

Summary

Increasing feminist attention to Willa Cather's The Professor's House has resulted in interpretations that view the novel's main character, professor Godfrey St. Peter, negatively. An extreme example of this tendency is Doris Grumbach's portrait of his as a frustrated homosexual misogynist. While

The Deeper Role

of Gender Conflict in

Willa Cather's The

Professor's House

gender conflict is an important element of the novel, an exaggerated and distorting emphasis on it trivializes the cost of the professor's struggle and the significance of his final decision.

Resumo

O romance The Professor's House de Willa Cather despertou a atenção crescente dos interessados na teoria do feminino, suscitando, muitas vezes, interpretações negativas a respeito do personagem principal, professor Godfrey St. Peter. O trabalho de Doris Grumbach, que o retrata como um homossexual misógeno frustrado, é exemplo extremo dessa tendência. Embora o conflito dos gêneros seja elemento essencial no romance, a distorção desse conflito banaliza o significado da decisão final tomada pelo professor.

O Papel do conflito masculino/feminino em *The Professor's House* de Willa Cather

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The professor's house has been thoroughly searched. It is as though search warrants had been issued wholesale. The attic study has been exhaustively examined for clues. The dress forms in particular have been subjected to minute laboratory analysis by a variety of forensic experts. Even the garden has been combed for the slightest intimation of evidence. The result is a substantial and surprisingly disparate body of testimony.

I use the metaphor of criminal investigation advisedly, for a dominant pattern in recent critical discussion of this novel is to view Godfrey St. Peter as reprehensible in one measure or another. This negative view has evolved in tandem with the development of feminist criticism. Critics sensitized to gender conflict have turned a suspicious eye on Cather's charming professor, and their scrutiny of his relationships with women has produced rather scandalous discoveries. Professor St. Peter, formerly considered one of Cather's most admirable and sympathetic characters, has now been identified as a frustrated homosexual misogynist.

Margaret Doane asserts that Cather "established an antifemale bias as a dominant aspect of the book," as major a concern as the negative effects of materialism (302, 299). Doane views the professor as "remarkably obtuse and unfair to his wife, who emerges as generally kind, sympathetic, and long ago abandoned by her husband." St. Peter, like the rest of the men in the novel but in greater measure, displays a view of women as "petty, materialistic, and a distinct threat to the higher values of males" (300).

Doris Grumbach is considerably more subtle in attempting to explain

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the apparent anti-female bias. She explains that the novel is as close as Cather would come to what Grumbach delicately describes as "the question of sexual choice outside accepted social patterns" (338). Her thesis is that Cather transferred her pain at losing Isabelle McClung to St. Peter's loss of Tom. In plainer terms than Grumbach uses, both relationships were homosexual. St. Peter made a mistake in the first place by marrying a woman and has led "a life of marital escape almost from the beginning" (333). His love for Tom has what she considers a tragic dimension because it was not physically consummated and remained "private, unconfessed, sublimated" (339). Consequently, the professor's problem "lies in his late and blinding realization that the life he had been leading, the life of father and husband, is, and always has been, a false one for him, that his existence within these roles is no longer bearable, and that death is preferable to living any longer in the stifling, elaborately furnished, and *false* (for him) house of women and marriage".

This kind of narrow emphasis on gender conflict prompts obvious and fundamental questions ignored by these critics. For example, why would a female novelist write such an anti-female novel? Why should a character who shares so many characteristics of his female author be portrayed as such an unmitigated misogynist?¹ Why would a writer who has treated family relations positively elsewhere in her fiction come down so hard on them here? In short, what is the point or the larger significance of the professor's deteriorating relationship with his wife and family? An inordinate focus on gender conflict spawns distracting ambiguities in a novel already generously supplied with them. This is demonstrated in Thomas F. Strychacz's "The Ambiguities of Escape in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*." Assuming that the

key to the professor's personality is his retreat from "an appressive domesticity" and "long-standing sexual conflicts with wife and daughters" (51), Strychacz argues that St. Peter indulges in "impossible fantasies of a male paradise" prompted by Tom and the Mesa and that his creativity "depends upon the absence of female and familial ties." He describes the attic study as having "overtones of Gothic horror" and suggests that the dress forms "express the stagnation of his relationships with wife and daughters – even a morbid, repressed sexuality" (53). Such assumptions naturally lead him to construct ambiguities because they preclude viewing Tom, the Mesa, St. Peter's creative work, and St. Peter's very survival at the end as truly positive things. How can they be genuinely positive when they are linked with the anti-feminine?

The fact is that a relevant and potentially useful concern with gender conflict has been myopically applied to this text in a way that distorts and trivializes its larger themes. This novel provides significant, often profound, treatment of universal human problems such as the perennial tension between solitude and society, establishing a proper relationship with nature and the past, coping with the challenges of materialism and technological advancement, and adjusting to the diminishment ineluctably linked with aging. St. Peter's estrangement from his wife and family is obviously a central element of the story, but the degree of that estrangement should not be exaggerated. Marriage and family have been a great deal more satisfying to the professor than the critics mentioned would have us believe. Moreover, this tension in family relations should be recognized as a condition subsidiary to Cather's larger concerns. It is a situation that serves instrumentally to illuminate human problems transcending those

of this particular man and his family, including any gender conflicts that might be involved.

Was St. Peter's marriage a mistake from the very beginning and his domestic life been a resented and regretted obstacle to his creativity? Not at all. He was "very much in love" with Lillian when they married (31), and as he reflects on their nearly thirty years together, he concludes that "joyful years they had been, nothing could ever change that" (281). On occasions when thoughts of the loneliness of death had oppressed and terrified him – moments that occur in most lives – "he used to feel that if his wife could but lie in the same coffin with him, his body would not be so insensible that the nearness of hers would not give it comfort." (272)

Like any writer he needed solitude in which to work, but

When he was writing his best, he was conscious of pretty girls in fresh dress – of flowers and greens in the comfortable, shabby sitting-room – of his wife's good looks and good taste – even of a better dinner than usual under preparation downstairs. All the while he had been working so fiercely at his eight big volumes, he was not insensible to the domestic drama that went on beneath him. His mind had played delightedly with all those incidents.... the most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories. (101)

The drama of domestic life that went on below him while he worked is described as "engaging" and his sense of it as "pleasant" (26). He didn't want to go down for oil because "he would almost surely become interested in what the children were doing" (27).

St. Peter had been deeply attached to his family and they were in his thoughts even during periods of intensest creativity. This is why he now, returning to his attic, must muster his courage and resignation in order to face the unpleasant

awareness "that under his work-room there was a dead, empty house" (15-16). He misses rather than begrudges that past domestic life. It was blended with creativity not alien to it. This is symbolically reinforced by the way the professor's notebooks and manuscripts share the same box with Augusta's patterns, those "notched charts which followed the changing stature and figures of the Misses St Peter from early childhood to womanhood" (22). Furthermore, the dress forms the professor's playful allusion to M. Bergeret in Anatole France's *Le Mannequin D'Osier* notwithstanding² — are not symbols of misogyny. Although they subtly intimate the ambiguities of St. Peter's relationship with the women of his family, they are primarily mementos of a happy domestic past. As he tells Rosamond, "They remind me of the times when you were little girls, and your first party frocks used to hang on them at night, when I worked" (6).

During those years of writing he didn't go to his study at all if someone in the family happened to be ill. "Two evenings of the week he spent with his wife and daughters, and one evening he and his wife went out to dinner, or to the theatre or a concert" (28). A contemporary family counselor wouldn't insist on more than this, particularly of a writing scholar and teacher. St. Peter "had burned his candle at both ends": "By eliminations and combinations so many and subtle that it now made his head ache to think of them, he had done full justice to his university lectures, and at the same time carried on an engrossing piece of creative work". And his family was not sacrificed in this process. As he tells his wife, "I wasn't willing to slight anything — you, or my desk, or my students. And now I seem tremendously tired" (163). This "diminution of ardour" (13) is introduced from the beginning as central element in the novel. He is confronting the universal question

posed in Robert Frost's *The Oven Bird*: "What to make of a diminished thing?" — a question that ultimately must be answered by the solitary self in response to "the unpleasant effects of change" (15). He had attempted to balance family, teaching, and writing. Family life had not been a mistake, but rather a vital part of his life, as much a joy as his history. To discount the efforts and satisfactions of his previous domestic life, which were inextricably linked with those of his creative life, is to reduce the significance of his crisis. They are an important part of what he must let go at the end of the novel. His confrontation with a diminished thing loses weight and poignance when his marriage and familial ties are viewed as a mistake from the beginning.

As the professor reflects on past domestic joys — "family festivals and hospitalities, little girls dancing in and out, Augusta coming and going, gay dresses hanging in his study at night, Christmas shopping and secrets and smothered laughter on the stairs" — he asks himself, "when a man had lovely children in his house, fragrant and happy, full of pretty fancies and generous impulses, why couldn't he keep them?" (125-26). The final phrase is the important one and resonates through the novel. The professor is not simply between two houses as the novel begins, he is between two families. One of "the unpleasant effects of change" that plague him is that family relationships often evolve in unfortunate ways. It is remarkable that Cather, who had no children of her own, could capture so movingly the experience of a parent confronting his children's adulthood and all the changes that involves. The closeness and dependency of the early years is gone. The children, now independent adults, harden into their own molds, which are seldom exactly what the parent admires or desires. It is an unsettling phase in parent-child relations and affects husband-wife

relations as well. Moreover, husband-wife relations evolve in their own right, sometimes in regrettable ways. The professor himself reflects on this: "people who are intensely in love when they marry, and who go on being in love, always meet with something which suddenly or gradually makes a difference" (49).

It is of course Tom who has made a difference in this marriage, both directly and indirectly through the money his invention generates. Husband and wife drift apart, not, as Doane contends, because the professor is "remarkably obtuse and unfair to his wife" and had long ago abandoned her, but because they have reacted differently to change. Godfrey has turned to the past and the values reflected in the Tom Outland section. Lillian has adapted to the future (94). Since her daughter's marriage to Louie, Lillian has "changed and hardened" and become worldly (160-61). "With Louie, Lillian seemed to be launching into a new career, and Godfrey began to think that he understood his own wife very little" (78). Louie and Scott, her sons-in-law, have replaced the professor in her affections and with them "she had begun the game of being a woman all over again" (79). Lillian is at the beginning of something, Godfrey at the end. The differences in perspective prevent their understanding each other. She thinks he has become inhuman; he thinks she has hardened; each finds the other intolerant. Lillian is a woman of "very vehement likes and dislikes which were often quite out of proportion to the trivial object or person that aroused them." For many years her "prejudices" had been "the most interesting things in St. Peter's life" (50). But his interest in the trivial has, largely through the influence of Tom, greatly diminished and the prejudices now strike him as perplexingly materialistic.

This rift in the family, interesting in itself as a study of the way the human self retains a certain independence and isolation even in the most intimate union with others, corresponds with a rift in American civilization. James Schroeter has observed that Tom is associated with effort and Louie with reward, a pairing that corresponds to two phases in America's history—a noble idealistic past and an ignoble materialistic present (504-5). Effort and reward are both part of the professor's life. He treasures the effort and his wife and the Marselluses treasure the rewards. The point behind the gender and family conflict is that it encapsulates and illuminates a much larger conflict of values. And, incidentally, the tensions in family relations are not simply a matter of gender—St. Peter against the women of the household. Kathleen is clearly aligned on the side of Tom and her father, and the professor's relationship with Augusta has always been cordial and is ultimately pivotal.

Godfrey and Lillian have a moment of tender understanding at the opera, which prompts him to reflect that "the heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's" (95). Man and woman remain alone even in the most intimate union. They cannot

penetrate each other's innermost center. Each person is ultimately solitary and aware of it. This is the universal predicament Cather explores in this novel. Susan Rosowski notes a pattern of surrogate selves (258): St. Peter lives first through Lillian then through Tom; Lillian lives first through St. Peter and then through her daughters (Rosamond is like her "second self" (66) and sons-in-law; as children the daughters lived in Tom's stories; Kathleen looked to Rosamond as "a kind of ideal"; and later Rosamond has "become Louie" (86). The case of St. Peter makes clear that "the unfortunate effects of change" and "diminution of ardour" ultimately force the reflective mind to recognize its fated solitude and the futility of surrogate selves. As Paul Tillich explains in "*Loneliness and Solitude*,"

The creation of the woman has not overcome the situation which God describes as not good for man. He remains alone. And the creation of the woman, although it provides a helper for Adam, has only presented to the one human being who is alone another human being who is equally alone, and from their flesh all other men, each of whom will also stand alone. (16)

For Tillich aloneness, though a burden, is also a blessing, for "it is man's greatness that he is centered within himself" (17). He therefore makes a distinction between

"loneliness" and "solitude" and suggests that the former can be conquered only by those who can bear the latter. A person's character is determined by what he does with his inevitable aloneness. Cather certainly understood both the pain and the glory of solitude. Her professor rediscovers his primitive child self, his primary or "realest" self, which remains when the effects of chance and change are cleared away. He is tempted to lapse into "eternal solitude" as "a release from every obligation, from every form of effort" (272). But in the end he opts for a wise and courageous solitude among the living, a solitude that separates him from his family but enhances the significance of his humanity and provides a sense of human purpose that endures where career and creativity and even family fail. It involves a principle that Tom discovered on the Mesa and that Augusta embodies. His family will neither understand his epiphany nor realize he is not the same man. His qualified contentment must remain private and solitary.

An exaggerated description of and emphasis on gender conflict in the novel trivializes the cost of the professor's struggle and the significance of his final decision. □

NOTES

¹ James Woodress provides an extensive list of parallels between Cather and St. Peter in *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987: 368-69.

² Alice Bell Salo's "*The Professor's House and Le Mannequin D'Osier: A Note of Willa Cather's Narrative Technique*" (*Studies in American Fiction* 8 (1980): 229-31) is the most extensive exploration of the allusion. To view M. Bergeret's violent destruction of a dress form as an indication that St. Peter has a repressed violent hatred for his wife, as several critics have done, is to take the playful allusion too solemnly and depreciate the subtlety of Cather's using it. James C. Work provides an entertaining warning against taking the novel's allusions too seriously in "Cather's Confounded conundrums in *The Professor's House*" (*Western American Literature* 18 (1984): 303-12).

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