12 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Professor's House (1925)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

"Being essentially an intuitive artist she is at some times markedly more successful than at others, and her new novel is not among her best. Its method is characteristically hers, for though the theme is fairly distinct it never degenerates into a thesis; her story of a scholar whose faith in life fails him when he sees how fortuitous wealth destroys the spiritual integrity of his family is never made, as most contemporary writers would have made it, 'an indictment of commercialism'; and, being always rather elegiac than argumentative or bitter in tone, its effects are purely artistic ones. Yet in spite of many fine touches it does not live up to the promise of the earlier pages. Fragmentary and inconclusive, it starts off in several directions but never quite arrives at any of the proposed destinations.

The initial mistake was, I think, the elaboration of the character whose story constitutes the second of the three parts into which the novel is divided. Miss Cather has wished to multiply the incidents which produce in the professor his dominant mood—the result of a conviction that while achievement is good its rewards, whether reaped by those to whom they are due or by others, are invariably evil. For this purpose she invents a young student who turns up at the university and carelessly presents the professor with some priceless Indian pottery which he had discovered in the West. Later he invents a vague but wonderful gas, rushes away to be killed in the war, and leaves it to the professor's bright son-in-law to commercialize the invention. In a fashion this young hero runs away with the story. He is glamorous, he has adventures, and he furnishes the reflection about which the whole book turns: 'Fellows like Outland don't carry much luggage, yet one of the things you know them by is their sumptuous generosity—and when they are gone, all you can say of them is that they departed leaving princely gifts.' Yet he has no business to dwarf as he does the professor, for he is not made one-tenth so interesting nor is he by any means so richly conceived. The professor's household was, I would be willing to wager, the observed or remembered situation with which the book started. It is the fact which appeared to the author with that aura of feeling of which I have spoken, and Outland is…merely a hero, almost an abstraction; he has attributes but he has no character; and he is only very superficially convincing. Put beside Outland even the casually indicated Marcellus, the active son-in-law, and the former pales to a shadow.

In *The Professor's House* there is much that is very beautiful—passages which only Miss Cather could have written. Taken as a whole, however, the book is a disappointment to those who know how good her best work can be."

Joseph Wood Krutch
Review of *The Professor's House*
Nation (23 September 1925)

"A further explanation of her attitude toward the modern world is contained in *The Professor's House* (1925), in the figure and the attitude of Professor St. Peter. The professor's new house is crowded with all of the furniture of modern life that she claims must be thrown out—'stuffy with new things,' as she tells us in her preface to the novel: 'American properties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies—until one got rather stifled.' In the old house, from which the professor will not be moved, he recalls the story of a favorite student, Tom Outland, whose invention, incidentally, has been exploited by the modern spirit of the professor's in-laws. 'Tom Outland's Story' is the story of the return to a primitive world, purified of all of the physical and moral clutter of the modern. The ancient cliff city on the solid, hard mesa offers a security and a refuge for the professor which his author was soon thereafter to embrace."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 65

“*The Professor’s House* is Willa Cather’s subtlest and richest—though not her greatest—book, a book full of nourishing food for the mind and spirit of a disillusioned, if not despairing, maturity. Its spirit is kept free of bitterness, for the professor drops his burden at last after he has been nearly asphyxiated in his old study; he knows not ‘that life is possible, may even be pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs’; he faces the future with fortitude. But the failure of the life he lives—and of the age he lives in—to nourish his spirit is nearly complete.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 328-29

“Godfrey St. Peter, professor at a Midwestern university, on reaching middle age completes his great work on the Spanish adventurers in America. He is now well-to-do, but does not desire material comfort, and, when he and his pleasure-loving wife Lillian move to a beautiful new home, he keeps the homely old house whose garret study he has long shared as a workroom with the German seamstress Augusta. His daughters have grown away from him since their marriages, Rosamond to Louis Marcellus, a lavish enterprising Jew, and Kathleen to Scott McGregor, a journalist who suppresses his artistic leanings to write ‘glad’ pieces for a living. Marcellus is rich, having marketed a gas patent bequeathed to his wife by her former fiancé, Tom Outland, the professor’s favorite student, who died in World War I. The story of Outland’s exploration, with his companion Roddy Blake, of an ancient New Mexican cliff city, is recalled by the professor. Marcelus’s patronizing attitude toward the dead Outland alienates the professor, but his generosity and love of beauty strike a sympathetic chord in Lillian, who tours Europe with him and Rosamond. During a lonely summer, the professor loses interest in life, and when gas from a faulty stove fills his study one night, he is about to let it suffocate him when he is saved by Augusta. This crisis, and his appreciation of the quiet patience of the old seamstress, reconcile him to continued existence, which he faces with a certain apathy but ‘at least…the ground under his feet’.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 609

“The significance of this new phase in Willa Cather’s work is best seen in *The Professor’s House*, which has been the most persistently underrated of her novels. Actually it is one of those imperfect and ambitious works whose very imperfections illuminate the quality of an imagination. The story of Godfrey St. Peter is at once the barest and 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. The violence with which she broke the book in half to tell the long and discursive narrative of Tom Outland’s boyhood in the Southwest was a technical mistake that has damned the book, but the work as a whole is the most brilliant statement of her endeavor as an artist. For St. Peter is the archetype of all her characters and the embodiment of her own beliefs. He is not merely the scholar as artist, the son of pioneer parents who has carried the pioneer passion into the world of art and thought; he is what Willa Cather herself has always been or hoped to be—a pioneer in mind, a Catholic by instinct, French by inclination, a spiritual aristocrat with democratic manners.

The tragedy of St. Peter, though it seems nothing more than a domestic tragedy, is thus the most signal and illuminating of all Willa Cather’s tragedies. The enemy she saw in Ivy Peters—the new trading, grasping class—has here stolen into St. Peter’s home; it is reflected in the vulgar ambition of his wife and eldest daughter, the lucrative commercial use his son-in-law has made of the invention Tom Outland had developed in scholarly research, the genteel but acquisitive people around him. St. Peter’s own passion, so subtle a pioneer passion, had been for the life of the mind. In the long and exhaustive research for his great history, in the writing of it in the attic of his old house, he had known something of the physical exaltation that had gone into the exploration he described. As a young man in France, studying for his doctorate, he had looked up from a skiff in the Mediterranean and seen the design of his lifework reflected in the ranges of the Sierra Nevada, ‘unfolded in the air above him.’ Now, after twenty years, that history was finished; the money he had won for it had gone into the making of a new and pretentious house. The great creative phase of his life was over. To hold onto the last symbol of his endeavor, St. Peter determined to retain his old house against the shocked protests of his family. It was a pathetic symbol, but he needed some last refuge in a world wearing him out by slow attrition.

In this light the long middle section of the novel, describing Tom Outland's boyhood in the desert, is not a curious interlude in the novel; it becomes the parable of St. Peter's own longing for that remote world of the Southwest which he had described so triumphantly in his book. Willa Cather, too, was moving toward the South, as all her books do: always toward the more primitive in nature and the more traditional in belief. Tom Outland's desert life was thus the ultimate symbol of a forgotten freedom and harmony that could be realized only by a frank and even romantic submission to the past, to the Catholic order and doctrine, and the deserts of California and New Mexico in which the two priests of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* lived with such quiet and radiant perfection. Her characters no longer had to submit to failure; they lived in a charming and almost antediluvian world of their own. They had withdrawn, as Willa Cather now withdrew; and if her world became increasingly recollective and abstract, it was because she had fought a losing battle that no one of her spirit could hope to win."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Doubleday Anchor 1942,1956) 188-89

"*The Professor's House* (1925) marks another temporary abandonment of the frontier setting. The middle-aged Godfrey St. Peter, historian at a midwestern university, is completely devoted to his studies in the Spanish period in American history; he is the epitome of the scholar and the introvert. When his wife Lillian demands a larger and more modern house, he insists on continuing to study in the attic of the old house, where he feels comfortable with his books and mementos. His daughters have married and gone away, and he finds little satisfaction in family life.

As the story unfolds the reader learns the great event in his life: his encounter with Tom Outland, the one fine mind among all the students he has taught, who was killed in the First World War. A long flashback in Book Two relates Outland's life: as a cowhand in New Mexico he had encountered, with his companion Roddy Blake, an untouched cliff village inhabited by Indians in prehistoric times; the discovery fired his imagination and eventually led him to seek an education. Thus he came under the influence of St. Peter. Before he was killed Outland, by this time a brilliant physicist, had invented a gas device which had 'revolutionized aviation.' The patent for this invention came into the hands of his fiancee, St. Peter's daughter Rosamond; and when Rosamond marries the pushing and aggressive Louie Marsellus her husband becomes rich on the patent.

All this depresses the Professor, and when a gas jet is accidentally opened in his room he can see no reason to shut it off; he narrowly escapes death and is rescued only through the loyalty of an old German seamstress, Augusta, who shares the room with him. This crisis, and his gratitude for the loyalty and affection of the old seamstress, reconcile him to continued existence, and he faces his old age with a kind of optimistic stoicism."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 198

"Houses are in this novel made the symbol of varying attitudes toward life; a principal episode is concerned with Professor St. Peter's doubts when his wife wants him to move to a new and supposedly better house. The Southwest, in which Miss Cather had become increasingly interested, contributes numerous incidents and motifs, and also the cliff-dwellers' homes which her characters find beautiful and deeply significant. St. Peter's is a troubled mentality. He comes to a crisis at the age of fifty-two, 'exactly the age the author reached in the year of the novel's appearance,' as Leon Edel recalls in his *Willa Cather* (1953). It is a sad, pessimistic, despairing book, a reflection of Miss Cather's own mood at the time. It records four types of corruption, failure, and betrayal: St. Peter as the victim of his wife's ambition and his daughter's desire for social position; his own realization that the university at which he teaches has lost its integrity; Tom Outland's inability to interest government archaeologists in his discovery of an ancient mesa city; the commercialization of the airplane invention that Outland had made."

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 921

"An older American whose memory can go back to the 1920's and 1930's might remember her as the publicity-shy but generally acknowledged leading novelist of the time…an impression formed from such ephemeral tokens of immortality as her picture on the cover of *Time* in 1931 or her 'Profile' by Louise Bogan in the *New Yorker.* But the American who can remember the significant Willa Cather behind the 1920's celebrity or the embalmed textbook figure is rapidly disappearing….

The Professor's House (1925), Willa Cather's only work which contains a major, full-scale portrait of a Jew…is an interesting, vigorous, thought-provoking book, perhaps Willa Cather's most interesting, and one of the significant American novels of the twentieth century. The Jew in the book, Louie Marcellus, does not appear to be a stereotype….she said in an interview that *The Professor's House* was the only book she had ever written in which she had tried to be 'ironic.' The hidden irony of the title—the 'house' is, among other things, the professor's grave—has been beautifully explained by the late E.K. Brown; but no one has ever explained the irony of the epigraph, which unlocks the doors to the lower story. It functions a little like the epigraphs T. S. Eliot was coming out with at about that time, in 'The Waste Land,' for instance… Miss Cather's epigraph is a quotation from the Jew, Marcellus: 'A turquoise set in silver wasn't it?…Yes, a turquoise set in dull silver.'

On the more accessible level, the 'turquoise set in dull silver' is a piece of jewelry, and the more accessible irony is that Marcellus, who refers to it, has no understanding whatever of its history, value, or beauty, nor do any of the people he is talking to, least of all his wife…. The basic irony, then, as those familiar with the values running all through Willa Cather's fiction will recognize, is that the half-forgotten Indian bracelet represents true beauty, while the overvalued gold necklace represents the false. The deeper ironic levels can be seen clearly only in the light of the overall structure of the novel. The structure is of a radical, experimental sort, in its own way…like what some of Willa Cather's younger contemporaries—James Joyce, Virginia Woolf—had been up to.

It consists of three parts, apparently quite unrelated [?], which compose into a surprising significance once you see the angle and distance from which you are supposed to view them. Two of these parts, Book I and Book III, deal with a single set of people, the Professor's family and colleagues, and with their depressing relationships—their petty jealousies, bickering, back-biting, greed. They are set in the present (after 1922, the year in which Willa claimed the world broke in two), in a small, dull Midwestern college town, and their general flavor, pace, and texture suggest what is small, joyless, and commonplace. Book II is the sharpest contrast. Almost devoid of human figures and relationships, it is dominated by one character, Outland, and one relationship, Outland's friendship with Rodney Blake, a relationship opposite from those in the other books, and based like all Miss Cather's ideal relationships on disinterested friendship rather than the ties of sex, marriage, and family. Instead of telling of selfish ambition, it deals with the heroic quest of recovering a vanished civilization. Rather than being in the kind of dull Midwestern town excoriated so often in the fiction of the twenties, it is set on a mesa in the Southwest, a part of the country Miss Cather used in *The Song of the Lark* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as her symbol of ideal natural beauty.

The point is that Book II is the 'turquoise' and Books I and III are the 'dull silver.' The whole novel, in other words, is constructed like the Indian bracelet. It is not hard to see that Willa Cather wants to draw an ironic contrast not only between two pieces of jewelry but between two civilizations, between two epochs, and between the two men, Marcellus and Outland, who symbolize these differences…. Willa also contrasts the men as symbols of time past and time present. Her technique and situation are a little reminiscent of Joyce's in his story 'The Dead'… Like Robert Frost and Sherwood Anderson, she thought the threat to human values was posed by the machine, mass-production, and the substitution of the yardstick for the heart. As she saw it, the engineer was the new man. He and his machinery were pulling us relentlessly away from the past and into the future. And so she merged Jew and engineer in one….

The majority of the novel is seen through the mind of the Professor. Like Miss Cather and Outland, he came West with his parents when he was a child, and he, too, symbolizes the American tradition. Tom is the son the Professor would have liked to have; Marcellus is the son he actually gets. If the Professor can be taken as a symbol of America, then Willa's 'message' is simply that America is falling into the hands of the Jews. This is what she means by having the Professor's daughter and Outland's discovery fall into the hands of Marcellus. They, the Jews, are the unworthy inheritors of that tradition and wealth which they had no share in making but which, through some unaccountable flaw in the scheme of things, they have taken over, very much as the Snopes in Faulkner's Yoknapatapha novels take over the glories and traditions of the old South….

The whole experience of getting the wealth and fame and then having them turn sour provided [Cather] with the major theme of *The Professor's House,* accounting for much of the contrast between Outland (effort) and Marcellus (reward), and for the 'tragedy' of the Professor, whose life is split into two opposing parts, the glorious first phase in which he struggled and created, and the unworthy phase in which he wins prize money, success, and the luxury of an expensive, modern house. And it accounts, too, for an implied criticism of America, whose history parallels that of the Professor, consisting of a noble past and an ignoble present cheapened by material things."

James Schroeter
"Willa Cather and *The Professor's House*"
Yale Review LIV.4
(Summer 1963)

"*The Professor's House* (1925) is the novel some readers (this writer included) consider her masterpiece. It's a book about despair and aging, the misery of a marriage in which all passion is spent, the trials of family life, the ugly face of ambition, and the deep sadness of a love that has passed away without ever being realized…. Cather's hatred of modern science and what it had brought upon the world (especially the lethal usages of war) is reflected in Godfrey St. Peter's question when he asks what science has ever done for man except to make him more comfortable. She despised the noise, gracelessness, and tumult of the modern world, disliked automobiles (but used them when necessary), and hated the rate at which things were changing. She regretted the disappearance from her world of resoluteness, fidelity to ideals, persistence, strength, gallantry, manners, religious devotion, civility."

Doris Grumbach
Foreword, *O Pioneers!*
(Houghton 1988) xxvii-xxviii

"Much critical attention has been directed toward both structure and form in *The Professor's House.* Early critics questioned the effect of the book's tripartite structure, but modern Cather criticism—beginning in 1965 with James Schroeter's structural analogy of 'Tom Outland's Story' as the turquoise' encased in the 'dull silver' frame of the Professor's story—has helped us to see that Cather's experimental form is not only balanced but also purposeful. Based on spatial relationships as much as temporal ones, the structure of *The Professor's House* is avant-garde even today; based on archetypal shapes and on Platonic idealism…. And it is the structure to which she refers when she writes that, as in Dutch genre paintings, she wanted to open within her novel 'the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa…. The image of the open window extends throughout *The Professor's House,* providing symbolic import and contributing to the spatial structure of the work.

The blank wall space of St. Peter's attic study is interrupted by 'a single square window, swinging outward'… In the middle section of the novel the window completely disappears; the reader is outside the window in both space and time, beyond the confining frame of the realistic present and in the past—both the recent past of Tom Outland's discovery and the ancient past of the cliff dwellers' civilization itself—that juxtaposes idealistic aspirations with human betrayals…the organic form of Cliff City also suggests the novel's structure, for the round tower is the structural center of the ancient city, just as 'Tom Outland's Story' is the structural center of the novel…. Suspended between the tall round tower and the deep canyon Tom inhabits spatially an 'ideal' plane of vision that is almost Platonic, the artistic and spiritual ideal rising above him and psychological reality yawning below him… The round shape of the tower is also symbolically significant, for circular shapes, according to Aniela Jaffe, symbolize 'the totality of the psyche in all its aspects, including the relationship between man and the whole of nature.' The round shape of the ancient tower and also the round, natural shapes of the water jars and bowls in Cliff City stand in stark contrast to the square shape of St. Peter's isolated attic room and his French garden just as, according to Pat Yongue, Augusta's 'round' dress patterns contrast with the Professor's 'square' manuscripts….

I have been unable to locate a direct connection between Cather's reading and Plato' however, not only her broad classical education but also the influence of Emerson on her work…suggests an indirect link back to Platonic ideas. Even without such a link, however, Plato and Cather clearly use parallel images. It will be remembered that Plato symbolized his theory of ideal forms with the images of the sun, the cave, and the divided line…. In *The Professor's House,* both Tom and St. Peter encounter cave structures. In fact, the 'long, low, twilit' structure that Tom discovers at the back of the cavern of the cliff dwellers incorporates Platonic imagery… But the message that Outland brings to St. Peter is insufficient to draw him out of the cave of himself, the womblike attic study identified by Leon Edel as 'A Cave of One's Own.' In fact, St. Peter identifies with Euripides, who as an old man 'went and lived in a cave by the sea' because 'houses had become insupportable to him'…

Like the ladder that connects different spatial levels of Cliff City, Augusta helps St. Peter to make human connections across his empty mental spaces. Likewise, Augusta and her forms reach across the structural and spatial gap of 'Tom Outland's Story' to connect 'The Professor' to 'The Family' and to help him bridge mentally the space of the Atlantic and face with fortitude the return of his family."

Ann Moseley
"Spatial Structures and Forms in *The Professor's House*"
Cather Studies 3
(U Nebraska 1996) 197-99, 202-03, 204-06, 208

"The case for Cather as a crypto-modernist, a modernist in nineteenth-century clothing, seems rather persuasive. And Cather's tendencies toward modernism are nowhere clearer than in *The Professor's House,* a novel built upon dramatic, formal, and imagistic juxtapositions—of contemporary Midwestern town and ancient cliff-dwelling culture, of third- and first-person narrative, of…the dull silver and turquoise of Rosamond Marsellus's bracelet. Though Cather is elsewhere careful to distance herself from art that too loudly proclaims a break with the old, her comments on the relation of *The Professor's House* to visual art and sonata form are unmistakable evidence of her own desire to make it new….

More than a mere contrast between noble past and degraded present, the relation between Cliff City and Hamilton is of far greater emotive power, as each embodies a conflict between the competing obligations of private life and communal life, the double life that Cather describes in her essay 'Katherine Mansfield'… Cather establishes the relation between Cliff City and Hamilton not only in theme but in abundant parallels of detail that mark specific 'distant and correct' correspondences…. Their multiplicity and resonance suggest that in ways both large and small *The Professor's House* is indeed an image in the form of a novel, a conjunction of two realities with surprising correspondences."

Michael Leddy
"'Distant and Correct': The Double Life and *The Professor's House*"
Cather Studies 3
(U Nebraska 1996) 182-84

"*The Professor's House,* her most profound book, has never received the praise it deserves, partly, I think, because it is such a terrifying piece of work—one that, as Doris Grumbach has written, 'impresses the mature reader as dangerously threatening to his own self-possession.'… The *New York Times,* in its review of *The Professor's House,* found Cather 'out of her philosophical depth' in writing about death. In the *San Francisco Examiner* Tom Outland, the younger, second hero of *The Professor's House*—the boy who discovers the ancient city—was described as 'a spinster school teacher's dream of a Zane Grey cowboy.'… Her prose did not have the formal intricacies that were the New Critics' meat. When she did get experimental, as in *The Professor's House,* where Tom Outland's story is driven like a wedge into the center of the professor's, the New Critics tended to reproach her for deviating from what they had decided was her simplicity. Mostly, however, they stayed away from her—she was unfashionable in any case—and those people who wrote about her focused not on her style but on her content, her values, which they judged to be transcendent, spiritual, and good….

That sky is reprised at a crucial moment in *The Professor's House.* Tom Outland, like Jim [Burden], has lost everything: his precious Anasazi relics, his friendship with Roddy Blake. He returns alone to the Cliff City, and as he arrives the sun sets. The sky turns silvery blue, 'and presently the stars shivered into it, like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water.' No color, no heat—only light. And this establishes the key for Tom's last summer on the mesa. Plundered and abandoned, the Cliff City now seems to him more beautiful than he had ever known it. Before, he realizes, he had approached it with 'motives') profit from the relics). 'Now they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed… I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything.' If there is religion here, it doesn't sound exactly Christian. (Tom spends the summer reading Vergil). It is the contemplation of pure idea, clearness in clearness, like the stars. It is Platonism, or Platonism is the word that comes closest to it. Like a Platonist, Cather continually subordinates the emotion to the idea…. The Nebraska plain turned Cather into a Platonist…

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 21-22, 32-33, 41-42, 54, 87

Michael Hollister (2015)