



Brokeback Mountain: Entertainment

Blazing saddles

Brokeback Mountain

Based on the award-winning short story of the same name, *Brokeback Mountain* is the heartbreaking story of impossible love between two ranch hands in the West, Ennis del Maar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal). Annie Proulx's story was discovered by Ossana when she was staying at McMurtry's Texas house. The two writers had begun their partnership back in 1992, and subsequently co-developed books, film and television projects. *Brokeback Mountain* was to be the next. They secured an option and then spent the next seven years developing the script.

Taiwanese-American director Ang Lee

In our series on BAFTA Best Script winners, Kira-Anne Pelican looks at *Brokeback Mountain* written by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana.

(*Sense and Sensibility*, *The Ice Storm* and *The Hulk*) was eventually attached and the production commenced. Made for around \$14 million, *Brokeback Mountain* became Focus Features' top-grossing release, making \$178 million worldwide at the box office despite the controversy surrounding the film. Tagged as the world's first 'gay cowboy' movie, the film was banned from theatrical release in the People's Republic of China.

Brokeback Mountain's popular appeal was mirrored in its critical success. At the 2006

BAFTA Awards it garnered awards for Best Adapted Screenplay, the David Lean Award for Achievement in Direction, and the foremost prize of all - Best Film. The success was repeated at the Oscars and at film festivals worldwide.

Adapting Annie Proulx's short story

As an adaptation of Annie Proulx's short story, *Brokeback Mountain* is remarkably true, from character sketches to the dialogue. In expanding a 58 page story to 134 minutes,

of feature script spanning twenty years, some characters who were just sketched in a couple of lines are developed into bigger parts and scenes were added to mark the passing of time.

One of the additions is the second lovemaking scene between Ennis and Jack in the tent on Brokeback Mountain. Ang Lee has talked of the necessity of adding this second scene as a way of showing the men commit to their relationship. Another change in the adaptation of story to script is in the characterisation and casting of Jack. In Proulx's short story, he's described as a far tougher, gruffer character than the more articulate romantic lead in the script. It's a change that serves to heighten the contrast between the two characters and make for a far more emotional love story.

Three-Act Structure

Brokeback Mountain is another example of the classical Three-Act Structure. In the first Act, Ennis and Jack's characters are established and the two men set off on their journey.

The second Act begins when the men embark on their sexual relationship. The first turning point arrives as summer ends when it's time to leave Brokeback Mountain and the couple are separated. By the film's midpoint, the pair have been apart some time. They're reunited when Jack sends Ennis a postcard saying he's passing through town. The second turning point occurs when Jack learns Ennis is getting divorced and assumes the pair can be together.

The transition into Act Three comes when Jack realises that's never going to happen.

Act One

Ennis and Jack set off up Brokeback Mountain

Two men, Ennis del Maar and Jack Twist, arrive at Joe Aguirre's ranch in the Rocky Mountains to pick up work. Aguirre instructs them to take good care of his sheep whilst they herd them to summer pastures on top of the mountain. They're to watch for predators and to sleep with the sheep at night. Ennis and Jack go for a drink together and introduce themselves. Ennis is a man of few words but reveals he's engaged and saving up for a place. Jack is the more carefree of the two, an adventurous bull-rider in the rodeos.

The next day they set off on their journey.

The central drama and point of conflict in any love story is the obstacle between the lovers.

When they reach camp, Jack stays behind and cooks while Ennis rides away to tend to the sheep.

The first rules are broken

All is well until 15 minutes into the script when a bear spooks Ennis' horse. He's thrown to the ground and the men's food supply is scattered everywhere. When Ennis returns to camp that night, Jack suggests shooting one of the sheep to make up for the lost food. Reluctant to break Aguirre's rules, Ennis instead shoots an elk.

Tired of the four hour commute to and from camp every night, Jack and Ennis trade roles. One night, when the temperature drops, Jack invites Ennis to share his tent. As the two lie side by side, Jack casually drapes his arm around Ennis. Ennis recoils and wrestles Jack away but moments later, it is Ennis who instigates sex.

Act Two

New lovers

Early the next morning, 25 minutes into the script, Ennis gallops away from the camp, disturbed. He discovers they've lost their first sheep to a predator. When he returns to camp, there's an awkward silence and then a brief exchange when both men deny they're gay. That night Ennis again joins Jack in the tent. This time they make love.

The next morning, the pair play around and wrestle like new lovers but they're not alone. Unbeknown to them, Joe Aguirre is watching with binoculars. Moments later, he approaches Jack and tells him his uncle has been taken into hospital. Joe implies he's seen what's going on.

That night, a storm strikes. Ennis and Jack wake the following morning to find their sheep have become entangled with another herd. They separate them as best they can. Aguirre forewarns of another storm approaching. Ennis is reluctant to leave but they have no alternative. The two men drive the sheep back down the mountain. Jack talks of his plans to return to the rodeo and his father's house; Ennis is to get married and find more work. They say their farewells and Ennis walks away. Out of sight, around the

corner, he breaks down and wretches. Some time later, Ennis marries the lovely Alma (Michelle Williams).

Jack returns to Brokeback Mountain

45 minutes into the film, Jack returns to Aguirre's ranch at the prospect of a job. Joe throws him out, telling him they'll be no further work for the likes of him. Ennis, meanwhile, has fathered two daughters and is living a lonely life with Alma in a small apartment on the outskirts of town.

Sometime later at a rodeo, Jack's attempts to pick up another man are met with derision. Instead, he's chatted up by Lureen, a wealthy daddy's girl. They're soon married. As time passes and she gives birth to a child, Jack is increasingly left out of her family circle.

A postcard arrives

Four years later, at the midpoint of the script, a postcard arrives at Ennis' house. It's from Jack. Ennis can barely conceal his delight when he reads Jack will be passing through town. Reunited, the men's passion is immediately rekindled and they take off on a fishing trip. Jack suggests they set up a ranch together but Ennis insists they could never take the risk and have to live separate lives. He recounts the story of two gay men in the town in which he lived as a child. They set up home together and were later found murdered in a ditch with tires around their necks. Ennis' father took his nine-year old son to see their bodies.

Ennis returns to his increasingly unhappy life with Alma and Jack to his with Lureen. Time passes.

Ennis divorces Alma

The next turning point comes when Ennis divorces Alma. Thinking that means an end to the obstacle between them, Jack turns up unannounced on Ennis' door. When Ennis says he can't see Jack as he has his daughters for the weekend, Jack drives away devastated across the border to Mexico where he picks up another man.

Ennis spends an unhappy Thanksgiving with his children, Alma and her new

husband. When Alma insinuates she knew he was having an affair with Jack, they fight and Alma makes Ennis leave. Ennis then takes out his anger by beating up a lorry driver into whose path he runs.

On their next fishing trip, Jack again suggests he and Ennis could find a way of living together but Ennis won't listen. On their return, Ennis is picked up by a waitress. Jack, meanwhile, takes an interest in the husband of a friend of his wife.

When he next meets with Ennis, Jack pleads that he can't stand being apart. Ennis admits that because of his commitments to work, he won't be able to see Jack for over six months. Jack is furious. The couple argue and leave, despondent.

Act Three

One of Ennis' postcards to Jack is returned in the mail, stamped DECEASED. Ennis calls Lureen who explains there was an accident when Jack was pumping up a flat tire. Ennis pictures a gang of men beating Jack and hanging the tire round his neck, just as they did with the gay men in his childhood village. Lureen mentions that Jack had always wanted his ashes sprinkled on Brokeback Mountain but she never knew whether the place even existed. Ennis promises he'll visit Jack's parents and carry out his last wish.

Jack's father is filled with hostility. There's no way his son's ashes are going anywhere but the family plot. He tells Ennis that Jack used to talk about bringing Ennis to the family ranch and starting a life there. Recently, talk of Ennis was replaced by another man. Jack's mum suggests Ennis might want to go upstairs and look at Jack's childhood room. Upstairs, inside the wardrobe, Ennis finds two shirts, one inside the other. One is his, the other belongs to Jack. Ennis takes the shirts, says his goodbyes and leaves.

Back in his shack, Ennis' daughter pays him a visit. She announces she's to marry her



They shoot queers don't they?

boyfriend and adds she'd love Ennis to attend the wedding. Ennis responds he's supposed to be rounding up cattle. Then he reconsiders. He'll quit his job. It's more important that he finds time to be with his daughter. The film's final image shows Ennis alone, opening the door to his wardrobe. Inside are the two shirts and beside them, a photograph of Brokeback Mountain.

Genre

The central drama and point of conflict in any love story is the obstacle between the lovers. In the best-known tragic love story in Western history, *Romeo and Juliet*, the obstacle is their feuding families; in the classic film *Casablanca* it's virtue and in *Brief Encounter*, it's the marriage of one of the lovers.

For Ennis del Maar and Jack Twist, their obstacle is being true to their feelings in an environment where homosexuality was entirely unacceptable. As with any love story though, the real barriers between the lovers are internal. The audience is urged to respond with feelings of regret when the lovers don't simply defy convention or fears of being hurt and risk all for love. In *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack is prepared to take that chance. What

keeps the lovers apart is Ennis' reluctance to risk everything for love.

Most importantly of all, a love story needs to have universal appeal. Tagging *Brokeback Mountain* as simply a gay cowboy movie completely denies the underlying premise of the script. The film's popular appeal is much better understood as the story of two people who fall in love, where one is afraid to commit to the relationship until it's too late.

Characterisation

Ennis Del Maar

Haunted by his parents' death, "There was one curve in the road in 43 miles and they miss it," Ennis is driven by a fear of taking the wrong turn and not living to tell the tale. Early in the script he tells Jack about the two gay men in his village who were beaten to death. Ennis would far rather repress his feelings than risk the same happening to him.

In contrast to Jack, Ennis is a very physical character - a man of few words, uncomfortable in his own skin - who expresses himself best through his actions. He's quiet, antisocial and has the air of a man carrying a great burden.

Ennis' language is direct, unwavering, colloquial and informed by his life as a cowboy. He's the product of a non-verbal culture and his exterior is as tough as the landscape around him.

ENNIS: Well, if you can't fix it, Jack, you gotta stand it.

JACK: For how long?

ENNIS: As long as you can ride it. There ain't no reins on this one.

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Of his sexuality, Ledger was quoted as stating in *Time*, 'I don't think Ennis could be labeled as gay. Without Jack Twist, I don't know that he ever would have come out... I think the whole point was that it was two souls that fell in love with each other.' Ennis' words in response to Jack's taunt suggest the same (spot the reference to *Casablanca*):

JACK: So what we got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything's built on that. That's all we got.

ENNIS: Why don't you let me be, Jack Twist. It's because of you that I'm like this.

In Jack's absence, Ennis doesn't chase after other men but then neither does he chase after women. He's a closed book, as much in need of love as Jack, but Ennis is unable to take the risk of reaching out for it. When the external obstacles start being removed with the break-up of his marriage, the possibility comes of moving away to a more tolerant place and giving life with Jack a chance. Ennis still won't take the risk. His priorities remain earning a living as a ranch hand and keeping himself to himself. It isn't until after he learns of Jack's death that he realises what he's lost and what he could have had. Although Ennis' worst fears seem to be confirmed, it's the turning point that acts as Ennis' emotional trigger. For the first time he takes a chance: he puts life before

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Jack Twist

As the foolhardy cowboy, articulate, carefree and in touch with his emotions, Jack is the perfect counterpart to Ennis. He takes rules and consequences lightly and follows his heart rather than the dictates of society. Jack is the risk-taker. He's the one who invites Ennis, for the first time, into his tent. It's Jack who makes the first move. For him their relationship is their choice:

ENNIS: This is a one-shot thing we've got going here... You know I ain't queer.

JACK: This is nobody's business but ours.

Unlike Ennis, Jack is able to communicate his emotions. He represents the soft, romantic side of the men's relationship.

JACK: The truth is sometimes I miss you so much I can hardly stand it.

Foreshadowing

Heavy with foreshadowing, the film's climax is even more poignant because it's been set up time and time again throughout the script. From the moment Joe Aguirre warns the men to obey his rules and sleep with the sheep, we know that by ignoring his warning things will go wrong. Ennis communicates his fear of repeating his parents' mistake and driving off the curve in the road. His stumbling upon a bear in the woods spells the first signs of approaching danger. A second warning from nature comes in the form of the disembowelled sheep, lost to a predator, when Ennis and Jack break Aguirre's rules and spend a night away from the sheep.

After spending their second night together, Aguirre's sheep become entangled with another herd and impossible to separate, as do the lives of the two men. In his story of the gay couple beaten to death in his childhood village, Ennis warns Jack of the dangers of coming out, a message that couldn't be more poignant when Ennis learns of Jack's death, apparently trying to fix a flat tire.

Above all, *Brokeback Mountain* excels as a meticulously crafted but simple story expressing a universal theme: regret for love lost. By devoting the majority of the script to its primary plot, Ossana and McMurtry create space to develop their characters. Dialogue is only ever used where necessary, giving far more emphasis to the spoken lines. In leaving the film's emotional climax to the last moments and spending the rest of the film building up towards that point, the end result is far more powerful than had the audience's energy been spent at an emotional low point at the end of Act Two. Like *Casablanca* and *Brief Encounter*, classic love stories of the '40s, the result leaves the audience walking away filled with empathy.



Counting sheep

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