

The Ambivalent Nature of the Professor's Character in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925)

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Abstract

The theme of conflict in the Professor's character in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) is a prevalent idea that caught the reader's attention throughout the novel. This inner conflict divides the professor's character into two halves: one that is connected and attached to the past domain of his life that haunts his character during his entire life, or rather perpetuates and overlaps with his own way of living, and the other dimension is the aspect that is connected with the future part of his life, which is seen as an awakening or self-realization, and thus constitutes another essential ontological part in Godfrey's life. However, this conflict is accompanied by the contradictions of life itself from the point of view of the professor's character. It is found that Godfrey's ambivalent considerations of his own life are essential, decisive, and influential.

Keywords: ambivalence, contradictions, domestic, future, past, self-realization

1. Introduction

The conflict in the Professor's character, named Godfrey St. Peter, in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* is a prevalent idea that caught the reader's attention throughout the novel. Apparently, the inner conflict divides the professor's character into two halves: while the first one that is connected and attached to the past domain of his life haunts his character during his entire, the other is the aspect that is connected with the future part of his life, which is seen as an awakening or self-realization, and thus constitutes another essential ontological part in Godfrey's life. However, this conflict is accompanied by contradictions and paradoxes of life itself from the point of view of the professor's character. Godfrey's ambivalent considerations of his own life are essential, decisive, and influential.

Godfrey has various views about success and failure, defeat and triumph, happiness and sadness, consciousness and unconsciousness through meditating his past. His character undergoes drastic and dramatic changes exactly as the place triggers in his mind. For example, through his contemplation of his room, Godfrey sees success and failure at the same time "There was one thing about this room that had been the scene of so many defeats and triumphs. From the window he could see, far away, just on the horizon, a long blue, hazy smear lake Michigan, the inland sea of his childhood" (Cather, 2002, p. 106)

The past and childhood dreams remain the strongest influence in his life, but again we see ambivalence and conflicting feelings that range from the very happiness to extreme disappointment: "He didn't observe the details or know what it was that made him happy; but now, forty years later; he could recall all its aspects perfectly. They had made pictures in him when he was unwilling and unconscious, when his eyes were merely open wide" (Cather, 2002, p. 115). This transformation made Godfrey realize his self but remains unable to discover the very simple things around him. Ambivalence, in determination and contradiction are the main characteristics of his understanding of things. For example, when he was asked by some boys about the Michigan Lake, he said "it's altogether different. It is a sea, and yet it's not salt. It is blue, but quite another blue. Yet there are clouds and mists and sea gulls, but I don't know, il est toujours plus naïf". (Cather, 2002, p. 115)

The Professor's House is a novel of oppositions - past vs. future, youth vs. age, solitude vs. domesticity. Godfrey St. Peter, the protagonist, is a man who grew up on the American prairie, entered the academic field and attained professional success and considerable amount of wealth which at first seems to be domestic happiness. But over the year in which his family abandons the old house for the new, –the year that ends with his near-death in the old house which he has refused to abandon—it transpires that St. Peter's success is meaningless, and that his relationship with his wife and children is heartless and embittered. The only meaningful relationship remaining in the professor's life lies in the past, in his relationship with a gifted pupil, Tom Outland.

The contradiction seems also to overwhelm his academic life and even impairs his view about knowledge and human science. The clash seems also obvious when he insists that science is useless. We can notice this when he was talking to one of his student "No Miller, I don't myself think much of science as a phase of human development science hasn't given us any new amazements" (Cather, 2002, p. 137). St. Peter is a traditional character who consistently criticizes modernism and sees no value in science. He views science as a corrupting and debilitating force that takes away the happiness of people. This is also contradictory to his own academic position and his professorship "it hasn't given us any richer pleasures, as the renaissance did" (Cather, 2002, p. 137). It is very noticeable that St. Peter's character starts to be also contradictory and inconsistent in his relationships. We see a big change in his relationship with his wife and also in his relationship with the people around him. We can understand that when his wife tells him: "'Godfrey," she said slowly and sadly, "I wonder what is that makes you draw away from your family. Or who it is", and then he replied "my dear, are you going to be jealous?" Then his wife said "I wish I were going to be. I'd much rather see you foolish about some woman than becoming lonely and inhuman" (Cather, 2002, p. 138).

The change in his character also appears saliently through his ambivalent behaviours. His wife tells him "two years ago you were an impetuous young man. Now you save yourself in everything. You are naturally warm and affectionate; all at once you begin shutting yourself away from everybody." And she then said "why is it Godfrey? I can't see any change in your face, though I watch you so closely. It's in your mind, in your mood. Something has come over you." Then he answered her "I can't altogether tell myself, Lillian. It's not wholly a matter of the calendar. It's the feeling that I've put a great deal behind me, where I can't go back to it again and I don't really wish to go back" (Cather, 2002, p. 197). From the point of view of Godfrey, the past contradicts with the future and the present. Even though he likes his past but he also does not want to live it again. It seems that Godfrey's character is still developing and changing to more contradiction and inner conflict.

2. Analysis and Discussion: St. Peter Godfrey's Characterization Levels

The character of the professor is torn between the past represented by his old house (the past, and his formative years) and the new house which represents the new material prosperity of the family (the future). Yet, this conflict seems to be resolved by St. Peter from the time his family moved to the new house, when he recovered his sense of belonging, the Professor's discarded younger (past) self: "he was 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." (Cather, 2002, p. 241)

This explains why St. Peter remains so strongly attached to Tom Outland almost a decade after the young man's death. St. Peter's isolation from his family is due to the ideals represented in Tom Outland and the mesa. Marilyn Arnold (1975) suggests that, "It is an ideal of non-materialism, solitude, and primitive oneness with the landscape." (Arnold, 1975, p. 170) The professor is a man who lost all interest in life, and even his family. The professor comes to realize that his essential self is when he was as a boy and that his relations to his family and society are only the constructed self. 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." (Cather, 2002, p. 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.

St. Peter learned how to express himself and express his contradictory behaviours in a way that might be understandable to others. He has more power to discover himself and to be discovered by others, but he still has that conflict. We notice this when he says at the very end of the novel "he doubted whether his family would ever realize that he was not the same man that had said goodbye to; they would be too happily preoccupied with their own affairs. If his apathy hurt them, they could not be so much hurt as he had been already. At least, he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude the Berengaria and the future (Cather, 2002, p. 271). 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 grief. But it had

never occurred to him that he might have to live like that." (Cather, 2002, p. 257)

Alexandra DeBiase (2013) suggests that 'Liminality' which is defined as "a threshold, or a sense of being in-between" is a fitting description for the character of the Professor. Through defining the two main characters in the novel (St. Peter and Tom Outland) as *liminal*, Cather makes a comment on a modern shift in the concept of identity, suggesting that as time goes on and values change, we all will struggle with liminality. DeBiase goes on to assure that the novel, *The Professor's House*, is an "ontological study, filled with ambiguities and open to many readings" (DeBiase, 2013, p. 6).

3. Ambivalence and Characterization

To Godfrey, the family is quite essential and important as it always reminds him of an interesting life he once lived, and despite this, he is willing to sacrifice the stability of his own family for the sake of a visionary memory of an old past. As Tiara Masashi (1991) states in *The Seven Deadly Sins in Willa Cather's The Professor's House*, "The traditional concept of the family is the harmonious unity of all members of the family centring on the father. However, the harmonious unity of St. Peter's family seems to be entirely broken up, and each of the family members – St. Peter, his wife Lillian, and their daughters Rosamond and Kathleen – becomes selfish and even shows hatred toward the others. This family break-up is basically brought about by Tom Outlander's invention, a revolutionary vacuum tube, the patent for which Tom left with Rosamond, his fiancé before he went to war. Louie Marsellus, who marries Rosamond after Tom's death in the war, commercializes and exploits Tom's invention." (Masashi, 1991, p. 34)

St. Peter's family relies heavenly on the father as a model who represents the family union and harmony; however, it seems that St. Peter's character seems to lose this part of altruism which could have kept the family united and strong. St. Peter's thought was all focused on himself as he tried to put his own life in a framework within the individual thinking. We cannot ignore the family part in *The Professor's House*. Richard Giannone (1965) states that "the domestic tensions are there but [are located] in the background of St. Peter's mental disturbance" and that "[w]hat rubs his peace is an existential sense of life's meaninglessness. His mood is bitter at the start and then darkens into despair." (Giannone, 1965, p. 59) Giannone remarks the cold joy the professor was having as he contemplates his past, "Low-spirited though Godfrey St. Peter is, he does realize the submission to accidental extinction is an extension of his bitterness, not a reversal of it or escape from it. He has, at least, the cold joy which comes with resignation. His family will never understand his apathy, just as Rodney Blake never understood why Tom heartlessly dismissed him on the Blue Mesa. One requires faith and friendship in a different coinage from that in which one makes a payment to the ideal." (Giannone, 1965, p. 60)

Godfrey was very busy with all that made him happy and contended trying to forget the sad part of his inner life. The sense of individualism seems to break the family unity, as each of his family members began to draw a personalized way of thinking which, in fact, weakened the family strength and union. As a pillar of the family, St. Peter does recognize this role very well, but he rather prefers to stay in his old-traditional method of thinking, even he is not ready to accept the new changes life might force him to do. As a result, the family turned out to be materialistic and it seems to lose the spiritual union it once had. It is important to note that personal qualities of St. Peter's character are the most essential when we think of the family union and success. Greed or selfish thinking negatively affects the way families live, and could possibly lead to catastrophic outcomes, i.e., "with the Professor's growing recognition of the discord around him bred out of greed comes an increased sense of being continuously tired and a desire to withdraw from the vain competitive struggles of the world." (Stouck, 1972, p. 19) The professor lost the motivating desire as he felt he is about to leave the past he loves behind. He clings to his pride, and considers his past life to be the source of his glory, which all seems to be a living memory of his own house. Masashi (1991) notes that "many critics point out that St. Peter's withdrawal from the outside world is due to his negative feelings toward materialism as well as to his uneasy feelings about his early old age. However, his retreat to his old attic room and subsequent alienation are caused not only by external factors, such as the rise of materialism, but also by internal factors, that is, his own innate human weakness – especially his pride. St. Peter believes that man has a magical power and can control everything." (Masashi, 1991, p. 34)

Masashi continues to say, that this is similar to the character of Gatsby in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as she says:

This is exactly the same kind of pride that Gatsby has in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* which was published in the same year as *The Professor's House*. Gatsby believes that he has a magical power to control everything and repeat the past as he wishes. This pride brings Gatsby alienation and his ultimate tragic death. St. Peter's strong confidence and pride can clearly be seen in his relationships with others, especially with Augusta. With

Lillian, and with his students. (Masashsi, 1991, p.34)

Part of this is the mentality of the character of the professor, which seems to impose a selfish behaviour, which is all self-centered and unrealistic. Stineback (1973) argues that “St. Peter is growing less and less able to cope with the petty commercialism of his academic life in Hamilton, particularly the envy and greed by the success of a vacuum invented by Outland at the university.” (Stineback, 1973, p. 318)

Materialism seems to play a very major role in the family’s life, as each one started think of having a financially independent life for a secure future. Perhaps Cather criticizes this part in the family as well as the mainstream materialism that swiftly changed and transformed people’s lives at the turn of the twentieth century, when materialism prevailed on a large scale affecting everyone's life and future. While many critics point out the impact of the rise of materialism in the twentieth century on St. Peter, Masashi finds that the plot of the novel focuses on St. Peter’s growing sense of “disillusionment and isolation in the midst of materialism.” (Masashsi, 1991, p. 33) Yet, in the novel Cather gets beyond this problem of materialism, and deals with the essential human nature, namely, the fundamental human weakness which leads people to commit sins. “This human flaw, reflected in the seven deadly sins - the sins of pride, envy, avarice, gluttony, wrath, sloth, and lust – is clearly demonstrated in this novel as a major factor which hinders man from establishing good relationships with others.” (Masashsi, 1991, p. 33)

The ambivalent and complicated nature of the Professor's life seems to harmonize with patterns of thought of modernism at the advent of the new century, where fragmentation and foggy thinking started to prevail in the common life. Generally speaking, fragmentation and states of consciousness seem to be one of the most prevalent ideas and characteristics of modernism as a literary and social life of the American history. Cather’s *The Professor’s House* provides such an example. Sara Wilson (2003) refers to this quality, “*The Professor’s House* has been described as ‘fragmentary and inconclusive’, its form marked by the violence with which the middle section fractures the narrative.” (Wilson, 2003, p. 571)

The Professor, Dr. Godfrey St. Peter, as the title of the novel suggests, is a representation of his own personal philosophical vision about life, having such a philosophical thought about his own life, brings him new moments about his life in the past. The House seems to play an important part of his emotional character and psychological side, as it reminds him of his own past that he once lived with a spontaneous overflow of reminiscence and memories. Such thoughts all come naturally and subconsciously as he is deeply rooted in his own past. The new house seems to be a new life transformation for him which poses another direction in his professional and personal lifestyle, which all seem to change his understanding and convictions about his own ontological life. He is completely attached to his own past that brings him various memories about his own self. Every single corner of the house gives him a chance to remember something that relate to his own ontological and personal life.

The professor is reluctant to give up the old house, and instead he keeps on in it, so that he can use the attic as his study. The attic to him represents the old dream and passion he always wanted to have in his life. And he is not ready in any way to give up the Professor’s image of himself, his own image, the same passion, and the same identity, which all constitutes who he is now. His house seems to give an opportunity to look back to his own past, with a view to his future as well, as we notice in the following passage from the novel:

Professor St. Peter was alone in the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters. It was almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be; square, three stories in height, painted the colour of ashes- the front porch just too narrow for comfort, with a slanting floor and sagging steps. As he walked slowly about the empty, echoing rooms on that bright September morning, the professor regarded thoughtfully the needless inconveniences he had put up with for so long; the stairs that were too steep, the halls that were too compared , that awkward oak mantles with thick round posts crowned by bumptious wooden balls, over green-tiled fire-places (Cather, 2002, p.1).

Melancholy controls his personality, and sadness seems to threaten his own life as he seriously ponders over his past. Ann Fisher Wirth (2003) states that, “Desolation pervades *The Professor’s House*, a novel that describes not only the loss of paradise but also, and more terribly, the loss of desire itself, of what Cather calls the ability to conjugate the verb ‘to love’” (Wirth, 2003, p. 264). St. Peter, a middle aged professor in a mid-western university who “feeling the bleakness attendant upon completing his life's work-a vast history of the Spanish explorers-and whose own family relations are increasingly fraught with jealousy, fatigue, and tension, turns in a season of spiritual destitution to thoughts of the most gifted student he ever had, a young man named Tom Outland" (Cather, 2002, p. 1) The House and the garden bring him memories back, and even the smallest details inside the garden would make highly attached to his own childhood and past:

On this September morning, St. Peter knew that he could not evade the unpleasant effects of change by tarrying among his autumn flowers. He must plunge in like a man, and get used to the feeling that under his work-room there was a dead, empty house. He broke off a geranium blossom, and with it still in his hand went resolutely up two flights of stairs to the third floor where, under the slope of the mansard roof, there was one room still furnished—that is, if it had ever been furnished. The low ceiling sloped down on three sides, the slant being interrupted on the east by a single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook in the sill. This was the sole opening for light and air. Walls and ceiling alike were covered with a yellow paper which had once been very ugly, but had faded into inoffensive neutrality. The matting on the floor was worn and scratchy. Against the wall stood an old walnut table, with one leaf up, holding piles of orderly papers. (Cather, 2002, p. 2)

The memories of his student Tom Outlander continues to haunt his memory, as Wirth notes, "Musing upon Tom Outland's life, Godfrey St. Peter concludes that for him, the truth, too, is that 'he was solitary and must always be so'. There is the moment on the mountain, and the endless fall. Tom dies young; the Professor survives his own near-suicide to gaze without hope or delight at a darkening future." (Wirth, 2003 p. 265) Reynolds (2003) suggest the importance of domesticity as shown by the professor's character, "The popular image of Cather tends to see her as a rather homely writer; and much recent criticism has sought to accept homeliness or domesticity by seeing these features as inherently marked by a distinctive female culture. Critics then read Cather as a sophisticated modifier of an American female tradition of the home and the domestic. In this respect, Judith Fryer's work on Cather and space deepens the approach of 1970s feminists by means of a critical reading that redeems the female cultures of the late nineteenth century. This Cather emerges out of the late Victorian female, spatial culture of Sarah O. Jewett. There is the same emphasis on the domestic, and particularly on a womanly domesticity at the centre of a rich sentimental culture." (Reynolds, 2003. P. 10)

4. Conclusion

The character of the professor is ambivalent on various levels. St. Peter loves his past, however, he looks for the future as he is not sure about his inner motivation. He is not quite sure about the way he wants to be in the future. Sometimes he seems to be convinced about the reality of his life, and at other situations he seems to suffer a lot psychologically as he does not exactly feel satisfied about his role in life. St. Peter has two daughters. The eldest daughter, whose name is Rosamond, was actually betrothed to one of his previous student, Tom Outland. However, this turns out to be a tragic event, as Tom died in the war, Tom was an inventor and his patent inventions were big success. However, he died before he could get those fruitful achievements of his own, which later turned to be an inheritance to his fiancé. She inherited the patent and the man she married invested the fortune. Cain (2016) notes that suffering and disappointment seems to dominate the whole novel, and this is basically seen through St. Peter Godfrey's character, "Cather's keynote, the dominant theme that in her writing affects us from beginning to end, is suffering—the disappointment, hurt, and sorrow in the soul, and the imperative for men and women to make the most of life despite suffering's abiding presence in it. For Cather the challenge that every person faces is living in suffering, fastened to a body in the process of decay and aggrieved by memories of missed opportunities (Cain, 2016, p. 289)

The professor's ambivalent character seems to influence every one of the family. St. Peter's wife tries to keep the family together, but she is carried away by the materialistic part of life, and she is completely driven by the feelings of pride and vanity. Such transformations on the levels of personality occur the moment Peter decides to live his own life.

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