Understanding Society and Civilization and its Relative Values in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*

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After 20 years of publishing, Willa Cather's first Novel *Alexander's Bridge*, was admitted as most interesting novel by the critics. Cather preferred vigorous and bold realities to the romanticized version of life, depicted in the majority of novels written and read by women. Cather embraced the tenets of literary realism and effectively defined herself as a writer outside the feminine tradition. She usually expressed her belief that a novelist should write a true story of the people and was a far more modern writer than critics have traditionally viewed her. She published her most important works during the Movement in literary history, known as modernism. The Movement, which developed and reined in the period between the World Wars I and II was a reaction to and an expression of the social, political, cultural and technological changes. A Social realist, Cather tended to produce chronological narratives and worked within traditional forms.

The Professor's House is a novel about the disappointments of a compromised life, set in a world where compromise is unrecognizable to the majorities who have accepted crass materialism and empty conventions as the epitome of civilization. The resolution of the Professor's crisis lies partly in the solace St. Peter takes from the knowledge of the heroic achievement of the sort

embodied in the ancient cliff-dweller civilization had once existed. Her central characters are generally bold and imaginative men and women who strive hard to accomplish a dream. Through the eyes of her characters, the world is full of promise, and humans need only the courage of their convictions to make something of it.

The setting of the novel is a crucial element of Cather's vision. Like Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*, all of Cather's central characters feel a vital connection to the place Cather fills her novels with. The descriptive passages that present the beauty of the landscape recognize and help the readers by providing a sense of the relationship between humans and the universe. Cather's best fiction has a strength and individuality that promise her a continued place in American literary history. The *Professor's House* explores the conflict between individual sensibility and the demands of the conventional world. In *The Professor's House* Cather gives her full treatment, exposing the inevitable disappointments that result from compromised ideals. This novel proves her artistic genius that makes this exploration as moving and significant as Outland's New Mexico discoveries. By grafting Tom Outland's adventure onto the Professor's life, however, she manages to bring out the nature of civilization and its relative values of history, art, religion, science, technology and materialism in each civilization by portraying a sensitive and complex portrayal of the inner working of one man's heart and mind.

The first section of the novel, *The Professor's House* describes St. Peter's philosophy of life and scholarship, which is also accepted as Cather's. Civilization is at its worst when it becomes wrapped up in materialistic considerations. Exploring these themes and proving this thesis is the main business of the novel. This first section also paints a portrait of St. Peter's family life. His relationships with Lillian, his daughters, and his sons-in-law Louie and Scott are becoming strained as he retreats into himself, musing more and more on his dead protégé Outland.

The second section of the novel consists of the Professor's remembrance of Tom Outland's story. Outland was a brilliant scientist and amateur archaeologist who discovered the ruins of an ancient cliff-dwelling civilization on the Blue Mesa. Outland revives the Professor's flagging enthusiasm for his work while he is in the middle of writing his magnum opus, and he leaves Rosamund, his fiancé, the rights to his invention, the Outland vacuum, before he is killed in World War I.

The third section of the novel chronicles the Professor's slide into an indifference to life and acceptance of suicide. This shows that he has lost interest in life because he has completed the work of raising a family and completed his academic life's work; he has nothing left to accomplish and looks forward to a future marked by a slow purposeless and joyless decline to death.

Cather wrote that the main business of *The Professor's House* was to show the emptiness and futility of modern civilization when compared to the ancient civilizations like that of the Anasazi. Using the example of the cliff-dwellers' ruins, Cather attempted to prove her thesis that human civilization is at its best when it elevates art, history and religion above science, technology and materialism .

Throughout the novel, Cather's protagonists Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland exclaim over artistic displays of autumn foliage in drawing-rooms and ancient monuments of artistically stone rising in the depths of cliff cities in the Southwest. St. Peter also formalizes Cather's reverence for art during a lecture to his students at the University; according to his and Cather's philosophy, civilization is at its best when it reveres art, religion and history and at its worst when it admires material wealth and science.

Art and religion, St. Peter claims, are really the same; they both engage people's minds in more worthwhile ways than materialistic and technical concerns do. Art uplifts the human spirit, the Professor claims. Cather shows that scientific and technological pursuits and achievements – make life more comfortable without making it better.

Tom Outland, one of Cather's protagonists, a brilliant scientist, has a keen appreciation for art and history. Also, his invention, the Outland vacuum, has brought money to some of the novel's characters but has ultimately served to break up the St. Peter family. Science, Cather makes clear, does not often uplift the human spirit.

Cather makes clear that the cliff-dwellers, who lived in harmony with their natural surroundings, namely the caves and shelves of rock in the Blue Mesa, reached a high level of cultural achievement, and that their accommodation and appreciation of nature made this achievement possible. Religion has the capacity to encourage people to focus on the great, unsolvable mysteries of life rather than mundane details like money or creature comfort. Religion's power to elevate human intellectual activity is why it should be revered in modern civilization. Closely related to this point of view is Cather's embrace of Episcopalianism and

Catholicism; though she was not religious in terms of belief, she respected the " pomp and circumstance" that filled Catholic and Episcopal services as a natural outgrowth of other positive societal influences, namely art and history.

Historical study and appreciation elevate the mind, St. Peter states in his lecture, and this is widely accepted as Cather's assertion as well. Cather's heroes, St. Peter and Outland, are both historians. St. Peter is repeatedly shown to be more interested in his work, his pursuit of the study of history, than in his family or in the human race in general. Throughout the novel, Cather, St. Peter and Outland decry materialism; nearly every negative development in the novel can be traced back to the destructive influence of money. As has been noted, Cather's project in the novel was to show the tug–of –war occurring in human civilization between the old values of art, history and religion on the one hand and materialism, technology and scientific advancement on the other. Money, and its attendant religion, materialism were Cather's constant targets throughout the novel. Cather dramatically demonstrates that money, is responsible for most of the ills of the characters of *The Professor's House*.

The Professor's House (1925) is, appropriately, a transitional work, bridging the gap between the novels of the soil on which her reputation flourished and the historical novels on which her late career rests. It is also one of her best. The story of Professor Godfrey St. Peter, a sensitive and an intelligent man in the midst of a midlife crisis, explores the conflict between individual sensibility and the demands of the conventional world.

Cather makes the Professor's memory as a nature of civilization not only on the soil but also on his own idealistic youth based on his own disappointments. Perhaps Cather's first critics were unprepared for the new direction of the Professor's House, expecting another novel of the soil . Writing *The Professor's House* during the heyday of the period of American literary history known as modernism, Canby noted that experimentation was an expectation of literature. Not only does she attempt to inject musical form into the novel's structure and to adapt European forms to her American subject, but she also experiments with the linear structure of the two books devoted to the Professor's story. Thus, the plot of *The Professor's House* is a deliberate and even modern design, as complex as its subject, and its three-part-structure gradually unfolds its source and its resolution.

Cather assembles her cast of characters as individuals and in ever shifting pairs to reveal their complex personalities and relationships. From the Professor's nature, one can understand the competing needs and desires and the reasons for life compromises. When St. Peter accepts one of the first university positions offered to him, his purpose is clear. As a new scholar, in his mid-twenties and fresh from his doctoral studies, wants nothing more than to marry the beautiful American he had met while earning his degree in Paris.

Lillian as a wife became a primary source of intellectual companionship. St. Peter's affection towards his wife increases since her endowed nature responded strongly to life and art, giving her vehement likes and dislikes. Certainly, The Professor appreciates his wife for her "fastidiousness", and her instinctual understanding of the right and proper that has kept her family from being "drab" and "absurd". But Lillian's fastidiousness has begun to harden into an attitude that St. Peter finds distasteful. Regretfully aware that a rift has developed between them, Lillian transfers her attention to and seeks the approval of her sons-in-law. Professor found that Tom Outland walked into their lives. Despite his early death on Flanders fields during World War I, the aptly named Outland had led a remarkable life, including the daring but disheartening adventure that constitutes Book two of the novel. But everything about Tom's life beyond that adventure is equally remarkable.

Tom Outland also factors in the lives of the St. Peters' daughters. Rosamond, the elder, beautiful, worldly, and so like her mother, had been engaged to marry him and had inherited on his death the patent to the invention that would make her a wealthy woman. Kathleen, however, the younger, less certain of her worth, more sensitive than her sister, for whom her father has a special kind of affection and with whom she shares fond memories of our Tom, had secretly loved him, too.

Inseparable as girls, Rosamond and Kathleen had adored Outland and lived in his stories. But now, as adults, his memory is the source of friction between them. Kathleen has married Outland's best friend, Scott McGregor, a young journalist who among other things, contributes a daily "prose poem" to a newspaper syndicate but now that the thrill of first success has passed deeply loathes his profession, which he feels is beneath his talents.

Louis Marsellus, in contrast, Rosamond's gregarious and generous husband, believes that he is merely completing Outland's work. His foresight and initiative had been responsible for the development of the potential in the Outland vacuum. The novel's plot has been moving towards

the resolution of this conflict and therefore integral to the development of its major themes. Cather explores the pathos of all human endeavors, the gap between desire and achievement that constitutes human existence. The inspiration for St. Peter's life's work reveals the nature of civilization and its relative values.

The Professor's House ends on a somber note that underscores Cather's central theme. St. Peter does not triumph over his predicament any more since Tom Outland conquered his. Indeed, that is the meaning of Tom Outland's story, which parallels the Professor's in its downward arc: Buoyed by the thrill of a discovery that connects him to great human endeavor, Outland lives his own heroic adventure and wants only to share it with others. However, official bureaucracy, petty greed, and human misunderstanding stymie his efforts and diminish his achievement, leaving him sad and disillusioned to forge ahead into his future.

Cather's choice of point of view or the perspective from which the narrator tells the story, gives her novel a masculine – an identified stance. In narrating her story from the Professor's and Tom Outland's points of view, Cather lends these men her sympathies. Through their eyes, readers understand their motivation, experience their exhilaration and defeats, and gradually, like their creator, come to identify and empathize with them. Almost uniformly, the women in *The Professor's House* are defined and effectively confined by their domestic world. Daughters who claim adulthood by marriage and the establishment of their own homes, they devote virtually all their effort and energy to homemaking and to facilitating their husband's careers. They may be intelligent and well educated.

They may even possess, as Lillian St. Peter does, an intuitive understanding of life and art that gives them charm, wit, and taste and unerring ability to evaluate others. The domestic world that they create is an insidious trap that prevents men from fulfilling their different and, by implication, more worthy destinies. While feminist critics would argue that patriarchy, which imposes this domestic role on women, must bear primary responsibility for its shape and effects, Cather, who has supplied the evidence from which to develop such an interpretation, never explores it. Indeed, as her masculine–identified perspective makes clear, patriarchy had never been her subject. Indeed, in the end, what moves readers of *The Professor's House* is Cather's poignant dramatization of human limitation. Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland, had such

dreams, and they came so close to realizing them. Nature, Circumstance, and even conflicting human desires impinged on them, leading inevitably to disappointing compromises and tragic losses. By the end of *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland dies on Flanders fields, and Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter go on an exile to Elba.

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