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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: ANOTHER READING OF WILLA CATHER'S THE PROFESOR'S HOUSE

by

REBECCA BONACCHI

Under the Direction of Dr. Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

This project examines Cather's experimentation with conflicting voices of narrative authority in the presentation of four central female characters in The Professor's House, using St. Peter and an entity termed the implied narrator as lenses through which we view other characters. The project is broken down into four chapters, each dealing one addressing the central issues involving that specific female character.

INDEX WORDS: The Professor's House, Feminism, Willa Cather, Narratology, Point of view

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REBECCA BONACCHI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Nana whose love, support, and encouragement made this work and much more possible.

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I would like to acknowledge the direction of Drs. Audrey Goodman, Janet Gabler-Hover, and Nancy Chase. I could not have completed this work without their knowledge, and support.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Introduction.....1

Chapter 1: Augusta 12

Chapter 2: Lillian.....20

Chapter 3: Rosamond.....28

Chapter 4: Kathleen.....34

Chapter 5: The Closing.....41

Works Cited.....45

Introduction

Willa Cather was a prolific American modernist who authored novels, short stories, essays, and nonfiction works during the first half of the twentieth century. This project centers on *The Professor's House*, written in 1925, which Cather wrote halfway through her career. In this work, Cather presents a fictional account of Professor Godfrey St. Peter and his family. Nestled inside the St. Peter family drama is an account of young Tom Outland's discovery of the Blue Mesa. Cather presents these two story lines- the seemingly mundane events that comprise the lives of the St. Peter family and Outland's extraordinary adventure- in a way that makes the intersection of the two more critically compelling due to the juxtaposed subject matter. Tom's wild story of discovery and betrayal in America's southwest seems worlds away from the niceties observed by St. Peter and his family in their small Midwestern town. This startling juxtaposition was exactly what Cather wanted to achieve when she brought the two worlds together; in fact, this intentional experiment with writing is one of several that Cather skillfully incorporated into the text. My study examines several of the literary techniques with which Cather experimented when writing *The Professor's House.*

Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art includes a letter that Cather wrote to a friend describing her methodology in writing *The Professor's House*. She explains, "I wished to try two experiments in form. The first is the device often used by early French and Spanish novelists; that of inserting the *Nouvelle* into the *Roman*." Here Cather is describing why she tucked Tom's story into St. Peter's. The fact that Cather chose to insert Outland's discovery into the story of St. Peter's isn't just artistically pleasing; it also is critically compelling because it indicates that she took a premeditated, methodical approach to her writ-

ing. Cather experimented and took risks in the form and content of her novels because, like any good artist, she was honing her craft. This attention to art is relentlessly underscored both in the content and structure of her work to such an extent that the form of this novel lends much to my reading of it. There is another experiment in writing that Cather utilizes in crafting *The Professor's House* which I will discuss at length later as it frames my reading of the text.

Written in 1925, *The Professor's House* contains many elements that are seen throughout much of Cather's work, and thus it is often used as a prototype in Cather studies, with much analysis based on the fraught dynamic created by the diverse storylines. While many scholars focus exclusively on the relationship between St. Peter and Tom Outland, I choose to leave interpretations of their relationship to other more focused critiques. However, I do not wish to disregard the Outland connection entirely, as the inclusion of Tom's story at its basic level exemplifies the connection to the artistic process that Cather references in the above text. Viewing this work through another lens will add to our understanding of this rich and nuanced novel. I would like to examine the ways in which this novel is informed by Cather's devotion to artistic experimentation. My reading of *The Professor's House* focuses mainly on how the four women in St. Peter's life- his wife, Lillian, their two daughters, Rosamond and Kathleen, and the family seamstress, Augusta, are presented in the text.

The first source of information regarding these characters is St. Peter himself. Rather than considering the Professor to be the main character, I believe he should be viewed as a light that both exposes and distorts these characters in the same way that a candle illuminates and obscures other objects in its scope. Due to the duality of the candle's nature, St. Peter should be considered to be an unreliable narrator. Luckily, there is another voice in the text

that provides an unbiased account of the characters; we should think of this competing voice of narrative authority as the "implied narrator." In *Narrative Fiction,* Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes the implied narrator as "a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text." (88) This study attempts to explore the instances throughout the text in which St. Peter's account of the female characters around him differs from the account that can be gathered from the implied narrator. As Rimmon-Kenan points out, "the concept (of an implied narrator) is important and often crucial in determining the reader's attitude to such a major component as the narrator." (89) This is especially true in the case of St. Peter, since his position as titular character grants him narrative authority that might not be questioned by a non discriminating reader. St. Peter is not merely an unreliable narrator, though; his function in the text is more complex and linked to act of writing as a conscious process.

As stated, the character of St. Peter is both an unreliable narrator and a way for Cather to experiment with writing as a form of art. To understand the latter, it is helpful to read Cather's own explanation of experimentation included in *The Professor's House*:

> Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea. The feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on the waters of the globe- to Java, etc.

> In my book, I tried to make Professor St. Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies- until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland's face and in his behavior. (32)

While the above selection from *Willa Cather on Writing* is Cather's explanation of why she structured the novel so that St. Peter's story frames the seemingly unconnected story of Outland's discovery of the blue mesa, I think that Tom Outland is not the only facet of the novel that mimics the scene through the window. If we allow for the possibility that Cather implemented this experiment with the window for more than just the Professor and Tom, it can also explain the relationship between the Professor and the female characters in his life. If we posit that St. Peter is the stifling living room and his is perception the window through which we can glimpse the moving, mobile women whom I liken to the Dutch ships, then we can begin to catch a glimpse of the complexities of the dynamic between St. Peter and the women. To claim both that St. Peter is the stifling living room and the women vast ships is a valid reading when we examine the abundance of textual evidence that supports this theory.

St. Peter is physically the least mobile of all the characters; we learn almost immediately that although the old house is "almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be" (3) St. Peter hesitates to experience the "unpleasant effects of change" (7) related to the move. In fact, so strong is the professor's desire to remain in the same place that he breaks with normative behavior and rents the entire house for the sake of being able to remain in his attic room, an "extravagance" of which he feel fiercely protective. We also learn that his family moved west when

he was a boy, and that "St. Peter nearly died of it" (21). Furthermore, St. Peter is the only one of his family that cannot bear to travel to Europe, which we learn upon the family's discussion of the trip. That when he decided not to go Cather tells us, "St. Peter knew at that moment that he would never be one of this light-hearted expedition," (139) and this speaks to the depth of his rootedness in marked opposition to the family's mobility. Considering his reluctance to physically move and travel, St. Peter's character is in opposition to the ambulatory nature of the women, all of whom move frequently throughout the text.

In his text *Stuff of Sleep and Dreams: Experiments in Literary Psychology* Leon Edel offers the following description of St. Peter:

> He is a Gallic epicure isolated, like his garden, in surroundings to which he cannot ever wholly belong. He has had only one student in all the years of his teaching for whom he could feel affection: Tom Outland. He dislikes the new generation of students. He dislikes college politics. He has no real friends among his colleagues. He feels himself oppressed by the prosaic, mediocre world of the town of which his wife and daughters are so much a part. Commercial values have been exalted here over those he cherishes; the rich fabric of art related to the rich fabric of the old religion in which great cathedrals and the drama of Good and Evil exalted men to a high creativity. (203-204)

The above summation of St. Peter's existence conveys the deep sense of stagnation and distance that the professor experiences in every aspect of his life, from his university career, to his place in the community, and even within his own family. St. Peter reveals this sense of stagnation upon running into a colleague when he thinks, "They had both come there as young men, fighting for their places and their lives; now they were not very young anymore; they

would neither of them, probably, ever hold a better position. Couldn't Langtry see it was a draw, that they had both been beaten?"(45) This sense of defeatism- both against a specific opponent and generally within his academic career, shows how deeply St. Peter thinks himself rooted in his current unhappy state. It also evokes a sense of how deeply exhausted the professor feels. Thus, St. Peter can be said to be metaphorically immobile in addition to embodying a physical being that evidences a deep-seated reluctance to movement. As Edel points out, the one outlet that seems to provide St. Peter with any sort of solace is an affinity for an old world sort of art. However, although St. Peter prizes art for its intrinsic value in the way that Cather herself arguably did, it still does not provide him with enough of a sense of fulfillment to continue on with a life that he seems to think is devoid of purpose. It is this deep seated sense of defeat that leads to the exhaustion which results in St. Peter's near death.

In the novel's final chapter, we are presented with a scene that is foreshadowed at the beginning. The professor has spent an afternoon alone in his old house and is working in his attic study when the window to his study is blown shut by a gust of wind. The reader is already privy to the possibility of this event:

> There was no way to warm the sewing room, except by a rusty, round gas stove with no flue-a stove which consumed gas imperfectly and contaminated the air. To remedy this, the window must be left open-otherwise, with the ceiling so low, the air would speedily become unfit to breathe. If the stove were turned down, and the window left open little way, a sudden gust of wind would blow the wretched thing out altogether. (16-17)

The reader and St. Peter are also privy to the potentially disastrous consequences of such an occurrence, that "a deeply absorbed man might asphyxiate before he knew it" (17). So the win-

dow shutting without St. Peter noticing, the subsequent toxic room and St. Peter's collapse seem to be a rather inevitable course of events for a man who is retreating from the world. That the study, with its "single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook on the sill," (7) resembles the room in the Dutch paintings is no coincidence. More telling, however, is that fact that the culmination of the novel's action, and of St. Peter's depression, is in fact inaction. When the window to the exterior is shut by a gust of wind very much like the ones that power those Dutch ship masts, St. Peter cannot rouse himself off the couch to save his own life, asking of the universe, "How far was a man required to exert himself against accident? How would such a case be decided under English law? He hadn't lifted a hand against himself- was he required to lift it for himself?" (252). That St. Peter almost dies for a lack of air and being reluctant to move, to "exert himself," is no coincidence, but yet another piece of evidence in the case for St. Peter as a stifling/ stifled presence. The deep depression that he evidences in this situation is conveyed with little fanfare, yet resonates deeply with the view of St. Peter as a disillusioned and broken man hinted at throughout the rest of the novel.

In opposition to St. Peter's stagnation are the women in his life who, throughout the text, experience a fluid mobility comparative to those Dutch masts Cather was drawn to. Rosemary and Lillian are at varied points in the process of moving into newer larger homes, which shows their willingness to be physical and their ability to move through something less tangible, like socioeconomic status. Even though St. Peter moves houses, his resistance to the move is in marked opposition to Lillian's wholehearted endorsement of the new home. Kathleen is often described as being in motion, with her and Scott traveling to and from the Professor's house. We learn that Augusta is mobile as well because she travels for a living sewing for other families

in the community. And while St. Peter once was an ambulatory character- there are repeated references to his travels in France, for example- his former ability to move makes a more marked contrast to who he has become.

Although it seems fairly clear that St. Peter is the Dutch room, there is the compelling question of why, if Cather's intent was to write about the female characters in the novel, she entrusted a male narrator with this task. Although this work is looking at the issue of male narrative authority from a slightly different angle, it is helpful to consider this issue of female subjectivity in *The Professor's House* within the context of the larger academic debate that has raged in Cather scholarship.

In her text*, Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism,* Joan Acocella does an exemplary job of chronologically tracking the critical conversation in Cather scholarship. Although Acocella charts the critical conversation from Cather's time to ours, it is two of her chapters that fall midway through the timeline that are most pertinent to our discussion. They are titled, "Cather and the Feminists: The Problem" and "Cather and the Feminists: The Solution." Before the feminists got a hold of Cather, however, there were several decades that saw a political battle waged through her work. In her time, according to Acocella, Willa Cather was first, "condescended to in the twenties" (24) by the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Edmund Wilson, before being "attacked head on" (24) in the next decade by the growing contingent of young, mostly Marxist critics. This tug of war had little to do with Cather's writing and much to do with whether it promoted a particular side's political agenda. Acocella summed up this time period by writing that Cather "wrote twelve novels, most of them about the great subject of early twentieth- century literature, the gulf between the mind and the world, and they were judged

by her most energetic critics according to whether they embraced or opposed the struggle of industrial workers in the cities" (29). Acocella describes the criticism of the following two decades as, "small and taxidermic," (32) and as "her Rushmoresque period," (35) with Cather scholarship remaining "a small backwater" (35). With the feminists Cather fared no better. First having touted her as an emblem for their cause, the feminists were dismayed by Cather's choice to place male narrators between the reader and the characters in the story, just as she did with Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*. This was problematic for feminist theorists so they came up with what Acocella termed "the unreliable-narrator school of Cather criticism" (41) which basically posits that Cather's male narrators expressed patriarchal views only so Cather's texts could subversively condemn these views. Acocella seems to think that this explanation is not sufficient enough to explain Cather's penchant for male narration; as she points out, "if her contemporaries misread her, failing to notice her sustained attack on the patriarchy, why had she never corrected them?" (43) Acocella's point is valid to a degree; Willa Cather hardly seems the type of woman who would have meekly sat by while her work was misinterpreted. But Acocella's assessment lacks her explanation of why Cather chose to write from the male point of view. I think that in the case of *The Professor's House*, Cather was not trying and failing to criticize the patriarchy, instead she was trying to experiment with competing voices of narrative authority.

It is not just in her writings that she experimented with these issues of authoritative voice. Cather herself exhibited traits that were generally considered to be masculine during her time. In *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, Edel summarizes Cather's experimentation in the below selection:

> In her high-school days she wore her hair shingled, shorter than many of the boys. Her clothes and hats were also boyish: a standard starched shirt, a tie, and a hat almost like a boy's. She did not care to be called Willa; many of her friends used Willie, but to this she preferred Will or Billie; and it gave her a particular satisfaction when a perceptive, appreciative person would call her Dr. Will. (48)

It stands to reason that if Cather felt comfortable experimenting with masculine behaviors in life, then we would also see experimentation with a masculine voice in her art. What is unique about *The Professor's House* is the way in which the masculine voice of St. Peter works with and against the gender neutral voice of the implied narrator. In *Domesticity and Design in American Women's Lives and Literature*, Caroline Chamberlin Hellman points out that "Gilbert and Gubar's notions of doubles and surrogates in nineteenth century women's writing seem to resonate particularly with Cather, with regard to both her sometime male identity as William and her fictional self-representations" (57). This suggested preoccupation with doubles or surrogates speaks to why Cather chose St. Peter as her lens and helps to explain the contradiction found in portraying a female though a male lens while contrasting his voice with a neutral- gender implied narrator.

Added to the complex issue of narrative authority is an issue in Cather's work that Acocella refers to when she writes, "If there is one theme that Cather, in her mature work, states more often than any other, it is that most important truths about life can never be spoken, only hinted at" (13). In fact, the art of allusion is something that Cather carefully cultivated in her craft. Scholars repeatedly reference Cather's practice of carefully cultivating in her novels

"the thing not named" which plays out in *The Professor's House* in the intersections in which the voice of St. Peter and the voice of the aforementioned implied narrator are intertwined.

Let us consider St. Peter in these two functions: as a light which simultaneously illuminates and obscures the four pivotal female characters and more subtly as a way for Cather to experiment with voices of narrative authority. Always keeping in mind Cather's attention to writing as an art form, we can embark upon a study of these women as seen through the lens that is St. Peter, and as they are presented and judged by the constructed implied narrator who completes and competes with the voice of St. Peter.

Chapter 1: Augusta

Because Augusta, the St. Peter family seamstress, is the first woman that Cather introduces in the text, she will also introduce our study of St. Peter's interactions with women. Since she is such a presence in the Professor's life, there are several interactions between the two in which competing voices of narrative authority work with and against each other to inform the relationship between Augusta and St. Peter. An examination of how this process of narration works in this particular relationship illuminates a larger theme throughout the text- of the act of writing as being a deliberate, developmental process. Since the competitive voices of narrative authority are woven so closely into the storyline, it is only when we pay attention to this novel as a work of art that we can begin to understand Cather's preoccupation with the artistic process of writing. Interestingly, while Augusta works for the St. Peter family, she does so in a place reserved for the Professor- a room of *their* own, as it were- where both St. Peter and Augusta practice their particular art. The emphasis on Augusta's work as being the vehicle that links her to the St. Peter family further underscores the importance of the development of art throughout this novel. Also, putting Augusta in a position that is both separate from and intrinsically linked to the St. Peter family allows Cather to utilize another avenue in the interplay of St. Peter's voice versus the implied narrator's voice.

The reader learns immediately that the Professor "shared his cuddy with Augusta, the sewing-woman, niece of his old landlord, a reliable, methodical spinster, a German Catholic and very devout." (8) We know this to be the voice of the implied narrator, and not St. Peter's inner thoughts and so we can trust that this is an accurate, unbiased description of Augusta. The juxtaposition of Augusta working mainly under Lillian's direction in the same space as the profes-

sor not only creates an interesting dynamic but it also establishes Augusta as outside of the patriarchy, ensuring she and St. Peter enjoy a relationship free from the normative rules of behavior that govern his relations with his wife and daughters. The Professor observes appropriate behavior with his family seamstress as well; their interactions are so remote from impropriety, in fact, that from the implied narrator we learn "Augusta enjoyed the Professor when he was risqué, since she was so sure of his ultimate delicacy" (9). His impropriety is usually centered around asking Augusta teasing questions about her religion. One such exchange prompted the response that "Augusta grew red, and tried to look angry, but her laugh narrowly missed being a giggle." (15) But what is it about their relationship that causes the Professor to have such leeway with the family seamstress when he seems so staunchly concerned with correctness elsewhere? It must have something to do with Augusta herself.

In their text, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar assign to Augusta a host of qualities, claiming that "Rigorous in her dedication to the Virgin Mary, Augusta represents not the mastery of men, but the mystery of women," (209) implying that there is an old-world femininity in the seamstress. Later in the same text, Gilbert and Gubar expound on the topic of Augusta's feminine mystique by claiming, "Augusta herself- a solitary and spiritual creator of contemporary patterns- seems to represent an earlier and almost mystical female wisdom, all that is left from the self-reliance of her predecessors, Alexandria and Antonia" (210). However, I would argue that there is neither an explicit mention of these feminine wiles through St. Peter's point of view nor an implicit suggestion of the same through the implied narrator. While it is true that Augusta is devout, her religious education is stripped of mystery, as she repeatedly discusses religious issues with the

Professor in a matter of fact manner and evidences a practical attitude toward death. At no point in the text is there a hint of "mythical female wisdom". If anything, Augusta seems more grounded and less given to flights of fancy than the rest of the St. Peter family, including the Professor himself. It is probably more accurate to say that Augusta is afforded a sense of respect from the Professor, not from some archaic concept of female wisdom, but the fact that she successfully practices her art alongside his.

Although what the two "do" is very different, St. Peter's art being that of writing and teaching, and Augusta's dressmaking, both succeed in their respective practices. Augusta made a career out of successfully clothing the female St. Peters, and the Professor, "By eliminations and combinations so many and subtle that it now made his head ache to think of them…had done full justice to his university lectures, and at the same time carried on a piece of creative work" (19). The difference in the art is typified in the art that Cather describes in the following passage from *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as Art:*

> Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand- a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods- or it should be an art, which is always a search for something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values. (103)

Augusta's dressing making is the same kind of necessary and commendable art as that of making soap. For the professor's part, while his *Spanish Adventures in North America* eventually paid off monetarily, there were years where very few people took notice of his work: "For all the interest the first three volumes awoke in the world, he might as well have dropped them into Lake Michigan… Nobody saw that he was trying to do something quite different- they

merely thought he was trying to do the usual thing, and had not succeeded very well" (22). This type of writing is clearly commensurate with Cather's view of writing as art- the professor's work did not follow the standardized values that were accepted in his academic community. It is the fact that both practice some form of production and share a work space in which "patterns and manuscripts interpenetrated" (13), separate from the "harrowing" house that requires of him domestic duties which take him away from his intellectual pursuits and other interests, that makes the Professor have an unusual sense of respect for Augusta.

Augusta's work is the thing which links her to the St. Peter household, and so any discussion of her would be remiss if it didn't introduce the topic of Augusta's two sewing figures: the bust and the wire lady. They are introduced in the reader's first meeting with Augusta, and thus the two (Augusta and her figures) are as inextricably linked in the mind of the reader as they must be for Professor St. Peter, for whom they have quite an impact. In his text titled, *Willa Cather and the Art of Conflict*, Patrick W. Shaw claims that:

> Through the forms he (St. Peter) can endorse conventional male-female sexuality without having to confront the private realities which such relationships demand and which his wife and daughters personify. Even when he transfers his interest in the forms to their caretaker Augusta, the relationship does not move beyond minor titillations and inconsequential jests. (122)

There is abundant textual evidence that supports Shaw's theory that St. Peter views Augusta as a distinctly asexual figure. Several times throughout the text, St. Peter refers to Augusta in ways that convey her lack of femininity: when she surprises him by entering a room, St. Peter is astonished "that he had not heard her heavy, deliberate tread on the now uncarpeted

stair!" (10) He describes her as being "tall, large-boned, flat and stiff, with a plain, solid face, and brown eyes not destitute of fun… with hands that folded and unfolded like umbrellas" (14). Through St. Peter's description of Augusta as an unfeminine character, the reader is presented with a figurehead who contrasts sharply with the feminine figures of his wife and daughters who are represented by the sewing figures. Gilbert and Gubar explain that, "In their mechanical fakery as they are tricked up in new party dresses, they are suitable emblems of the feminine for an intellectual who identifies with Euripides" (210). Their interpretation speaks to the fact that there is something in the text that insinuates that St. Peter is made uncomfortable by femininity. This is not a sentiment of which St. Peter himself is aware, so it becomes the role of the implied narrator to make this suggestion to the reader. Through his relationship with Augusta, St. Peter comes into contact with her sewing figures, and it is in these figures that the implied narrator in the text most clearly demonstrates St. Peter's discomfort with issues of sexuality and femininity that Gilbert and Gubar and Shaw mentioned in their interpretations.

The first of these two figures to be described is the bust in the following excerpt from *The Professor's House*:

> The one which Augusta called "the bust" stood in the darkest corner of the room, upon a high wooden chest in which blankets and winter wraps were yearly stored. It was a headless, armless female torso, covered with strong black cotton, and so richly developed in the part for which it was named that the Professor once explained to Augusta how, in calling it so, she followed a natural law of language, termed, for convenience, metonymy. (9)

In my reading of the text, one of the most significant things about this passage is the Professor's enjoyment in explaining to Augusta that she is practicing metonymy in naming her figure the bust. The Professor's use of the linguistic term firmly establishes his comfort with language, which is significant because he is a figure tasked with describing and analyzing the behavior of others, and as the titular character, he is given a significant amount of narrative authority. It also establishes that St. Peter possesses a certain kind of academic knowledge that he is privy to where Augusta is not which further underscores his legitimacy as an authoritative figure.

Augusta is not the only character who practices metonymy in regard to the bust- the Professor does so as well. In *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Raman Selden explains that "in its broad sense, metonymy involves the shift from one element in a sequence to another, or one element in a context to another: we refer to a *cup* of something (meaning its *contents*); the *turf* (for *racing*); a fleet of a hundred *sails* (for *ships*)…" (73). Use of the term metonymy indicates that for St. Peter, Augusta's "bust" conveys more than just the actual physical specimen upon which fabric is measured. Further on in the same text, Selden notes that "metonymy requires a *context* for its operation… Realism speaks of its objects by offering the reader aspects, parts, and contextual details, in order to evoke a whole" (73).

For St. Peter, the bust does not merely represent a physical part of female anatomy, but it is linked to the physical figures of his wife and daughters due to its use as a stand in for their figures. It is clear just how closely the bust stands with the girls in St. Peter's mind because he is always unpleasantly surprised when he encounters the cold hard surface of the bust, having imagined it being somewhat different; "For no matter how often you had bumped up against

that torso, you could never believe that contact with it would be as bad as it was" (9). Written in St. Peter's tone, his disgust with the bust indicates the sense of unease St. Peter feels regarding the female form. His reaction also implies there may be a difference between St. Peter's concept of the ideal wife and the actuality of Lillian as a physical being.

The other feminine figure that St. Peter desires to have in his office is the wire lady. About her we learn, "At times the wire lady was most convincing in her pose as a woman of light behavior, but she had never fooled St. Peter. He had his blind spots, but he had never been taken in by one of her kind!" (10) The function of this passage in the novel is two-fold: it conveys St. Peter's sense of antagonism toward a certain "kind" of woman, and it establishes that St. Peter (who we rely on to see and convey truth), is blind to certain truths linked to seeing women accurately. The implied narrator seems to be making a bit of a joke on St. Peter's behalf; something about his self righteous assurance that he'd never been "taken in" by a certain kind of woman (represented here by a wire construct) makes St. Peter seem petty and small minded. As Rimmon-Kenan explains, "Interpretations often provide information not only about their direct object but also about the interpreter" (100). When St. Peter claims to never be taken in by the wire lady, we can read this as the implied narrator making a gentle joke on St. Peter's behalf, and we learn something about St. Peter himself.

Thus, St. Peter can in some ways address Augusta on the level of equal because he does not see her as the sexual figure that his wife once was, or the feminine figures that his daughters are. This is why, even though St. Peter perceives Augusta to be below him, he allows Augusta's life work to intertwine with his, while he avoids the duties (such as the running of the household) of his shared life with Lillian. In fact, his study is both the place of his and Augusta's

shared workspace, and “the one place in the house where he could get isolation, insulation from the engaging drama of domestic life. No one was trampling over him, and only a vague sense, generally pleasant, of what went on below came up the narrow stairway” (16). To St. Peter, Augusta is a comforting presence because she represents both physically and with her forms, a non-sexual female and an escape from domestic duties. In some ways, St. Peter treats Augusta, “the sewing-woman, niece of his old landlord, a reliable, methodical spinster” (8) with more consideration and generosity than he extends to his own wife.

Chapter 2: Lillian

One of the main narrative strands threading throughout *The Professor's House* is the fraught marriage of Lillian and Godfrey St. Peter. Typically, critics seem to think of St. Peter as a stand-in for Cather herself, and so attribute St. Peter's sentiments to Cather. This theory is not completely without merit; as Acocella points out, "the traits that supposedly disqualified Cather's male narrators and protagonists were her traits as well. Romanic, elegiac, attached to ideal forms, besotted with Virgil, deeply read in classical literature and given to alluding to it-Cather was all these things, and she believed in them" (42-43). These characteristics could describe either the professor or Cather. Even Hermione Lee, who firmly states at the beginning of her chapter on *The Professor's House* that the professor is "thoroughly imagined, not merely a transparent 'stand-'in' for Cather," (225) undoes her separation of the two by listing, a mere three pages later, all the ways in which "Cather also embodies herself, as she has done before, and will again, in her objectified male character" (228). Lee cites the fact that in the professor Cather creates a character that is her age, was unhappily uprooted from a childhood home, treasured positive memories from abroad, and experienced challenges in his writing life, as evidence of the fact that Cather has written herself into the character of St. Peter. However, it is too simplistic to assume that St. Peter is just a sound piece for Cather's own critiques; to do so is to ignore the subtleties of Cather's narrative technique which skillfully intertwines the point of view of St. Peter with the understated but pervasive voice of the implied narrator. Both the voice of the implied narrator and the voice of St. Peter should be viewed as two different vantage points of the same image. By recognizing and examining the picture of the subject provided by competing narrative authorities, a more complete picture is formed. This complex rela-

tionship of narrative authority is woven throughout the text, but manifests most clearly in scenes with Lillian and Godfrey St. Peter. Rimmon- Kenan explains that "The main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme" (101). In the case of Lillian and Godfrey, St. Peter falls into the second category, becoming an unreliable narrator because he cannot be objective about his marriage.

The following scene from *The Professor's House* is one that showcases how skilled Cather is at navigating between the voice of St. Peter and the omniscient voice of the implied narrator. St. Peter has just returned home after an afternoon spent gardening at his old house to find his wife Lillian and son-in-law Louie bent over a casket of jewels. The implied narrator relates that St. Peter "left the walk and cut across the turf, intending to enter by the open French window, but he paused a moment outside to admire the scene within" (61). Not only is Cather oscillating between St. Peter's point of view and that of the implied narrator, but she is also experimenting with the scope that she allows each of these entities. At the start, the scene is expansive in that we see St. Peter on his homeward path before the scope narrows to focus on the scene that the Professor sees through the window frame. The act of St. Peter as an outside observer looking through the window into the tableau of Lillian and Louie highlights his role as an observer in the drama. Concurrently, the shift from wide to narrow scope at the beginning of the scene mirrors the change in perspective that is presented as we shift from observing St. Peter's actions to observing Lillian through his eyes.

In the scene that St. Peter is observing, Lillian and her son-in-law Louie are examining an old necklace without stones to which Louie has apparently just suggested adding emeralds. Lillian replies "'Of course emeralds would be beautiful Louie, but they seem a little out of scale-

to belong to a different scheme of life than any you and Rosamond can live here. You aren't, after all, outrageously rich. Where would she wear them?'" (61-62). In this small exchange, Lillian is shown to be realistic while the worst that could be said of Louie is that he is perhaps too grandiose. However, Louie makes short work of convincing Lillian that emeralds would be appropriate, and we learn that "Mrs. St. Peter smiled, easily persuaded" (62) which shows both her natural tendency to be realistic but also the capability for pleasurable excitement on behalf of another. My reading interprets this exchange in a positive light while other critics have taken a different viewpoint; Hermione Lee refers to Lillian and Louie leaning over the casket of jewels when citing a list of why St. Peter's family represent "the corrupt, sexualized world… seen in dramas of greed and malice" (227). Lee's reading seems to be informed by St. Peter's interpretations of his wife and son-in-law's behavior, and does not take into account that a close reading of the text actually shows Louie's generosity and Lillian's excitement. St. Peter himself only chooses to enter the scene after Louie exuberantly refers to a secret kept between himself and Lillian. We have been viewing the scene though the lens of St. Peter at the window, but now that "St. Peter swung in over the window rail" (62) saying, "That's always the husband's cue to enter, isn't it?" (62) the scope of the scene widens to include St. Peter in its lens -a change in perspective that should also alert the reader to a shift in narrative authority. No longer an outside party to the scene, St. Peter's constant entrances and exits serve to show that he cannot be an impartial observer and is probably an unreliable narrator. This becomes especially important when at the end of the scene when Cather switches back into St. Peter's point of view.

We learn that "As he went up the stairs he turned at the bend of the staircase and looked back at them, again bending over their little box" (63). This movement is clearly relayed

by the voice of the novel, but then the text immediately dives into the voice of Professor St. Peter:

> Mrs. St. Peter was wearing the white silk crepe that had been the most successful of her summer dresses, and an orchid velvet ribbon about her shining hair. She wouldn't have made herself look quite so well if Louie hadn't been coming, he reflected. Or was it that he wouldn't have noticed it if Louie hadn't been there? A man long accustomed to admire his wife in general, seldom pauses to admire her in a particular gown or attitude, unless his attention is directed to her by the appreciative gaze of another man. (63)

Not only does the use of the word "successful" seem to indicate a degree of derision on the Professor's part towards his wife's endeavors of dressing and socializing, but he also shares a keen insight into the human psyche with his thought regarding tendencies of married men. This coupling of derision paired with startling insight is a key element in the Professor's persona, and it speaks volumes when he directs this coupling of contempt and understanding toward his relationship with his wife. In this case we learn that while St. Peter may think Lillian to be frivolous, he also appreciates how good she is at her work. St. Peter's acknowledgement of the fact that his perception of Lillian is influenced by outside forces (like Louie's presence) also underscores his unreliability as a narrator. The exchange between Lillian, Louie, and Godfrey indicates that St. Peter cannot accurately see and thus cannot reliably assess his wife- and he has enough self introspection to realize this. Although I agree with Acocella's assessment that there is more at work in Cather's fiction than St. Peter being an unreliable narrator, the question of narrative authority is one that is at play throughout the text especially in instances such as this one.

Cather subtly but firmly reinforces St. Peter's double function throughout the text while also portraying a different Lillian through the voice of the novel. St. Peter's function as an observer is constantly underscored in scenes like this during dinner when the Professor "studied his wife's face through the candlelight"(66) in which the element of St. Peter looking at Lillian by candlelight illuminates the Professor's unreliable perception of his wife. This setup demonstrates how St. Peter both observes and interacts with Lillian, and thusly cannot be an impartial observer in the way that the novel presents facts about Lillian.

In fact, a close reading of the text hints at some sympathy toward Lillian herself. In *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up*, Hermione Lee writes, "Lillian suffers in her own way from the failed marriage, and at moments her interior life is sharply and surprisingly felt. When the husband and wife are watching Mignon at the Chicago Opera, it is not only St. Peter who sadly remembers their Paris courtship" (227). Lee is referring to a moment in which the St. Peters come close to acknowledging their shared loss but she is also drawing attention to a shift in narrative authority when Lillian's interior life is thrown into stark relief. This shift is notable for Lee because we learn about Lillian's interior through the voice of the implied narrator, and although subtle, it is vastly different from the voice of St. Peter. The scene that Lee references is one in which the couple has been out at a weekend jaunt in Chicago and are watching the Opera. St. Peter turns to Lillian and notices that she is emotionally moved. "There was something lonely and forgiving in her voice, something that spoke of an old wound, healed and hardened and hopeless. 'You, you too?' he breathed in amazement" (78). This tender scene stops short of showing reconciliation, but it demonstrates a softening for both of the parties, and the acknowledgement from St. Peter that "The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter

how close it has been to one's own," (78) indicating St. Peter realizes there are things about his wife that he cannot understand.

Although Lee writes about this shared moment, there is a dearth of criticism that examines the actions from Lillian's point of view. In a novel where narrative authority is so tightly contested, it is important to acknowledge the instances where Lillian's voice is clearly heard. In one of the only texts that espouses a sympathetic reading of Lillian, "This is a Frame-Up: Mother Eve in *The Professor's House,"* Jean Schwind points out, "While St. Peter dismisses his wife's criticism of Outland as provoked by jealousy, Cather's text subtly supports Lillian's reservations about her husband's student"(84). Schwind uses the term Cather's text to describe what I have termed the implied narrator. I will elaborate on this argument further, but it suffices to show that there are critical readings that support Lillian's vocalizations.

There are numerous incidents where an off-hand remark or thought shows that St. Peter may not be the ideal husband, and thus, Lillian's behavior alone cannot be cited as the reason for their estrangement. For example, when we learn about St. Peter's garden, it is in the context that he started working on it, "soon after the birth of his first daughter, when his wife began to be unreasonable about his spending so much time at the lake and on the tennis court" (5-6). This comment, written in the Professor's voice, shows that his wife is understandably unhappy with the amount of time her husband invests in solitary pursuits after the birth of their first child. St. Peter's disregard for his wife's feelings is shown in the way that he first notes her behavior as being unreasonable then switches from one hobby to another, discounting his wife's feelings. The couple's interpretations of each other's physical appearance is an issue as well. Several instances in the text show St. Peter reflecting cruelly on Lillian's physical appear-

ance, yet Lillian tells her husband “No, you are very handsome, my dear, especially in your bathrobe. You grow better looking and more intolerant all the time” (25). This is one of the few instances in the text when Lillian’s voice is given agency in her critique of his personality. St. Peter’s reaction to Lillian’s judgment is immediate; he looks up at her in surprise and thinks, “The thing that stuck in his mind constantly is that she was growing more and more intolerant, about everything except her sons-in-law; that she would probably continue to do so, and that he must school himself to bear it” (25). Since this novel is so concerned with whose truth is valid, it is especially interesting that both characters seem to find the other one becoming more intolerant. However, a close reading of the text shows that while Lillian may occasionally judge her husband, asking “Oh Godfrey, how can you be such a poor judge of your own behavior?” (25), most of Lillian’s insightful criticisms about her husband are tempered by tenderness. When St. Peter chooses not to accompany his family on the trip to Europe, Lillian asks him, “What is it, Godfrey? I can’t see any change in your face, though I watch you so closely. It’s in your mind, you mood. Something has come over you. Is it merely that you know too much, I wonder? Too much to be happy? You were always the wisest person in the world. What is it, can’t you tell me?” (142). During this exchange, both characters are portrayed from the implied narrator’s point of view since neither is shown through the eyes of the other character. In this case, Lillian is being considerate, discerning, and concerned for her husband, even though their marriage is obviously strained. She also exhibits concern for him when St. Peter returns, defeated, from a shopping trip with his elder daughter. He is upset with Rosemary’s behavior and we learn that Lillian’s “heart ached for Godfrey” (136).

Contrasted with this sentiment is St. Peter's statement when Lillian asks him what he is thinking. St. Peter replies, "I was thinking… 'about Euripides; how, when he was an old man, he went and lived in a cave by the sea, and it was thought queer, at the time. It seems that houses had become insupportable to him. I wonder whether it was because he had observed women so closely all his life'" (136). Since the chapter ends there, Lillian is not even given a chance to respond to St. Peter, so once again, it is only St. Peter's comment that is heard. Lillian may very well have retorted that perhaps Euripides' family was much better off without his negativity. And indeed, it is not only miscommunication that causes the reader to feel the disregard St. Peter has for his wife, for when he thinks about what day he would have chosen as his last day on earth, "he found the perfect day, but his wife was not in it"(79).

Throughout *The Professor's House*, it is clear that Cather is experimenting with how to convey voices of narrative authority that compete with and inform each other. This makes character analysis complicated, and can be problematic if critics and readers interpret St. Peter's perception as Cather's, leading to misreadings like the one that is presented in Lee's *Willa Cather and the Art of Conflict*:

> Though much has been made of Cather's anti-feminism in the novel, her sentiments seem less anti-feminine and more the sublimated disappointments of a women whose erotic relationships had not proven gratifying. The "real" women in the narrative (with the possible exception of Augusta) are collectively unappealing, given to superficialities, jealousy and greed, thereby suggesting the values for which natural human affections have been bartered. Not only may women such as Lillian and her daughters serve to

> personify similar traits which she feared in herself, but they may serve also to personify the disappointments Cather experienced in other females. (122-123)

In the quote above, Lee reads the negative feeling St. Peter exhibits for his wife as the outlet for disappointments that Cather herself may have experienced in her personal life. The problem with this reading is that reads too much into the author's biography and assumes that St. Peter's perception of Lillian is the same as Cather's without considering the fact that St. Peter's estimation of Lillian and the implied narrator's view of her differ. Throughout the text, Lillian is presented in a much more sympathetic light by the implied narrator than the one that St. Peter provides. The reading of St. Peter as Cather is particularly troubling since he seems to be an unreliable narrator because his opinion differs from others, as in this instance when Cather tells her readers in St. Peter's voice, "That worldliness, that willingness to get the most out of occasions and people, which had developed so strongly in Lillian in the past few years, seemed to Louie as natural and proper as it seemed unnatural to Godfrey" (140). That both men look at the same aspect of Lillian's behavior and view it differently hints to more about the men themselves than Lillian. Again, there is the suggestion that we can glean more about the men in their judgment of women than we learn about the woman herself. St. Peter's assessment shows that he tends to be rather ungenerous in his estimation of people, while Louie's shows him to be too forgiving of faults, Thus, we get insight into the characters of Godfrey and Louie while learning that the truth of Lillian's behavior exists somewhere between the two men's estimation of her, making Lillian a more nuanced and realistic character than St. Peter would have us believe. His biased perception of Lillian does not stop him from making judgments, however. St. Peter looks at his wife and thinks:

> With her really radiant charm, she had a very interesting mind- but it was quite wrong to call it mind, the connotation was false. What she had was a richly endowed nature that responded strongly to life and art, and very vehement likes and dislikes which were often quite all out of proportion to the trivial object or person that aroused them. Before his marriage, and for years afterward, Lillian's prejudices, her divinations about people and art (always instinctive and unexplained, but nearly always right), were the most interesting things in St. Peter's life. (38)

That Lillian's opinions once were the most important things in St. Peter's life inherently implies that this is no longer the case and thus something in their relationship dynamic has shifted. Since the tone of this passage sounds like St. Peter, it should be understood that it's St. Peter who has changed by discarding what he once treasured in his wife's estimation of life and art. If his perception of Lillian has changed, then St. Peter's reliability as a narrative authority is undercut. He also employs a mix of compliment and insult, implying that Lillian is unintelligent before calling her nature "richly endowed," and somehow managing to convey a sense that her strong inclinations were quite petty, although he grudgingly notes that they were also valid. St. Peter is not an unreliable narrator just because his perceptions change, however. As Jean Schwind points out in the excerpt below, St. Peter is also guilty of omitting pertinent information regarding his life with Lillian:

> Nowhere explicitly mentioned, the expense of the life-style that makes St. Peter's literary pursuits possible is everywhere implied in *The Professor's House*… That happy married life subsidized by Lillian's income includes the luxury of time for writing and research (St. Peter not only has the summers to himself while his wife and daughters vaca-

> tion in Colorado but also enjoys a three-year leave of absence from teaching while working on his books) and domestic comforts important to St. Peter's sense of well-being (he is able, for example, to indulge his predilection for foreign imports: Spanish sherry, Italian wine and cheeses, French swimming visitors, and Irish linen). 81-82

This failure to disclose information about their marriage and life together makes St. Peter rather suspect source in the attempt to glean a comprehensive picture of Lillian. Paired with his obvious estrangement that borders on distain and his self-acknowledged lapses in observation, it is fairly clear that St. Peter is a lens that distorts the image of his wife. A closer reading of the text that includes both textual clues from the implied narrator and the rare but pertinent glimpses into Lillian's psyche should be paired with St. Peter's estimation in order to fully interpret the character of Lillian St. Peter as a flawed but generous woman.

Chapter 3: Rosamond

Rosamond Marsellus is the St. Peters' elder daughter, and perhaps the fact that she "resembled her mother in feature" (26) contributes to the tension evidenced in Rosamond's relationship with St. Peter. Of course, Rosamond's behavior surely negatively affects their relationship as well, but throughout the text, there are several subtle but distinct references to the fact that St. Peter's assessment of his daughter's physical appearance differs, in a negative way, from the way Rosamond's beauty is perceived by everyone else. The implied narrator tells the reader that "In the low room she seemed very tall indeed, a little out of drawing, as, to her father's eye, she so often did. Usually, however, people were aware only of her rich complexion, her curving, unresisting mouth and mysterious eyes. Tom Outland had seen nothing else, and he was a young man who saw a great deal" (46-47.) We also learn that Tom's perception of Rosamond's beauty differs from her father's in that Tom seems to only see the beauty in her figure. Again, this is more of a reflection on Tom's idealistic personally which is drawn toward beauty than a comment on Rosamond's appearance. For St. Peter, though, the explanation of why certain flaws were highlighted is more complex. It seems counterintuitive for a father to have a heightened perception as opposed to a blind spot in regard to his daughter's physical flaws, unless there are other mitigating factors affecting his assessment such as misplaced resentment towards his wife.

As it turns out, the issue of Rosamond's beauty gets a significant amount of attention in the text and in critical commentary. In "Outland Over There: Cather's Cosmopolitan West," Geneva M. Gano makes the following comment in regard to Rosamond's suitors Tom Outland and Louie Marsellus; "Perhaps what these men see in Rosie is quite obvious: her beauty. Though the

men are both engineers- men of science whose attention to function is supposed to outstrip their attention to form- they have in common an eye for the beautiful" (102). Although it is a bit of stretch for Gano to highlight the fact that both men were engineers, it is true that both fell in love with and proposed to Rosamond, and as Louie and Tom are different from each other in almost every other way, for them to find a common bond in Rosamond's beauty further reinforces the general notion that Rosamond's beauty is universally accepted by everyone- except for her father. Gano's comment is important also because it puts an emphasis on perception as reality; her use of the word "eye" calls attention to the issue of how perception is connected to truth, which Cather weaves throughout the text, and by using the pronoun "the" before beautiful, Gano objectifies Rosamond. When, like in the case of Rosamond's beauty, St. Peter's perception blatantly differs from the norm, Cather is clearly trying to draw the reader's attention to the discrepancy in St. Peter's viewpoint. Consider the excerpt below of St. Peter's perception of his daughter's physical appearance:

> Her father, though he was proud of her, demurred from the general opinion. He thought her too tall, with a rather awkward carriage. She stooped a trifle, and was wide in the hips and shoulders. She had, he sometimes remarked to her mother, exactly the wide femur and flat shoulder-blade of his old slab-sided Kanuck grandfather. For a tree-hewer they were an asset. But St. Peter was very critical.

The description of Rosamond's "wide femur" and "flat shoulder-blade" emphasizes the physically masculine traits that her father finds unappealing. From the beginning, the implied narrator makes it clear that St. Peter is essentially alone in his negative assessment of Rosamond's beauty by cluing the reader into the fact that "Nearly everyone considered Rosamond brilliantly

beautiful" (26). Because his assessment is not only different but cruel, the reader should understand the light in which St. Peter views his daughter to be biased and unreliable. St. Peter's snide remarks regarding Rosamond's shoulders point toward more than a slight resentment toward his daughter- and possibly to his wife, whom Rosamond is said to resemble. The text does not show Lillian answering St. Peter, although there are repeated references to Rosamond's beauty by other characters. Since we know that Rosamond favors her mother in some ways physically and that St. Peter believes Lillian has a special affinity for her first born; according to St. Peter, "Lillian always worked things out for Rosamond," (53) some of St. Peter's negativity towards his daughter may be misplaced resentment for her mother.

Earlier I mentioned that Rosamond's behavior, and not just her connection to her mother, could be a source of her father's antagonism. There are two instances in which Rosamond's interactions with St. Peter show her in an unflattering light either by St. Peter or by the implied narrator. In the first, the reader is not privy to the events, but they are later hinted at by St. Peter to his wife. He has just returned home from a shopping expedition with his elder daughter, looking, "absolutely flattened out and listless" (133) and obviously exhausted. Rosamond had asked her father to accompany her on a trip to Chicago for the purposes of assessing a shipment of Spanish furniture and rugs which, according to St. Peter, turned into, "an orgy of acquisition" (135). This is one of the notable times in the text when St. Peter's perception of the situation seems to jibe with others around him. The shopping trip with Rosamond was clearly a trying experience for St. Peter, and the way in which Rosamond coolly and methodically spent money on acquiring things for herself without gracefully offering to offset her father's expenses in accompanying her on the trip shows the calculating and ungenerous side of her nature. The

dichotomy of St. Peter's exhaustion, and Rosamond's selfishness is apparent to Scott McGregor who sees his father-in-law on the train on the way home from the shopping trip and thinks "The Marselluses have no mercy" (134) while making a mental note to tell Kitty they need to check up on her father more, and it is also apparent to Mrs. St. Peter, who is aghast upon learning of Rosamond's treatment of her father. In fact, Lillian feels quite a bit of empathy for her husband after the trip and tries to soothe his wounded sensibility: "Mrs. St. Peter went swiftly down-stairs to make him a cocktail. She sensed an unusual weariness in him, and felt, as it were, the bitter taste of his tongue. A man, she knew, could get from his daughter a peculiar kind of hurt- one of the cruelest that flesh is heir to. Her heart ached for Godfrey" (136). From the inclusion of other character viewpoints, we learn that St. Peter's perception of Rosamond in this case is probably accurate. If St. Peter is a candle that sheds light and throws shadow, this is one of the cases when he provides a lighted, accurate portrayal of another character.

Another striking incident in which Rosamond interacts with her father in a way that leaves a negative impression is upon taking a car ride with her father and husband. Since the Marselluses are moving into their new estate, Outland, and purchasing new furniture and various items to fill the house, Louie generously suggests offering their old things to Scott and Kathleen. Rosamond's negative reaction is contemptible- she refuses to let her sister have any of her old things, telling Louie, "You can do as you like with your old things, Louie. But I don't want any of mine in the McGregor's bungalow. I know Scott's brand of humor too well, and the kind of jokes that would be made about them" (148). The selfishness that Rosamond displays in this scene is mirrored in her physical appearance, which changes as the conversation progresses; first we learn that "Rosamond had grown quite pale. Her upper lip, that was so like her moth-

er's when she was affable, so much harder when she was not, came down like a steel curtain" (147). Later in the same exchange, "Rosamond's paleness changed to red" (148). The tying in of her physical appearance with her emotional reactions is seen throughout the text, and underlines how the act of perception creates truth. For example, in an earlier scene during which St. Peter witnesses Rosamond leaving Kathleen's home, St. Peter observes that Rosamond, "had a singularly haughty expression on her face; her brows drawn together over her nose. The curl of her lips was handsome, but terrifying" (67). We will eventually learn that Rosamond has been involved in some sort of altercation with her sister which causes Kathleen to become very upset. Again, there is the repeated motif of Rosamond's normally appealing outward appearance changing to reflect a negative inner expression. This adds another aspect of the concept of physical perception as a foreground for truth telling. Typically this change is shown through the voice of the Professor, and as I've stated throughout this text, the Professor is not always a reliable narrator, so his opinion should be examined with caution but in most cases where Rosamond is concerned, excepting perception of her beauty, St. Peter's interpretation is fair. In the selection mentioned above where Louie asks Rosamond for her opinion on gifting things to her sister, Rosamond's negative behavior highlights her selfishness. St. Peter is naturally embarrassed by his elder daughter's negative reaction, to the point where he is indignant towards her, and feels compelled to extend an apology to Louie on behalf of Rosamond and the rest of the family. Although this scene is largely seen through the eyes of St. Peter there is little room for an interpretation that Rosamond is being anything but selfish, so most would accept his portrayal and reaction to her behavior as valid and just. However, Louie's reaction to St. Peter's apology indicates a varying viewpoint of Rosamond. Louie explains to St. Peter, "As for Rosa-

mond, you mustn't give that a thought. I love her when she's naughty. She's a bit unreasonable sometimes, but I'm always hoping for a period of utter, of fantastic unreasonableness, which will be the beginning of a great happiness for us all" (149). Rosamond's husband's perception of her behavior is much more generous and forgiving than her father's as the chapter ends with St. Peter exclaiming, "Louie, you are magnanimous and magnificent!" (149).

This scene is another instance where St. Peter's perception and presentation of a character stands up to scrutiny, although it is countered by Louie's assessment of Rosamond's behavior. However, storing her unneeded things in their oversized attic, rather than giving them to her sister, is selfish, and so St. Peter is a clear, rather than opaque or distorted glass through which we can see the female figures around him. Unlike his assessment of her physical characteristics, St. Peter's assessment of Rosamond's behavior is in line with most of the other characters, and the implied narrator's, and it is Rosamond's husband whose interpretation is unreliable.

Chapter 4: Kathleen

In almost direct opposition to St. Peter's relationship with his elder daughter, Rosamond, is the presentation of the relationship that St. Peter enjoys with his younger daughter, Kathleen. In the way that Rosamond is seen as being in the physical image of her mother, and certainly seems to be favored by her, Kathleen and her father have a special bond as well. Sometimes the pair seems to exhibit a kind of kinship that St. Peter does not have with the other members of his family, as evidenced by the fact that the Professor "didn't in the least understand his older daughter. Not that he pretended to understand Kathleen, either; but he usually knew how she would feel about things" (51). At other times, the St. Peter/ Kathleen relationship is one in which Kathleen seems to be a pet of her father's: "He had opportunity to observe all her ways. She was only six, but he found her a square-dealing, dependable little creature. They worked out a satisfactory plan of life together" (73). St. Peter treated Kathleen like a favored pet when she was a child, and this continued throughout the years, even when she was arguably too old for such treatment. In fact, we even learn that:

> When she was a student at the university, he used sometimes to see her crossing the campus alone, her head and shoulders lowered against the wind, her muff beside her face, her narrow skirt clinging close. There was something too plucky, too 'I can-go-it-alone,' about her quick step and jaunty little head; he didn't like it, it gave him a sudden pang. He would always call to her and catch up with her, and make her take his arm and be docile. (51-52)

Throughout St. Peter and Kathleen's relationship, he functions in the traditional role of father figure in that he subtly but firmly forces her to be physically under his protection. This is sharply

contrasted with St. Peter's relationship with Rosemary, in which he constantly thinks that she is too masculine, suggesting that St. Peter's resentment of his elder daughter stems from emasculation created by her physical appearance or wealth. Kitty, on the other hand, is a docile and feminine creature. For St. Peter and his younger daughter, this does not necessarily seem to be a negative trait in their relationship, because Kathleen exhibits respect and love for her father.

For her part, Kathleen is very perceptive where her father is concerned, as evidenced by the fact that "She had done several really good likenesses of her father- one, at least, was the man himself. With her mother she had no luck" (52). Kathleen's ability to see and then accurately portray her father directly contrasts with St. Peter's inability to see the rest of his family accurately and it is interesting that Kathleen cannot adequately portray her mother, so in this way she and St. Peter are alike.

Even though Kathleen is aware her father can be blind to certain things, she still has great respect for his opinions. In fact, we learn that "Kathleen had never been deaf to reasoning, deaf to her father, but once; and that was when, shortly after Rosamond's engagement to Tom, she announced that she was going to marry Scott McGregor" (53). Since this instance is the only one in which Kathleen deliberately disobeyed her father, it must be a significant instance in Kathleen's life. The fact that Kitty married Scott against her father's wishes is key to understanding their relationship dynamic. Since their relationship is one of mutual respect and understanding in all instances except for this one, St. Peter failure to understand Kitty's decision to marry Scott indicates there is something else at play that St. Peter does not seem to see. We know this because while St. Peter observes that Lillian's support of the marriage between Kitty and Scott is strange, he does not understand the reasoning behind it. However, in her article

titled, "This is a Frame-Up: Mother Eve in *The Professor's House*," Jean Schwind presents one of the most acute readings of the relationship between Kathleen and Tom Outland offered in this body of scholarship that accounts for this discrepancy between what the Professor understands and what occurs in the novel. Although Tom is not the focus of this particular work, Schwind's reading of his relationship with Kathleen is significant here because it illuminates the Professor's shortsightedness or inability to perceive what is unpleasant to him and it shows how the Professor's misreading of a situation colors the reader's perception of the persons and situations involved. At the close of Chapter Nine in *The Professor's House*, there is an inexplicable exchange between the McGregors as they drive home from a Christmas dinner party hosted by Professor St. Peter and his wife. The following snippet of their conversation, in which Scott says to his wife "Awful nice of you to have told me all about it at the start, Kitty. Most girls wouldn't have thought it necessary. I'm the only one who knows, ain't I?" (92-93) seems incongruous within the context of their conversation and strangely, is a matter upon which critics have been silent. Schwind, however, provides compelling evidence to provide the missing piece of the puzzle, claiming that "Outland had evidently been involved with Kitty before his engagement to her sister, and at some point shortly before or after her marriage Kitty told McGregor about the liaison" (85). Although this is a rather subversive reading, claiming that Tom Outland had an inappropriate relationship with Kitty explains the conversation between husband and wife in which there is something that is clearly "Felt upon the page without being specifically named there." Schwind makes use of the connection between the ambiance of the scene and Cather's above comment in "The Novel Demeuble" in her own argument regarding a suspected Tom/ Kitty romance. Furthermore, as Schwind points out, St. Peter misses this point entirely, causing

Cather's readership to do so as well. So great is St. Peter's influential viewpoint in fact, that there is a dearth of critical scholarship examining the relationship between Kitty and Tom. According to Schwind, "This oversight is important because it indicates the power of St. Peter's idealization of Outland" (86) and it is dangerous because it shows both the nearsightedness of St. Peter and the reader's dependency on his vision.

Although it is true that for Kathleen the Professor felt "a special kind of affection. Perhaps it was because he had had to take care of her for one whole summer when she was little" (72) the father-daughter relationship should have changed over the years as Kitty grew from that young, square dealing creature into a young married woman with her own home and hearth. Once again, St. Peter's lack of insight into the women in his life is demonstrated in the way that his perception of his daughter still favors Kathleen McGregor as young Kitty. It is perhaps the most innocent and understandable of all of St. Peter's blindness toward his female family members and yet indicates a lapse of judgment on his part.

Chapter 5: The Closing

One of the basic issues at the crux of this work is the issue of storytelling; Tom tells a story of his discovery of the Blue Mesa and the St. Peter family (and readers) are captivated. The men in the mesa find Mother Eve and create different stories about her life and death. Linked to the practice of story-telling is the issue of truth telling. What is the "truth" of Mother Eve's story and what, if any, intrinsic value does knowing the truth have for Tom and Roddy? The struggle for truth telling is one that Cather clearly grapples with throughout the text; St. Peter struggles with writing the forward to Tom's diary because he wants to provide an accurate account that conveys the essence of Tom Outland. For St. Peter writing the introdution "was a little thing, but one of those little things at which the hand becomes self-conscious, feels itself stiff and clammy" (150). Since St. Peter was concerned with accurately introducing Tom into the world, it is safe to assume that St. Peter at least attempts to accurately reflect the truth and that he understands the importance of his perception. The fact that Tom's diary is the written account of experiences that he related verbally is also significant because it prizes the written account over a lived experience. Tom's diary allows Cather to delve further into the issues that the text grappled with such as the double function of writing as both an act and an art. Throughout *The Professor's House*, Cather experiments with the binary between writing as a form of art and as a method of truth telling. This navigation is most prominent in scenes where intertwined competing voices of narrative authority (competing truth tellers) are woven seamlessly into the text. Most scholarly criticism of this text focuses on the issue of St. Peter as a male narrator but the heart of *The Professor's House* is the uncertainty created by St. Peter as an unreliable narrator.

As I have stated previously, the issue of having Professor Godfrey St. Peter "speak" for the women in the text was problematic in certain critical circles who felt that a masculine narrator silenced the feminine in the text. Other critics answered this with the explanation that St. Peter was supposed to do this as a way for Cather to criticize the patriarchy from within- a Trojan horse, as it were. However, if we stick to what we know Cather was interested in; the issues of art and writing that I have outlined above, then the most pertinent reason for Cather to have chosen the Professor to be one of the main authoritative voices in *The Professor's House* is because he is a professor of history.

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of St. Peter, is his role as Professor in which he is established, authoritative, and involved in the business of truth telling. As a professor of history, he is more than an academic writer and recorder of facts but is responsible for relating the "truth" to others. This obsession with accounting truths via the written word gives St. Peter the agency that he needs to be a plausible narrator (even if he is not a reliable one). Throughout the novel there are countless references to St. Peter's being a writer, to the act of writing, to writing as truth telling. The description of how St. Peter came to formulate a plan for writing his magnum opus while looking at the Sierra Nevada Mountains is one such example: "St. Peter lay looking up at them from a little boat riding low in the purple water, and the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted is as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through" (89).

The reverse side of this nature is that while respecting that St. Peter is, by passion and trade, writer of facts, there are times when he was shown to clearly be an unreliable source. It

is this tension between what St. Peter knows to be true and actually is true that makes his portrayal of Lillian, the girls, and Augusta so compelling, especially when we consider the various ways in which the implied narrator supports and contradicts St. Peter's positions.

In *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up*, Hermione Lee opens her discussion of *The Professor's House* with the following description:

> Godfrey St. Peter, the professor of *The Professor's House*, is a historian, and his story is a recalling of the past. He is the most articulate and reflective memorializer in all Cather's work. The novel he inhabits is about splits disjunctions: between the male and feminine, language and silence, materialism and idealism, and above all, the past and the present. Poised, as the novel begins, between the old house he is reluctant to leave and the new house that is being forced upon him, Cather's historian is poised between the past and the present. The professor's house is, in one sense, the house of memory. (224)

Lee is right to point out that St. Peter's most significant trait is his profession, and all that is entails. She also picks up on the split nature of the text, which speaks to my concept of two narrative voices that don't always coincide in a passage. One of the more significant entries in her list is the use of related but not parallel terms "male" and "feminine". The word male implies agency when paired with use of the word feminine which does not name, but only describes. Thus, St. Peter possesses agency as the male figure who describes the feminine aspects of the characters who surround him. Binaries such as male versus femininity, and the relationship between living and writing, inform the *The Professor's House* creating a complex and nuanced work.

However, the most significant binary or doubling is the one created by the issue of two narrative voices. There have been many interpretations that question St. Peter's narrative au-

thority, but they do not consider the way his account is enhanced by another authority. Complicating and enriching his narrative is the voice of the implied narrator who alternately supports and contradicts St. Peter's perceptions of his world. Although much of this work attempts to prove that St. Peter is an unreliable narrator by relying on instances where the implied narrator's or another character's judgment of a character differs from St. Peter's, the real point of the narrative is not to determine whether St. Peter is an accurate reflector of truth. The crux of *The Professor's House* lies in the space between the two voices of narrative authority, where Cather is free to imply and suggest conclusions that are only hinted at but never stated by the text. Her ability to subtly coax truths from the page is the most compelling aspect of her writing and has kept scholars and readers intrigued by *The Professor's House*.

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