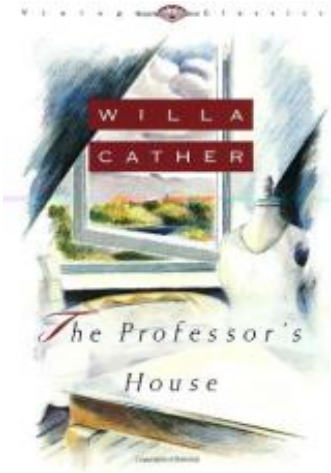
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The Professor's House

by Willa Cather



About the Book

The Professor's House was published in 1925, only seven years after **My Ántonia**, but it is set in an America that is at least a half-century removed from its frontier past, an America that sells off its heritage while buying up the relics of European antiquity. Its protagonist, Godfrey St. Peter, might be an older version of Jim Burden. He is a man who grew up on the prairie, entered academia and in his fifties has attained professional success and what at first seems to be domestic happiness. But over the year in which the novel's events transpire--the year that follows his family's move to a new house and ends with his near-death in the old one he has refused to abandon--it becomes clear that St. Peter's success is hollow, his relations with his wife and children passionless and embittered. What meaning remains in the professor's life lies in the past, in his relationship with a gifted pupil who died young and whose discoveries have made St. Peter's family wealthy--but at an awful cost. "If Outland were here tonight," St. Peter thinks, "he might say with Mark Antony, *My fortunes have corrupted honest men*." [131]

If the tone of **My Ántonia** is that of the romantic pastoral, **The Professor's House** is a bleaker--and at times even a savage--book. In place of Jim Burden's rhapsodic concluding vision, we are left with St. Peter's realization that "He had never learned to live without delight. And he would have to learn to, just as, in a Prohibition country, he supposed he would have to learn to live without sherry. Theoretically he knew that life is possible, may be even pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs. But it had never occurred to him that he might have to live like that." [257]

Discussion Guide

1. This novel is named, not after its protagonist, but after his house. It is a house in which no one lives, that has been "dismantled" [3], and that, even when inhabited, was "almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be." Why, then, is it so important to Professor St. Peter--and, indeed, appear to become more so in the course of the novel? How does Cather establish the house's character and use it to indicate the character of her protagonist? Compare her description of St.

Peter's old house to her treatment of the family's new residence and other houses, like Louie Marsellus's "Outland" and the abandoned cliff-dwellings on the Blue Mesa.

2. Although St. Peter has pursued a life of the mind, Cather describes him in highly sensual terms: "for looks, the fewer clothes he had on, the better." [4] He luxuriates in the ornamental shrubs and flowers of his French garden, and in swimming. His keenest memories--of his youthful voyage along the coast of Spain and the dahlias he bought as a student in Paris--vibrate with sensuous detail. Why does such a sensual--and in some ways even hedonistic--man seem to disapprove of his family's pursuit of worldly pleasures and possessions? In what ways does St. Peter's hedonism--if such it is--differ from theirs?

3. Although the St. Peters initially seem happy, the reader gradually realizes that the family is torn by jealousy and resentment, and that its patriarch has effectively withdrawn from its affairs. At what points do these characters become aware of their emotional disconnection? Why are they unable--or unwilling--to overcome it?

4. One reason for the divisions in the St. Peter family is Tom Outland, who was Godfrey's pupil, his daughter's fianc?, and, ultimately, her benefactor. In what ways has Outland fragmented the family, both while alive and after his death, and why did the family let him do so? Why do nearly all the members of the household stake some kind of claim on him, as evidenced by Kathleen's remark to her father: "Our Tom is much nicer than theirs"? [113]

5. Why does St. Peter remain so strongly attached to Tom Outland almost a decade after the young man's death? Cather equates the boy with the Professor's discarded younger self: "He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed...places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been--and yet he was terribly wise." [241] What other reasons might there be for the Professor's devotion? To what kind of wisdom is Cather referring in the preceding passage? How did St. Peter lose it as he grew older and what did he acquire in its place? In what ways does Tom Outland's story recapitulate the older man's?

6. Alongside the spartan Outland, who refused to contaminate his friendships with any element of self-interest, Cather gives the professor a son-in-law, Louie Marsellus, who is unabashedly materialistic. In marrying Tom's one-time fianc?e, Louie has also become the main beneficiary of his discoveries. But wealth alone may be insufficient: Louie seems intent on replacing Tom in the professor's affections, just as he jokes about having Tom's talismanic blanket made into a dressing-gown. Does Cather want the reader to dislike Louie, as his brother-in-law Scott McGregor does? In what way does Louie conform to period stereotypes of the social-climbing, luxury-loving *nouveau riche*? Why does the professor feel affection for him, even though Louie's values seem diametrically opposed to his?

7. Is St. Peter subconsciously attempting suicide when he falls asleep without turning off the gas stove in his old study? What significance do you find in the fact that he is saved by a woman? How clearly does Cather allow us to know the motives of any of her characters?

8. The Professor's House is a novel of oppositions--youth vs. age, instinct vs. contemplation, solitude vs. domesticity. Yet we should be careful not to read those oppositions too simplistically. Although St. Peter mourns the way he has sacrificed his truest self to the demands of society and family, Tom Outland is equally haunted by the way he betrayed his friendship with Roddy Blake, who had committed the crime of selling Indian relics to a German buyer: "Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it." [229] Does Tom suffer from his inhuman idealism just as

the professor suffers from his unthinking compromises? In what other ways does Cather introduce ambiguity into this novel's moral scheme? Does she suggest any way in which her opposing values might be reconciled?

9. Where does Cather draw analogies between St. Peter's betrayal of his ideals and events in the larger world? In what ways does the novel's milieu function as a macrocosm of its protagonist's psyche?

Author Bio

Willa Sibert Cather was born December 7, 1873, near Winchester, Virginia. When she was about ten years old her family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where many of her novels and short stories are set. "I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything," she told an interviewer many years later. "It was a kind of erasure of personality."

Following her education at the University of Nebraska, where she at first studied medicine, Cather became a newspaperwoman and teacher in Pittsburgh. In 1906, she moved to New York City to work as an editor on*McClure's Magazine*. She eventually left journalism to devote herself to writing fiction full time. Her novels include **Alexander's Bridge** (1912), **O Pioneers!** (1913), **The Song of the Lark** (1915), **My Ántonia** (1918), **One of Ours** (1922), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, **A Lost Lady** (1923),**The Professor's House** (1925), **My Mortal Enemy** (1926), **Death Comes For the Archbishop** (1927), **Shadows on the Rock** (1931), **Lucy Gayheart**(1935), and **Sapphira and the Slave Girl** (1940).

Willa Cather died on April 24, 1947, in New York City.

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