warped, "uncivilized" ideas of morality and pleasure. Moreover, the euphemistic use of "make your own fun" to refer to murder and necrophilia makes violence and enjoyment effectively synonymous, emphasizing the immoral nature of what the Crooms understand as "fun." Finally, though this sentence has a structural resemblance to the moral or stock phrase that often appears at the end of a folktale, it is not a moralistic declaration. Rather, it seems to declare that in the rural world of the story, separated from civilization, morality has completely ceased to exist.

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.

55 MILES TO THE GAS PUMP

Rancher Croom is unshaven, wearing "handmade boots" and a "filthy hat." He's a "warm-handed," "quick-foot" dancer who brews his own "strange beer," which "burst[s] out in garlands of foam."

Proulx introduces Rancher Croom with language that suggests isolation (he's unkempt and has to make his own goods), but that also suggests warmth and fun: she uses words the evoke a party, such as "garlands" and dancing and beer. While this description might prepare readers to like this character, Proulx is deliberately setting up a surprising reversal.

In this moment, Rancher Croom is on his horse, "galloping drunk" through the "dark plain," and he stops when he arrives at the "canyon brink." There, he dismounts, "looks down on tumbled rock, waits," and then steps off the edge of the canyon, "parting the air with his last roar." As he falls, his sleeves are "surging up," his arms move like a "windmill," and "before he hits," Rancher Croom "rises again … like a cork in a bucket of milk."

While Proulx introduced Rancher Croom cheerfully, here he suddenly dies by suicide and readers never learn if there's a reason. Since he dies by falling on the rocks, the isolated landscape becomes a weapon, which perhaps suggests that rural isolation had something to do with his suicide. Proulx's description of his death is particularly notable for its positivity: she uses words and phrases ("surging up," "windmill," "rises again") that evoke lightness and triumph. This disorients the reader by being at odds with how one likely imagines a suicide. Furthermore, the final image of Rancher Croom "rising again" evokes Christ's resurrection, again setting readers up to think that Croom might be a good person.

Mrs. Croom, Rancher Croom's wife, is cutting a hole into the roof of their home with a saw, trying to get into the attic. She has not been in the attic for twelve years because of Rancher Croom's "padlocks and warnings," which are "whets to her desire." Sweating profusely, she works at the roof with a saw, a hammer, and a chisel, until she frees a "ragged slab peak" which allows her to see inside.

Like the heroine of the folktale "Bluebeard," Mrs. Croom was forbidden to enter a room of her house—and here, Proulx suggests that her "desire" was stoked by this prohibition. Proulx leaves the specific meaning of this ambiguous: it might simply be that Mrs. Croom became more curious about the attic because she was banned from it (therefore the "padlocks and warnings" increased her desire to know what was in there), but it might also be that Mrs. Croom's desire is stoked by something beyond secrecy. After all, the story reveals immediately after this that Mrs. Croom essentially knew that there were bodies in the attic—so perhaps her husband's violence excites her. Regardless, the word choice of "whets to her desire" is clearly sexual, so Proulx is likely trying to set a mood that will make the discovery of the corpses all the more jarring.

What Mrs. Croom sees in the attic is "just as she thought": "the corpses of Mr. Croom's paramours," whom Mrs. Croom recognizes from seeing their pictures in the **newspaper** when they went missing. Some of these corpses are "desiccated as jerky," others are moldy, and some are covered in "bright blue" paint that was "used on the shutters years ago." All of the corpses, however, are "used hard": they're "covered" with "tarry handprints" and the "marks of boot heels." One of them is "wrapped in newspaper, nipple to knee."

Proulx doesn't spell this out explicitly, but the implication of the handprints and the phrase "used hard" is that Mr. Croom has been engaged in necrophilia with the corpses of the women he murdered. While this is likely shocking to the reader, Mrs. Croom seems to have suspected it all along. Given the age of some of the corpses, it seems likely she's known about the killings for quite some time and never interfered—perhaps this is because she feared that her husband would kill her, too, but Proulx suggests that her motive might have been more monstrous, since the sensuality of her description of the corpses (she describes them with delightful and surprising language that evokes all of the senses) suggests that she takes some pleasure in looking at them, rather than being horrified.

The narrator concludes with one sentence: "When you live a long way out you make your own fun."

The implication of this "moral" to the story is that isolation makes people seek fun in violence, just as the Crooms have done. Throughout the story, Proulx has blended violence and pleasure (through the buoyant description of Mr. Croom's suicide, or the sensuous description of the corpses, for example). Because of this—even though the reader is likely shocked to see such a horrifying sentiment articulated—Proulx has set readers up to understand it on some level: after all, the reader has likely taken pleasure in Proulx's beautiful descriptions of monstrous things, therefore finding fun in violence themselves. Since Proulx uses "you" in this sentence, it's clear that she means to implicate the reader. The Crooms are not anomalies for turning to violence for pleasure—anyone, Proulx suggests, would do the same in their shoes.

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