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Crisis and Discovery in The Professor’s House

by FRANK G. NOVAK, JR.

Among the many critical discussions of Willa Cather’s The Professor’s House, Leon Edel and Alfred Kazin have provided two of the more influential and compelling readings of the novel. Although Kazin’s discussion is brief and Edel’s psychological interpretation diminishes the work’s intent and significance, these two studies accurately identify the basic issues and tensions in the book. As an “experiment” in psychological criticism, Edel’s reading emphasizes the autobiographical, purportedly unconscious aspects of the work. He views The Professor’s House as a novel replete with womb symbols, mother figures, infantile behavior, and Oedipal phases. While this sort of analysis has its limitations, Edel does focus on the central issue in the novel; he poses the crucial and perplexing question which any discussion of the work must inevitably address: What is the cause of Professor Godfrey St. Peter’s malaise, his state of “deep depression”? “Why does he wish for death when his life has been crowned with success and when his family flourishes as never before?” The answer does not reside, as Edel claims, in “the inner problems of the author” nor is it true that Cather provides “no clue” to explain St. Peter’s behavior. 1

Granted, as an artist and writer Willa Cather likely experienced a predicament similar to that of her protagonist; but St. Peter’s problem is typical and universal, not merely personal. Alfred Kazin’s perceptive discussion, another critical touchstone, gives the work a much broader significance. He describes the basic tension of the novel as a dichotomy between the materialism of “modern industrial culture” on the one side and artistic, spiritual ideals on the other: St. Peter’s “pure and subtle . . . passion . . . for the life of the mind” set against the “vulgar ambition” and “lucrative commercial” interests of his family. Kazin asserts that The Professor’s House is “the most elaborately symbolic version of the story of heroic failure she told over and over again, the keenest in insight and the most hauntingly suggestive.”2

The dichotomy which Kazin describes informs the basic imagistic and

thematic structure of the novel and defines the role of each character. The novel depicts what St. Peter sees as an irreconcilable conflict between the ideal realm of art and intellect, to which he has been committed, and the ordinary, materialistic world which threatens to suffocate him. The answer to the crucial question which Edel poses, but so unsatisfactorily answers, is to be found in this tension and in St. Peter's response to it. The novel does, in fact, provide ample motivation and revelation of character to explain and to justify St. Peter's state of depression and alienation. The causes and nature of St. Peter's malaise and describe the sort of understanding he ultimately acquires. One cannot adequately discuss St. Peter's crisis without also evaluating the role of the other members of his "house"—particularly Louie Marsellus whose insidious influence corrupts the family and taints the world St. Peter once cherished. Furthermore, following Kazin's suggestion, more needs to be said about the significance of *The Professor's House* as one of Cather's "most haunting" and profound novels. For in the story of Godfrey St. Peter, Cather presents a fable of the intellectual in the modern world: the novel explores the crisis and attendant malaise which the artist or thinker experiences when he confronts a society lacking aesthetic and spiritual values. The book also suggests a means of transcending such a society whereby the artist or intellectual may survive his confrontation intact, if not victorious.

During the critical year of his life which the novel describes, St. Peter's ideals of art, intellect, and integrity clash with what he perceives as a superficial, corrupt, and thoroughly materialistic world. This dichotomy comprises the fundamental tension of the novel. Prior to the period which the book describes, St. Peter had led a productive and meaningful life; he had enjoyed success and happiness in his family, career, and writing. As the novel opens, he has recently finished his eight-volume history, *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, and has been awarded the Oxford Prize for history. However, rather than enjoying the rewards of fame and success, he suddenly finds himself confronting a family and a world which have become petty, materialistic, and avaricious. The conflicting forces in the novel are respectively embodied in Tom Outland and Louie Marsellus. Figuratively suspended between the two, St. Peter must mediate between Outland's uncompromising idealism and spiritual depth, on one hand, and Marsellus' aggressive acquisitiveness and crass

3. In another article which takes issue with Edel's interpretation, James F. Maxfield also examines the causes and nature of St. Peter's condition of alienation and depression. Maxfield argues that the professor's malaise is largely self-induced and unwarranted and that what happens at the end of the novel is merely another "strategy of self-deception." He also asserts that it is "wrong . . . to conclude that the author fully endorses the ideas and attitudes St. Peter expresses at the end of the novel," that he "remains to the last a man divided from himself." The present essay takes an opposite view: not only is there adequate, justifiable cause for his views and behavior, but he also acquires a knowledge he had not possessed and he ultimately benefits from the disillusioning, nearly fatal experiences described in the novel. See "Strategies of Self-Deception in Cather's *Professor's House*," *Studies in the Novel*, XVI (1984), 72-86.
materialism, on the other. For St. Peter the dichotomy is clear: Outland symbolizes the ideal realm of intellect and beauty while Marsellus represents the ordinary, materialistic world in which value is measured solely on the basis of monetary worth and in which people act from base rather than noble motives. Unable to reconcile these two extremes and refusing to compromise, St. Peter experiences a personal crisis and succumbs to a malaise of ennui, depression, and alienation.

Tom Outland, who had served as an inspiring and sustaining force in the professor’s life and work, tragically died as a young man in World War I. St. Peter feels that Outland’s memory and accomplishments are being exploited and debased by his son-in-law, Louie Marsellus. Moreover, all the members of the professor’s “house”—save the steadfast, pious sewing woman Augusta—have become petty and selfish. Pleasure and purpose growing more and more elusive, St. Peter dwells in memories of the past, especially recollections of his friendship with Tom; he discerns little of beauty or substance in his present life. The trials attending the year of introspection and adjustment which the novel describes are trying and very nearly catastrophic for St. Peter, yet he manages to survive them. Even though he must relinquish the life motivated by the values and ideals which had once sustained him, he discovers a truth, an understanding which enables him to come to terms with his family and to survive his crisis. While much of the book records St. Peter’s despair at the corruption of his family and the world he once knew, the view which the novel ultimately advances is one of hope and reconciliation: after undergoing a harrowing period of alienation and despair, St. Peter finds the will and means to endure.

The antithesis of beauty and noble ideals juxtaposed with a debasing materialism shapes the novel’s pervasive imagistic and symbolic pattern. Cather describes St. Peter’s intellectual and artistic ideals and Outland’s experiences on the Blue Mesa using images which are direct, pure, and vivid. Beneath this brilliant surface, however, exists a dark underside of materialism, envy, and avarice. Images and symbols of ideal purity and beauty—usually associated with Tom’s experiences on the Blue Mesa or certain of St. Peter’s nostalgic reminiscences—contrast with those of decadence and corruption, particularly the ones which describe the worldly concerns of St. Peter’s family. The novel’s thematic dialectic follows this imagistic-symbolic pattern. The secular is pitted against the sacred: the voracious and insidious materialism of Marsellus versus the noble, spiritual quest of Outland. St. Peter is the nexus where these two forces merge and conflict. As his name suggests, Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter’s life is torn by antithetical forces and values: his given name suggests a Napoleonic spirit of secular, ruthless, and selfish acquisition—an attitude embodied in Marsellus, Rosamond, and Lillian; and his surname reflects the ascetic, pure, saintly lives of Augusta and Outland.

One way in which Cather indicates this contrast is through the use of
color symbolism. Darker, heavier colors, especially greens and purples, are associated with the base materialism of St. Peter's family. Reflecting her envy of Rosamond's wealth and possessions, Kathleen's hair and complexion have a distinctly "greenish tinge." Marsellus wears a gaudy purple golfing jacket (p. 165), and Rosamond has an expensive, "purple-grey" moleskin coat (p. 82). The color of Rosamond's lips "was like the duskiness of dark, heavy-scented roses" (p. 37), and she wears an extravagant emerald necklace. One evening St. Peter has a terrifying vision of his daughters' faces leering at him: "the handsome face of his older daughter, surrounded by violet-dappled fur, with a cruel upper lip and scornful half-closed eyes . . . and Kathleen, her square little chin set so fiercely, her white cheeks actually becoming green under her swollen eyes" (p. 89).

On the other side, references to bright light and the color gold accompany the most beautiful and meaningful moments in the lives of both Outland and St. Peter. He vividly remembers "the gold of sunset" (p. 106) on the Sierra Nevadas when he first envisioned the design of his book and the "golden days" (p. 32) when the early volumes of his history were published. Similarly, some of his most rewarding experiences in the present are "golden" moments spent swimming and lounging at the lake (pp. 67, 270). Outland also speaks of the "gold days" on the mesa where the sun on the cedars resembled "tarnished gold-foil" (pp. 191-92). Returning to the mesa after his sojourn in somber Washington, Tom becomes more acutely aware than ever of the golden, luminous quality of the place: "And the air, my God, what air! — Soft, tingling, gold, hot with an edge of chill on it, . . . it was like breathing the sun" (p. 240). Pervading the most meaningful experiences of both St. Peter and Outland, this golden aura illuminates their moments of inspiration, insight, and recognition of beauty. But such golden moments have all but vanished for St. Peter. He enjoys these occasions only rarely in the present and, when he does, they usually consist merely of nostalgic recollections.

The novel's dichotomy between aesthetic, spiritual ideals and commercial, selfish concerns is also manifest in the various members of St. Peter's family: Outland and Augusta represent for him a noble, purposeful life while Lillian St. Peter, his daughters, and Marsellus are associated with a superficial and corrupt materialism.

Louie Marsellus, one of Cather's most skillfully and subtly depicted characters, exhibits crass materialism in the delusive guise of culture, taste, and refinement. His name as well as his actions suggests the affluent decadence of a worldly Renaissance prince or a wealthy Roman noble. Having cunningly exploited Outland's research to amass a fortune, he devotes his considerable energies to conspicuous consumption. Constant-

4. The Professor's House (1925; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 37, 86. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and are noted by page in the text.
ly spending money, Marsellus purchases jewelry, furs, motorcars, rugs, furniture, travel, and a huge new house. He exhibits in all of this what St. Peter terms “the florid style” (p. 48). By reducing everything to mere monetary value, Marsellus debases and corrupts all that he touches—including Outland’s life and scientific achievement, Lillian and Rosamond, even St. Peter’s longstanding friendship with Dr. Crane. Indeed, Louie’s corrosive gold standard tarnishes the professor’s entire “house.”

The novel contains many examples of Marsellus’ greed and obsessive materialism. In his view, Tom’s research possesses no value beyond a monetary one. Because Outland had died young, Marsellus indelicately remarks, he missed the most significant aspect of his scientific research: the large “monetary returns.” Ironically revealing his own superficial materialism, Louie says that “Outland got nothing out of it but death and glory” (p. 41). Another telling scene takes place in the old study where St. Peter has on the couch Tom’s Indian blanket, one of the professor’s most cherished possessions. Whereas Kathleen lovingly strokes the blanket and recalls all that Tom meant to her (p. 130), Marsellus—in foppish golf attire including the “purple jacket with a fur collar”—“pounced upon the purple blanket, threw it across his chest, . . . studied himself in Augusta’s glass,” and remarks on what a fine dressing gown it would make “for Louie” (pp. 165-66). Marsellus selfishly and heedlessly appropriates Outland’s blanket just as he ruthlessly exploited his scientific discovery for financial gain. Louie similarly responds to one of Outland’s gifts to Rosamond: the simple yet beautiful turquoise and silver bracelet which symbolizes the elemental purity and beauty of the life he discovered on the mesa. Ever the materialist, Marsellus remembers the unpretentious beauty of the small bracelet she wore when he first met her; his description of it serves as the book’s epigraph: “a turquoise set in dull silver” (p. 107). He admires but cannot understand or duplicate the simple, refined beauty of the bracelet. Marsellus replaces it, in a way, with an ostentatious necklace of emeralds and gold which he presents to her in grandly dramatic style at a dinner for St. Peter’s colleagues in Chicago. The gift is, typically, garish and exorbitantly expensive; he says of these emeralds, “I like the idea of their being out of scale” (p. 76). St. Peter, therefore, is understandably appalled by Marsellus’ announcement that he will name his costly “Norwegian manor house” (p. 39) for Outland. The house is “rather an expensive affair” (p. 38), even by Marsellus’ standards. Louie plans to make the place “a sort of memorial” to Outland by moving his laboratory there and establishing a shrine where “his brother scientists” may visit (p. 42). St. Peter views all of this as a travesty, as an attempt to “convert [Outland’s] very bones into a personal asset,” typical of Louie’s “florid style” (pp. 47-48).

Yet an ingratiating charm accompanies Louie’s obsessive materialism. He is always cheerful and generous; he possesses a genuine tolerance and a sincere, if naive, desire to be well-liked. Unlike his wife Rosamond, he
is never malicious or vindictive. He offers to set up a trust fund so that St. Peter can pursue his scholarly work without the distractions of teaching. He wants to give his used but valuable furniture to Scott MacGregor, and he remains friendly towards MacGregor even after hearing that he blackballed his membership in the Arts and Letters club. After observing Louie patiently endure one of Rosamond’s egotistical tantrums, St. Peter admiringly murmurs: “Louie, you are magnanimous and magnificent!” (p. 170). It is this seductive charm of Marsellus, his ability to disguise his materialistic and avaricious instincts under a disarmingly ingenuous and open appearance, that makes him and all that he represents so insidious. Although he is always ebullient and generous, neither his ingratiating demeanor nor his appearance conceals the rapacity that lurks beneath. His eyes are “vividly blue, like hot sapphires” set in an otherwise ordinary, “mackerel-tinted” face. These eyes, “his quick, impetuous movements,” and his prominent “Semitic” nose (p. 43) are intended to betray the grasping acquisitiveness which is his motivating force. Mrs. Crane describes Marsellus cruelly but accurately when she characterizes all that he has done to market Tom’s discovery as “a salesman’s ability” (p. 138). His motives for marrying Rosamond are suspect; he has ruthlessly exploited Tom’s discovery, and has probably mistreated Dr. Crane in the process; he is certainly crassly materialistic. Yet, at least, he does not devolve to the envy and pettiness of his wife Rosamond: perhaps this is the best that can be said for him.

The wealth that Marsellus acquires by exploiting Tom’s scientific research taints everyone in St. Peter’s family. While they do not receive any of the money, Marsellus’ wealth makes Kathleen and Scott MacGregor envious and unhappy. Rather than pursuing his higher literary interests, Scott writes moralistic poetry and vapid editorials in order to earn enough to appear respectable alongside the Marsellus’ great wealth. And Kathleen is often humiliated by Rosamond’s affluent arrogance. Motivated by a pathetic struggle “to keep up appearances,” the “petty” and “slavish” lives of the Bixbys (p. 232), the couple with whom Tom boarded while in Washington, anticipate the sort of lives led by the MacGregors.

Kathleen and Scott MacGregor can only envy and futilely mimic the luxuries of wealth enjoyed by the Marselluses, and Louie, at least, can be cheerful and magnanimous. Yet the wealth which Marsellus accumulates has its most corrupting effect on Rosamond. She possesses all of Louie’s materialistic and acquisitive traits without the mitigating effect of his ingratiating generosity. Kathleen says: “She’s become Louie. Indeed, she’s worse than Louie. He and all this money have ruined her” (p. 86). Rosamond  

5. There is a strong indication that Marsellus married Rosamond in order to acquire the rights to Tom's patented discovery: their engagement is announced after Louie had made many seemingly innocent visits to Dr. Crane to discuss Outland’s work and after Rosamond’s lawyers had obtained his papers (p. 136).
mond spends money voraciously, yet she “detested to hear sums of money mentioned, especially small sums” (p. 44). She refuses to share any part of her fortune with Dr. Crane, even though he played an important role in Tom’s research; she disdainfully rejects Kathleen’s appeal to join the rest of the family in contributing to help Augusta recoup her meager life savings lost in a foolish investment; and she becomes enraged when Louie generously proposes to offer their old furniture to the MacGregors. The incident which most discourages St. Peter is the shopping expedition with Rosamond in Chicago to purchase old Spanish furniture. Returning home depressed and exhausted, he describes the experience to his wife as “an orgy of acquisition . . . like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces” (p. 154). Outland never suspected that his fiancée, who could be content with a simple “turquoise set in dull silver,” would later exhibit the ruthlessly acquisitive and selfish tendencies suggested by her father’s given name and practiced by someone like the German collector Fechtig. Both Louie and Rosamond spend their newly acquired wealth with a greedy impetuosity; their ostentatious and vulgar acquisitions reveal them to be nouveau riches of the worst sort. St. Peter recognizes that since Rosamond’s marriage both she and her mother Lillian “had changed bewilderingly . . . changed and hardened” (p. 161).

Like her daughter Rosamond, Lillian St. Peter has become increasingly concerned with materialism and social status. Marsellus has brought out in her a “worldliness, that willingness to get the most out of occasions and people.” He “never forgot one of the hundred foolish little attentions that Lillian loved,” and he becomes for her one of those “beaux-fils . . . meant to take the husband’s place when husbands ceased to be lovers” (p. 160). St. Peter thinks, with more than a little irony, that all of this is “splendid,” for with such superficial preoccupations she will never face the sort of crisis he experiences: “She was less intelligent and more sensible than he had thought her” (p. 79). The scene in which Lillian overhears a segment of her husband’s lecture to his senior history class (pp. 67–70) dramatically emphasizes the difference between the ideal, spiritual values of St. Peter and the monetary, material concerns of Lillian and the rest of the family. In an impassioned and eloquent response to a student’s question, St. Peter defends art and religion—a sense of the dramatic and mysterious as transmitted through culture and history—against the mundane, superficial concerns of science. He asserts that humanistic and spiritual values are the sources of “the only happiness” man has ever had. After overhearing his articulate and moving speech from the hallway, Lillian’s first words to her husband are: “I came over to get you to go to the electrician’s with me.” Obviously insensitive to the significance and intensity of his remarks, she callously upbraids St. Peter, saying that she wished he would not “talk to those fat-faced boys as if they were intelligent beings” and that “it’s hardly dignified to think aloud in such company.” Lillian similarly misunderstands St. Peter’s epigrammatic state-
ment which serves as an accurate indictment of the empty consumerism practiced by Louie, Rosamond, and herself: “The great pleasures don’t come so cheap” (p. 33). In their seemingly insatiable frenzy to acquire houses, clothes, furniture, and jewelry, they ignore or, at least, misunderstand the sort of values and “pleasures” St. Peter has sought and cultivated: the beauty and gratifications of his scholarly work and the ideals embodied in Tom Outland.

Outland was the single most important person and influence in St. Peter’s life. He served as the inspiration for St. Peter’s romance “of the mind—of the imagination,” which began to flourish as his romance “of the heart,” his love for Lillian and his daughters began to wane: “Just when the morning brightness of the world was wearing off for him, along came Outland and brought him a kind of second youth” (p. 258). In spite of the frontier gaucheries which so annoyed Lillian, Tom was intelligent, sensitive, and virtuous; he became a genuine hero in the eyes of St. Peter’s young daughters. In contrast to the “florid style” of Marsellus, Tom embodied simplicity, integrity, and idealism; his life was a quest for clarity, beauty, and truth. St. Peter finds the diary of Tom’s exploration of the Blue Mesa “almost beautiful, because of the stupidities it avoided and the things it did not say,” yet “the kindling imagination, the ardour and excitement” shine through the “austerity” of his descriptions (p. 262). Book Two of the novel, “Tom Outland’s Story,” conveys a similar feeling of the beauty, passion, and intensity which marked Outland’s life.

Outland’s brief life is, in a way, a capsule of St. Peter’s. Each nourishes youthful hope and noble dreams which are destroyed by materialism and greed. Yet, unlike St. Peter, Outland never experiences a devastating crisis. He does not live to see his disinterested scientific research turned to practical, vulgar purposes and its profits become the source of extravagance and envy. What was apparently the most disheartening event in Tom’s life—Blake’s selling the Indian relics to Fechtig—leads to his most transcendent experience. Soon after, just when the romance of the place seemed to have vanished, he acquires a deeper understanding of the Blue Mesa: “instead of having lost everything,” he discovers that he “had found everything”; for him, “the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion” (p. 251). Outland’s life remains on this level; he never confronts the vexing details and dispiriting compromises of family and career. St. Peter recognizes that Tom would have been changed, if not crushed, had he lived to shoulder mundane responsibilities, to make his way in a materialistic world:

St. Peter sometimes wondered what would have happened to him, once the trap of worldly success had been sprung on him. . . . What change would have come in his blue eye, in his fine long hand with the backspringing thumb, which had never handled things that were not the symbols of ideas? . . . It would have had to “manage” a great deal of money, to be the instrument of a woman who would grow always more exacting. He had escaped all that. He had made something new in the world—and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others. (pp. 260-61)
Though not without his flaws, Godfrey St. Peter is unquestionably a noble, admirable character. He has successfully devoted his life to teaching and scholarship, and he has recently completed his celebrated eight-volume history. While he is disheartened by the excesses of his wife and daughters, he has been devoted to his family; he retains particularly strong feelings of affection for Kathleen, and he cherishes memories of domestic felicity in the old house. St. Peter is a cultivated man of the world; he is a gourmet and has impeccable taste in music, art, and furniture. He is also a man of ideals and integrity; he turns down Marsellus’ alluring offer to set up a trust fund which will free him from teaching obligations. He battles tirelessly to retain high standards and a liberal arts emphasis in his university. Even his physical appearance is heroic: at age fifty-two he is athletic and vigorous; he has a look of imperial command, and his head “was more like a statue’s head than a man’s” (p. 13)—in the rubber visor he wears when swimming, he resembles “the warriors on the Parthenon frieze” (p. 71).

Writing his Spanish Adventurers in North America has been for fifteen years the sustaining element in St. Peter’s life. Contemplating the history at the outset of his career, he determined: “I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing” (p. 25). His first vision of the design of his volumes is a great moment of epiphany; he perceives a truth, a plan, and a purpose which have informed both his writing and his life:

One day stood out above the others. All day long they were skirting the south coast of Spain; from the rose of dawn to the gold of sunset the ranges of the Sierra Nevadas towered on their right, snow peak after snow peak, high beyond the flight of fancy, gleaming like crystal and topaz. St. Peter lay looking up at them from a little boat riding low in the purple water, and the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through. (p. 106)

In the work that followed, he attempted “to do something quite different” which discarded “all the foolish conventions about that kind of writing” (p. 32); the history is as much a creative, artistic work as a scholarly one. The project gradually became his chief source of happiness and fulfillment as his family life grew less rewarding. He worked on the history four nights a week (after full days of teaching) and “like a miner under a landslide” on weekends (p. 28). Although St. Peter’s writing has been the most enduring source of his happiness, there are other meaningful experiences in his life, many of which are inseparable from his history. These include his garden, various events of his earlier domestic life, and, most importantly, his friendship with Tom. In fact, his writing gives an order of significance to these other facets of his life: “to him, the most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories” (p. 101).

There are many factors which contribute to St. Peter’s despair. While the change which Marsellus has wrought in his family is the chief cause, he finds the world he once knew in ruins nearly everywhere he turns.
Those things which he most valued have been debased, lost, or destroyed. All that remains is "the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters" (p. 11). He has completed his life's work, the *Spanish Adventurers*. His marriage has lost the zest of youthful hope and love. Tom Outland's scientific achievement has been bartered by Marsellus for a fortune, and his memory has been enshrined in the ghastly manor house "Outland." St. Peter's daughters have become petty and mercenary. Throughout his "house" envy and avarice have supplanted beauty and innocence. His university has compromised its integrity by giving in to student and political pressures, emphasizing vocational and mechanical studies at the expense of the liberal arts and high standards; the future is apparently in the control of the business and agricultural schools and in the likes of the stylish and popular Langtry, instead of scholars like St. Peter and Crane. In short, Marsellus' world of large monetary profits and superficial commercial values has supplanted Outland's world of ideals and high aspiration. Added to these discouraging factors is the exhaustion which has beset St. Peter; he feels "tremendously tired" from the intense effort he has poured into his family, teaching, and writing (p. 163). All of this precipitates St. Peter's crisis and malaise.

Feeling stifled and debased by the materialism and pettiness of his family, St. Peter continues to rent his old house because, as he tells Applehoff, he needs "room to think" (p. 52). In addition to its associations with a richer, more purposeful past, the house is a retreat from the crass world of Lillian and the Marselluses and from the jealous resentments of the MacGregors. His old study has not been tainted by Lillian's decorative "improvements" nor is it associated with the tawdry ostentation of Marsellus "Outland." Obstinately, futilely, almost pathetically, the professor clings to the house and study where he had experienced his greatest triumphs and happiness in both his scholarly work and family life. In his old study, the pages of his notes and manuscripts mingle with Augusta's dress patterns. The two dress forms in the study serve as ideals of what his daughters might have become, yet the hardness of one and the steel "nerves" of the other also symbolize the type of women they have actually become (p. 18). Normally a man of equanimity, St. Peter becomes quite perturbed when Augusta comes to remove the forms; he says that he will be "damned" before giving up his "ladies," whose company he obviously prefers to that of his family (p. 21). In an effort to escape the emptiness of his present life, St. Peter also frequently returns to memories of certain beautiful and meaningful experiences in his past: an "intense silvery grey" day in Paris years earlier when he bought some pink dahlias (pp. 102-03); the moment he envisioned the design of his work while sailing off the coast of Spain; and scenes of his friendship with Outland.

The "diminution of ardor" (p. 13) mentioned in the initial description of St. Peter is a mere suggestion of the totality of the despair he ex-
experiences. He feels this “diminution of ardor” not merely for his wife, his
daughters, his teaching, and the rewards of his success, but also towards
his own life which has become empty and purposeless. Lillian complains
that he has become “lonely and inhuman”; she says to him: “Two years
ago you were an impetuous young man. Now you save yourself in
everything. You’re naturally warm and affectionate; all at once you begin
shutting yourself away from everybody” (p. 162). And she is right: he
avoids his family; he daydreams; he sympathetically thinks of Euripides
who “when he was an old man . . . went and lived in a cave by the sea”
(p. 156). His teaching lacks the purpose and vitality it once had; as the fall
term begins, he has the ominous feeling that his relations with his students
“would be of short duration” and he makes no effort to learn their names
(p. 271). His life and the world around him have become very nearly in-
tolerable, without purpose or hope:

The world was sad to St. Peter as he looked about him. . . . The university, his new house,
his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is im-
prisoned seems to a sea-sick man. Yes, it was possible that the little world, on its voyage
among all the stars, might become like that: a boat on which one could travel no longer, from
which one could no longer look up and confront those bright rings or revolution. (p. 150)

Consequently, when the flame in the old gas stove is extinguished and
he is confronted with the possibility of “accidental extinction,” St. Peter
feels “no will to resist.” During this loss of consciousness, he “let
something go . . . something very precious, that he could not consciously
have relinquished” (p. 282). The book does not indicate in so many words
precisely what he relinquishes, but whatever it is clearly involves a pro-
found reorientation that he must undergo in order to survive. During the
summer he spends alone in reverie and “half-awake loafing” (p. 263), this
change in view begins to evolve: St. Peter reconciles himself to a world
and a family which he had found alien and dispiriting, and he acquires the
will to endure. He perceives that those qualities which had been tangibly
embodied in Tom and artistically represented in his historical writing are
elusive and transitory. He recognizes that there is a fundamental “Truth”
(p. 265) existing apart from those things which he had most valued and
which had heretofore sustained him. Because of the “fervour in the blood
and brain, books were born as well as daughters,” yet these had little to
do with his “original ego,” his essential self (p. 265). During the weeks his
family is in Europe, he rediscovers “the original, unmodified Godfrey St.
Peter” (p. 263), a self who is “primitive” and “terribly wise” (p. 265). He
regains “that first nature . . . unchanged by all the pursuits and passions
and experiences of his life; untouched even by the tastes and intellectual
activities which have been strong enough to give him distinction among
his fellows and to have made for him, as they say, a name in the world”
(p. 267). 6

6. In Cather’s novel Lucy Gayheart (New York: Knopf, 1935), the singer Clement Sebastian ex-
periences a crisis and an illumination similar to that of St. Peter. After a successful career and at about
The key to understanding the change which occurs in St. Peter lies in "Tom Outland's Story." While his family is abroad, St. Peter recalls and understands as never before the meaning of Tom's experience on the Blue Mesa. St. Peter's summer of introspection and illumination parallels the summer in which Tom experienced "a religious emotion" and "happiness unalloyed" during his solitary sojourn on the mesa after his disappointments in Washington and the catastrophe of Blake's selling the artifacts to Fechtig. "Having lost everything," St. Peter does not, like Tom, find "everything" (p. 251); yet he does at least find something: the courage and means to continue living, to endure in spite of the disheartening and demeaning forces that surround him. St. Peter acquires what is perhaps best described as a religious understanding. He had intuitively possessed this understanding as a boy but had lost it over the years as his life and career unfolded. St. Peter apprehends the sort of timeless and sacred values represented in the Cliff City—the truths which had inspired a "religious emotion" in Tom.

Father Duchene recognizes the spiritual, transcendent dimension in the civilization of the Blue Mesa cliff dwellers, and his analysis of their existence helps to define the religious understanding which St. Peter ultimately acquires. The simple, purposeful quality of life on the mesa stands above the pettiness and materialism of St. Peter's family; the cliff dwellers' values endure whereas even those things which St. Peter had most cherished lose their meaning or are destroyed. Father Duchene says that the original inhabitants developed "an orderly and secure existence":

There is evidence on every hand that they lived for something more than food and shelter. . . . I see them here, isolated, cut off from other tribes, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, . . . doubtless entertaining some feelings of affection and sentiment for this stronghold . . . where they had practically overcome the worst hardships that primitive man had to fear. . . . I feel a reverence for this place. Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot. (pp. 219-21)

The priest even performs a sort of clear water sacrament using the pure, crystal water which flows from the spring in the Cliff City—an act which commemorates the enduring, sacred values of the ancient mesa civilization (p. 209). Duchene's analysis confirms Tom's initial impression that the place possessed an "immortal repose . . . the calmness of eternity" (p. 201) and that those who built it were "a strong and aspiring people" (pp. 203-04).

Only after completing his history and observing the debasing influence which Marsellus has exerted upon his family does St. Peter fully under-
stand what Outland had discovered on the Blue Mesa. The professor has, of course, long recognized the value of art and religion and had often discussed their importance in his lectures (see pp. 67-69). However, only after the year of crisis and discovery which the novel describes does he possess a profound understanding of the meaning and crucial role of art and religion in sustaining life: his intellectual awareness becomes, as for Tom, "a religious emotion." Editing Tom's diary and recalling his story reveal to him the elemental truth and beauty reflected in the mesa and its civilization. St. Peter, like the cliff dwellers, becomes "a primitive"; he becomes "terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths" (p. 265). All of this culminates in the symbolic, though very nearly fatal, death passage from which he emerges with a new understanding and will to endure.

The professor is "reborn," appropriately, through the offices of the pious Augusta, the German Catholic seamstress who has long served the family. Augusta embodies certain of the essential, "primitive" values which St. Peter recognizes and begins to acquire after his near-death; his feelings for her become "instinctive, escaping definition, but real" (p. 281). She is hard-working, patient, and uncomplaining. She represents to him a stoical endurance in the face of hardship and death—"the bloomless side of life he had always run away from" (p. 280). Although she barely comprehends the intellectual and artistic pursuits which have preoccupied St. Peter, Augusta possesses a selflessness and spirituality that both he and his family lack. He often expresses interest in her religious faith, and she was able to make even death "seem less uncomfortable" to him (p. 281). Augusta becomes a source of strength and inspiration for St. Peter; he admires her abiding faith and her ability to face life courageously in spite of deprivation and hardship. He finds the will to endure knowing that "there was still Augusta, . . . a world full of Augustas with whom one was outward bound" (p. 281).

The renewal which St. Peter undergoes is understated and circuitously disclosed. He does not experience here the dramatic ecstasy of a golden vision or similar epiphany. Rather he gains understanding only after several weeks of lethargic reverie, his "novel mental dissipation" (p. 263). He gradually comes to the realization that his life must be motivated by a fundamental and durable "Truth," something he had never really

7. Perhaps this is why critics have often misinterpreted or ignored St. Peter's profound change in outlook. For example, see Maxfield (cited above). John Hinz argues that St. Peter is ultimately defeated, that he remains "the cynical, pessimistic spectator of life" ("A Lost Lady and The Professor's House," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXIV [1953], 85). Robert Alan McGill says that "St. Peter's letting go is not a victory but a defeat. It is inescapably clear at the close of the novel that he is a much reduced figure" ("Heartbreak: Western Enchantment and Western Fact in Willa Cather's The Professor's House," South Dakota Review, XVI, 3 [1978], 74). While she accurately identifies the sort of "basic values" that St. Peter finally recognizes, Susan J. Rosowski asserts that the ending is "only a partial affirmation," that St. Peter experiences "renewal rather than growth," and that "Cather offers little hope that this pattern will be extended outward" ("The Pattern of Willa Cather's Novels," Western American Literature, XIV [1981], 262-63). Rosowski's analysis is similar to mine, yet I argue that there is substantially more than a "little hope" for St. Peter at the end of the novel; that "growth" is inevitable.
acknowledged. In order to resist and to transcend the degrading forces that surround him, he must acquire the “primitive” yet quintessentially human values symbolized in the Cliff City and exemplified by Augusta. These values include simplicity and sacrifice, moral strength and creative purpose; St. Peter must also cultivate what Father Duchene describes as a “reverence” for both human achievement and spiritual aspiration. For the professor, all of this is a lesson slowly and painfully acquired.

St. Peter’s religious understanding, therefore, provides a sense of human purpose which endures where family, career, and art fail. It involves an awareness of the essential nature and ultimate sources of one’s being. It is the reality principle that Tom discovered on the Blue Mesa, that Augusta embodies, and that St. Peter acquires after his near-death: “At least, he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude the Berengaria and the future” (p. 283). At this point, the end of the novel, St. Peter is well on his way to overcoming his malaise. He has acquired the courage to continue living, and he has gained the insight which will enable him again to view his life as potentially purposeful.

The Professor’s House, therefore, describes the crisis and malaise which beset St. Peter as he confronts a society that does not appreciate his ideals of art and intellect. The novel is a pessimistic, even tragic one in that St. Peter recognizes for the first time the ultimate futility of all human endeavor. Yet the final view that the book asserts is one of survival and hope, for he acquires an understanding of the primitive and sacred truths Outland discovered on the mesa as well as a measure of Augusta’s stoical endurance and sense of spiritual certainty. Moreover, I think, he recognizes more profoundly than ever before the crucial and sustaining function of art, thought, and spiritual values; he perceives that they comprise the only means of escaping the trivializing and dehumanizing effect of a superficial, materialistic, and avaricious society. His subsequent experience verifies the thesis of his history lecture: “Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had” (p. 69). This painfully acquired wisdom should motivate him to attempt again some “dazzling . . . beautiful . . . utterly impossible thing.” Through the “magical” alembic of desire and creation (p. 29) he may yet create a work, if not a life, with the aesthetic simplicity and enduring quality of the “turquoise set in dull silver.”

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