

Inner Struggle and Battle Against Materialism in Willa Cather's The Professor's House

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ONOMÁZEIN 65 (September 2024): 67-73

ISSN: 0718-5758



Abstract

In this paper, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* is examined for the way it portrays the protagonist's fight against materialism and quest for something magnificent in the contemporary wasteland. The novel contains side-stories about the pursuit of a more meaningful American ideal as well as accounts of the depraved morals and emotional void that by the 1920s completely defined that ideal. While balancing her feelings between her two emotionally dependent sons-in-law, Lillian St. Peter strives to comprehend her changed husband. Louie, who was never able to go to college, attempts to get into that world of learning by becoming a member of the Arts and Letters Club, purchasing the affections of his father-in-law and the college-educated Scott, and purchasing furniture that reflects sophisticated preferences.

Key Terms: War, Dream, Struggle, Utilitarianism, Pioneer, Materialistic.

1. Introduction

Inner Struggle and Battle Against Materialism in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*

Willa Cather is one of the prominent woman writers of twentieth century American literature. Her novels, which are masterfully conceived and performed, allow readers to comprehend the significance of her ability to blend European culture and American experience. Her inner struggles might be linked to the ideas of community and individualism in relation to the pursuit of achievement. Through her redefined definition of the American dream, she transcends condemnation and affirms it unequivocally. Her perspective on self-fulfilment departs from the conventional alignment with material achievement and the belief that competitiveness is a fundamental social norm. According to her new definition of success, a successful person is one who is rooted in the community yet still struggles to strike a balance between their own demands and those of the community. She embraces the tension in her reinterpretation of the American dream while also delving into each person's potential for fulfilment.

Cather's seventh novel, *The Professor's House*, was written over a ten-year period in phases. The first

phase started in 1915 when she visited the Mesa Verde, Colorado ruins and found the information she needed for her Tom Outland portion. Subsequently, she became aware of Richard Wetherill, who made the discovery of the Mesa Verde ruins and attempted to create a fictionalised account of it. Lewis points out that Cather got the notion to frame the Tom story with a professorial tale during her time in France.

In *The Professor's House*, the main character is not as convinced of his desire to endure in a world that is changing. Although Professor Godfrey St. Peter is not elderly, his wife Lillian feels that he is acting elderly. The mindset of Godfrey St. Peter is like that of the storyteller. Though he is not young, the professor longs for his youth. While not elderly, he feels it, and he may be repeating the narrative. There is no denying that Godfrey St. Peter no longer loves his wife with the same fervour. The intense drive that propelled him to complete his twelve-volume chronicle of the Spanish explorers in North America, who were motivated by passion and ambition akin to a younger Godfrey St. Peter, has vanished from him.

As his wife speculates, St. Peter's immersion in the world of knowledge may contribute to his weariness with the outside world. Godfrey St. Peter is too wise and too ignorant at the same time since he cannot see a place for himself in the evolving universe that his new home signifies. He experiences a "dark night of the soul" on his path to self-definition, where he must decide which communities would best support him in achieving self-fulfilment. Like many of Cather's protagonists, he vehemently distances himself from the materialistic America of his day.

Tom's first-hand account of discovering a long-abandoned but unaltered Indian village on the Blue Mesa and his transcendent experience of it is at the heart of *The Professor's House*. At first, he and his partner Roddy Blake were adamant about understanding this perfect documentation of a vanished society in all its historical detail, so they spent months meticulously cataloguing the relics of the mesa's vast cliff-city and smaller clusters of cliff dwellings. Outland learns the extent of his affection for the relics and that he does not fully comprehend the nature of this feeling when he returns from his unsuccessful trip to the Smithsonian and discovers that Roddy has sold all the Blue Mesa artefacts to a German. To comprehend

these feelings, he says that the treasures are not for sale.

Tom uses the pots and pans that belonged to my impoverished grandmothers a millennium ago to illustrate his point that the mesa people is his own ancestors. Tom's claim to the mesa symbolises what the novel views as mesa culture and culture in general. "Tom's reading of *The Aeneid* suggests that the Blue Mesa and classical society are utterly unrelated flowerings of the same ideals," (112) according to David Stouck in *Willa Cather's Imagination*. This suggests that humankind has an inherent propensity towards these values. When Tom's friend Father Duchene claims that the mesa population was completely wiped out by some nomadic Indian tribe devoid of culture or domestic values, Cather methodically attacks the value of the idea of abstract culture. Therefore, culture is not the culmination of a people's customs; rather, it is a subset of those customs. That is, in fact, the main idea of Tom's narrative. In this way, Cather's involvement in the general worry during the interwar period regarding the character or even existence of a specifically American civilization is once again apparent. When faced with such a dread, there are two clear ways to respond: either confront the cultural situation head-on and attempt to comprehend its motions, or withdraw into idealism and nostalgia.

The latter response is tested at *The Professor's House*. What it means to understand a previously unknown society is traditionally understood in cultural anthropology to be quite like Tom's original conceptualization of his interest in the Mesa civilization. The detailed record that Tom maintains track of the location and state of each artefact, as well as his reflections after departing for Washington, demonstrate his commitment to the idea of rebirth through thoughtful and well-informed reconstruction: "When I saw it again, I told myself. I would have done my duty by it. I would bring back with me men who would understand it, who would appreciate it and dig out all its secrets" (224). Tom still views this scholarly mission as the sole way to gain cultural access to the mesa, even after his trip to the Smithsonian has failed and he is having difficulty explaining his commitment to the mesa society, believing he had lost everything because of the treasures being sold. He starts to fantasise desperately about the legitimate academic endeavour that could have been.

The novel conclusively closes the door on the possibility of future cultural reconstruction in the traditional archaeological and anthropological senses, even though the mesa structures themselves, Tom's journal, and the physical continuation of the relics in Germany would seem to allow for it. Importantly, Tom and the book do not lament this loss for very long. Rather, a completely different understanding of the value of a cultural past is put forth, one that vehemently rejects the previous academic method and its focus on historical particularity.

Tom's narrative is characterised as one of boyish failure, and St. Peter implies that this is the reason he had always withheld it. There is undoubtedly a tremendous lot of defeat in his story, as evidenced by the antiquities being sold, his lovely relationship with Roddy disintegrating, and his being rejected by the Smithsonian. But what Tom views as the most ideal incident of his life begins right after Roddy leaves, when he returns to the mesa by himself. Tom experiences euphoria at the end of his encounter, even after the full horror. In a sense, Tom is able to combat the loss of everything by experiencing the loneliness of an empty house free from all cultural and personal constraints - something St. Peter is unable to create for himself without catastrophic consequences. The tale of St. Peter turns into a meticulous examination of Tom's formal ideal on the mesa in the framework of contemporary American culture. Tom had thought that by piece-by-piece dissecting and interpreting the mesa remains, the experts would be able to "revive" the culture.

In contrast to the historical depth of the artefact and of culture that she would create in Archbishop, "Tom Outland's Story" is the most developed exposition of the autonomous aesthetic object in Cather's fiction. She exerts tremendous pressure on her formulation by making the object embody culture itself, since other parts of the book paint a picture of a modern American society where change is so quick and widespread that nothing lasts, much like the marauders who wiped out the Blue Mesa population, a culture devoid of culture. "Tom Outland's Story" is wedged between two portions of the work that deal with modern American culture and describe how the culture and aesthetic ideal of the mesa were destroyed.

Academician Godfrey as the novel's defender of the moral principles expounded in the Outland chapters, St. Peter experiences a worsening depression that almost drives him to take his own life. The two most persistent themes of this crisis are Tom's diary being ready for publication and St. Peter's persistent inability to finish the writing endeavour that haunts him throughout the novel. St Peter considers this journal to be an amazing work of art, drawing comparisons between its aesthetic and Tom's building of the mesa.

Because he so carefully excluded himself from his notebook, St. Peter feels that Tom is meaningfully present there, just as the mesa culture grew more complete for him as the cliff city grew more deserted. But this presence has to be painfully partial and transitory, as it never leads to the introduction St. Peter is attempting to write, and thus predicts Tom's disappearance, which the novel will chronicle. Cather investigates an effort to transform the beautiful into tools for daily life in St. Peter. According to St. Peter, the meaning of life is found in the ambiguous areas, just as the vital elements of art are found in the unsaid. His reaction to a pupil who inquires about his thoughts on science best illustrates this. St. Peter does not assert that religion offers solutions, even as he highlights the shortcomings of science and draws comparisons to Christianity. The best student at Godfrey St. Peter was lost to the war.

Tom disappears, leaving St. Peter without a mentor. His family and his university have been poisoned by postwar materialism and ethical shoddiness. Louie Marsellus, his son-in-law, has been instrumental in "translating" Tom's ideas into dollars and cents. Godfrey's family has been split as a result: Rosamond Louie, his older daughter, has lost her husband Tom, and as a result, she has grown resentful and self-centred. The jealousy of Rosamond and Louie that St. Peter's younger daughter Kitty and her husband Scott harbour for one other is equally poisonous. Materialism is also a threat to Godfrey St. Peter's University, both personally and institutionally. The university is entangled in the new commercialism that was undermining and vulgarising education, and his colleague, Dr. Crane, who selflessly assisted Tom with his experiments, wants a piece of the profits from Outland's discovery.

The Professor sees himself and his environment as victims of the pursuit of achievement, when he should be basking in the American Dream as a prosperous writer, educator, and family guy. His son-in-law Scott notes that, if we use the word "house" as a metonym for his independent self, his family, and his university, then it is split, much like American society was in the 1920s: "This country is split into two, socially" (108). As a result, when his financial success buys him a new home, he refuses to move into the new and keeps onto the attic room of his former home, where his greatness had blossomed. He also refuses to move onto a new stage of his life because he believes he cannot. He turns docile, almost defenceless. He looks up to his wife because she can "adapt... so readily" (95), something he is not able to do and something Cather appears to be worried about achieving as well, given her attention on this

issue in the novel.

The new practice of journalistic syndication reduces Scott to the role of “writing machine” in his career life, and that unfulfilling career and its accompanying financial limitations reduce Scott to the role of cynic in his personal life. Kitty struggles emotionally, feeling constantly incapable of competing with her sister for wealth or for love. A labourer who despises materialism, Roddy Blake tries to give his friend Tom a better future. Meanwhile, in the nation’s capital, Washington, corrupt bureaucrats “do almost anything for a good lunch” (229) and stressed-out clerks strive to realise a devalued version of the American Dream.

Narratives of those who have suffered and persevered in the pursuit of success are juxtaposed with those of the fortunate few who manage to escape the clutches of materialism: Augusta, whose unwavering integrity in a world of materialistic pursuits provides St. Peter with stability throughout her life, and who finally becomes a role model for him through her “bloomless” but spiritually meaningful life; and Tom, whose quest for self-discovery on the Blue Mesa inspires the Professor to embark on a similarly introspective journey.

The Professor’s House is enhanced by these stories alone, much like the tableau of knights and heroes is enhanced by the small, whimsical pattern on the tapestry. Through these subplots, we are continually shown how, by 1925, Cather had come to regard the American fantasy of achievement as an unsupportable fantasy, just as St. Peter does the same about his current existence.

Godfrey St. Peter is trying to get away from a world that is restless, driven by ambition, success, and money. This is a world that is more concerned with appearance, cost, and production than with quality, beauty, or content. Some of the principles that he retained from his upbringing in a different society are still present in the increasingly materialistic Rosamond St. Peter. Louie remarks, “She doesn’t like anything showy,” on page 37. He recollects that upon initially encountering her, she wore a basic bracelet - “a turquoise set-in dull silver” - symbolic of Tom, the person who had gifted her the turquoise, and who had resisted the allure of gleaming silver, which was prevalent in his time. Her name is naively spelt “remark,” using the only language he is familiar with to convey his wife’s value and attractiveness. However, his comment also reveals Rosamond’s current standards for what constitutes fulfilment.

Rosamond, tainted by her time, surrounds herself with ostentatious symbols of success, such as a limousine, a large new house, jewellery, and furs. Her attitude of Augusta and Professor Crane demonstrates her lack of empathy. When Augusta makes a poor investment and loses a significant amount of money, her father asks Rosamond to bail her out financially. Rosamond also rejects St. Peter’s recommendation that she reach a financial settlement with Professor Crane. Strangely, Louie Marsellus has not harmed himself in spite of turning Tom’s bones into a personal asset. Although he is limited to the trade sector, he yet possesses generosity and public spirit. In addition to his gift of technicalities, which has made him wealthy, Louie also possesses the talent of sympathy. Upon learning that a resentful Scott has intentionally withheld information from him to prevent him from joining the Arts and Letters Club, Louie makes the sanguine prediction that Scott will eventually change. “Louie, as St. Peter tells him, is magnanimous and magnificent” (170).

Louie can live in the 1920s because he has established his own brand of ethics, which is not as all-consuming as Tom’s. Like Tom, but in a more subtle way, Louie is romantic at heart and constantly

looks forward to a day when everything will be completely irrational and our happiness will finally begin. Godfrey St. Peter finally learns that Tom idealised the people he loved, while Louie comprehends and accepts the people he loves on a practical level - yet he still manages to love them. He is an old-fashioned civic humanist, an opportunist with a heart, who enjoys his job and feels a feeling of duty that goes along with it.

The Professor is aware that he can rely on Louie to shoulder the financial burden for the Cranes and Augusta when Rosamond declines to accept any responsibility. Louie is content because he thinks his actions can have a significant, good impact on other people. Augusta has experienced a comparable level of joy. Her existence is made more significant and mysterious by her religion and charitable work. St. Peter emphasises to his students the importance of religion and the arts in providing happiness to mankind.

In addition to living her religion through helping those in need - she sits with ailing patients and lends a hand whenever a member of the family passes away - Augusta lives her art by creating outfits for other people. Godfrey, recuperating from his injuries from the malfunctioning gas cooker in his study, takes some time to reflect about Augusta's singular blend of religion and art as she saves St Peter. Godfrey St. Peter finds the group he wants to be a part of in this woman. In his mind, there is an endless supply of Augustas, with whom one is inextricably linked. The Professor had been running away into history. He lost himself in his work of editing Outland's diary, travelling in his mind to Blue Mesa, the home of Tom, maybe in the hopes of regaining the sense of wholeness Tom felt there. Tom had written: "I had my happiness unalloyed"(251) in response to that encounter. When St. Peter embarks on his inner quest to find the Kansas child he once knew, he believes he has discovered a comparable "unalloyed" happiness. Unadulterated joy, on the other hand, is not an option in St. Peter's world, even though it would be feasible in a remote "world above the world" (240) like the Blue Mesa.

It is just as false as the American Dream of universal opportunity or affluence that inevitably results in inner tranquilly. Thus, following his near-death encounter, St. Peter actively chooses to live in the real world and actively chooses to "let something go" - that unreal desire for pure happiness in a lonely, above-the-world mental realm. Rather than that, he opts for community - a new, ill-defined community in a world full of Augustas - rather than the communities of his family or the university that have so guided and disturbed his existence. Godfrey St. Peter believed that fulfilment could only come from learning to live without joy. As he recuperates on the study couch with Augusta curled up next to him to read, St. Peter recognises in her humanity a fellow human being. He now acknowledges her strong impact and even feels a sense of duty to her, having always subconsciously seen her as a correction.

Godfrey St. Peter realises at the same moment that he no longer feels the same sense of duty to his family. As a result, he chooses the new group that will provide significance for what he has not yet acquired. Members of this community are more focused on other goals and are less driven by accomplishment. They are also less interested in short-term "delight" than they are in long-term principles. Through her characters, Cather honours pioneering virtues like tenacity, love of the land, and human concern instead of materialistic ones.

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