

READINGS

GRETEL EHRLICH

About Men

● Gretel Ehrlich (b. 1946) grew up in California and studied at Bennington College, the UCLA Film School, and the New School for Social Research. She began writing full-time in 1979. She has written eloquently about the American West, publishing poetry, essays, short stories, and novels that have earned her awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Whiting Foundation, and the Wyoming Council for the Arts. Among her many books are the best-selling novel *Heart Mountain* (1988) and an essay collection, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985), from which the following work is taken.

Preview You read an excerpt from this essay earlier in the chapter (p. 220). On the basis of that reading, what kind of generalization and examples might you expect from Ehrlich in this longer piece?

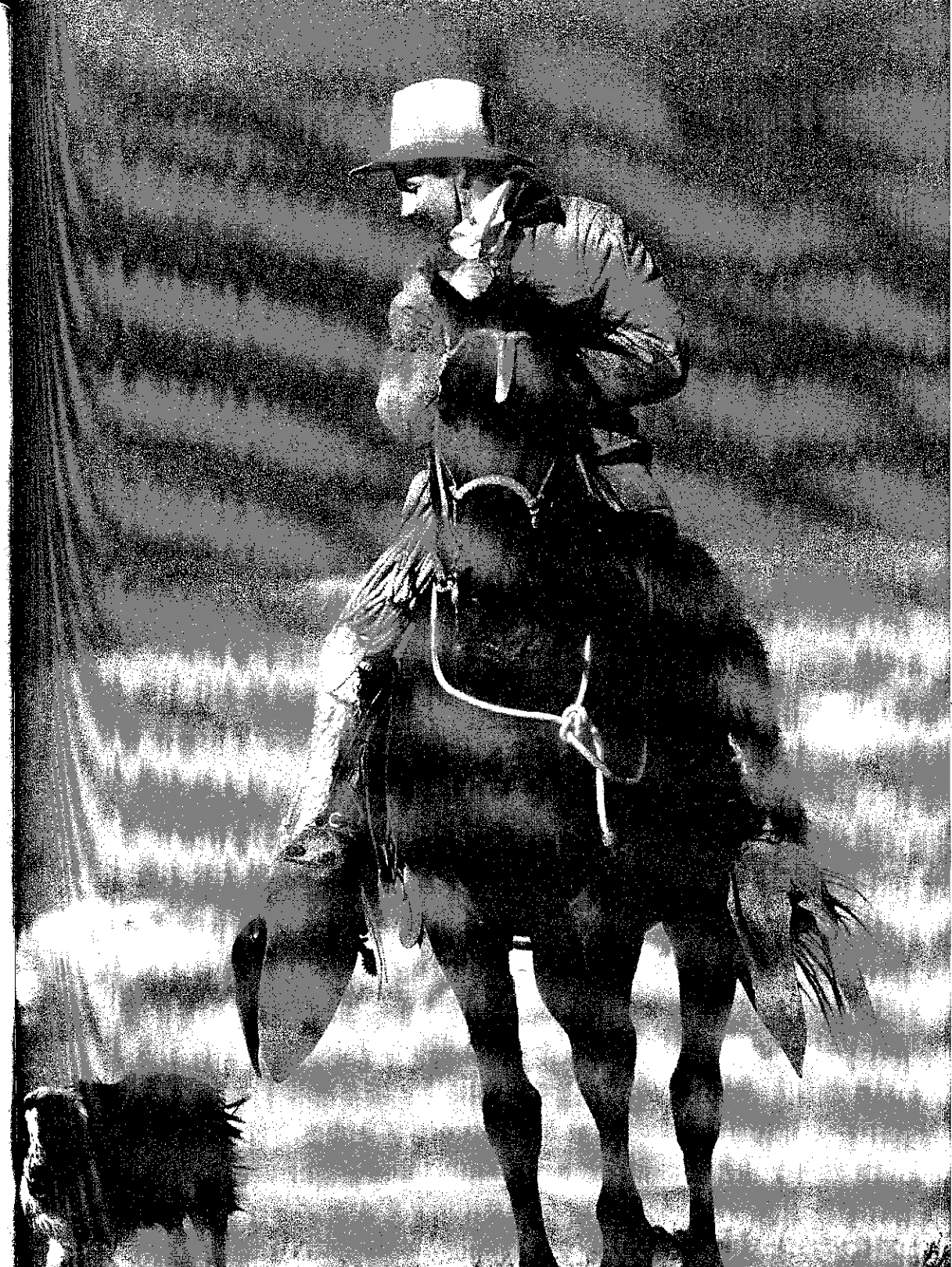
When I'm in New York but feeling lonely for Wyoming I look for the Marlboro ads in the subway. What I'm aching to see is horseflesh, the glint of a spur, a line of distant mountains, brimming creeks, and a reminder of the ranchers and cowboys I've ridden with for the last eight years. But the men I see in those posters with their stern, humorless looks remind me of no one I know here. In our hellbent earnestness to romanticize the cowboy we've ironically disesteemed his true character. If he's "strong and silent" it's because there's probably no one to talk to. If he "rides away into the sunset" it's because he's been on horseback since four in the morning moving cattle and he's trying, fifteen hours later, to get home to his family. If he's "a rugged individualist" he's also part of a team: ranch work is teamwork and even the glorified open-range cowboys of the 1880s rode up and down the Chisholm Trail in the company of twenty or thirty other riders. Instead of the macho, trigger-happy man our culture has perversely wanted him to be, the cowboy is more apt to be convivial, quirky, and softhearted. To be "tough" on a

ranch has nothing to do with conquests and displays of power. More often than not, circumstances—like the colt he's riding or an unexpected blizzard—are overpowering him. It's not toughness but "toughing it out" that counts. In other words, this macho, cultural artifact the cowboy has become is simply a man who possesses resilience, patience, and an instinct for survival. "Cowboys are just like a pile of rocks—everything happens to them. They get climbed on, kicked, rained and snowed on, scuffed up by wind. Their job is 'just to take it,'" one old-timer told me.

A cowboy is someone who loves his work. Since the hours are long—ten to fifteen hours a day—and the pay is \$30 he has to. What's required of him is an odd mixture of physical vigor and maternalism. His part of the beef-raising industry is to birth and nurture calves and take care of their mothers. For the most part his work is done on horseback and in a lifetime he sees and comes to know more animals than people. The iconic myth surrounding him is built on American notions of heroism: the index of a man's value as measured in physical courage. Such ideas have perverted manliness into a self-absorbed race for cheap thrills. In a rancher's world, courage has less to do with facing danger than with acting spontaneously—usually on behalf of an animal or another rider. If a cow is stuck in a boghole he throws a loop around her neck, takes his dally (a half hitch around the saddle horn), and pulls her out with horsepower. If a calf is born sick, he may take her home, warm her in front of the kitchen fire, and massage her legs until dawn. One friend, whose favorite horse was trying to swim a lake with hobbles on, dove under water and cut her legs loose with a knife, then swam her to shore, his arm around her neck lifeguard-style, and saved her from drowning. Because these incidents are usually linked to someone or something outside himself, the westerner's courage is selfless, a form of compassion.

The physical punishment that goes with cowboying is greatly underplayed. Once fear is dispensed with, the threshold of pain rises to meet the demands of the job. When Jane Fonda asked Robert Redford (in the film *Electric Horseman*) if he was sick as he struggled to his feet one morning, he replied, "No, just bent." For once the movies had it right. The cowboys I was sitting with laughed in agreement. Cowboys are rarely complainers; they show their stoicism by laughing at themselves.

If a rancher or cowboy has been thought of as a "man's man"—laconic, hard-drinking, inscrutable—there's almost no place in which the balancing act between male and female, manliness and femininity, can be more natural. If he's gruff, handsome, and physically fit on the outside, he's androgynous at the core. Ranchers are midwives, hunters, nurturers, providers, and conservationists all at once. What we've inter-



preted as toughness—weathered skin, calloused hands, a squint in the eye and a growl in the voice—only masks the tenderness inside. “Now don’t go telling me these lambs are cute,” one rancher warned me the first day I walked into the football-field-sized lambing sheds. The next thing I knew he was holding a black lamb. “Ain’t this little rat good-lookin’?”

So many of the men who came to the West were Southerners—men looking for work and a new life after the Civil War—that chivalrousness and strict codes of honor were soon thought of as western traits. There were very few women in Wyoming during territorial days, so when they did arrive (some as mail-order brides from places like Philadelphia) there was a standoffishness between the sexes and a formality that persists now. Ranchers still tip their hats and say, “Howdy, ma’am” instead of shaking hands with me.

Even young cowboys are often evasive with women. It’s not that they’re Jekyll and Hyde creatures—gentle with animals and rough on women—but rather, that they don’t know how to bring their tenderness into the house and lack the vocabulary to express the complexity of what they feel. Dancing wildly all night becomes a metaphor for the explosive emotions pent up inside, and when these are, on occasion, released, they’re so battery-charged and potent that one caress of the face or one “I love you” will peel for a long while.

The geographical vastness and the social isolation here make emotional evolution seem impossible. Those contradictions of the heart between respectability, logic, and convention on the one hand, and impulse, passion, and intuition on the other, played out wordlessly against the paradisaical beauty of the West, give cowboys a wide-eyed but drawn look. Their lips pucker up, not with kisses but with immutability. They may want to break out, staying up all night with a lover just to talk, but they don’t know how and can’t imagine what the consequences will be. Those rare occasions when they do bare themselves result in confusion. “I feel as if I’d sprained my heart,” one friend told me a month after such a meeting.

My friend Ted Hoagland wrote, “No one is as fragile as a woman but no one is as fragile as a man.” For all the women here who use “fragility” to avoid work or as a sexual ploy, there are men who try to hide theirs, all the while clinging to an adolescent dependency on women to cook their meals, wash their clothes, and keep the ranch house warm in winter. But there is true vulnerability in evidence here. Because these men work with animals, not machines or numbers, because they live outside in landscapes of torrential beauty, because they are confined to a place and a routine embellished with awesome variables, because calves die in the arms that pulled others into life, because they go to the mountains as if on a pilgrimage to find out what makes a herd of elk tick, their strength is also a softness, their toughness, a rare delicacy.

Reading Closely

1. What is this essay about? In one paragraph, summarize the entire essay.
2. What did you learn about cowboys from this essay? What did you already know? What surprised you the most? What do you want to know more about? Write out your responses.
3. What special part does the opening paragraph play in the overall essay? Write out your answer. Then, **working with two or three classmates**, compare answers. If there is a big difference among your answers, share them with the rest of the class.
4. What is the purpose of Ehrlich’s essay? How does the visual support that purpose? What specific passages or details support that purpose?

Considering Larger Issues

1. Who is Ehrlich’s audience for this essay? Imagine the primary audience for it—the actual readers she wrote it for in the first place. (If you think about her purpose for writing this essay, you’ll have an easier time determining her audience.) What broader audience is reading her essay now? Share your responses with the rest of the class.
2. What generalizations does Ehrlich make about men who are westerners? List and number them. What examples does she provide for each generalization? **Working with two or three classmates**, compare the generalizations and examples you have found.
3. **COMBINING METHODS. Working with two or three classmates**, mark or list all the rhetorical methods Ehrlich employs to support her generalizations: the *narratives, descriptions, comparisons and contrasts, cause-and-consequence analyses, process analyses, arguments*. You may want to divide up this activity, preparing a short report to share with the rest of the class.

Thinking about Language

1. Using the context of the essay or your dictionary, define the following terms. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

convivial (1)	stoicism (3)	chivalrousness (5)
cultural artifact (1)	laconic (4)	peal (6)
maternalism (2)	inscrutable (4)	immutability (7)
iconic (2)	androgynous (4)	pilgrimage (8)
2. Ehrlich uses stereotypes to develop her essay. Without looking back at the essay, write a brief definition of each of the following phrases: “strong and silent”; “rides away into the sunset”; “rugged individualist”; and “toughing it out.” **Working with a classmate**, compare your definitions. Where do they overlap? diverge?
3. How do the phrases listed in the previous question play on people’s preconceived ideas of men, cowboys, and westerners? How do these particular word choices contribute to Ehrlich’s essay?

4. Can the phrases listed in question 2 be applied to groups of people other than cowboys? If so, under what circumstances?

Writing Your Own Essays Using Exemplification

1. Using Ehrlich's essay as a model, prepare to write a three- to four-page essay about men, women, children, boyfriends, or some other group of your choice. First determine the generalization you want to make about this group. Then list all the examples that will support your generalization. As you freewrite and begin drafting your essay, write out the specific purpose you want to fulfill.
2. Look over the examples you've gathered for the previous question. Do they all fit under the umbrella of your generalization? Is each one relevant to the generalization? Can you classify the examples in different categories? If so, how? What is the dominant trait for each category? You may find that you can use classification to organize your exemplification essay. (For more on classification, see Chapter 5.) Using classification, or another method of organization that works with your generalization and examples, draft your essay. Remember to refer to "Checking Over the Use of Exemplification" on p. 221.
3. Think of another kind of work that is romanticized in ways that distort the characteristics of the actual men and women who do the work: fire-fighter, police officer, teacher, nurse, doctor, attorney, flight attendant, computer-support person, writer, and so on. Draft a three- to four-page essay in which you explore this line of work. Like Ehrlich, begin your essay by discussing popular misconceptions about this particular group of people, and then move on to different features of the generalization that you want to "prove." As you draft and revise, refer to "Checking Over the Use of Exemplification" on p. 221.