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Does it Matter if the Cowboys Are Sleeping Together? Adventures in Missing the Point

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The New Republic returns to the issue of *Brokeback Mountain* in an essay by Christopher Orr on "[Masculinity and Brokeback Mountain](#)." Orr argues that the furor over the movie has to do with the fact that our current cultural context no longer allows two men to be living together without someone (or most observers) assuming them to be homosexual. He laments the disappearance of the cowboy as "archetype" of such male relationships.

In so doing, he suggests that the relationship of the two central characters in *Brokeback Mountain* was in "the shape of a marriage." Yet, looking back to Larry McMurtry's 1985 novel, *Lonesome Dove*, Orr argues that the same was basically true of the central characters in that novel, Woodrow F. Call and Augustus McCrae. McMurtry wrote the screenplay adaptation of Annie Proulx's short story for the film version of *Brokeback Mountain*.

Here is the most revealing section of Orr's essay:

*Anyone familiar with the 1985 novel (or the miniseries adaptation) will have no trouble recognizing the similarities between Ennis and Jack on the one hand, and Call (played by Tommy Lee Jones onscreen) and his partner, Augustus McCrae (Robert Duvall), on the other. In both cases it's a pairing of opposites, the laconic with the loquacious, the abstemious with the openly pleasure-seeking, the masculine with the (at least relatively speaking) feminine. It's tempting to suggest that McMurtry and Ossana subvert these characters in *Brokeback Mountain* by making them gay, but sexuality seems largely beside the point. Call and McCrae, after all, were "life partners": Does it really make so much difference whether they were sleeping together? Homoerotic tension has, in any case, been part and parcel of the Western cattle drive at least since Montgomery Clift and John Ireland compared pistols in *Red River*.*

*No, the real difference between Call and McCrae and Ennis and Jack isn't about the appearance of homosexuality but the disappearance of homosociability. The former lived in the late 1800s, a time when there were still wide open spaces to conquer; wildernesses where men could be men and could be with men—sexually, platonically, who was to say? In a border hamlet like *Lonesome Dove*, let alone in the wilds of Montana, no one could complain if two men lived together, given that all the marriageable women had been left behind in Kansas City or San Antonio. Indeed, the life that Call and McCrae shared—two bachelors running a ranch together—is exactly the one Jack dreams of, and pleads with Ennis to undertake. But the modern world denies such a possibility. Land is no longer free to anyone with the nerve to take it, and "civilized" expectations—marriage, children, work—pertain everywhere. Even on *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis and Jake must negotiate the conflicting rules of the Forest Service and the rancher who hired them.*

The key question behind the interpretation of *Brokeback Mountain* and its meaning is revealed in this question posed by Orr about the characters in *Lonesome Dove*: *Does it really make so much difference whether they were sleeping together?*

Of course it does. That is the central point made so well by Anthony Esolen in his brilliant essay, "A Requiem for Friendship: Why Boys Will Not Be Boys and Other Consequences of the Sexual Revolution," published in *Touchstone Magazine*. Esolen argues that the normalization of homosexuality inevitably leads to these assumptions. The social norms against homosexual behaviors are *precisely* what allowed two men to establish close friendships without the society assuming that they were homosexuals.

As I argued in my commentary, "[Sexual Confusion and the End of Friendship](#)," the cultural celebration of homosexuality (and the constant barrage of images and narratives like *Brokeback Mountain*) means that boys and men who are not homosexual are now tempted to pull back from normal male friendships and to avoid any gesture that might imply more than casual acquaintance.

Orr is on to something in his essay. What he seems not to realize is that the loss of the "homosociability" he laments is directly tied to the cultural acceptance of homosexuality that *Brokeback Mountain* intends to promote. Yes, it *does* matter whether the cowboys are sleeping together.

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