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THE FUNCTION OF STRUCTURE IN CATHER'S
THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE

By MARILYN ARNOLD

It is a commonplace in Cather studies to say that she works by juxtaposition and contrast. She herself has said so. In fact, in one novel, *The Professor's House*, that method frames the basic structural pattern of the work, and that pattern in turn establishes the basic theme of the book. *The Professor's House* is concerned principally with the conflict between society and solitude, between community and isolation—a conflict dramatized graphically in the person of Professor Godfrey St. Peter and echoed in Tom Outland. That conflict is portrayed structurally in the three sections of the novel, “The Family,” “Tom Outland's Story,” and “The Professor.” The family is community, habitat of the social man. The professor by the end of the book is the man in isolation, separated from family principally by the ideal represented in Tom Outland’s story. And in a very real sense Tom Outland does come between the professor and his family; or he might be said to precipitate the division within the professor himself, the division between the social St. Peter and the primitive loner who returns as St. Peter's other self in the book's final section. This structural and thematic dichotomy is projected symbolically in the two houses of St. Peter. Once the new house is built it takes the community function from the old house, and the old house becomes a place of solitude, a fitting context for the isolated man.¹

James Woodress, recalling that Cather said her world broke in two in 1922, says that *The Professor's House* could almost be viewed as “a kind of spiritual autobiography, for her pro-

¹ Sister Peter Damian Charles, “The Professor's House: An Abode of Love and Death,” *Colby Library Quarterly*, VIII (June 1968), 70-82, sees the professor's basic conflict to be between Eros and Thanatos, a conflict symbolized by the two houses. Lavon M. Jones, “Willa Cather’s *The Professor's House*," *University Review*, XXIV (Winter 1967), 154-160, also sees death as the antagonist to the mesa ideal, death as symbolized by the town of Hamilton.
tagonist Godfrey St. Peter, a middle-westerner exactly her age, is a man whose world also has split.”

It seems appropriate that Cather would begin to structure a divided novel in 1923, during a time of personal crisis when the world seemed to be breaking in two, and that she would place at its heart a divided man, a man wrested from his childhood home just as she was. Eudora Welty, in her address at the International Seminar on Willa Cather in Lincoln, Nebraska, in October 1973, said that Cather must have experienced a “wrenching to the spirit” when she was uprooted from Virginia and planted in Nebraska. Perhaps this move has been given too little attention in Cather scholarship and criticism. Leon Edel, speaking at the same seminar, seemed to concur with Woodress that Cather and St. Peter are spiritual kin. He said that at the time Cather began writing The Professor's House, she was in great distress and desperately life weary. Instead of giving up, she “wrote it out” in the novel.

The basic movement of the book is from society to solitude, from the social man to the solitary man. And the split in St. Peter, mirrored by the book's split structure, occurs principally because society comes more and more to represent materialism to the professor. This is of special concern because St. Peter observes a growing materialism in his own family and among his colleagues. He himself falls into its trap on occasion. He watches money and things change his daughters and his wife and feels himself pulling away from them. In the old house, even when the professor was shut away working in his study, his family was less concerned with things and enjoyed some degree of harmony.

It is clear that what is really separating St. Peter from his family is the ideal represented in Tom Outland and the mesa. It is an ideal of non-materialism, solitude, and primitive oneness with the landscape. Were it not for the professor’s need to grasp the mesa ideal, he might have been able to move into the new

house and its new study with some ease. Tom enters the professor’s life and splits him off from his family just as his account structurally divides “The Family” and “The Professor.” It is no wonder Lillian grew jealous over the professor’s friendship with Tom and that this friendship drove him further into isolation. At the same time that Tom’s story illustrates the ideal for the professor, it also serves as a supporting subplot which likewise traces the divisive effects of materialism.

Materialism separates Tom from his friend, Roddy Blake, just as it separates the professor from his family. The mesa ideal, which Tom almost subconsciously acquires, insists that there are things which cannot be measured in monetary terms, and that only such things have lasting value in this life. When Tom returns to the mesa after a disappointing excursion to Washington with its money-grubbing and social climbing, he finds that Blake has sold their Indian relics to a Dutchman. He realizes that night that he “cared more about them than about anything else in the world.” Blake had not understood. In anger Tom explains that the relics were never his or Blake’s to sell, that one individual cannot own these remnants of every American’s heritage. Blake, bewildered and hurt, packs up and leaves.

Though Tom regrets having hurt Blake and even goes off to search for him, it is only when he returns to the mesa alone and completely free of material interests and human association that he comes into possession of the ideal. He speaks of the night of his return as “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.” He describes this feeling as “possession,” even a “religious emotion.” He says the whole summer was his “high tide” and that he awakened each morning feeling that he “had found everything, instead of having lost everything” (pp. 250-251). It is Tom, the solitary man, who has

3 Willa Cather, The Professor’s House (New York, 1925), p. 239. All citations are from this source.
experiences on the mesa that the social man could not have. Tom, when he is on the mesa, is a kind of primitive, almost absorbing the landscape through his pores. He joys in “the feeling of being on the mesa, in a world above the world. And the air, my God, what air!—Soft tingling, gold, hot with an edge of chill on it, full of the smell of piñons—it was like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky” (p. 240).

Tom, then, cuts himself off from the one close human tie he had ever had and immediately thereafter experiences an exhilaration on the mesa that he had never known before. His turning against Blake and finding joy in solitude in the yellow cliffs parallels the professor’s inward turning against the wife whom he had once loved and finding gladness in the solitude of his old yellow-papered study. Even the primitive element is there, in the figure of St. Peter’s solitary boy-self.

Twice the products of Tom Outland’s imagination and work are turned into money, on the mesa and in the laboratory. A brilliant scientist, Tom completes work on his invention and then runs off to war where he is killed. But he had left everything to his fiancee, St. Peter’s daughter, Rosamond. She marries Louis Marsellus who turns Outland’s patent into a gold mine. Lucy Lockwood Hazard observes that the whole book is a reenactment of Tom’s “tiny tragedy” which is buried at the heart of it. The profits from his invention are misused in the same way as the mesa relics are misused.

The professor stands by and watches money come between his two daughters. He sees the new house his prize money (for his histories) has built and the different life they live there come between him and his wife. He sees one of his revered colleagues surrender principle before the lure of money. Miss Cather

4 Both William Martin Curtin, “The Relation of Ideas and Structure in the Novels of Willa Cather” (Unpubl. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1959), pp. 165-166, and Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties (New York, 1955 —first publ., 1949), p. 160, have noted parallels between the mesa cliff dwellings and the old study of the professor. They point to the old yellow paper and the yellow canyon walls, the slanting ceilings and the jutting cliffs, the old dress forms and the Indian artifacts.

makes only a few overt statements of St. Peter's hatred for the materialism which is sucking his family under, but she carefully relates his awareness of the widening distance between him and his family to the materialistic values which increasingly engulf them. Tom, as much an idea as a person, "paid his devoir to the ideal." The professor,desiring to live his life according to an ideal, turns to Tom. After Tom's death, he refuses to accept any profit from the success of Tom's invention: "In a lifetime of teaching, I've encountered just one remarkable mind; but for that, I'd consider my good years largely wasted. And there can be no question of money between me and Tom Outland. . . . my friendship with Outland is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue" (p. 62).

In a lecture before his class at the university, the professor makes it clear that he stands for art and humanness as opposed to science which has merely "given us a lot of ingenious toys." Watching his daughters become estranged because one is wealthy and the other is not grieves him deeply: "Was it for this the light in Outland's laboratory used to burn far into the night" (p. 90)? He suffers over the taciturn disaffection which has grown between him and his wife: "The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own" (p. 95). Forced to go on a shopping spree to Chicago with Rosamond, he comes home greatly worn. He tells Lillian, "Let's omit the verb 'to buy' in all forms for a time" (p. 154). It is usually in the midst of his realizations about what money

6 Theodore Stanford Adams, "Six Novels of Willa Cather: A Thematic Study" (Unpubl. dissert., Ohio State University, Columbia, 1961), pp. 204-205. asserts, however, that Tom participates in the general corruption which absorbs the other characters in the book: "After Tom leaves the mesa, he becomes a child of this world. He is aware there may be money in his physics experiments. Rather than go to Europe with St. Peter, he attends to the formalities of his patent. He becomes engaged to Rosamond and sees nothing but her beauty. Making out his will, he excludes from it any mention of Professor Crane, without whom Tom, a sloppy experimenter, might never have known that he made a discovery." Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale, 1962), p. 85, point out that "Even the cliff remains, which had been an unfailing source of inspiration in The Song of the Lark, here become a crippled image, nurturing greed and shattering friendship."
and worldliness have done to his family that he turns in gratitude from social responsibilities to the solitude of his study in the old house.

One event in particular illustrates the extent to which the professor desires to sever relationships with his family, and this event sets the stage for a complete severance and a return to his solitary, primitive youth self. St. Peter's son-in-law, Louie Marsellus, arranges a summer-long trip to Europe for the professor and his wife and himself and Rosamond. St. Peter simply cannot and will not go. He uses his work as an excuse. But instead of developing Tom's notes into a manuscript as he had hoped to do, he spends much of his time daydreaming—something he had never before done in his busy life. This once active man lies in the sun or contemplates the stars. Enter, St. Peter's other self. "Tom Outland had not come back again... , but another boy had: the boy the professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley—the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter" (p. 263).

St. Peter contrasts this boy with the self he has become and concludes that "life with this Kansas boy, little as there had been of it, was the realest of his lives." He feels that "His career, his wife, his family, were not his life at all, but a chain of events which had happened to him. All these things had nothing to do with the person he was in the beginning" (p. 264). This prefigures what Archbishop Jean Latour was to say near the end of his life: "More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself." St. Peter believes that the personality his friends know began to grow during his adolescence "when he was always consciously or unconsciously conjugating the verb 'to love'—in society and solitude, with people, with books, with the sky and open country, in the lonesomeness of crowded city streets. When he met Lillian, it reached its maturity" (p. 264). Man beginning to love is man becoming a social creature. For a time he was still

moving between “society and solitude,” between being “with people” and finding “lonesomeness” in the crowded city streets. But eventually, the “secondary social man, the lover,” won out, and this man shaped his life “by all the penalties and responsibilities of being and having been a lover” (p. 265). Even his books, he believes, were products of the social man and “had no more to do with his original ego than his daughters had; they were a result of the high pressure of young manhood” (p. 265).

All the while he had been working on his histories, the professor “had managed to live two lives” (p. 28), teaching his classes and being a husband and father by day and working fiercely on his books by night; but his minor duality had scarcely even the power to foreshadow the real split in his life when the Kansas boy comes back. This boy “was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was interested in earth and woods and water. . . . He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father” (p. 265). St. Peter knew that the social man had superseded the solitary primitive; what he did not know was that “at a given time, that first nature could return to a man, unchanged . . . untouched” by all the pursuits and experiences of his life. “He did not regret his life, but he was indifferent to it. It seemed to him like the life of another person” (p. 267).

Accompanying the return of his boy-self is a feeling in St. Peter that he is nearing death. The primitive boy “was earth, and would return to earth” (p. 265). A great weariness rests upon him, and his old study takes on the aspects of a tomb. He welcomes death as a final path to solitude, as a door leading away from society. “He could remember a time when the loneliness of death had terrified him, when the idea of it was insupportable. He used to feel that if his wife could but lie in the same coffin with him, his body would not be so insensible that the nearness of hers would not give it comfort. But now he thought of eternal solitude with gratefulness; as a release from every obligation, from every form of effort. It was the Truth”
This passage unmistakably states the polar pull between society and solitude which has divided Godfrey St. Peter.

It is important that St. Peter’s boy-self is a primitive, that the self who supplants his social being partakes of the mesa ideal. Like Tom on the mesa, the returning youth is at one with the landscape, part of the earth and sky. It is always that ideal, of necessity anti-materialistic, that is divisive in the book. In this sense, Tom is as responsible for the split in St. Peter as he is for the division between St. Peter and his family. The structural split and the character split are mutually supportive.

St. Peter’s summer as a solitary man, a primitive in his garden and on his mesa (the old study in the old house), must end, of course. His family must return from Europe, but he cannot face it: “He loved his family, he would make any sacrifice for them, but just now he couldn’t live with them. He must be alone. That was more necessary to him than anything had ever been, more necessary, even, than his marriage had been in his vehement youth. He could not live with his family again—not even with Lillian. Especially not with Lillian” (p. 274). It was falling in love that had “grafted a new creature into the original one” (p. 267) and made him a social being; it is falling out of love that brings a return of the solitary primitive and a rejection of the social man. “Falling out, for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed” (p. 275).

At this point the book is drawing to its climax and to its close. What can a man in St. Peter’s predicament do? Death presents itself as a possibility, as a way to retain the primitive Kansas boy, and the professor almost succumbs to the temptation. Not that he would take his own life, but when he is nearly asphyxiated by the old heater in his study, he is tempted not to try to save himself. He loses consciousness, but Augusta, his wife’s seamstress and household helper, happens by and rescues him. Still, that experience seals his fate, gets him around the corner, so to speak, and into the arms of society once more. He
who just hours before had dreaded Augusta's coming because he wanted solitude, now asks Augusta if she will spend the night. "It would be a comfort. I seem to feel rather lonely—for the first time in months" (p. 279). Augusta takes up her book and St. Peter lies watching her with half-closed eyes, "regarding in her humankind, as if after a definite absence from the world of men and women" (p. 279). Augusta represents to him "the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from" (p. 280), but he decides that only in forming an alliance with the Augustas of the world, ordinary humankind, can he survive. He is a changed man, a man who has relinquished the will to fight for his separateness and acquiesced to being a social creature. The language itself in the last paragraph of the book takes on a bleakness and emits the despair of a man who tries to hope when he knows there is no hope, who forces an affirmation he cannot fully believe in.

Structurally, what has happened? The whole book had been moving toward the return of the professor's boy self, the solitary self. Book I portrays St. Peter's growing disillusionment, his increasing sense of alienation from his family and their values. Then Book II, by moving abruptly to Tom's story, confirms the break, cuts the professor apart from his family. Book III shows him as the solitary man—until just at the book's end. The return of the primitive boy had meant closing the door on society, on the professor's social self. But a man who lives in a city, who teaches at a college, who has a wife and family, is not a primitive; he is part of society, like it or not. This realization comes to St. Peter in his brush with death which climaxes the book and marks the turning point of the movement toward solitude and away from society. In a dramatic reversal, Miss Cather halts the movement that had been building throughout the book and turns it back upon itself. Gravely and in full

8 David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (New York, 1951), pp. 67-68, notes the professor's isolation and makes the rather cryptic comment that St. Peter's isolation "continues to increase until the conclusion of the story puts it suddenly but improbably on a new basis."
knowledge that it means forever living "without delight," St. Peter turns back to society. There the book ends.

We are left asking the question: What does this reversal mean? Clearly, the precision and control that lead to the climax and then reverse the direction of the movement show an advance in Willa Cather's ability as a craftsman. She had reached a new high in precision with *A Lost Lady*, but the later book shows even more skill. And in *The Professor's House* she is working with a much larger body of material. But why doesn't the professor die, clinging to the old ideal? Should one want to survive if survival means abandoning the mesa ideal? Is Cather saying in this book that, lovely as they are, one must compromise the ideals that divide? The very structure of the book, reversing itself as it does, forces us to ask if Willa Cather has decided sadly that her philosophy of the ideal life cannot practically be applied to modern man. An Archbishop in a long ago desert can hold to it, or a pioneer woman on a prairie farm, or a boy on a desert mesa, or a girl in early Quebec, but not a professor in a modern community. If Woodress is right in calling *The Professor's House* Cather's spiritual autobiography, then this structural reversal at the book's conclusion is crucial. Perhaps St. Peter, denied the gratuitous escape of death allowed to Tom, found the same solution for survival in the modern world as Willa Cather did.

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9 William Curtin (p. 169) implies that Cather's sympathetic treatment of Louie Marsellus is evidence that she settled for some kind of compromise between the mesa ideal and human society. He says, "The victory of Marsellus is that of humanity over idealism, a victory that makes life possible." It could well be argued, however, that Tom abandons society, not humanity. Part of his feeling of self-unity and peace comes from his sense of connection with ancient humanity. Of course, that is a very safe kind of human connection, for it requires no attendance at dinner parties.