

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

The Professor's House (1925)



Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

INTRODUCTION

St. Peter is the gatekeeper of Heaven. Remarkably, critics overlook this. The name *God-frey* St. Peter initiates a religious allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne and T. S. Eliot, using the “mythic method” advocated by Eliot and the irony also characteristic of Modernists: In her case there are two prominent myths: (1) the American myth of the Garden of the West and (2) the Christian myth of salvation. Both these myths are treated ironically in what Cather called her only “ironic” novel: (1) The American West, celebrated in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), turned out far from fulfilling its utopian promise to become a New Eden or heaven on earth. In fact it degenerated, as Cather had dramatized in *A Lost Lady* (1923); (2) St. Peter spiritually progresses *backwards* in time and is redeemed by an integration of the values symbolized by the culture and the tower of the ancient Cliff City in the Blue Mesa. Tom Outland becomes his transcendent Christ-evoking figure and Augusta his salvation in this world.

Cather was taken from a pastoral farm to harsh frontier Nebraska at age 9. St. Peter was “dragged” from a pastoral farm to the wheatlands of Kansas at age 8. Eventually both she and he were transformed by visiting the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde in the Southwest. Both are idealists in a decadent society. Both feel that “A work-room should be like an old shoe; no matter how shabby, it’s better than a new one.” Cather’s dislike of this novel—ironically her greatest—may be due to her uncharacteristic exposure of herself in personifying some of her own masculine traits in the Professor and some of her own female traits in the seamstress Augusta. The psychological relationship of St. Peter to Augusta is symbolized by the contents of the box-couch in his attic study where he lies down to rest and dream, where his manuscripts and her patterns “interpenetrated.”

The Family

I

The Professor’s comfortable old house is “the colour of ashes,” evoking Eliot’s waste land with irony, since he prefers it to the new house designed by his wife Lillian. It is Autumn, the season of natural death,

and the soul of *God-frey* is dying. He has “carpentered” in the past but no longer has time to fix anything. By now he is God-free, a secular Professor complicit in the decline of religion: “His wicked-looking eyebrows made his students call him Mephistopheles.” Since his marriage in Paris he has been increasingly alienated from his natural self in a dispiriting process of adaptation to his family and a materialistic society. Ironically, he physically resembles one of the Spanish conquistadors he has written his books about, while becoming a weakling in his own household.

Allegorically, St. Peter is more than American, he is international: “Canadian French on one side, and American farmers on the other.” He was educated in France and looks like a Spaniard. He travels a lot and has a “homesickness for other lands.” Cather refers frequently to Paris, where he married Lillian, as a symbol of high culture at a time when Modernist literary achievement was peaking there. As a professor of the most advanced knowledge and ideals of western civilization, St. Peter is potentially the gatekeeper to a spiritual heaven: “That part of his head was high.”

The Professor rents his old house from a man named Applehoff and enjoys studying in the garden, as in eating apples of knowledge. There to some degree his values of head and heart synthesize. However, his heart is not his own. Applehoff is a German, a man of the head. St. Peter turns his grounds into a French garden, walled in like his heart, implying a marital loyalty not often observed in the French. “And it was there he and Tom Outland used to sit and talk half through the warm, soft nights.” Ironically the student becomes the inspirational guide to the Professor in the “outland” of the spirit beyond society, his exemplar of idealism, like a scholarly Natty Bumppo—especially as in *The Prairie* (1827) by Cooper. Like a son of *God-frey*, Tom becomes a Christ-evoking figure. St. Peter progressed toward salvation by taking Outland inland—into his heart and soul—but in the end he is saved by Augusta.

Outland, embodying his ideals, is dead now—largely forgotten, his memory desecrated. Professor St. Peter has also lost the brave spirit of the conquistadores and retreated from life into his attic study, as into a cave or a womb. It is revealing that in this house symbol of St. Peter’s psyche, there is no basement to represent the unconscious—as there is in, say, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Hawthorne uses a cave, as Cather does at the Cliff City. The psyche of the Professor, or at least its dominant forces, are personified in (1) Godfrey the scholar, a mind elevated by ideals but compromised so much by social and marital adaptation that he has lost touch with his natural self, his unconscious, his soul, his religion and all that is embodied in (2) the seamstress Augusta. Though they share a work space, they are opposites in most other ways. Augusta’s social subordination is ironic, like that of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* and of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, because she is superior in character. The “interpenetration” of their works in the box-couch implies a synthesis of opposites in the creative process, as Virginia Woolf describes. The synthesis of opposites is also characteristic of literature expressing the transcendent mode of consciousness, such as Tom Outland experiences on the Blue Mesa.

Traditionally in popular culture a seamstress represented all poor working class women, as Priscilla does in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Hawthorne. Unlike the weakened Priscilla, the seamstress Augusta is strong and powerful in spirit—a German like Appelhoff. “There is no light French touch about Augusta,” in contrast to his wife Lily, whose name is a symbol of France. As a Realist, Cather makes her seamstress a convincing individual as well as a figure in an allegory—a “reliable, methodical spinster.” Augusta succeeds Alexandra and Antonia in the line of Cather’s strong heroic women, except that she is more common, humble and lives in the Midwest, the center of the country, representing “humanity.” Cather affirms that humanity will prevail in the end by implicitly contrasting Augusta to the conqueror Augustus Caesar, a variation on the biblical affirmation that the meek shall inherit the earth. St. Peter’s soul mate is not the artificial Lily but, ironically, the natural seamstress, who saves his life both literally and spiritually, becoming the most august person in their households, old and new.

St. Peter grows so attached to the “forms” Augusta uses to make dresses he cannot part with them and cannot write without them. The quotation marks give the word “forms” an emphasis that transcends the text, calling attention to the concept of form in art—as in dressmaking or writing—and in philosophy. The Professor associates Augusta’s forms with his daughters when they were young, when he idealized them. He calls them “my women.” But the Victorian tradition of idealizing women has past. And he has “disappointments” in how his daughters, and his wife, have deviated so far from his idealizations of them—

especially Rosamond. Augusta calls the form in “the darkest corner of the room,” in an elevated position, “the bust.” Cather implies that the dark Rosamond is a “bust” in a moral sense, drawing upon the traditional connotations of the Dark Lady as opposed to the Fair. Victorian connotations no longer apply. Lily the Fair Lady raised Dark Ladies even more spoiled than herself.

Cather calls the forms “archaic” and uses them to establish the idealism of the Professor, Outland and herself. The “forms” refer to Platonic ideas or archetypal images. Like Outland, Cather “never handled things that were not the symbols of ideas.” In this, like Frost and Hemingway, she is a Modernist in the mode of *holistic realism*. Platonism informed Christianity and Augusta is a “very devout” Catholic. In contrast, the Professor’s father was a “weaned-away” Catholic. St. Peter has been dissociated still further from his Faith by his secular education at the same time that his marriage and career dissociated him from his natural self. Augusta acts as his conscience and reminds him of “All Souls’ Day”: “You’ll never convert me back to the religion of my fathers now,” he tells her, if you’re going to sew in the new house and I’m going to work here.” By now his only remaining contact with his natural self is “far away”—the lake he can see from his “sole” window—the “inland sea of his childhood.” Inland as distinct from Outland. He can sail and swim in the lake, but the transcendence of Outland is an ideal beyond his current vision and his reach until he experiences a spiritual death and rebirth thanks to Augusta.

II

Mrs. Lillian St. Peter is a conventional Fair Lady—“very fair, pink and gold.” The higher she rises socially, the more intolerant, selfish and materialistic she has become. Likewise her dark daughter Rosamond, a striking brunette with lips like roses. She and her daughter, a fair Lily and a dark Rose, are the most beautiful and the least attractive members of the family, contradicting appearances. Tom Outland was in love with Rosamond before she got spoiled. The historical turning point was Tom (idealism) getting killed in the First World War, leaving Rosamond the patent on his invention that gets marketed by Louie Marcellus, making she and Louie the unworthy beneficiaries of his sacrifices—which is comparable to the common view by the 21st century that those who won World War II were “the greatest generation” and that succeeding generations declined into the cynical selfishness of Postmodernism.

Marcellus is Jewish but he has a name that sounds Roman, suggesting a parallel between America and the rise of the Roman Empire. In an article in the *Yale Review* (1965) that accuses 16 gentile writers of anti-Semitism, the critic James Schroeter argues that Cather is anti-Semitic in her portrayal of Marcellus. He identifies himself as a Marxist when he calls Randolph Bourne “America’s best critic.” Schroeter admits that Marcellus “does not appear to be a stereotype.... He is rather handsome and appeals to women. He is not even especially acquisitive or vulgar, at least not on the surface. On the contrary, he is described as ‘generous to a fault,’ and is constantly giving away expensive presents.” Schroeter further admits that “there is no other example in her novels of a major anti-Semitic strain. When one takes the balanced view, one sees that anti-Semitism, for the most part, is really a rather unimportant aspect of Willa Cather’s fiction, just as it was unimportant in her personal life.... Her other portraits of Jews, which have mainly a cultural basis, are the product of the general way of looking at things of the America of her day...[and] “it would be possible to find favorable passages about the Jews to match the disturbing passages”.’ Schroeter does not mention that after 1921 Cather’s publisher was Jewish—her good friend Alfred Knopf. The critic goes so far as to claim that it was anti-Semitic of Cather to dedicate her novel to a Jew by saying, “For Jan, because he likes narrative.” Schroeter “suspects” that there is a “nasty” private joke in this statement because, he claims, the novel is “anti-narrative.”

Schroeter attributes “the vigor of Miss Cather’s hatred” of Jews to the fact (1) that a Jew—Jan Hambourg—had won the heart and married the love of her life, Isabelle McClung in 1916; and (2) that Jewish critics had attacked the work of her friend Sarah Orne Jewett and were also now “publicly sticking barbs into Miss Cather’s work.” Rather than see Cather’s balanced portrayal of Louie Marcellus as a remarkable exhibition of objectivity and transcendence of spite, Schroeter sees nasty anti-Semitism. His primary grievance against Cather, however, is not that she degraded Jewish characters, but that (1) she did not write enough about Jews; and (2) that she blames the evils of modern civilization exclusively on Jews. He complains that *The Professor’s House* is “Willa Cather’s only work which contains a major, full-scale

portrait of a Jew.” Only one. And he protests that while she wrote about other immigrant groups, she did not write about Russian and Polish Jews. By writing only about the immigrant groups who were the actual pioneers on the prairies, Cather formed the equivalent of a “terribly exclusive” club that discriminated against Jews. Furthermore, “The struggle and triumph of the Swedes and Bohemians, was played out in a still more dramatic way by the Eastern European Jews, who often struggled against fiercer odds and won out to a more striking success.” That is, Jews are more heroic and successful than gentiles. Cather should have grown up in New York and written about heroic Jews or else she should have celebrated imaginary Jewish pioneers crossing the plains and establishing a kosher kibbutz in Kansas.

According to Schroeter, the fact that Marcellus profits from Outland’s invention conveys the “message” that Jews are taking over America. According to him, gentile writers should (1) always include more than one “major, full-scale portrait of a Jew” in their writing; (2) should depict Jews as superior to gentiles; (3) should never attribute egotism, pushiness, or greed to Jewish characters; and (4) should not depict Jews as successful in business or as taking over anything. This is an example of early Political Correctness, before the Feminists took over. In fact, Cather depicts the gentile women as “worse than Louie,” who is consistently generous, warm, and likeable. Lillian and Rosamond are disgusting. They are the ones who shop “like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces.” And the first name of St. Peter, who is also compared to Mephistopheles, is actually Napoleon.

The tone of irony is sustained when the intolerant Lillian accuses St. Peter of becoming more intolerant. The name St. Peter generates many such ironies throughout the novel that have gone undetected by critics like Schroeter whose vision is limited by prejudice. Cather also manages to render characters both as social types and as complex individuals in the Realist tradition of Henry James and Edith Wharton, with their sense of irony, as in showing that none of the upwardly mobile educated women in the novel have half the wisdom of Augusta, their seamstress.

III

St. Peter laments that Louie and Rosamond have named their over-furnished mansion Outland, calling it “brazen impudence.... They’ve got everything he ought to have had.” Cather contrasts prose styles as well as life styles when she has St. Peter remark of Marcellus, “One likes the florid style, or one doesn’t.” Mark Twain makes a similar contrast between the romantic style of Tom Sawyer and the plain style of Huck Finn. The Imagists in poetry and Hemingway in prose likewise promoted simplicity. Cather associates a florid style with bad taste, artifice, pretense, and self-indulgence—evidence of crass materialism. Arguing against the “over-furnished” novel, she said that any form of extravagance is apt to become “slightly vulgar.” St. Peter wrote his masterpieces in a plain style in a plain old house. By the end of the novel, in his soul he has moved higher up--into a cliff house as plain as can be.

When Lillian complains to him that he does not praise her enough, he explains traditional male reticence: “It’s a nice idea, reserve about one’s deepest feelings: keeps them fresh.” Cather is masculine in her reserve about deep feelings, inclined to evoke rather than state them, as Eliot does by finding an “objective correlative.” Hemingway had not yet become famous for his method—the iceberg principle—and Cather was already promoting the same aesthetics in other words.

St. Peter encounters the early trend toward what would later be called Postmodernism in the university where he teaches history according to the traditional standards of objective scholarship. His rival, the pink-cheeked Professor Langtry, is called Lily--like his own wife!--reinforcing the sense that Lillian is competing against him for control in their marriage. Lily Langtry was the name of a popular entertainer at that time. In ironic contrast, the effeminate Professor Langtry tries to be entertaining but is unpopular. He is “very English,” even a Tory, making his decaying standards symptomatic of the decadent and shrinking British Empire. St. Peter is a Modernist, his rival Langtry a Postmodernist. Here in 1925, Cather identifies Postmodernism as a foreign import and attributes the decay of standards to feminization by lilies like Langtry and Lillian. As was later to happen on a national scale, academic standards declined as grades got inflated. St. Peter complains that *The Scarlet Letter* and *Tom Sawyer* were being used to satisfy loose requirements, whereas by the 1990s higher education had become so decadent that American literature and history were often no longer even requirements. Studies such as *Academically Adrift* (2011) revealed that

most students were no longer learning much of anything. “Langtry had become, in a curious way, an instructor in manners”—later called Political Correctness.

IV

The younger professors who lowered standards, then and later, “had a sharp eye to their own interests.” The integrity of St. Peter is proven when he refuses to accept any money from the invention of Tom Outland, against the urgings of Rosamond, who takes after her mother. His other daughter Kathleen takes after him. Kathleen is more independent than Rosamond yet “she had always seemed to need his protection more than Rosamond.” Ironically, the traditional St. Peter feels that Kathleen is “too plucky”—*too* independent: “He would always call to her and catch up with her, and make her take his arm and be docile.” St. Peter makes the same complaint about Kathleen that his wife makes about him. Kathleen is a talented artist, but limited, realizing that she “can’t really do anything but Papa.”

With respect to women, St. Peter is *too* traditional. Yet Cather seems to share his view that the egos of women were inflating like the economy: “Nowadays the girls in my classes who have a spark of aptitude for anything seem to think themselves remarkable.” At least Kathleen knows her limitations. St. Peter tells Lillian that Rosamond is just like her, but more pampered and spoiled. The social trends toward ever more narcissism and greed contribute to his pessimism. Due largely to Rosy, his view of the future is not rosy. Despite all his success with his books, and despite all his years of teaching, the Professor was not able to pass along his values to his own daughters.

V

Professor St. Peter expresses skepticism to a student that science has contributed much to human development: “It has given us a lot of ingenious toys; they take our attention away from the real problems, of course, and since the problems are insoluble, I suppose we ought to be grateful for distraction.” Science has increasingly eroded spiritual life, secularized society, diminished morality, and replaced God with bureaucratic government. Science led to Postmodernism. As St. Peter says, “It’s the laboratory, not the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.... I don’t think you help people by making their conduct of no importance—you impoverish them.”

VI

Cather expresses her aspiration as an artist when by selection and design she brings Nature “into the house.” The Professor appreciates the beauty of Autumn flowers arranged in the drawing-room, contrasts the artful design to unselected Nature and compares the effect to painting and poetry. In a contrast between art and avarice, Louie shows off to Lillian an expensive emerald necklace he intends to give Rosamond, for her to wear at their dinner table at “Outland.” Louie likes green jewelry and green money more than green Nature, a rich man with poor taste. He lets his chauffeur do his gardening. After the Professor allows himself to be drawn into Louie’s plans, feeling pressure to accommodate him, he asks Lillian whether he must destroy his garden at the old house, a spatial metaphor of his heart.

His son-in-law Scott McGregor is so resentful of Louie Marcellus for acquiring all the profits from Outland’s invention that the Professor anticipates he will blackball Louie for membership in the Arts and Letters Club. The name St. Peter reminds us of the only admission that really matters. He notices that Lily by now belies her name. Her face “had become, he thought, too hard.” Lillian stiffens with resolve to persuade Scott to disregard Louie’s bad taste and accept him in Arts and Letters. Louie has been accepted already by the Country Club only because it needs his money, which is Cather’s acknowledgement that anti-Semitism is common among gentiles. As to the Arts Club, however, St. Peter sees the situation as a test of Lillian’s power to lower standards and enable vulgarity to prevail in the Arts.

VII

Rosamond is wearing her newest fur “with a singularly haughty expression on her face.” She recalls the lady aristocrats in Hawthorne. Her opposite in this novel, Augusta is the equivalent of one of Hawthorne’s modest fair ladies who are the salvation of men, like his seamstress Priscilla. St. Peter recognizes Rosie’s fur as moleskin--ratlike--and “drew back a little.” Her fur is “very warm” like the stove in his study that almost kills him. To Kathleen her sister has become a snake in the garden of the family: “When she comes

toward me, I feel hate coming toward me, like a snake's hate!" Extending the motif of green, "Her pale skin [Kathleen's] had taken on a greenish tinge---there was no doubt about it.

St. Peter warns Kathleen that her envy of her sister is "self-destruction." And he points out that "If Rosamond has a grievance, it's because you've been untactful about Louie." Kathleen replies that her sister had once been to her a "kind of ideal," as she had been to St. Peter. "But she's entirely changed. She's become Louie. Indeed, she's worse than Louie. He and all his money have ruined her." Rosamond soon forgot about Tom Outland and his ideals. Now she has a "cruel upper lip and scornful half-closed eyes." St. Peter sees affluence bringing out the worst in his own daughters and loses confidence in himself, education, and human progress. As living standards rise, moral standards decline. "Was it for this the light in Outland's laboratory used to burn so far into the night!"

VIII

In Chicago to give lectures, the Professor is drawn further into Louie's world: "The Professor had forgotten his scruples about accepting lavish hospitalities...it was much more convenient to be on the same floor with Louie and Rosamond... When I consented to occupy an apartment I couldn't afford, I let myself in for whatever might follow..." St. Peter takes Lillian to the opera and is reminded of Paris when they met years ago, nostalgia that contrasts with their present alienation. Cather deepens her characterization by recognizing the sad isolation of human beings from each other: "The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own." St. Peter's spiritual elevation makes him personally aloof and his highest nature is imaged as mountain peaks "along the southern coast of Spain." The image of his creative process—high in the Sky--expresses a transcendent consciousness: The design of his books "unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves."

Lillian cautions that his old stove might poison him with gas and we learn that he has already been poisoned that way enough to give him headaches. This hazard is mentioned a number of times in the story, foretelling disaster. Because it warms, a stove may be a metaphor of the heart, as the fireplace is in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). St. Peter's feelings—his loves and ideals—are out of date and dangerous to him now. He keeps his "sole" window open to the world and wind from outside, influences like Lillian and Louie and Langtry, sometimes are strong enough to blow out the light within, stop the warmth of his heart, leave him in the cold and poison him.

IX

Acting as his conscience on Christmas day, Augusta calls St. Peter to account for saying "slighting things about the Church" to his classes. St. Peter is himself at times a Postmodern professor in using his authority to subvert religious faith, in claiming that he does not think he "ever" does that, and in professing that anyway, "It doesn't matter." Cather is a Modernist in criticizing the Professor for self-indulgence, presumption, cynical indifference, lack of objectivity, and insufficient self-knowledge. With irony she emphasizes his limited education through Augusta when he asks the seamstress a question about theology: "Why, Professor! Did you receive *no* religious instruction at all?"

Here as in "The Waste Land" (1922) symbols from the past have lost their spiritual meaning in the modern world. Professor St. Peter must ask his seamstress for the significance of "the Mystical Rose, Lily of Zion, Tower of Ivory"—even though one of his daughters is named Rose and his wife is Lily. "And you're always finding out how little I know." In Eliot's poem towers appear as symbols of cities with the highest civilizations, such as Athens and London, without including any from the western hemisphere. Cather answers by dramatizing the discovery of the cliff city in the Blue Mesa, evidence of an agrarian civilization in the ancient West that, though primitive, had a higher spiritual culture than the "Unreal" secular cities of modern Europe.

It is Louie Marcellus who calls attention to the bracelet Tom Outland gave Rosamond—"a turquoise set in dull silver." We have seen that Louie likes jewelry for its monetary and status value and infer that he is contrasting Tom's modest gift with his own gift of an "outrageously" priced emerald necklace. At the end of the chapter Scott also refers to the bracelet. Critic James Schroeter noticed that the bracelet resembles

the novel in having three parts with a jewel in the center, the turquoise corresponding to the Blue Mesa, but he reduces its significance to alleged anti-Semitism. Schroeter sees the mesa as merely a “symbol of natural beauty.” He fails to note that the significant difference between the bracelet and the book is that the bracelet is balanced like Tom the exemplar, whereas the book tapers in the third part, shortening like life as it goes along and expressing in form the diminishing spirit of St. Peter.

The innovative structure of *The Professor's House* is a conspicuous expression of Modernist aesthetics unrecognized by reviewers and critics who responded to her Nebraska novels by categorized Cather as a traditionalist and a regionalist. Structuring a novel is a function of intellect. The structure of this novel is an achievement equal to the most innovative structures by Faulkner. With characteristic honesty and modesty, Cather gave the credit to early French and Spanish novelists, to the academic sonata, and in particular to Dutch painters who included a square window in their pictures—a painting within a painting. The “sole” window in St. Peter’s attic study is pointedly square: “I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off Blue Mesa.” Her achievement is how well she adapted the form into an allegory of both the history of civilizations and the individual psychology of St. Peter.

X

Scott McGregor’s loss of idealism is expressed when he admits that “Tom isn’t very real to me any more. Sometimes I think he was just a—a glittering idea.” At this point Cather renders Tom Outland with a detailed Realism that brings him to life as a person as well as the central figure in an allegory. St. Peter recalls when he first met Tom. He was walking in his garden and Tom came in through the green door, a boy with a “manly, mature voice.” Both his parents were pioneers who died on the trail of wagon trains to the West, in Kansas—the heart of the country, where St. Peter grew up. Tom embodies the independent spirit of the Westward Movement. Orphaned like Ishmael, Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn, he was raised by a locomotive engineer and his wife, further identifying him with the idea of Progress symbolized in the 19th century by the railroad. He had no formal education and is largely self-taught like Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison and other self-reliant Americans. “I’ve studies. I read Latin with a priest.” Outland is both Neoclassical and religious like Cather, whose novel is a gift to humanity that she parallels to his gift to Rosamond.

A water jar Tom found at the Blue Mesa is “shaped like those common in Greek sculpture.” He voices Cather’s complaint about prejudice against the West, also evident in the responses of some East Coast critics to her novels: “‘Museums,’ he said bitterly, ‘they don’t care about our things. They want something that came from Crete or Egypt’.” Tom displayed a generosity in keeping with the bountiful country out West. Unlike Louie, he had a rare disregard for money. He was so innocently unselfish that his memory moves St. Peter to recall when his daughters were “lovely children.” The chapter ends with a shocking Neoclassical allusion to a play by Euripedes that conveys how bitterly St. Peter despairs of them now—to Medea, who helped steal the Golden Fleece and who murdered her children.

Such classical allusions sharpen the criticism of modern priorities. St. Peter now *feels* like his wife is a modern Medea who helped Louie and Rosamond fleece Tom Outland and steal the golden proceeds of his invention--and worst of all, that Lillian has killed the souls of her own children. “Was there no way but Medea’s, he wondered?” Cather did not live long enough to see Medea’s way literally established by federal law in the form of abortion.

XI

The hearts of the daughters are put to a test that makes St. Peter’s despairing reference to Medea an exaggeration at least with respect to Kathleen. Augusta loses money on an investment because she did not follow Louie’s advice. She resists Louie and pays for it, as do “a lot of people in her church.” Spirituality gets wiped out in the marketplace. Kathleen, who sews for the poor, redeems herself to the reader by trying to raise money to reimburse Augusta. Rosamond refuses to help. “She was very haughty” and is “altogether too blind to responsibilities of that kind.”

St. Peter tells Kathleen he will speak to Louie: “He’s an absolutely generous chap.” Kathleen notices that her father is wearing Tom Outland’s old Mexican blanket: “He wouldn’t have given it to anybody but

you. It was like his skin.” Mexico evokes the primitive or natural characters of Tom and his friend Roddy Blake, who brought the blanket up from Old Mexico and gave it to Tom to warm him the winter he got sick. Now, wearing the mantle of Outland, the Professor is sick with depression and uses the blanket to warm him when he lies down on his box-couch. The blanket is a wise alternative to the dangerous old stove, which is associated with his old feelings for his family when they all lived together in the old house and he could idealize his daughters.

Kathleen says, “Now that Rosamond has Outland, I consider Tom’s mesa entirely my own.” This identifies her with Tom’s lofty ideals, but even as merely figurative, the phrase “entirely my own” conveys that Kathleen remains competitive, envious, and acquisitive.

XII

Mrs. Crane appeals to St. Peter that her husband deserves compensation for his assistance to Outland in developing his invention. St. Peter explains that they are bound by Outland’s will—a grand irony--and generously gives Louie credit: “Without capital to make it go, Tom’s idea was merely a formula written out of paper.” Still, as St. Peter grants, “Heaven knows” that Crane ought to get something out of the patent.”

XIII

The physics building where St. Peter confers with his colleague Professor Crane is compared to the old Smithsonian building in Washington D.C. where Tom Outland tried unsuccessfully to get the government to protect the artifacts found at the Blue Mesa. The building—like the government—is full of faults that require constant repair and both St. Peter and Professor Crane pled unsuccessfully with the government for “the integrity of that building. But nothing came of all their pains. It was one of many lost causes.” The general moral of the novel is expressed as St. Peter imagines that if Outland were here he would agree with Mark Antony that “My fortunes have corrupted honest men.” This is one of over half a dozen classical references that give a sense of proportion to the themes in the novel and evince a conservative view that people are selfish and that basic human nature does not change.

XIV

St. Peter went to Chicago previously as a professional to give lectures. This time, against his will, he goes to Chicago with Rosamond to help her buy things for her overfurnished country house. Now he is implicated in the betrayal of Outland’s ideals, hence betraying himself. But Rosamond “had set her mind on his going, and Mrs. St. Peter told him he couldn’t refuse.”

St. Peter is a good judge of Spanish furniture and he knows “a good deal about rugs, too.” After all, he is accustomed to getting walked on: “When his wife said a thing must be done, the Professor usually did it, from long established habit. Her instincts about what one owed to other people were better than his.” This estimate of his wife, who is the opposite of Outland, contradicts the tenor and contrary evidence throughout the novel, which indicates that she is the primary force in his own betrayal of Outland. He was more accurate when he compared Lillian to Medea.

Louie is to join his brother, the one who “was in the silk trade in China, and go on to New York with him for a family reunion.” Here the Marcellus family evokes the spread of western capitalism worldwide, more extensive than the Roman Empire. Cather subverts the ethnic stereotype by suggesting that Louie’s brother may have a “silky” nature less abrasive than Louie’s. The clannish aspect of the stereotype is contradicted when “Louie sincerely hated to leave them” and seems to prefer the company of the gentiles. At the same time, Cather does personify big capitalism in Louie. She sees the positive effects while doubting they are worth the cost in the long run. Instead she idealizes the small agrarian economy and local government of the Blue Mesa cliff-dwellers, the antithesis of big capitalism and big government, and hence comparable to the culture of the pioneers in Nebraska. Like Melville in “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Cather depicts the priorities of the Wall Street world as deadly to humanity. Her judgment of big capitalism is connoted by the syllables of Mar-[sell]-us, implying that the selfish motive of capitalism on a large scale mars us by selling out our souls.

At the railroad station, after boarding, Louie kisses his hand goodbye repeatedly from a rear platform of the Twentieth Century. St. Peter takes Rosamond's hand and expresses a feeling of obligation to Louie, who has taken over leadership of the family. By now, though he "had so often complained that there was too much Louie in his life, now felt a sudden drop, a distinct sense of loss." He cannot meet the demands of his family in body or spirit and later confesses to Scott, "apologetically, as if he were ashamed to admit it," that he is tired and "flattened out" like a rug.

That evening Lillian stands by French windows in her drawing-room. She is repeatedly identified with France and her husband with Spain, expanding their characters with the national traits of two cultures in decline. Even though Paris was at that time the cultural center of the world at the peak of the Modernist movement, Cather took a much longer view and did not go expatriating on the Left Bank or courting Gertrude Stein or sit around in cafes sipping absinthe with Djuna Barnes.

St. Peter concludes from shopping with Rosamond that "Too much is certainly worse than too little—of anything. It turned out to be rather an orgy of acquisition." Obscene that is. "I should say she had a faultless purchasing manner. Wonder where a girl who grew up in that old house of ours ever got it." Obviously from Louie. "She was like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces." But also from the Professor himself—"the Professor's darkest secret. At the font he had been christened Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter. There had always been a Napoleon in the family, since a remote grandfather got his discharge from the Grande Armee." Louie calls the Professor's history books "your splendid Spanish-adventurer sons!" Conquistadors. So the Professor might as well have said of his offspring Rosamond, "She was like the Spaniards looting the New World."

Lillian is humanized when she feels sorry for the hurt his daughter causes her husband. "Her heart ached for Godfrey." She is not really a Medea after all. That she is well-intentioned and unconscious of her faults makes the comparison by St. Peter seem extreme once again, a measure of his ideals and of the despair that is becoming suicidal, as he thinks "about Euripedes; how, when he was an old man, he went and lived in a cave by the sea.... It seems that houses had become insupportable to him. I wonder whether it was because he had observed women so closely all his life." Feminist critics have tended to ignore this line, which seems to express Cather's feeling as well. St. Peter's study has become his cave. "The desk was a shelter one could hide behind, it was a hold one could creep into."

XV

Louie wants to take the family to France for the summer and Lillian and Rosamond are eager to do some more shopping there. The Professor "liked Paris, and he liked Louie." But the relationship of Louie and Lillian—"that worldliness"—"seemed unnatural to Godfrey." Lillian and Godfrey "had ceased to be lovers" and Louie has displaced Godfrey in devoting to her "the hundred attentions that Lillian loved." As a social type of conventional American womanhood in an allegory of social history, Rosamond first loves Tom Outland, who embodied St. Peter's ideals and died for them, leaving her the legacy of his sacrifice. Now, however, "Since Rosamond's marriage to Marcellus, both she and her mother had changed bewilderingly in some respects—changed and hardened. But Louie, who had done the damage, had not damaged himself."

At the end of the chapter, though feeling "tremendously tired," St. Peter expresses to Lillian a faith "that I'll get my second wind." This recalls Lillian's earlier warning about the stove, that a "gust of wind might blow it out at any moment" and that he would "get a fine headache one of these days." Already suffering from the headache of living with her, St. Peter declines to accompany her to Paris, where they met, in effect surrendering his wife to Marcellus.

XVI

Marcellus acts like a conquistador with St. Peter when his acquisitive eye notices the Mexican blanket, the gift from Tom Outland. "Louie pounced upon the purple blanket, threw it across his chest and, moving aside the wire lady, studied himself in Augusta's glass." He moves the wire lady, a form of the ideal, out of his way. Now Louie has seized the mantle of Outland, claiming to "think of him as a brother." The irony

is increased when he admires himself in the mirror of Augusta, who would see him quite differently than he sees himself.

Louie appears to be such a good fellow. He does not believe Scott would blackball him until Rosamond tells him she knows he did. Louie thinks the best of people, like the also generous Great Gatsby in the novel by Fitzgerald published the same year as *The Professor's House*. Rosamond's upper lip was "so much harder" than her mother's, yet Louie indulges her completely. St. Peter apologizes for the behavior of his family—Rosamond and Scott—and Louie is gracious: "I love her when she's naughty.... I like the fellow." Louie is so magnanimous that he appears to be a nicer guy than St. Peter. He prevails through a kind of generous Pax Romana—a Pax Marcellus.

Louie was partially modeled on Jan Hambourg, the Jewish musician who married the love of Cather's life—a sensitive violinist rather than a crass businessman. Cather managed to sustain a cordial relationship with Hambourg despite her pain. Her balanced characterization of Louie is evidence of her own magnanimous character and her Modernist principles of objectivity and transcendence.

XVII

St. Peter retreats to his old house, enjoys his garden and plans to edit Tom Outland's diary for publication. "He idealized the people he loved and paid his devoir to the ideal rather than to the individual, so that his behavior was sometimes a little too exalted for the circumstances." His perspective had been identified with high mountains, isolated and cold in contrast to the warm cliff city in the Blue Mesa. Outland brings St. Peter down to earth—to essentials in the tradition of Thoreau—paradoxically by taking him to a higher place than the plain.

Outland reconnects the alienated scholar with the common people in the egalitarian spirit of Walt Whitman, from whom Cather borrowed the title *O Pioneers!* "There is," St. Peter knew, "this dream of self-sacrificing friendship and disinterested love down among the day-laborers, the men who run the railroad trains and boats and reapers and thrashers and mine-drills of the world." Tom Outland's is "a story of youthful defeat" that answers the Romantic optimism of Whitman with stoical Realism, while retaining Whitman's longterm faith in humankind, embodied in Augusta.

The summer after Outland's graduation, alone in his old house while his wife and daughters were out of town, St. Peter invited Tom over to dinners and got to know him during long talks in his garden. Inside his house they "read Lucretius." Classical allusion again enlarges historical scope, deepens perspective, documents philosophical continuities and sustains themes, like allusions in "The Waste Land." The Roman philosopher Lucretius (98-55 B.C.) was a stoical follower of Epicurus, an atomistic materialist. Lucretius believed that religion is the chief cause of human misery, preached that men should not fear death, and committed suicide. Atheistic thinking is also in the tradition of literary Naturalism and is the foundation of the Postmodern secular trends eroding St. Peter's faith and his will to live—a poison in him like the gas from his stove when the light goes out. "Tom Outland's Story" is the antidote to Lucretius.

Tom Outland's Story

I

Tom's partner Rodney Blake is a common man, a railroad worker. Blake is "the sort of fellow who can do anything for somebody else, and nothing for himself. There are lots like that among working-men. They aren't trained by success to a sort of systematic selfishness"—as are Louie, Rosamond and Lillian. Both Tom and Roddy Blake are very generous. Blake comes up from Mexico and he and an old Mexican woman nurse Tom back to health from a serious illness. In American literature, Mexico represents the deeply natural, like a taproot of North America.

Roddy Blake quits the railroad, the popular symbol of Progress, and takes Outland along to be cowboys, rejecting the priorities epitomized in Louis Marcellus. They make a countercultural retreat that leads them to the Blue Mesa, completing the archetypal pattern of individuation from the City (railroad) to Wilderness,

Garden and Sky—culminating in the view from the Cliff City, and in the tower. Roddy does the heavy chores and encourages Tom to study his Julius Caesar: “He said if I once knew Latin, I wouldn’t have to work with my back all my life like a burro.” After conquering much of the civilized world, Caesar got assassinated for threatening liberty, whereas Tom will invent an engine that improves aviation—liberty in the Sky—and gets killed defending liberty on a battlefield.

II

The cabin by the river below the Mesa fits modestly into the natural environment and is “as clean as a prairie-dog’s house,” like Thoreau’s cabin at Walden Pond. Cleanliness is next to Godliness. It is so peaceful, “It was the sort of place a man would like to stay in forever”—a paradise. The Blue Mesa rises above them like a house of God, apparently inaccessible. “I wanted to see what it was like on the other side.” The Mesa is an enigma like The Sphinx: “Its sky-line was like the profile of a big beast lying down.” With trees clinging to it high in the air, it is a wonder of the world also compared to the “hanging gardens of Babylon.” Thunder echoes from the cliffs and rumbles beyond them as if the Mesa is full of deep canyons and caverns like a labyrinth, as unexplored as the unconscious, the refuge of wild cattle roaming free rather than the lair of a bullheaded Minotaur.

III

Tom and Roddy and their hired cook and housekeeper Henry Atkins “made a happy family” in contrast to the modern St. Peter family—happy because there are no women. This is the myth of the cowboy who loves only his horse. When he crosses the river to the other side and enters the Blue Mesa in the sky, Outland marvels at the purity of the air: “I kept telling myself that it was very different from the air on the other side.” Breathing produces “a kind of exaltation.” Then he discovers the heavenly city within. The Blue Mesa is analogous both to the turquoise in the bracelet and to the pearl in the medieval classic *Pearl* (c.1350-1380), the dream vision of a Christian who must learn in his heart the religious truths he knows in his head, like Professor St. Peter. The dreamer, like St. Peter, is grieving for his daughter and fears she has pushed herself forward too aggressively. His vision breaks off when he tries to cross a stream that separates him from salvation, the Heavenly City.

Outland discovers the tower in the Cliff City on Christmas Eve, associating it with the birth of Christ and salvation. As in Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” what is affirmed is not Christianity alone, but religion. The tower is “the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something.” It is religious art: “I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would have built it, and a people with a feeling for design.” As St. Peter says, “Art and religion (they are the same things, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.”

Tom’s experience of discovering the tower is so exalted it is ineffable: “I can’t describe it. It was more like sculpture than anything else.” The uneducated roughneck Blake is named ironically, after the mystical poet. He “didn’t find any way of getting from the bottom of the box canyon up into the Cliff City—“that sky village.” Blake is goodhearted and means well but as a common man, he displays his limitations repeatedly, most crucially when he sells the precious artifacts cheap while Tom is away in Washington D.C. As a Realist writing about human beings, Cather makes both Blake and Outland imperfect. Both unconsciously commit sins. Blake is too literal and oriented toward making a profit, Outland so idealistic that he gives more importance to things than to his friendship with Roddy. In her writing, Cather gives more importance to her characters as people than as ideas. Like Hawthorne and Melville, she is able to make characters both realistic human beings *and* allegorical figures.

The Cliff City is contained in an arch that is a natural parallel to arches in the cathedrals and churches of various religions: “These arches we had often seen in other canyons. You can find them in the Grand Canyon, and all along the Rio Grande.” A mountain ram “looks like a priest.” These similes evoke the pantheism of native tribes. Here in particular Cather achieves a transcendent dimension through Realism that William Dean Howells had affirmed but could never achieve. Her patient, extensive, precise, detailed description establishes the solid foundation—the rock—that is required for a reader to experience vicarious transcendence, as Melville does in describing the whale as a symbol of Truth.

IV

The Cliff City incarnates the virtues of its people and aesthetic values of Cather such as simplicity, economy, plain style and organic unity. "Everything proved their patience and deliberation." The city is made of stones "warm to the touch, smooth and pleasant to feel." It is peaceful and "everything seemed open and clean." Likewise, Cather's best novels are built on the solid rock of facts, constructed of archetypal forms as elemental as the earth, and written with patience and deliberation in a smooth plain style that is warm and pleasant to feel, straightforward so that everything seems open and clean, with an elevated vision comparable to that from the Cliff City.

These were "hazardous trails" in an era of Modernist "worldliness," rejection of traditionalism, and innovation. Cather reaches the top of her achievement by being both traditional and innovative at once. She creates an innovative structure, both linear and "rounded" like the bracelet and the tower, with Tom Outland's traditional story at the center. Modern cities include the pastoral separately as parks. In the Cliff City, to the contrary, puritan and pastoral values "interpenetrate" like the manuscripts and dress patterns in St. Peter's box-couch. "A fringe of cedars grew along the edge of the cavern, like a garden." The City in a Garden in the Sky with the round tower in the center is a mandala of wholeness. The tower of aspiration "holds it together" and is analogous to "Tom Outland's Story" in *The Professor's House*.

The perspective from her elevation is clear and vast. "The thing that made it delightful to work there, and must have made it delightful to live there, was the setting. The town hung like a bird's nest in the cliff...facing an ocean of clean air." Birds are natural images of transcendence because they fly. One of Augusta's forms is compared to a bird cage, suggesting that in modern society the spirit is contained, even imprisoned, whereas the Cliff City is like a nest of free birds.

The mummy they call Mother Eve is elevated above the Cliff City in "the Eagle's Nest," much as Cather elevates Augusta above the modern world. An eagle in American literature is a reference to the ideals of the country, like the "Catskill eagle in some souls" that soars in *Moby-Dick*. Paralleling the ideals of the Cliff City with the potential of America carries a warning like that of the Pequod, that Americans could be wiped out like the Anasazi of Mesa Verde (100-1300 A.D.)--at about the same time *Pearl* was published. The name Mother Eve suggests that this place was like an Eden, an ironic response to the traditional myth of America as a New Eden for Europeans, who instead created the modern world. Mother Eve has a wound in her side, a conventional evocation of the crucifixion of Christ.

Cather's idealization of primitive civilization is qualified by her Realism, just as she qualifies her affirmation of the uneducated common man in Roddy Blake: "In primitive society the husband is allowed to punish an unfaithful wife with death." No one in any society is entirely a free bird. Cather's ideal society is patriarchal—evil to Feminists. To the degree that men have been tamed, they have become vulnerable to their enemies.

V

In this dreamy garden of Eden the snake is current Reality. There is no ladder. Tom is the tallest and hoists old Henry up on his shoulders in their effort to climb higher and a snake strikes him in the forehead. The Englishman is buried on the mesa like the last survivor of an aristocratic Empire, by now reduced to a servant in an American family. Rather than biting the apple in Eden, he gets bit. The snakebite is followed by progress in knowledge. Father Duchene the priest and Dr. Ripley the archaeologist agree in surmising that the tribe had been exterminated down on their farms across the river. They "rose gradually from the condition of savagery.... At the same time, they possibly declined in the arts of war, in brute strength and ferocity." They were perhaps "too far advanced for their time." When this novel was published in 1925 the real Robert Ripley was a popular newspaper cartoonist and amateur anthropologist becoming famous for incredible discoveries—"Believe it or not!" Tom learns to trust the Father more than Ripley, who rips off the public and only really cares about getting a free trip.

Father Duchene attributes the quality of the Cliff City civilization to their "purifying life by religious ceremonies." Cather had been confirmed in the Episcopal Church three years before writing this novel. Father Duchene discerns the buried wall of an amphitheater, where "probably religious exercises and

games took place.” The priest identifies with Outland, as St. Peter does: “Like you, 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.” In comparing Anasazi pottery with early pottery from the island of Crete, he concludes that they are “identical,” implying equality of advancement and perhaps even a common origin. Father Duchene believes the tower was used for astronomical observations,” like ancient Stonehenge in England. “I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people.”

The final scene of the chapter summarizes themes with an historical image of the railroad train moving forward and the Blue Mesa on the skyline fading into the background. It does not detract from Cather’s vision that her plausible theory of what happened to the Anasazi has been supplanted among archaeologists by the theory that the cause of their disappearance was not an attack but lack of water.

VI

Tom Outland arrives in Washington D.C. and stands looking at the national Capitol building “with a very religious feeling.” Since the Cliff City is a kind of Heavenly City, Tom is by analogy trying to save religious artifacts and values. However, when he turns to government for help, everyone is out to lunch. “That seemed to be the one thing they did regularly in Washington.” Government officials prove to be lazy careerists—including a Dr. Fox—governed by self-interest, status and money. Legislators give priority to bills that benefit themselves over bills in the best interests of the country. Tom calls bureaucrats “the high-up ones,” an ironic contrast to the spiritually high-up people of the Cliff City.

Tom boards with a couple who typify government workers. “Living with the Bixbys gave me a kind of low-spiritedness I had never known before.” They “spent their lives trying to keep up appearances.” They “seemed to me like people in slavery who ought to be free.” Mr. Bixby “was intimidated by that miserable sort of departmental life. He didn’t know anything else.” Tom gives up on the government and returns to the Blue Mesa to “live a free life and breathe free air, and never, never again to see hundreds of little black-coated men pouring out of white buildings. Queer, how much more depressing they are than workmen coming out of a factory.” Cather portrays government workers as more “enslaved” than factory workers, the focus of Socialists and the Communist Party, which would eliminate religion and freedom altogether, vastly increase the number of selfish bureaucrats and enslave entire populations.

Outland returns to his “sacred spot.” He “wanted to see and touch everything, like home-sick children when they come home.... Once again I had that glorious feeling of being *on the mesa*, in a world above the world. And the air, my God, what air!” He feels this exaltation even though he has heard that his friend and partner Roddy has sold all the artifacts cheap to an enterprising German—like Heinrich Schliemann (1822-90), who excavated and was said to have “looted” archaeological sites at Troy and Mycenae. After initiating the First World War in particular, Germans were typed as aggressively acquisitive—worse than Louie. Cather offsets the stereotype by making Augusta a German and implicates other nationalities as well by having the German collector use Mexican customs and a French boat.

Tom is naturally angry at Blake. “I didn’t for a minute believe he’d meant to sell me out, but I cursed his stupidity and presumption.” At first Roddy seems like a lower-class version of Louie, but we must consider that Tom had acknowledged his failure in Washington and that his friend did what he thought Tom would want him to do: “I took the best chance going, for both of us, Tom.” They had an understanding that one way or another they would both make some money for all their labor and Tom is at fault for not explaining adequately how he felt about the artifacts. He expects Blake to have read his mind. “I didn’t know you valued that stuff any different than anything else a fellow might run on to: a gold mine or a pocket of turquoise.”

Tom piously lectures his friend and goes so far as to compare him to Dreyfus, the innocent Jew framed as a traitor by French officials. Cather shifts the moral authority from Tom to Blake by having Tom side with the persecutors of an innocent man. The comparison of Blake to Dreyfus implies that Blake likewise is innocent of blame. Ironically, Tom is the actual traitor to their friendship. In a sense he “frames” his friend, as the French did Dreyfus. This reference qualifies the praise of French culture throughout the novel and connotes that Louie the Jew likewise is unfairly accused.

Tom has given a higher priority to his abstract ideals than to his human relationship. He is unfair, rigid, unsympathetic and self-absorbed like the bureaucrats in the government. Roddy feels treated like a slave. "I see now I was working for you like a hired man, and while you were away I sold your property." Tom takes out on his friend the frustration that built up during his own failure in Washington. Roddy does not go down from the mesa by their established trail, he quickly drops out of sight forever, as if buried like old Henry. Cather understates the impact on Tom. He cares more than he thinks as he listens to Roddy descend from the mesa: "the sounds were comforting to me, though I didn't realize it."

As for himself, he wishes he were dead: "I went to sleep that night hoping I would never waken." His reckless judgment may ultimately lead to the death of his friend. Roddy might return to his former "drinking and acting ugly." That kind of behavior often led to an early death out West. Tom is humanized by his sin against his friend and he redeems himself by sacrificing his life in the war.

VII

Tom Outland is an American Adam who falls in his Eden when by surprise he verbally strikes his friend in the face like the snake struck old Henry. He goes searching for Blake. He asks around, sends wires and confesses to Father Duchene. His death wish is evidence of a (1) spiritual death from which he is reborn on the Blue Mesa. Additional characteristics of his individuation process and his attainment of transcendent consciousness in his story include: (2) quest into the Wilderness—"I crossed the river an hour before sunset"; (3) sense of responsibility to save his own soul—"Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it"; (4) Christ-evoking figure as exemplar—Blake; (5) spiritual guide—Father Duchene; (6) solitude and self-reliance; (7) confrontation with ultimate Truth, often in the form of a wild animal—the snake; (8) atonement with Nature—"Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it a great happiness"; (9) reconciliation of opposites that integrate puritan and pastoral values—studying Latin while absorbing Nature; "It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading"; (10) circular and cyclical imagery—the round tower and "Every morning, when the sun's rays first hit the mesa top"; (11) inner light—"I couldn't have borne another hour of that consuming light...I was full to the brim"; (12) numinous evocation—"The arc of sky over the canyon was silvery blue, with its pale yellow moon, and presently stars shivered into it, like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water"; (13) mystery, intensity, ecstasy—"It was my high tide"; "I had my happiness unalloyed"; (14) transcendence of time and space—"There was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself"; (15) sense of paradox—"the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything"; (16) ineffability—"I can't describe it"; "I didn't feel the need of that record"; (17) holistic perception—"This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole"; "the first night that all of me was there"; (18) harmonious vision of life—"For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion.

The Professor

I

Lillian does not "do housework, as the wives of some of his colleagues did...she became another person, and a bitter one." Yet the Professor feels lucky and fulfilled--but exhausted: "along came Outland and brought him a kind of second youth." He is later reborn through Outland just as Outland was reborn through Blake on the mesa. "To share his thoughts was to see old perspectives transformed by new effects of light." The light of Outland illuminates the Professor's four-volume history from the third book on—from the middle, just as his story illuminates *The Professor's House* from the middle. The Cliff City, Tom Outland's story, St. Peter's towering achievement of his history and Cather's novel--each is "rounded" and centered and by metaphor, synecdoche and parallelism approximates a mandala, an archetypal symbol of wholeness. Cather's greatest literary achievement has never been recognized. The only other American novels containing multiple coinciding allegories of such complexity are *Moby-Dick* (1851) by Melville, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Hawthorne, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Twain, and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by Faulkner. *The Professor's House* is an intellectual feat comparable to four-dimensional chess or a leaping quadruple spin in figure skating.

After his graduation Tom guided the Professor through the Southwest on horseback, following the trail of a missionary priest. Then they visited the Blue Mesa, climbed a ladder to the Cliff City and went on up to the Eagle's Nest. There they retrieved Tom's diary, the boon the hero carries back from his mythic quest to give humanity. Tom went on to give his life in the war and to leave the additional boon of his invention, avoiding "the trap of worldly success" and the Professor's fate--becoming "the instrument of a woman who would grow always more exacting." The reference to his "backflung thumb" makes Outland represent the evolution as well as the ideals and progress of the human race. As a creator Outland is a symbolist like Cather, who "never handled things that were not symbols of ideas."

II

With his family away, the Professor relaxes into a pastoral phase of individuation that parallels Tom's—making him an Outlander. He daydreams, enjoying a "half-awake loafing with his brain as if were a new sense, arriving late, like wisdom teeth. He integrates the pastoral with the puritan by starting to edit Tom's diary of the Blue Mesa. His description of Tom's objective style applies as well to Cather's characteristic style: "The adjectives were purely descriptive, relating to form and color, and were used to present objects under consideration, not the young explorer's emotions. Yet through this austerity one felt the kindling imagination...like the vibration in a voice when the speaker strives to conceal his emotion by using only conventional phrases."

St. Peter has often dreamed of Tom returning someday through his garden door—a second coming. Instead, the one who comes back is his own boyhood self, his authentic natural Self—the essence of his soul—left behind long ago in "the Solomon Valley," a place name identifying it with wisdom. For him wisdom is living again the natural life he lived in the country as a boy. "After he met Lillian Ornsley, St. Peter forgot that boy had ever lived." After that the conventional life he lived—"his career, his wife, his family"—were something that happened to him, "accidental and ordered from the outside." The "design of his life had been the work of this secondary social man, the lover." He betrayed his best self, as Tom betrayed his best self when he drove away Blake.

By now the Professor feels "not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been—and yet he was terribly wise.... He was a primitive." A wise primitive by now, he is living spiritually in the Blue Mesa, as Thoreau lived at blue Walden Pond.

III

The Professor's transformation leaves him drained of energy and convinced that he soon will die. He is distanced from his family and glad to be alone. Sometimes he feels like seeing once more the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, a great work of art representing the traditional faith and ideals of western civilization. But he gives preference to "Outland's country...those long, rugged, untamed vistas dear to the American heart." Here it may be that Cather is expressing her own disinclination to join the expatriate Modernists in Paris during the 1920s and instead, as her friend Sarah Orne Jewett advised her, stay home and write about what she loved best in the world.

IV

Apart from delivering lectures at the university, St. Peter becomes a virtual recluse in his study, his cave. The prospect of moving completely into the new house with Lillian contributes to his anticipation of death. "Lying on his old couch, he could almost believe himself in that house already. The sagging springs were like the sham upholstery that is put in coffins." Dreading the return of his family, he looks forward to death with gratitude as "eternal solitude." He has lapsed so far from Catholic faith that he regards suicide not as a sin but merely as "a grave social misdemeanor."

The letter he finally opens confirms his fear: "The family were hurrying home to prepare for the advent of a young Marcellus." The tone is ironic. The term *advent* denotes a divinity such as Christ, whereas a "young Marcellus" evokes secularism, capitalism, and acquisitive materialism. The selfless ideals of Christ and Outland are being displaced in the modern world by the selfish values of Louie and Rosamond, which are likely to be passed along in their descendants.

Desperate to “avoid meeting his own family,” St. Peter realizes that he could live with no family again and especially not with Lillian. Falling out of love with Lillian “seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed.” As an outlander, he “now wanted to run away from everything he had intensely cared for.” He welcomes the dark storm that will almost kill him because it means Augusta will not be coming to disturb his solitude. “The wind would be a protection, he thought.” Ironically, he “believed he was safe, for to-night.” He lights the stove to warm himself and lies down on the box-couch. Though he feels like dying, his ideals would not permit him to deliberately kill himself. He goes to sleep “without meaning to.” As if expressing his death wish, the storm blows “the stove out and the window shut.” The room fills with gas and he awakens with a choice: “He hadn’t lifted his hand against himself—was he required to lift it for himself?”

V

We learn from Augusta that St. Peter did try to save himself but was overcome—a summation of his recent spiritual history. “He had no more thought of suicide than he had thought of embezzling.” This means that according to Catholicism, had he died, he would not have sinned. Now feeling lonely, he calls upon Augusta, who after saving him physically takes up her little religious book and revives his spirit. “If he had thought of Augusta sooner, he would have got up from the couch sooner.” She is his moral guide, his conscience, as women had been to men in the Victorian Age. “Her image would have at once suggested the proper action. Augusta, he reflected, had always been a corrective, a remedial influence.” Augusta is also a Realist like Cather: “She wasn’t at all afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true... She was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from.” Like Cather, “She hadn’t any of the sentimentality that comes from fear of dying.”

At the end, what gives St. Peter “fortitude” is what he has let go—“something very precious, that he would not consciously have relinquished, probably.” He has transcended death, thanks to Augusta, by relinquishing his ego. The modern women in his family have all disappointed him. “There was still Augusta, however; a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound”—outward like Outland--toward the infinite, eternal and ideal. St. Peter sees Augusta as “humankind.” Cather here affirms natural womankind as opposed to the artificial Lily and the plastic Rose--the great *majority* of women throughout the world who, in the words of Toni Morrison in her dedication to *Tar Baby* (1981), have not lost their “true and ancient properties.” All that St. Peter represents in this novel—civilization, education, idealism, high culture, attaining salvation—all depend for their survival on the humble Augustas of the world, sustainers of tradition just as heroic as Alexandra and Antonia.

The “taste of bitter herbs” in this novel left Cather without the exaltation that Outland felt on the mesa. For her the world “broke in two”—traditional and modern—in about 1922, and she had become like St. Peter in facing the immediate future with a stoical resignation. But in the long term, she had a pantheistic faith in Nature and a religious Faith like Augusta. As a Platonic and a Christian dualist, she was grounded in both dimensions, like St. Peter: “At least he felt the ground under his feet”—unlike his family returning from their shopping orgy in Europe. They are inward bound, self-centered and at sea. Their transport is not spiritual but material. The *Berengaria* was one of the largest luxury liners in the world, representing society like the steamboat in *Huckleberry Finn* but with connotations of wealth and high status. Modern aristocrats on the upper decks were “the high-up ones”—in contrast to the people of the Cliff City, who were spiritually higher up. *Berengaria* was the Queen to King Richard II of England.

Michael Hollister (2015)

“QUEERING” CATHER

“In a 1989 essay Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pioneer of ‘queer theory,’ writes that *The Professor’s House* might seem, on the surface, ‘heterosexist,’ but that its underlying rebellion against heterosexism can be discovered by deconstructing the last sentence of the book—specifically, one word in that sentence, ‘Berengaria,’ the name of the ship on which the professor’s wife and daughter are sailing home from Europe. Here is Sedgwick’s analysis of that word: ‘*Berengaria*, ship of women: the {green} {aria}, the {eager} {brain}, the {bearing} and the {bairn}, the {raring} {engine}, the {bargain} {binge}, the {ban}

and {bar}, the {garbage}, the {barrage} of {anger}, the {bare} {grin}, the {rage} to {err}, the {rare} {grab} for {being}, the {begin} and {rebegin} {again}.’

This list of anagrams, which must have taken a while to work out, supposedly reveals the maelstrom of lesbian energies churning beneath the surface of *The Professor's House*, energies that Cather was venting when she gave the ship that strange name. Yes, Sedgwick says, the name has a historical meaning—Berengaria was the wife of Richard the Lion-Hearted—but otherwise it is a ‘nonsense word.’ She apparently does not know that it was the name of a real ship, a famous Cunard ocean liner, on which Cather had returned from Europe immediately before starting work on *The Professor's House*.”

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