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The Professor's House: A Novel in Sonata-form

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Perhaps the most inventive of Willa Cather's experiments with fictive form is her adaptation of the sonata in *The Professor's House*.¹ “The experiment which interested me,” Miss Cather explains, “was very much akin to the arrangement followed in sonatas in which the academic sonata form was handled somewhat freely.”² Precisely what “sonata arrangement” signified to Miss Cather is not clear. Like most terms describing a richly varied artistic practice, “sonata” can be taken in many ways because it is at once descriptive and prescriptive. Also, in the allied forms of the term (sonata-allegro, sonata-form, sonata development, Baroque sonata, Classical sonata), it refers to a genre as well as a development; and within both categories—form and development—“sonata” admits unlimited variety of practice.³ Miss Cather’s own statement of her intention in *The Professor's House* does not clarify the way one should take “sonata arrangement.” By her own admission the experiment is “vague”; like most of her critical observations, this analogy is subjective and impressionistic.

Using the novel as an illustrative definition of Miss Cather’s handling of musical form, rather than squaring the work with musical requirements, one sees that “sonata” describes Willa

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¹ *The Professor's House* (New York, 1925). All references are to this text.
³ Edward and Lillian Bloom in *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy* (Carbondale, 1962) speculate that the novel corresponds to the threefold evolution of sonata development and offer Beethoven’s opus 31, No. 2 as a “suggestive parallel.” Another commentator, Joseph X. Brennan, in *Willa Cather and Music* (forthcoming in *The University Review*), takes exception to the Blooms because “they have unwittingly confused the three-part structure of the first movement of the sonata, properly called the sonata-allegro, with the three movements of the entire sonata.” He then argues that Cather meant each book to correspond with a movement of the complete sonata.
Cather's experiment in two ways. The novel's rhythm follows the characteristic development of the sonata—statement, development, or fantasia, and restatement. Such an arrangement, more accurately, is called the sonata-form. While sonata-form refers to the progress of a single movement, it is also an arrangement in little of an arrangement in big because the sonata-form is frequently used in the slow and final movement as well. Willa Cather employs the "sonata arrangement" in both ways. At the same time the novel's rhythm corresponds to the organizing principle behind the sonata's dynamic growth, the three books of The Professor's House generally agree with the contrasting moods of the sonata's three movements.

Book I, "The Family," states the central conflict: Professor Godfrey St. Peter finds himself alone in a family—in a world, indeed—whose ultimate values are materialistic. This materialism around St. Peter takes two unattractive forms. For those with money, his wife, older daughter Rosamond, and her husband, Louis Marsellus, it is a matter of acquisitiveness—a relentless collecting of expensive houses, furniture, clothes, trips. For those without money, his younger daughter, Kathleen, and her husband, Scott MacGregor, their mercenary nature shows itself through envy. There are those who collect and there are those who covet and there is the Professor. Everywhere about him St. Peter finds an inordinate interest in property for its own sake and an insensitivity to the ideal which even physical things embody—the history behind the Spanish furniture which Rosie buys in Chicago, the cultural aspect of the family's trip to Europe, or even the scientific idea behind the Outland engine which brought the Marselluses so much wealth.

This theme of new prosperity gradually rises in Book I until it dominates. There are the Professor's new house which becomes his wife's sole interest, the family dinners which are occasions for money-talk, Rosamond's offer to build the Professor a new study, Scott's conversations about hack poems and "uplift" editorials which he knocks off and which sell so well, and his wife Lillian's narrowing attention to things of show and society. This theme finally reaches a climax in the seventh section where the suppressed resentment, threatening from the start, breaks into a hatred between the two daughters which separates them and gnaws at their father's loyalty.
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Kathleen says of Rosamond: “When she comes toward me, I feel hate coming toward me, like a snake’s hate!” (85) The action of the following section (VIII) sustains this theme at its high pitch as Rosamond, accompanied by father, mother, and husband goes on a buying spree in Chicago which is nothing less than “an orgy of acquisition,” as the Professor calls it. For two chapters this theme diminishes before rising again.

When the theme of money returns, it does so in a different way, in a lower key, so to speak. It is a variation of family finances. First (in XI), the destructive power of money shows itself in speculation. Augusta, the family maid, loses $500 in copper stock; and though the amount is small, from St. Peter’s sense of obligation to recuperate the loss, we know that the loss imposes a hardship on the woman. Then, the theme of money’s damage and the need for restitution and justice are echoed in the twelfth and thirteenth chapters as Mrs. Crane asks Professor St. Peter to intercede on her husband’s behalf. Professor Crane helped Tom Outland develop the engine but has not been compensated for his work. Now that the Marselluses are rich, he wants recom pense. The corollary themes of restitution lead into the second rise of the money motif just before the end of Book I when the Marselluses take the Professor along to Chicago and indulge in another “orgy of acquisition.” At this point the theme of worldliness and greed fades. The family now goes about preparing for a summer in Europe. Once they cross the ocean and once St. Peter is alone with his thoughts, any reminder of show and any jingle of change vanish.

Essentially, the rise and fall of the money motif follow the shifts of family affairs. As these doings occupy only the surface of St. Peter’s attention, the money motif underscores only a part of the drama. What puts the conflict in sharp focus is not the rivalry among the family members but a higher code of human conduct, an older and higher devotion to the ideal which is now scandalously unappreciated by anyone save the Professor. The theme of a devotion to an ideal is the second of two expository themes in Book I. As those around him contend more bitterly for fortune, big or little, and as the essential destructiveness of money reveals itself to him, the final importance of a positive commitment to some ideal becomes more necessary for Professor St. Peter.
In Book I this counter-theme is subordinate and never emerges through dramatic action; but within the Professor’s mind, where the ideal now resides—and where the final drama occurs—it gradually assumes a hushed prominence. The intermittent remembrance of the ideal brings into quiet conflict the recollected world in which the ideal was a way of life and the present world in which the ideal has no influence. The interweaving of these two themes and the modulating moods of the Professor mark the novel’s sonata rhythm.

Willa Cather introduces this counter-theme at the beginning of Book I. First we hear it in a minor key. There is not a direct reference to Tom Outland whose life embodied the ideal. Instead, the ideal comes in the Professor’s recollection of his own youth and his pursuit of the ideal. As he sits in the study of his old house, the idea of moving his notes and books to the new place disturbs him because this transfer forcefully reminds him that the productive period of his life has ended. He is now a recognized scholar, a winner of the Oxford prize for history, but fame brings only the wish to start again. His ideal has gone. The struggle was the thing. His “golden days” were ones of struggle and study. When the eight-volume Spanish Adventurers in North America was in progress he too had an ideal. The task’s completion (embellished with money from an award) makes the task meaningless because he has no higher aspiration to take that ambition’s place. The theme of the ideal, then, is softly stated at first. Once stated it fades into the background where it always hovers but is not always heard.

When St. Peter and his wife are in Chicago at the opera, the theme again rises (VIII). While hearing Thomas’ Mignon, St. Peter nostalgically reflects once more on his student days in Paris. This “young mood” sustains itself for a short while. In the ninth chapter, where the Professor is back home in Michigan, the twin expository themes come forth in harmonic balance. The first half of the chapter carries us back to France through St. Peter’s mnemonic voyage to his youthful hours in Versailles; and the other half extends this journey theme as the family discusses its elaborate plans for a spree in Europe. Willa Cather’s juxtaposition here reveals how dexterously the themes are interwoven. The first part develops through nostalgia, in the key of the ideal, and as the same journey motif
returns in the second part, it moves through anticipation of careless spending and self-indulgence, in the louder tonality of materialism.

The theme of past glory rises as the Professor's thoughts turn away from the domestic crises around him to Tom Outland, whose pursuit of the ideal paradoxically brought about the family conflict. The tenth part recalls Tom's arrival at Hamilton College and the growth of his acquaintanceship with Professor St. Peter. Remembrances of these days past relate Tom's vigor with the family's lost happiness and, finally, the past painfully reminds the Professor of the unhappy present. All of these conflicting impressions deject the scholar. Now Tom is but a "glittering ideal"; now the struggling days of youthful endeavor are gone; now, as Kathleen who has once again come invidiously to complain about Rosamond's hostility, the Professor stands silently transfixed in the turmoil of present sorrow "listening intently, or trying to fasten upon some fugitive idea," the evanescent love for Tom and what he stood for.

The theme subsides as the family quarrels take up the Professor's time, but the fugitive idea emerges finally at the end of Book I. The Marselluses have departed for Europe with Mrs. St. Peter and the Professor is alone. Peacefully, he muses about Tom's last years at Hamilton and settles down to edit Tom's diary, a testament of dream, self-sacrifice, and heroic defeat.

The quietly rising theme of Book I becomes a full flourish in Book II wherein Miss Cather tells the antecedent action of Tom Outland's life and celebrates the aspirations which informed it. Book II is at once stirringly different and strikingly similar to Book I, and the relationship between the books shows how originally Willa Cather has adopted the "sonata arrangement" in fictive form. "Tom Outland's Story" sings of love and devotion, not strife and greed. With this thematic reversal comes a new mood, a repose quite unlike the turmoil in the earlier book. The rhythm modulates from statement to fantasia.

Technically, Miss Cather develops this contrast by adopting another point of view and by altering the fictive time. Though ostensibly within the Professor's mind (he is editing the diary), the narrative voice is Tom Outland's. With Tom's autobiography we are taken out of the present and returned to the
past, to a moment of heroic experience. These technical shifts have a strong bearing on the symbolic rhythm of the novel because by vivifying the fugitive idea Miss Cather offers firm testimony of a life inspired by an ideal and gives voice to the higher obligation which St. Peter can vaguely feel but can no longer articulate. Again, the shift in time back to the past really takes the drama out of a temporal order entirely; and Miss Cather shows that the ideal which stirred Tom Outland endures beyond the historical moment and beyond even the Professor's memory. It persists in the immutable human spirit, where all ideals arise and to which they return.

Book II is not a nouvelle within a novel; it is an abrupt reversal of what precedes it. It is dreamlike, fanciful, romantic, exalted. By comparison to the introspective passages of Book I, the only passages which even hint of Book II's mode, the second book is a free flight of the imagination, not only for Tom Outland as fictive narrator but for Professor St. Peter himself. And to the extent that the sonata analogy applies here, Book II corresponds to the development or, as I prefer to call it, the fantasia, the middle part of the sonata-form.

The fantasia opens with an echo of the money motif, with a poker game where Tom Outland meets his fellow adventurer, Rodney Blake. They become fast friends and decide to give up their railroad jobs and take to the open range. As they set out for cattle country, the theme of beautiful land and freedom arises. Slowly, as they come to know the tantalizing Blue Mesa near which the cattle graze, the theme swells into a rhapsody in Tom's personalized picturing of the Mesa's architectural beauty and look of permanence. Their painstaking and reverent exploration of the Cliff City on the Mesa brings Tom's tale to lyrical heights as the youth descants upon his penetration into a civilization's mysterious existence. In the fifth part the theme of a lost, happy world regained continues—but not in the high lyrical tone of intuitive appreciation of beauty but, with Father Duchene's historical deductions of their discoveries, in a more assured, rational tone. The sixth chapter sounds the counter-motif of money. Tom goes to Washington for federal assistance in preserving this ancient city but encounters a world without regard for his relics or his ideal. In the seventh and last chapter the two themes coalesce. Distressed by Tom's
fruitless negotiations in Washington, Rodney sells some of the Indian relics to a foreign art dealer. Tom’s hallowed city is profanely sacked. The strident motif drowns out the tender strain of ideal love—the sacred vanquished by the profane—but we do hear a brief, sorrowfully soft chord towards the conclusion:

I remember these things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession... For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives, but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed (250-251).

In sum, the fantasia movement reiterates the themes of the first movement in a different, higher key. Whereas the profane motif dominates in the first, the sacred pervades the second. As material desires destroy, the first movement takes place within the great destroyer, Time. As one’s devoir to the ideal amounts to a participation in the permanent, the fantasia moves outside of change. And yet, the fantasia does more than develop the two expository themes in a joyful key. This story of “youthful defeat” and lost happiness prophetically anticipates the third movement wherein Professor St. Peter’s own ideals are shattered. Also, Miss Cather’s adopting a first person point of view functions as a bridge between her more expansive, though limited, vision in Book I and the tight, strict view from the Professor’s consciousness in Book III.

The third book, “The Professor,” restates the two themes of Book I in personal terms. The domestic tensions are there but in the background of St. Peter’s mental disturbance. What rubs his peace now is an existential sense of life’s meaninglessness. His mood is bitter at the start and then darkens into despair. Tom Outland’s discovery of a transcendent order in the Southwest reminds St. Peter how shallow his own penetration into life has really been. His work seems but a vicarious experience by comparison to Tom’s living grasp of essential
realities. His family—whose frequent letters about European shopping tours he indifferently casts aside unopened—has taken him far away from his natural youthful desire intimately to know the earth. “He was earth,” he muses, and the pressures of professional duty and personal association, except for the rare love for Tom, prevented him from returning to earth. To all St. Peter has achieved and loved he is now indifferent, not regretful, indifferent. When the wind, always a fresh release from drudgery, accidentally shuts the window and blows out the stove, he eagerly surrenders to the possibility of death. But Augusta, the maid—the mediator between life and death—revives him. She brings him around physically and spiritually as well. She, who seems to have accepted death and life with equal assurance and without sentimentality, becomes a living example of how one can live “without delight,” how one can learn to live “without joy, without passionate griefs” (282). Low-spirited though Godfrey St. Peter is, he does realize that submission to accidental extinction is an extension of his bitterness, not a reversal of it or escape from it. He has, at least, the cold joy which comes with resignation. His family will never understand his apathy, just as Rodney Blake never understood why Tom heartlessly dismissed him on the Blue Mesa. One requites faith and friendship in a different coinage from that in which one makes a payment to the ideal.

Book III is clearly not a restatement of the expository themes in any conventional way. As I said before, the themes of the ideal and the material do meet here, but the dramatic representations of this tension are of secondary importance. We are within a psyche in Book III. The symbolic rhythm starts with two themes presented in a standard, fictive dramatic form (Book I), moves into a lyrical quiet fantasia (Book II), and ends with a startling blend of both real and imaginary worlds (Book III). The novel ends with St. Peter’s bitter resignation to a life without happiness. The arrangement departs from the usual procedure of the sonata-form, and this independence from any rigorous plan only emphasizes the invention in Willa Cather’s experimentation. In St. Peter’s drear fictive world replete with gimcrack vulgarities there is no human pattern, no classical form of order, except the sonata structure which serves ironically to emphasize the abiding disorder.