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Stephens, Lindsay, "Reconsidering a Wyoming Tragedy: The Textual Crux of Alexandra Fuller's The Legend of Colton H. Bryant" (2014). *UM Graduate Student Research Conference (GradCon)*. 1.

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Reconsidering a Wyoming Tragedy:
The Textual Crux of Alexandra Fuller's *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*

Alexandra Fuller's *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant* is a moving, third-person account of a young man who meets his demise on a Wyoming oil rig. While Fuller does not make explicit assertions about the oil industry in the text itself, her interviews following the publication of this book focus primarily upon oil rig policy and proposed policy changes, as well as the industry's effects on the environment, the dangers which the oil rig workers face, and the industry's toll on human life. Fuller may be credited with stoking an already heated national conversation about the oil industry, its inherent perils, and its safety record. Nearly all of her book reviews either mention the injustices of the oil industry or leap to its defense.

Fuller's representation of Colton carries great social importance; her work suggests that justice and reasonable compensation for the widows and children of the oil patch is a necessary and responsible step for the oil companies to take. Fuller humanizes the faceless roughneck for her readers; part of Fuller's prowess lies in her ability to make the reader care about Colton H. Bryant, his family and friends, and the accident that changed their lives. Her rhetorical approach, however, is two-pronged: in addition to her guilt-producing reporting, Fuller's authorial efficacy relies heavily upon the idea that Colton's accident is a sudden, preventable tragedy. Fuller's rhetorical approach is sure to boost tissue sales as well as increase our awareness of the oil companies' gross neglect. Her overt, unabashed use of *pathos* suggests that Colton was taken before his time and is therefore a tragic figure. Yet this approach is compromised and perhaps critically flawed when we consider a curious statement which appears in her first chapter.

Fuller's curious statement in the first chapter of *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant* is nothing less than a vexing textual crux. Here Fuller claims that Bryant's story is tragic because it is set in the harsh American West. She writes, "But like all Westerns, this story is a tragedy before it even starts because there was never a way for anyone to win against all the odds out here" (3). This cryptic sentence, which invokes mythologies of the American West, is left unexplained. It suggests that Colton was doomed from the beginning, and contradicts her assertions (found in her interviews) that the oil companies are to blame for Colton's death. Because she invokes western American tragedy in that cryptic sentence, she is essentially killing him kindly with frontier rhetoric. Her rhetorical framing of Colton might therefore be flawed, since she portrays him as an embodiment of the Western American hero without acknowledging the self-sacrificial component of the Western myth. Moreover, Fuller's textual representation of Colton, which I examine through the lens of Affect Theory, suggests that he had begun to die long before he fell from the oil rig on that icy February night. *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*, then, is not the sad story of an ebullient young man whose life is cut tragically short on the oil rigs. Instead, it is a slow, accumulative tragedy which indicates that the Western American myth is fatal.

This paper explores Colton Bryant's declension through the lenses of Affect Theory and western American mythology using textual evidence from *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant* as

well as secondary support from Kathleen Stewart, Ben Highmore, Henri Lefebvre, and Ray Ring, among others.