

Out of a “Rupert” Frost Poem: Myths, Anti-Myths and Icons in Annie Proulx’s New England Short Stories

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Abstract

The idea of New England as a pastoral, authentic, and morally solid place emerged early in the nineteenth century, and was a consequence of rapidly changing social conditions. This kind of image, though cherished by the elite of the region and sought after by tourists, is obviously false and highly exclusive. *Heart Songs*, Annie Proulx’s debut collection of short stories, is one of the first texts to shatter the idealized picture of New England. This article will offer examples of settings and characters radically different from those conventionally associated with the region’s identity. A special focus will be placed on the imagined archetypal Yankee figure and the way Proulx’s New Englanders deal with such an unreal image in their very real lives. Likewise, the group of newcomers and their perception of the region will be commented on. The general methodological framework applied here relates to cultural studies and, more precisely, to studies of space, with an emphasis on a regionalist approach.

Keywords: Annie Proulx, short stories, regionalism, myth, New England

De un poema de “Rupert” Frost: Mitos, antimitos e iconos en los relatos cortos sobre Nueva Inglaterra de Annie Proulx

Resumen

La idea de Nueva Inglaterra como un lugar bucólico, auténtico y moralmente fuerte surgió a principios del siglo diecinueve y fue consecuencia de los rápidos

cambios sociales. Esta imagen, aunque mantenida por la élite de la región y perseguida por los turistas, es obviamente falsa y excluyente. *Heart Songs*, la colección de relatos cortos con la que Annie Proulx debutó como escritora, es uno de los primeros textos que echan por tierra este idealizado retrato de la región. Este artículo analiza algunas de estas icónicas imágenes y ofrece ejemplos de escenarios y personajes opuestos a lo que convencionalmente se asocia con la identidad de Nueva Inglaterra. Pone, además, especial énfasis en la figura del arquetípico yanqui y la manera en la que los habitantes nativos afrontan esta representación irreal en sus vidas reales. De igual modo, analiza la percepción de un grupo de residentes urbanos recién instalados en los pueblos de estas zonas rurales. El marco metodológico general aplicado en el artículo es el de los Estudios Culturales que destacan la importancia del espacio, especialmente ligados a un enfoque regionalista.

Palabras clave: Annie Proulx, relatos cortos, regionalismo, mito, Nueva Inglaterra

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

Kent C. Ryden

When reviewing Annie Proulx's *Heart Songs and Other Stories* in 1989, Loree Rackstraw began quoting R. V. Cassill's definition of the short story genre, who defined it as “a refuge for those who want to explore the human condition as sentient men and women” (qtd in Rackstraw 66). The reviewer also observes that, in her stories, Proulx not only reveals the touching and bizarre struggles of country folk, but she also makes vivid the painful irresolution of human need, which is somehow softened by irony.

Indeed, Rackstraw accurately summarized one of the crucial aspects of Proulx's work. In this study, the influence of settings and the physical and cultural burden of the milieu, will be emphasized above all other facets. Likewise, the archetypal Yankee figure and its confrontation with those inhabiting such a culturally complex area as New England are to be examined. As such, the aim of this article is to highlight Annie Proulx's iconoclastic treatment of one of the most recurrently imagined American regions, as the writer shatters its mythic foundations in order to uncover the burden its residents are forced to deal with in their mundane, prosaic lives. In like manner, the newcomers, their arrogance and aloofness towards the "locals," and their being ridiculed at the end, often as a consequence of the milieu's particular features, will form a part of this analysis.²

The first edition of Proulx's collection, published in 1988 under the title *Heart Songs and Other Stories*, contained nine stories. Two further stories were added to the 1995 edition, under the simplified title *Heart Songs*. The earliest texts from the collection had appeared in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, the favorite publication of "an ardent fisherperson and bird hunter," as Proulx described herself in those times and of "everybody who was even faintly literate and involved in outdoor stuff" (Cox). In an interview with Christopher Cox, the writer shared an anecdote relating to the payment for one of her texts according to which she "swapped a story for a canoe at one point" (Cox). Proulx then clarifies: "It was a three-way deal where *Gray's* ran an ad for Mad River Canoes, I got a canoe, and they erased the cost of the story. It worked out pretty well – I think the canoe was eleven hundred dollars. I named it Stone City after one of the stories *Gray's* published" (Cox).

Heart Songs takes place in northern New England, mainly in Vermont, "in Chopping County, a North America of shadowy ravines, monumental trees and cliffs too sheer even for the average mountain goat" (Cumming 148). The stories are set during the second half of the twentieth century, some in the 1950s, others in the 1980s. These were hard times for New Englanders from the rural areas, as small dairy farms were not profitable anymore. Progress has not yet reached the remote villages and no prospect awaits of a decent income for what survives of local businesses. Many native inhabitants had to abandon the hopeless

search for a decent job and move to urban areas, whereas those who lingered behind accepted welfare and occasional low-paid jobs. Families who had known each other for generations and lived in tight-knit, supportive communities started to disappear. The new residents who come to occupy their homes, are a rich neorural bourgeoisie, who gladly purchase the shabby farms from the desperate farmers, to convert them into bucolic, summer dream-houses. In this regard, Proulx’s short stories can be bound with those texts dealing with class difference.

Nevertheless, in her works Proulx does not classify characters into evil, heartless outsiders and virtuous, genuine locals. In fact, the newcomers are rather, the target for mockery. As Karen Rood points out, the summer part-timers in *Heart Songs* are often “sources of humor as they misinterpret and misjudge the actions and motives of rural individuals who are more attuned to the cycle of the seasons and steeped in a way of life alien to city dwellers” (17). The local residents, on the other hand, “are not merely victims of a national market economy that has made their ways of earning a living obsolete” (Rood 17). Proulx’s rural characters are far from being idealized. The author portrays candidly “the effects of years of poverty, backbreaking work, domestic violence, incest, rape, and anger that sometimes smolders for decades before it erupts in acts of revenge” (Rood 17-18).

Annie Proulx’s New England short stories are excellent examples of a critique of regional identity. This critique is not explicit, but, as Kent Ryden insists, “simply by virtue of setting her fiction in Vermont, a state with a long history of being imagined as a romanticized locus of escape, she forces a consideration of the differences between the place that New England has taken in the national imagination and the place that frustrates and kills its inhabitants” (“The Corpse” 74).

Indeed, the power of such an idealized image, both of the landscape and of its residents, must not be underestimated. Although in the twentieth century the West was the most culturally reimaged region of America, this was not so in earlier periods. As a matter of fact, even now, the West and New England can compete in the number and quality of their imaginary features. Ryden asserts that the phrase “the idea of ‘New England’,” invokes, for most Americans,

a spontaneous picturing of a set of conventional images they have internalized throughout their lifetimes:

In the popular mind, New England looks a certain way, marked by such things as quaint country stores, white village centers, steepled Congregational churches, venerable stone walls, and blazing fall foliage. It is populated by a certain group of people, largely the descendants of the region's Puritan founders and of the stalwart Yankee farmers of earlier centuries. And it has witnessed and been shaped by certain fundamental threads of historical experience, notably the arrival of English colonists and the nation-founding events of the American Revolution. ("Region" 110)

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

If we were to analyze, in general terms, the creation process and dissemination of New England's regional identity, such a review starts with the Puritans and, as Conforti formulates it, their "efforts to colonize and exercise imaginative dominion over New England" (8). First-generation Puritan migrants saw themselves as Englishmen in exile rather than colonists, and all they wished and attempted to do

was to “purify their church and society while also pursuing and extending the cultural patterns of their old homes – that is, to literally create a new and better *England*” (Ryden, “New England” 197). Yet, when considering the second generation of New England Puritans, significant changes in colonial life and shifts in their attitude towards the English homeland are observed. According to Ryden, given the fact that Puritans had enough time assumed their distance from England and embraced their colonies as home rather than as a site of exile, they began to interpret their migration in terms of separation, emphasizing the “New,” rather than the continuity signified in “England” (“New England” 197). Thus, for the first time, lineaments of some sort of regional identity were appreciated.

Given Puritanism’s distinctive culture, pre and post Revolution New Englanders stood out as the collective with the most defined regional identity and strongest awareness of their historical and cultural specificity. Being religious was not the only feature of this identity since with the growing secularization of this community, political integrity began to gain importance. This was the era when popular culture created the figure of the Yankee. According to Conforti, as early as the eighteenth century, influential geographers Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight observed the distinctiveness of New Englanders, even in their appearance. They were appreciably taller, more athletic, and frequently had darker skin and eyes. But Dwight and Morse primarily focused on the character of these people, “a hearty republican character forged from ancestry, history, piety, and even climate” (Conforti 115), that of “a simple but shrewd farmer” (Ryden, “New England” 198).

As for the region itself, the whole nineteenth century, but especially the years after the Civil War, was a time of crucial changes in the lives of New Englanders. The most important alteration of country existence, up until then supposedly peaceful, pastoral, and changeless, came hand-in-hand with the industrial boom. New England as a whole became “the single most urban part of the nation – the most industrial, the most Catholic, the most heavily immigrant, and the most rapidly changing area in the United States” (Nissenbaum 39-40). The colonial revival was a response to these changing conditions. This is when, as Ryden indicates, the white-

painted Georgian-style houses gained popularity and recognition, and village centers were restored to resemble a colonial ideal (“New England” 198). Moreover, that was when the Pilgrim story awakened in the Northern imagination, and therefore the image created during the colonial revival (later cherished afresh as a consequence of a devastating moral influence generated by the Great Depression and the Second World War) was highly exclusive and its protagonists were constrained to idealized, hard-working English settlers and Anglo-Saxon farmers.

The first significant example of the literary re-imagining of the New England past is Lucy Larcom’s memoir *A New England Girlhood* (1889). This text praises the Yankee mill girls’ disposition, the high morals and religious paternalism of their overseers, and the beauties of the landscape viewed from the factory window, while silencing the dangers and hardships of the mill’s machinery. Prior to this came Harriet Beecher Stowe’s works (“A New England Sketch,” 1834; *Oldtown Folks*, 1869), romanticizing New England village landscapes and populated by strong Yankee republican figures, which she promoted to powerful symbols of the region. But although these texts by Stowe appear, as Josephine Donovan puts it, “nearly Utopian” (67), they also “depict authentic regional detail, including authentic dialect, authentic local characters, in real or realistic geographical settings” (Donovan 50), features mastered later in Annie Proulx’s narrative.

There were some other writers whose intention was to portray a certain idealized image of New England identity. Nevertheless, in their fiction they aimed at the past, conscious of the fact that the present did not correspond with the altered picture they sometimes presented. Many of these authors have been condescendingly referred to as “local color” writers, as they focused on “small-scale, closely drawn scenes of village life, frequently paying attention to regional folk ways and patterns of dialect” (Ryden, “New England” 199). Such New England local colorists as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman or Rose Terry Cook are Proulx’s predecessors. However, this heritage does not lie in the choice of characters for their works. While these nineteenth-century writers are described today as foremothers of “women’s literary realism,” which “grew out of the bourgeois

critique of the romance, but ... expressed awareness and concern about female characters and female roles" (Donovan 11), Proulx favors male protagonists in her narrative. The linking point is the manner in which the settings are depicted, and their influence on New Englanders' lives. Cooke, and later Freeman, displayed in her stories what Donovan calls a "kind of grimly authentic realism," defined as a "vision [that] anticipates that of the naturalists: a bleak, uncompromising view of humanity ... as dull brutes" (68). In "The West Shetucket Railroad" and other stories published in the 1880s in *Harper's*, it seems that Cooke acknowledges the evil in rural worlds without attributing it to foreign influence. As Donovan points out, Cooke "fully realized that evil could be homegrown; indeed, she perceived that it may be fostered by the bareness and hardness of New England's physical environment" (68). This theme of rural brutality deriving from the milieu will be recurrent in Proulx's fiction.

While the idealized image of the New England village is shattered completely in Cooke and Freeman's texts, Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is still an ambiguous case of the region's portrayal. On the one hand, the novel is set within the geographical limits of New England, inhabited by good-hearted Yankees living in an idyllic domestic contentment. On the other hand, however, this writer presents a realistic portrayal of a world where the unfortunate consequences of the historical decline of the region's villages and rural areas are not ignored: a place which is moribund, unsustainable, and largely abandoned, especially by the young.

Such an image will prevail in twentieth-century writings. A similar depiction of New England's declining rural population in prose is found in the novels by Edith Wharton, a part-time resident of Massachusetts and, I believe, Annie Proulx's naturalistic narrative's forerunner. Her works *Summer* (1917) and *Ethan Frome* (1911) develop in morally corrupt, marginal, somnolent, and desolate towns. Her characters' fates, such as that of Ethan Frome, illustrate the author's judgment of the hopelessness of New England existence: "trapped in his home town, unhappily married, unfulfilled in every way possible – indeed, suggesting the impossibility of fulfillment in such a place" (Ryden, "New England" 206).

This brief revision of New England writers / mythmakers cannot be complete without the renowned New England twentieth-century poet, Robert Frost, himself a symbol of Yankee identity. Although sometimes described as a much more complex and sophisticated person, Frost embraced the image of himself as “a New Hampshire countryman and farmer who happened to also be a fine and talented poet” (Ryden, “New England” 207), a “Yankee-farmer-poet,” and “a celebrant of and spokesman for the region” (Ryden, “New England” 206). It is interesting to underline the change Frost’s writing underwent from his first book *North of Boston* (1914), which contains a serious critique of the socially untenable situation in waning rural areas of the region, to the reinforcement of the conventional views of New England in his 1923 collection *New Hampshire*. The poet reached the point of lamenting that in New Hampshire and Vermont, which he describes as the best states in the Union, “it’s hard to create literature from New England life, because there is so little tragedy to be found there” (qtd in Ryden, “New England” 207).

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, once the colonial revival resulting from the post-war moral decay was over, a much more inclusive regional fiction eventually began to be created. These writers, “partisans of place,” as Ryden calls them, not only dared to challenge the conventional image of the region. Above all, they tried to write a fairer and democratic regional literature, addressing the imbalance in the idea of New England. To do so, they insisted on portraying so far neglected communities such as the rural poor or people of French-Canadian descent in the regional literary imagination. Ernest Hebert and Carolyn Chute are clearly the most representative authors writing this kind of fiction. Their works describe depressed, beaten-down New England locations and focus on sharply realized, unglamorous scenes. In *Heart Songs*, Annie Proulx draws inspiration from Hebert and Chute’s texts. For instance, her rich “neo-rural” bourgeoisie reflects characters like Zoe Cutter in Hebert’s *The Dogs of March* (1979), a transplanted Midwesterner obsessed with an idyllic old magazine image who struggles to reconcile the material, physical, New England to the one she envisions.

The image of the region that emerges from Proulx’s texts is clearly unlike the one propagated throughout the colonial revival period — no

white-painted Georgian-style houses and no restored town centers to be found. In fact, Proulx reverses the myth of a flawless New England village³ and does not hesitate to present the region’s mid-twentieth-century countryside with all its ugly details, its grim and severe living conditions, and its economic struggles.

References concerning the grimy appearance of New Englanders’ or, more precisely, rural Vermonters’ properties, sleazy and cluttered with junk, are frequently used by the author in her descriptions of place. These depictions sometimes signal the loss of such a property by its native owner as imminent. But in general, it seems that the shabby houses and trashy surroundings result from some kind of a mixture of poverty, carelessness, and lack of aesthetic sensitivity. In the story “Heart Songs,” Snipe, a newcomer, on his way to the Twilight farm, passes “trailers and shacks on the back roads, the yards littered with country junk – rusty oil drums, collapsed stacks of rotten boards, plastic toys smeared with mud, worn tires cut into petal shapes and filled with weeds” (73). As the narrator indicates, all of this trash is nothing but “proofs of poor lives” (73), and one can only guess Proulx is not only referring to material poverty. Once there, Snipe’s impression is that the Twilights’ mountaintop farm made a “Godawful place to live” (74), his senses registering all the annoying details: “He could smell cow manure and hot green growth. Pale dust sprayed up at every step. He felt it in his teeth, and when his fingers picked at his face, fine motes whirled in the thick orange light of the setting sun” (74-75). The house itself, “old and broken, the splintery gray clapboards hanging loosely on the post-and-beam frame, a wavery glass in the windows mended with tape and cardboard” (75) completes this picture of decay and grime. Inside, in the “stifling” kitchen, “the stamped tin ceiling was stained dark with smoke” (75), above a table hung a “fly-specked” calendar, and a chair Snipe was pointed to had “a ripped plastic seat off to the side” (75), a description that points to the ubiquitous dirt and slovenliness of this space. There is a sharp contrast between the Twilights’ property and the one Snipe rented and lived in with his girlfriend, “a modernistic glass horror stinking of money and crowded by forty mammoth blue Arlas cedars set out at the turn of the century” (80). Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the juxtaposition of the two places is not perceived as an image exemplifying the obvious difference between bad and

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

A similar case of two contrasting properties is presented in “The Unclouded Day” and, again, it is not an easy task to judge the beauty of each. Santee, the best of the local bird trappers, owns a place that looks poor and untidy. The first thing to meet the eye here was “the warp screen door”, “the scabby paint on the clapboards” and “the run-down yard” (90). A property belonging to a newcomer and Santee’s hunting apprentice Earl, is described as a very different place, a huge spotless new house, with a large porch for his baby to crawl around and a flawless yard. Notwithstanding, its description suggests that the New England countryside is not a proper place for such a construction, which gives the impression of being, again, artificial and ridiculous: “an enormous Swiss chalet with windows like tan bubbles in the roof and molded polystyrene pillars holding up a portico roof” (93).

Interestingly enough, not only are physical properties set in opposition to each other in *Heart Songs*. One of the most recurrent themes in Annie Proulx’s narrative, is that of presenting dissimilar points of view and ways of life, as well as contrasting behaviors, of local residents and newcomers to a particular place. This is also the case of her New England fiction, where there are numerous examples of outsiders whose image is opposite to that of the locals’. Yet, it is worth highlighting that Proulx does not paint a portrait of stereotyped characters drawn from the history of the New England literature. In *Heart Songs*, the reader finds a broad spectrum of New Englanders, some of whom may resemble the imagined archetypical Yankee, and some its antithesis, while other characters self-consciously embody this mythic image of the Yankee in their own financial interest. As for the newcomers, a certain pattern in their representation can be distinguished. Their naive belief that reality reflects the image of the

New England they grew up with frequently makes them appear ridiculous. Indeed, it seems that for foreigners, the value of Vermont is “the way it receives romantic projections from the observer’s mind” (Ryden, “The Corpse” 79). Nevertheless, much more complex examples of summer part-timers and locals, the “rural insiders who, explicitly or quietly, through thoughts or words or actions, contradict and critique the roles to which they’ve been assigned” (Ryden, “The Corpse” 79) are also part of the analyzed texts.

In the amusing story “On the Antler” the protagonists are two contrasting local residents of Chopping County who hate each other since childhood. Hawkheels,⁴ who focalizes the narrative, used to sell parts of the family property “until he was down to the trailer, ten spongy acres of river bottom and his social security checks” (3). Unlike the archetype of a hard-working Yankee, living on welfare does not cause him any distress; rather, he believes “this was the best part of his life” (3). What truly mattered was that he could still reside in the place he belonged, among Vermont forests and mountains. It is worth noting the parallels between nature and religion which Proulx applies when describing Hawkheels’ eagerness for hunting, a hint of irony included: “He has his secret places hidden all through Chopping County and he visited them like stations of the cross; in order, in reverence and in expectation of results” (4). The way Hawkheel perceives the passing of time, a circular perception characteristic of those living close to nature, is also significant, though its romanticism generates an intriguing discordance:

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

While Hawkheel’s passion for hunting is, in truth, the only feature of a supposedly “classic” Yankee figure, from an outsider’s perspective Bill Stong fulfils all the necessary features. As a child, for example, he merrily “hunted with his father and brothers and shot his first buck when he was eleven” (4). Everything changed when

the boy was fifteen and all the members of the Stong family but Bill died, poisoned by strychnine-contaminated pork roast, “an event that exposed his mother’s slovenly housekeeping ways” (5). This is a morbid story, indeed, one of many demonstrating the sensationalist character of Proulx’s naturalistic fiction. The reader meets Bill Stong in his sixties, at a time when he has a surprisingly developed business acumen: “It was a time when people were coming into the country, buying up the old farmhouses and fields and making the sugarhouses into guest cottages” (7) and Stong knew how to take financial advantage of this. He resolved to line his own pockets “selling” the New England myth and arranged everything so as to meet strangers’ expectations. To start with, he adjusts his physical aspect, as to a “fine platinum white” hair and “good bones” (7) he adds overalls and a red bandana around his neck. Mockingly, when a neighbor first notices Stong’s new appearance, “he looked to see if there was a straw hat on a nail” (9). In his feed store now Stong offered everything an outsider could wish for and expect in such a “typical” New England country establishment. And so he carried from his house almost all the goods and “he arranged generations of his family’s possessions on the shelves beside the work gloves and udder balm” (8). The best customers, those who provided Stong most of his income, were the autumn hunters, and he fools them unashamedly: “The hunters bought Stong’s knives and ammunition and went away with rusted traps, worn horseshoes and bent pokers pulled from the bins labeled ‘Collector’s Items’” (10) . In spite of all these adjustments, Stong did not bother to conceal his anti-Yankee greed. By boldly informing his customers “Take what I can get” (10), in his neighbors’ disapproving eyes, Stong was “making a country virtue out of avarice” (10).

The new residents in “On the Antler” are presented in a clearly unfavorable light, their actions often the target of mockery. For example, old New England houses bought to, as they claimed, provide a taste of the country life, were immediately transformed into plush and incongruous dwellings and their gardens converted into tennis courts. The urbanites’ desire was to purchase a part of this imagined region and touch the mythic New England. Most of them held dear the image of Stong as an archetypal Yankee, for in the end this was one of the main reasons for drawing them into the country. They expected to meet

the kind of “rednecks” they knew from “Rupert” Frost, the poet’s name misquoted by a city woman: “Bill, you look like a character out of a Rupert Frost poem” (7). This is why they gladly paid for Stong’s trash, and this is why they eagerly listened to his interminable and fictitious stories, reading morals out of these “rambling lies” (7).

Similarly foolish in their seeming ingenuity are the newcomers in the story “Electric Arrows,” the Moon-Azures. Very much interested in everything related to rural New England, they are especially fond of the Clew family, whose old homestead they had purchased and inhabited during the summer. Nevertheless, it is significant that “all of their fascination is with the ancestor Clews; living Clews exist ... to be used. Dead Clews belong to the property and the property belongs to the Moon-Azures” (144). They seem to wish to become a part of what they probably perceive to be the original Yankee national archetype. The Moon-Azures research partly involved searching for maps of the farm, tracing the Clews’ genealogy or even studying the ear notch design the Clews used more than a century before to mark their sheep. They take for granted that both the dead and the living Clews were farmers, as all “real” Yankees ought to be. Reality was not what they were curious about, especially if it could not be adjusted to the idealized image of the place they now possessed. I agree with Ryden when he argues that this kind of superior attitude, this imposition of a specific image onto Vermonters, “amounts to a kind of colonialism or cannibalism; rural residents are consumed and put to work according to the needs of outsiders, pressed into roles that do not suit them and that they do not want to play” (“The Corps” 79).

The lack of real knowledge about the area and its native residents, and a naive faith regarding its mythic past encoded in their minds, leads the Moon-Azures to a particularly ridiculous “discovery.” For there is no other explanation why they mistake one of the Clews’ self-portraits carved in rock for a native tribal petroglyph of a “Thunder God”. The “god,” whose discovery is proudly announced in the newspapers, clutches three bolts of electricity in one hand, and around his waist hung a lineman’s belt, the same one worn by all electrical company workers, including the old Clew and the carver of the “god” himself.

Another irritating feature of the Moon-Azures pointed out by the narrator is their arrogance. From the very beginning, they do not hesitate to publicise to the locals, especially the Clews, “things they do to better the place” (142). They make it seem that without them this part of the New England countryside would probably be lost forever, doctor Moon-Azure openly stating: “I’ll never get used to the way you people let these fine places run down” (143). They are aware that, in spite of occupying the supposedly weaker position of outsiders, their money would grant them the real power, entitling them to make critical allusions, snide hints and comments. Perhaps for the same reason, or maybe just because of the famed Yankee helpfulness, they never ceased in expecting neighbors to do them favors, such as “getting their car going, clearing out the clogged spring, finding their red-haired dog” (144).

Native residents of the area judge the Moon-Azures severely, considering them opportunists. They mock their “fancy” habits, such as walking for pleasure, admiring the landscape and the New England flora: “You drive somewhere and here come the Moon-Azures, stumbling through the fireweed, their hands full of wilted branches” (143).

As to the way of life of these rural insiders, they have clearly lost a great part of their identity over the previous years. It seems that together with the destruction of the local community, save a handful of “leftover” neighbors who still lived in a few “worn-out houses” (138), they also lost their strength. The catastrophic perspective of “Venezuelan millionaires” and “cocaine dealers” occupying their lands made them feel disheartened and vulnerable. Some, in order to survive, felt forced to “eat quick, afraid of losing time that could be put into work” (140). The Clews, after giving up their property, at least try not to give away their family photographs, the only legacy they managed to maintain. This a real success, indeed, taking into account the Moon-Azures’ “insistence on denying the Clews’ very identity, their distinctiveness, their history, their humanity” (Ryden, “The Corpse” 80). It is important to comprehend the magnitude of the consequences such unequal social encounters can eventually generate. The coming together of the wealthy Moon-Azures, bearing culturally mistaken misconceptions, with the humble rural Vermonters is aptly described by Ryden in these terms:

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

Mockery of newcomers is a recurrent theme in Proulx's New England short stories, as it is in her *Wyoming Stories*. The author highlights the newcomers' ignorance as to the place they move to, underlining their incongruity with this new environment. These city people, generally very wealthy, are not only ridiculed because of the "glass" houses they build with their money, these "heliodor mansions" that at sunset "flashed like an armada signaling for the attack" ("Negatives" 171) nor even because of the ostentatious décor of these mansions. In the natives' eyes, the newcomers are foolish and laughable because of their inability to adapt to their country surroundings and the rules of nature. In "Negatives," Walter Welter explains ironically to a poor local drunk the reason for his partner's injury, crashing his bicycle into an unmoving deer: "The deer stood there and he thought it would run off so he kept on going but it didn't and he hit it. Then the deer run off and Buck had a broken ankle and a wrecked bike" (176).

In "The Unclouded Day" the ineptitude of Earl, another newcomer, seems even greater. According to Karen Rood, the story "is in some ways typical of the sort of fiction that has been published for years in magazines for hunters and fishers, humorous stories that often feature a wily outdoorsman who gets the better of an arrogant city slicker" (26). In my view, however, Santee is an example of an honorable New Englander, whereas, undoubtedly, Earl excels in his folly, as shows his belief in having killed three birds with just one shot and ignoring the lightning that struck the very moment he fired his gun. By contrast, local residents in this story are presented in a positive light. Except for the touch of slyness shown by Santee in the end, he and his family are presented as upright and decent people, especially taking into account that during the second year of Earl's training there is no money involved. It is also significant that the locals

in Proulx's stories are not always obstinate and narrow-minded. Rather, they can sometimes be observant and impressionable, as is the case of Santees' wife. Verna's contacts with Earl made her appreciate the aesthetic aspects of her surroundings, spurring her into cleaning and decorating her own property. Furthermore, in "The Unclouded Day," and in "A Run of Bad Luck," the New England families are presented as quite the traditional model. They are united and close, and the children raised in a country manner. The mothers are housewives, responsible for feeding their families, a partial exception being "A Run of Back Luck," where Mae becomes "a workin' girl" (61) for some time.

As far as the region's mythical image is concerned, there are several stories where its direct influence on characters is observed, though manifested differently in each instance, as in "Heart Songs," for example. Here, the protagonist's unsuitability for the New England countryside is obvious. Snipe and his girlfriend Catherine move to the country enthusiastically imagining how simple and wonderful their life will be "selling bundles of white birch logs tied with red ribbon to fireplace owners in New York City, or growing ginseng roots they would sell through a friend whose brother knew a pharmacist in Singapore" (78). Obviously, all these plans fail miserably, but Snipe keeps dreaming. He develops a taste for the "authentic" life of the rural musician, imagining he would

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

Snipe is truly delighted the moment he meets the Twilights, this family he perceives as "real backwoods rednecks" and "down and dirty" (77). Not only does he harbor a primitive instinct to delve deeply into their humility and simplicity — a natural response to his

own complicated personal situation — but he also feels there is a chance of earning some money. Snipe wants to convince them to record their songs, and let him organize tours and promotions. He even mentally designs the cover of their album: “a photo of them standing out front of their ratty house, sepia-toned and slightly out of focus, rural and plain” (80). It seems a dream come true, his imagined country life finally fulfilled: “Simple times in an old farmhouse, Shaker chairs by the fire, dew-wet herbs from a little garden, and an isolation and privacy so profound he could get drunk and fall down in the road and no one would see” (80).

The moment Snipe’s plans fail miserably, he resolves to try somewhere else. As Rood observes, indifferent to any emotional damage, “like the sniper his name suggests, Snipe strikes his victims and moves on” (26). The eternal dreamer and his emotionally unstable girlfriend turn to the only myth still left, the everlasting promise of infinite and marvelous possibilities: to go west. In New Mexico or Arizona they would “undoubtedly” lead a simple and easy life, for “Snipe knew somebody would pay him good money to collect the wild seed of jimsonweed” (86).

Is it particularly interesting to point out the universality of the myth of the West, equally powerful for sophisticated myth-seekers, such as Snipe and Catherine, as for crude country folk. Two characters in the story “In the Pit” illustrate this: a simple New England farmer and a cynical self-made young man, a city dweller named Blue. The reader meets the Vermonter, Mr. Fitzroy, through the eyes of Blue, who, as a child, spent several summers in his parents’ cabin in the New England woodland. The first image of Mr. Fitzroy is disagreeable: he seems to have turned into one of “those old boys,” “pumping along on a kid’s bike with its fat tires and faded handlebar streamers, face blazing with drink and the abrasive wind thrown off by passing cars” (105). After a few moments’ hesitation, Blue realizes this is a man whose barn he knew well, for every evening his father drove to the Fitzroys’ place “for sweet milk dipped from the tank, the shuddering liquid releasing a smell of torn grass and rain” (107). Indeed, the way he remembers those people and their farmhouse is not only illustrative of New England mythology, but an image linked to his own idealized memories. With his parents constantly arguing,

yelling at each other in hatred, this Yankee couple's life appeared calm and steady, enviable even for Blue's father:

After the milking was done he [Mr. Fitzroy] sat beside his wife on the porch and played "Lady of Spain" on the accordion. Mrs. Fitzroy cut and whittled. There were her wooden animals on the windowsills ... At last the light quivered behind them and they seemed to shrink from the assaults of moths on the glass. Blue and his father listened, sitting in the car with the windows down and slapping mosquitoes with a sound like sparse applause. (107)

But now Fitzroy is the living image of a failure, his own and that of the imaginary Yankee. Living in the milking room after the death of his wife, now the old man's only company are ex-convicts. This depressing, anti-mythical picture is what Blue perceives with dismay. Furthermore, it seems as though values such as work and helpfulness were never the New Englander's true principles. Fitzroy has no intention of running any dairy business anymore, and he is tired of "these new people from down below always goin' off the road and want[ing] you to pull them out for nothin' with the tractor" (109), a recurrent comical detail in several Proulx stories. Finally, this old Yankee's dreams are particularly meaningful and ironic. Unaware of his own role in the American imagery, he wishes to go west and succeed there, naively believing a newspaper ad: "No down payment, no interest, your own spread on Wild Buffalo Mesa. Get away from it all. Come to the big sky country where wild horses roam free among the sagebrush and breathe the unspoiled air" (110).

As to Blue, his unhappy childhood has made him a skeptical and contemptuous person. For a moment, when repairing and cleaning the cabin, and when some of the good memories return, he thinks with enthusiasm of using the summer house for his own family vacations. But this does not last for long because the image of a mythic woodland village has been destroyed along with his childhood: the locals are nothing but drunks and thieves. His judgments are fast and decisive, and turn out to be mistaken, for Mr. Fitzroy's companion, a reformed thief, has not stolen what Blue

instantaneously accuses him of. Less “tolerant,” to use Rood’s words, than the hospitable old farmer, just like the protagonist of “Heart Songs,” Blue “causes emotional pain through his misreading of others’ intentions” (Rood 27). The final conclusion as to the moral stance of both characters is left to the readers, yet I agree with Rood when she claims that his mistake “embarrassed Blue and probably dampened his plans to vacation at the cabin, but is has contributed little to his understanding of his own character” (28).

There are no easy and clear-cut judgments in Proulx’s works. The New England region is ironically portrayed in her stories. This irony makes her texts stand out from earlier texts construing New England, and it is turned into a weapon against prejudices, naivety and folly. It should also be noted that, in spite of Proulx’s realistic style, allegory is one of the narrative techniques she sometimes applies. Oddly enough, although the writer’s heritage derives from the local colorists and their down-to-earth themes and anti-sentimental visions, similarly to Sarah Orne Jewett, Proulx’s texts are sometimes considered to dwell on the limits between realist doctrine and symbolism, leaving to the reader multiple interpretations.

Not only does Proulx play with the dominant tropes of regional identity, but she inverts them. The writer penetrates “the rural surface to get to the underlying mechanisms that produce that surface and the human costs of that production,” and this is how she discovers New England, a place that is “deeply troubled, extremely complicated, and continually whipsawed by contingency and bad luck” (Ryden, “The Corpse” 76). Thus, Proulx’s representation of rural New England is sometimes surprising, sometimes disheartening.

Most of the outsider characters are unable to understand the discordance between the false image of their nation’s cradle that reached them down through the years and the real nature of the region. Perhaps the only exception is found in the story “Stone City,” where, wanting to escape an earlier stormy life, the protagonist assumes Vermont would be the peaceful shelter he had been seeking: “I had retreated from other people in other places like a man backing fearfully out of a quicksand bog he has stumbled into unknowingly. This place in Chopping County was my retreat from high, muddy

water.” (23). The New England he has imagined was just that, a safe refuge enhanced by the beauty of its landscape. What distinguishes him from the other characters carrying such a mistaken image is that he manages to correct his misconception in time. Once the village’s violent past and its inhabitants’ present dramas are discovered, he does not hesitate to sell his house and move out. The buyers are a New Jersey couple and it seems that, similar to the previous purchaser, they want to acquire something more than the physical property, for, as the narrator ironically observes: “They were innocently enthusiastic about the country” (40).

Annie Proulx’s *Heart Songs* are filled with examples of landscapes and characters that are nothing like those conventionally associated with the region’s identity, and even less with its mythical image. In Ryden’s words, they are, instead, written “against the weight of New England regional identity” and point at

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

Most of the inhabitants of this rural, generally shabby, Vermont, are presented as hopeless and morally questionable. While those belonging to the group of newcomers are ridiculed for their naivety and ignorance, their money bailing them out trouble, the locals are usually predetermined to fail in their life prospects. Some of the native residents try not to surrender and desperately cling to their impoverished properties and community values. Others give up and, after losing everything, surrender to fate while observing, perplexed and weary, the new set of rules imposed by the modern world. At the heart of everything, though, there are also characters, just as “native” as the supposedly “authentic” ones, who have always belonged to this area, although they have never been included in the collective imaginary, and who come to light in Annie Proulx’s narratives. The idea of New England as a pastoral and morally sturdy place is shattered in most of the writer’s short stories. It is, indeed,

thoroughly demolished not only by iconoclastic images of grimness and the moral sloth of the poverty-stricken residents, but by the disclosure that filthiness and misconduct have been part of this most idealized of American region from its very beginnings.

NOTES

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² Some parts of this article come from the author’s doctoral dissertation entitled “Dangerous and Indifferent Ground: Naturalism and Regionalism in Annie Proulx’s Fictional Realm” (2017).

³ As Stephen Nissenbaum observes in “New England as Region and Nation,” according to several historical geographers, Joseph Wood and Martyn Bowden among them, “the idea of a centrally arranged, or *nucleated*, New England village, with its collection of neat white houses facing a central ‘common,’ or ‘green,’” (43-44) was inaccurate. Not only were the houses painted bright red, green, or blue instead of white, but most importantly, not until the 1820-30 could anyone talk about compact villages. The rural New England before the American Revolution was composed of dispersed and isolated farmsteads. Also, ironically, it has to be underlined that “New England town centers developed not in simple opposition to capitalism but rather as an early strategy of adapting to it” (45), for it was vital for shopkeepers and professionals to establish their businesses and homes in the village centers. As for the bucolic “greens” or commons in town centers, they were bare and muddy rather than actually green. The commons, as Nissenbaum indicates, began to be beautified by businessmen and organizations of newcomers after the Civil War. Such valuable historical insights are an interesting introduction to any study of the New England imaginary landscape and should be noted when discussing the outsiders’ efforts to change and improve the region.

⁴ Hawkheel's name suggests "he is the last of the lone woodsmen, like James Fenimore Cooper's noble outdoorsman Natty Bumppo" (Rood 18)

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