

REBIRTH THROUGH DEFEAT
— An Approach to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* —

REBIRTH THROUGH DEFEAT
— An Approach to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* —

Shunji Tsunoda

Key Words: death, rebirth, materialism, paradox, self

It was through her "Frontier Novels," the novels made by laying their settings on Nebraskan frontier, that Willa Cather became renowned and came into her own as a novelist. *The Professor's House* written in 1924 was not situated on the western frontier, but this work, along with *A Lost Lady*, is to be regarded her culminating work because both are "parables of the decline and fall of her own great tradition,"¹ as Alfred Kazin aptly says. In *The Professor's House* the new, materialistic generation gain dominance and destroy Cather's great tradition, and they also degrade the protagonist's own family just as they trampled upon Niel Herbert's west. But at this stage she was prepared to be receptive of the bitter reality that "change is the hard facts of life." And also, she resolved not to avoid what we call "the paradox of success," which is insinuated in her own remark that "Success is never so interesting as struggle—even to the successful."² She eventually gained the courage, the courage to introspect and cope with her own problems. Alfred Kazin's words are very suggestive and most to the point:

The conflict between grandeur and meanness, ardor and greed, was more than ever before the great interest of her mind... now that she was no longer afraid of failure as a spiritual fact, her work gained a new strength and a keener radiance.³

For these reasons *The Professor's House* holds various elements that appear incompatible with each other, that is, criticism, defeatism, apathy, and receptivity. In consequence the novel has become so abstruse that critics' rating of *The Professor's House* varies from poor to excellent, either in its content or in its seemingly curious structure. J.W. Crutch said flatly, "Taken as a whole, the book is disappointment,"⁴ despite the fact that when it was published it gained such a favorable reception that Willa Cather herself was surprised. James Schroeter pointed its flaws, though he regarded it as one of the important works of the 20th century. In recent years, however, Catherian study has been carried on very extensively, and critics have come to make a very favorable revaluation of *The Professor's*

1) James Schroeter (ed), *Willa Cather and Her Critics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p.167

2) *Ibid.*, p.263

3) *Ibid.*, p.168

4) *Ibid.*, p.56

House that had been "the most underrated of Willa Cather's novels." Paul Comeau says:

Critics have only recently come to regard *The Professor's House* is an integrated work of art.⁵⁾

James Woodress calls it "a rich, complex, novel, a major accomplishment."⁶⁾ As a matter of fact, no one will deny that *The Professor's House* is one of the most important works of Willa Cather for understanding her art and approaching the core of her idea. As many critics have pointed out, the protagonist, the Professor Godfrey St. Peter, has so much in common with the author herself that the novel is called "self portrait of Willa Cather."⁷⁾

She expressed through the protagonist her attitude to the age which, in her eyes, had lost the values and tradition of the old days and was becoming more and more materialistic, and also she did her own introspection at this stage of her career. The portrait of the protagonist is complicated, and his behavior, both internal and external, appears at a first glance strange to readers.

The causes of the protagonist's dejection can roughly be classified into a few factors; the causes that originate from within himself, the causes that come from his family and his responsibilities for it, and the causes that stem from the materialistic society, although the last two are so interwoven that it is impossible to discuss separately, for the lamentable situation of his family is the direct results of this society. In this essay we survey how the Professor's family is affected by materialism in which money is the ultimate goal of life, and then, we look deeper into his mind and identify the nature of his depression. And further, in observing the Professor's state of mind and his behavior, we will examine the significance of the last chapter, THE PROFESSOR, which has been the most controversial and difficult to interpret. In this way we will illustrate how this novel, which for the most part depicts what happens only in the protagonist's mind, is truly the novel of "letting go with the heart"⁸⁾ of the author, as she wrote to Robert Frost.

His own family is, interestingly enough, the great element that causes the Professor's dejection because it is contaminated by money. Here, we will see, through the Professor's eyes, how each member of his family is devastated by the new, materialistic order and how it aggravates his dislocation in this family.

The Professor's House consists of three chapters: BOOK I: THE FAMILY, BOOK II: TOM OUTLAND'S STORY, and BOOK III: THE PROFESSOR. The novel begins with the

5) John J. Murphy, *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), p.217

6) James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p.371

7) Bernice Slotte & Virginia Faulkner (ed.), *The Art of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), p.59

8) Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p.215

REBIRTH THROUGH DEFEAT
— An Approach to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* —

symbolical sentence that "The moving was over and done." They build a new house by the money he was awarded for "the Oxford prize for history" which was given to his work of "The Spanish Adventurers in North America." But he cannot leave the old house where he had lived since he got married with Lillian, and even after the moving is over, he comes to the attic study in this dismantled house to do his work and spend his own time for retrospect. Almost two-thirds of the whole novel is occupied by BOOK I: THE FAMILY, the greater part of which is the description of what is reflected in the Professor's mind.

His family, apparently peaceful, soon turns out chaotic. Godfrey St. Peter and his pretty wife Lillian have two daughters, Rosamond the elder, and Kathleen the younger, who are both married respectively to Louie Marsellus, a jewish engineer-turned-businessman, and Scott McGregor, a newspaperman in Hamilton where the novel is situated. All of them are given their own important roles by the author. As is well known Willa Cather professed in an essay on Katherine Mansfield her conviction that human relationships are "the tragic necessity of human life":

... In those simple relationships of loving husband and wife, affectionate sisters, children and grandmother, there are innumerable shades of sweetness and anguish which make up the pattern of our lives day by day, though they are not down in the list of subjects from which the conventional novelist works.⁹⁾

Thus it is no wonder that willa Cather made the family relationships the cause that creates the protagonist's "anguish," and put them "in the list of subjects" of her art. Why has his family, which was a happy one before the story of *The Professor's House* opens, changed into this miserable state ?

The well-known remark that *The Professor's House* was the book she had written in which she had tried to be 'ironic', is an important suggestion, and a variey of interpretation have been made in relation not only to this work but even to her own private life. In fact, almost all the lives of the characters are dominated by irony of some kind, and the greatest irony that is relevant to the whole plot is the one concerning Tom Outland, who dies ten years before the story begins but determines all the characters' lives. The encounter of the Professor's family with this remarkable young man, and his early death in the First World War are the very cause of their past happiness and present disparity.

Tom Outland, an orphan, comes to Hamilton from New Mexico in dependence upon the name of the Professor St. Peter, who then was writing the Spanish Adventurers in North America. Before coming to this town, he makes the historical discovery and excavation

9) Willa Cather, *On Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949), pp.109-110

of the relics of ancient cliff dwellers on Blue Mesa in New Mexico. He enters the Professor's university and becomes, not a historian, but a physicist. Before he goes to the First World War in Europe he bequeaths to his fiancée Rosamond, the Professor's first daughter, his patent of the "Outland vacuum" that is to revolutionize aviation. Several years later Louie Marsellus, a Jewish electrical engineer, comes to Hamilton, marries Rosamond, and gets "the idea over from laboratory to the trade." He makes a fortune, which becomes the chief source of the family disparity. It fully exerts devastating power to all the people around the Professor. These events, including the Professor's receiving the Oxford prize, happens before the story of *The Professor's House* begins.

BOOK II: TOM OUTLAND'S STORY is a first-person narrative told by Tom himself, which is, as the author insists, "inserting the Nouvelle into the Roman." This is the story of Tom's adventure in discovering the cliff dwellings in Blue Mesa. As far as Tom Outland of BOOK II is concerned, he has the background of the early-generation pioneers who are, in Will Cather's notion "unpractical to the point of magnificence."¹⁰ But as the Professor retrospects Tom's narrative as "a story of youthful defeat," Tom experiences not only the supreme happiness but also a bitter despair.

Tom and a young man named Rodney Blake get a job as a cowboy, and in doing the job, they discover and excavate the ancient cliff city that had been deserted hundreds of years ago. But while Tom is staying in Washington D.C. in vain to ask the government and the Smithsonian Institution to send the specialists for studying and preserving them, Blake sells all the excavation to a German collector by a sizable sum for them, and saves all the money in a bank in Tom's name for him to go to college. Tom is in rage and despair. After some dispute Blake leaves him for good, saying :

I didn't know you valued that stuff any different than anything else a fellow might run on to a gold or a pocket of turquoise." (244)¹¹

While Tom excavated the relics purely from his artistic aspiration, Blake evaluated them only in money. But as he says, he is "no hog for money," and in that sense he is utterly different from such people as Louie or Rosamond who represents the materialistic generation. The pioneer tradition Willa Cather had admired in the former novels is, in *The Professor's House*, the very cause of their broken friendship. Blake protests to Tom, "Motives don't count, eh?" His "motives" and Tom's valuation of cultural assets are in conflict with each other, and both sides lose. Human relationship and artistic idealism are defeated by the materialistic values. Consequently Tom loses both his friend and his excavations.

10) Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1973), p.102. This edition was reprinted from the original type of the Riverside Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

11) Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1973), p.245. This edition was reprinted from the original type of the Riverside Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The page references in the parentheses throughout are to this edition.

REBIRTH THROUGH DEFEAT
— An Approach to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* —

Because of the encounter with this young boy who spent his youth "in the great dazzling South-west country," the Professor's latter volumes of the Spanish Adventurers in North America get more radiance than former ones. But at this stage no one knows the irony which is to happen about his life. When he visits the Professor's house for the first time and gives the daughters a large turquoise excavated in Blue Mesa, Lillian says to her husband after he left the house :

We ask a poor perspiring tramp boy to lunch, to save his pennies, and he departs leaving princely gifts. (116)

Ironically enough, her words symbolize the fate of Tom and the Professor's family. Tom departs to death several years later leaving "princely gifts" of the invention of Outland vacuum that would determine this family's future.

If read carefully, it becomes clear that the central plot of the present, which is about a decade after Tom Outland's death, is the story of the Professor's struggle and defeat against a new generation symbolized in Louie Marsellus. The result of the protagonist's struggle thereafter is suggested in his seemingly ridiculous behavior in a very early stage of the novel. He is sitting in his chair of the old attic study, when Augusta, the seamstress, who is to have the crucial role in the last stage of the novel, comes to the study to carry two "forms" out into the new house— "a female torso" and "a full-length female figure in a smart wire skirt." Surprised, he stands with his back against the door, and never lets Augusta take away the two female figures. This episode foreshadows the defeat in his struggle for the family.

Then, we will see how each family member is corrupted by Louie Marsellus and his money, though, it should be kept in mind, Marsellus himself is not at all a disagreeable figure.

The first victim of money is Rosamond, who was Tom's fiancée and is now Louie Marsellus' wife. Kathleen, the younger sister, says that Rosamond, the prettier, was "a kind of ideal" to her when they were very young. But now she says about Rosamond :

I (Kathleen) would never have believed that Rosie could do anything in such bad taste. (80)

Importantly, she becomes not only vulgarized but also unesthetic and unimaginative. Wearing a moleskin coat she goes out in a car with a chauffeur and comes to the Guild of women in a handsome French frock that costs "more than all their dresses put together." Rosamond's acquisitiveness is so great that she is "like Napoleon looting the Italian Palaces" on a shopping journey in Chicago. She can no longer understand that there

is something more important than money in this world, that money often destroys a person's happiness instead, and therefore she cannot understand her father. She makes an offer to spend some of their money for him to devote all his time to writing and research, because, she thinks, that is "what Tom would have wanted." The Professor, quite naturally, refuses the offer saying :

In a life time of teaching, I've encountered just one remarkable mind; but for that, I'd consider my good years largely wasted. And there can be no question of money between me and Tom Outland ... it would make that episode in my life commonplace like everything else. And that would be a great loss to me. (56-57)

These words are full of strength and his criteria for value judgment are very persuasively shown, but Rosamond "looked perplexed and a little resentful." The greatest irony about her is that her degeneration is resulted from Tom's act of bequeathing the patent of his invention, the act which was done in behalf of her happiness, though it is doubtful whether she is aware of her own misfortune. To make the situation worse, the Professor is the only person that deplores her change of characteristics, while even her mother doesn't.

Then, how about the younger sister who sharply denounces the elder? Kathleen has an aptitude to art, and her viewpoint is reasonable. She is the sympathizer of her father and he has a "special kind of affection" for her. She is a sympathetic figure not only to her father but also to readers. She and her husband Scott McGregor, a newspaperman, are leading a modest life and in this sense they are exempted from the paradox of success that material success brings spiritual deterioration. Her value judgment is in accord with the Professor's. As to Kathleen and Scott, J. B. Priestley says that "about fifty pages, chiefly concerned with them" are missing, while he feels he has been given enough of Rosamond and Louie."¹² To be sure, readers feel like knowing more about the McGregors, though the role of the Marselluses is far more important in this novel.

The great tragedy is that even Kathleen, the sympathizer of the old virtues, cannot help harboring envy for those she disapproves, which is, to put in her father's words, "self-destruction." To be short, she also is defeated by materialism.

He (the Professor) was watching Kathleen fearfully... he had never realized to what an ugly, painful transformation the common phrase "green with envy" referred. (80)

Paradoxically, Kathleen and Rosamond are both corrupted by money, the former by scarcity and the latter by profusion.

12) Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961), Introduction.

Then, we should turn our attention to Louie Marsellus, who is symbolic of the materialists and makes a fortune by commercializing Tom's invention. His role in the novel is far greater than has been thought. Tom Outland to whom Rosamond was engaged, and Louie Marsellus to whom she actually got married, are in fact the two driving forces of *The Professor's House*. The Professor's mind is for the most part occupied by longing for the past when Tom was the central figure and by the dissatisfaction with the present, and also, by the fear for the future when Louie Marsellus will gain total domination. Louie's words in one scene are, significantly, used as the epigraph of *The Professor's House*.

"A turquoise set in silver, wasn't it ? ... Yes, a turquoise set in dull silver"
—Louie Marsellus—

This turquoise is the one which Tom Outland gave little Rosamond on the day when he appeared to the Professor's house for the first time. It is evident that the epigraph symbolizes the good, old days are gone and Louie Marsellus' age has come. Tom with the old American tradition and Louie with the new, materialistic background are, in the Professor's eyes, sitting in opposite ends but, as J. Schroeter so aptly remarks, "Tom is the son the Professor would have liked to have: Marsellus is the son he actually gets."¹³

The Professor likes Louie Marsellus because he has his own virtues in his character. He, the extrovert, is good-natured and absolutely generous, and the Professor has "never known him to refuse to give either time or money." But, as there is "too much Louie in his life," the Professor's feeling about Louie is, in fact, ambivalent. In the unconscious part of his mind he is struggling against Louie Marsellus' intruding into his world, into his family, and into himself. He is, except on business matters, often tactless and unknowingly hurts the other people's feelings. But, as J. Woodress points out, he is "for most readers a sympathetic figure, despite his brashness and aggressiveness."¹⁴

What is important about him is that he is a new breed, a born materialist, and has an innate nature to it. He is not the one who changed under the influence of the new order. Rosamond is the one who changed, as Kathleen says :

"... she's entirely shanged. She's become Louie. Indeed she's worse than Louie. He and all his money have ruined her..." (81)

And importantly the Professor's wife Lillian, whom we will see later, is also the one who has shanged. But Louie does not chage himself at all, and changes others. It is those around him that come into his dominion.

13) James Schroeter, *op. cit.*, pp. 372-373

14) James Woodress, *op. cit.*, p.283

Since Rosamond's marriage to Marsellus, both she and her mother had changed bewilderingly in some respects—changed and hardened. But Louie, who had done the damage, had not damaged himself. It was to him that one appealed. (157)

As is already said, the story of the present develops as an invisible, unconscious struggle between the Professor and Louie Marsellus, or, to say more accurately, it develops as the Professor's desperate struggle against Louie's world for protecting his own. In this connection, what interests us is Scott McGregor, who keeps "a glittering idea" of Tom. One episode clearly manifests the author's intention. Scott blackballs Louie in a secret ballot for a literary cricle and exclude him from membership. To know this fact, the Professor apologizes to Louie for the behavior of Scott, referring to a "duel" scene in a novel by Henry James. Louie's magnanimity he shows in this scene does symbolize his complete victory over the McGregors :

"Oh, that's all right, sir ! As for Scott, I can understand... I think Scott will come around in the end ; people usually do, if you treat them well, and I mean to. I like the fellow..." (165-166)

As a matter of fact this is Louie's hearty remark coming from his own broad-mindedness. But we, as well as the Professor, feel even a kind of dread in his self-confidence. He never doubts his ultimate victory. The following is the Professor's answer :

"Louie, you are magnanimous and magnificent!" murmured his vanquished father-in-law." (167)

By the association with such words as "duel" and "vanquished," it is quite obvious that the motif of the scene is the invisible struggle between the Professor and Louie.

Now, we should turn our eyes to Lillian St. Peter, the Professor's wife. She has a far greater role in *The Professor's House* than she appears to have, or, rather, critics have thought she has. And for that reason, to define her character is not easy. She is a beautiful, intelligent woman and her husband has always admired her. But there is "an undefinable but unmistakable distance"¹⁵ between them, though, significantly, Lillian ascribes it to her husband's withdrawal from the existing world.

In BOOK I, readers are shown their estrangement in one scene where the author alludes to "that miserable little stove" as a preliminary for the Professor's near death by asphyxiation

15) David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Westport, Connecticut : Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1971), p.92

in BOOK III. On a very cold day, she, quite reasonably, tells him not to go to the study in the old house like "a refrigerating-plant" where there is no heating except the stove which might be blown out at any moment and poison him by gas. His answer to her considerate admonition about his "health" is stubborn and cold:

Why so ? It's not worth half as much as it was then." (91)

His words reveals not only his apathy but his unconscious inclination to death, but his wife, unable to see the back of his mind, "disregarded this."

The Professor harbors an ambivalent feeling to Lillian. She says the Professor becomes "more intolerant all the time," and the Professor, on the other hand, thinks it is she who is "growing more and more intolerant."

As for the Professor, it is when he encounters Tom Outland that he feels his "second youth" has come. On the other hand, the second youth comes to Lillian years later than her husband. When her two daughters get their own husbands, she begins "the game of being a woman all over again." The success of these young men becomes her greatest interest. Naturally, Louie Marsellus is her favorite one because he has achieved worldly success. Just as the Professor's tendency of mind was in complete accord with Tom Outland's individuality, so Lillian's characteristics are totally congruous to Louie's nature.

That worldliness, that willingness to get the most of occasions and people, which had developed so strongly in Lillian in the last few years, seemed to Louie as natural and proper as it seemed unnatural to Godfery. (156)

In this way, Lillian St. Peter gradually becomes prone to showing the new-generation traits, and the relationship with the Marselluses becomes the source of her pleasure and interest.

With Louie, Lillian seemed to be launching into a new career. (72)

She has entered into his dominion. After three decades since their marriage she has put herself entirely among the new generation.

In this connection, Mrs. St. Peter reminds us of Mrs. Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*, who lived halfway between two generations, and got "lost" in the new, materialistic order by throwing away the old-generation virtues. The Professor's view of his wife is very close to the Niel Herbert's view of Marian Forrester. It is even possible to regard Mrs. St. Peter as another "lost lady." Though the difference in their character portrayal is not small, it is thinkable that Marian Forrester is the archetypal character of Lillian St. Peter as is partly shown in the similarity of their maiden names, that is, Marian Ormsby and Lillian

Ornsley respectively.

We have seen, mainly through the Professor's eyes and mind, how the life courses and the personality of each family member are controlled by Louie Marsellus, and also how this deplorable situation of the family augments the Professor's depression. All the family members except him have already come under Louie's domination, or even Louie's opponent lost the game as we saw in the case of the McGregors. We remember here the episode about the two dress forms which he resisted to being taken out, crying :

You shan't take away my ladies." (14)

Now that all the women are corrupted or defeated by Louie, it is tragical, as well as ironical, that there are only women torsos left.

The Professor is already defeated in the struggle for his own family against Louie and his world. Then, we must look deeper into the state of mind and behavior of the protagonist himself. His portrait is very complicated and not easily understandable, but for this reason he is the most interesting of any of Willa Cather's men."¹⁶ We have already seen the causes of his dejection brought about by the family relationship and by the new age, but there is another important reason entirely of his own that is common to all Willa Cather's former novels.

One of the basic ideas to interpret her frontier novels written before *the Professor's House* is what we call "the paradox of success." The Professor St. Peter, although he is not a pioneer on the frontier, cannot be discussed without relevance to this problem. For the former protagonists like Antonia Shimerda or Alexandra Bergson, the object of their struggle was the land. But for the Professor, his challenge was the research of the Spanish Adventurers in North America. Believing in the power of will, he had set about the work none of his predecessors dared to do.

I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing. (18)

He is awarded the Oxford prize for history and receives five thousand pounds, by which they build a new house with Lillian's insistence.¹ But when he has completed this life work after fifteen years' devotion, he necessarily loses the object in which he is absorbed, and is trapped by the paradox of success. In the case of the Professor he is too intelligent and self-possessed to fall into vulgarity, but is overcome by fatigue and lassitude instead. Seeing his husband cling to the old house in spite of their new, comfortable one, Lillian asks him if there was anything else he would rather have done with that five thousand

¹⁶) James Schroeter, *op. cit.*, p.112

pounds. His answer is as follows :

"Nothing my dear, nothing... If with that check I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you'd never have got your house... The great pleasures don't come so cheap. There is nothing else, thank you." (27)

These passages reveals not only the Professor's value judgment but they show that his present dejection partly comes from the problem of his own. As Giannone points out "he has no higher aspiration to replace the earlier one."¹⁷ As a matter of course, however, the Professor, as well as the author, is well aware of it.

At the end of BOOK I: THE FAMILY, the Marselluses offer to take the Professor and Lillian to France for the summer. He thinks it a tempting idea but he knows he must decline this light-hearted offer. When they argue about the matter, Lillian's argument is evidently to the point, and for this reason the Professor's excuse, or, more accurately, his self-defense, is notable to readers because this is one of the very scenes where Willa Cather is "letting go with the heart." Interestingly he cannot refute Lillian's severe, but persuasive argument.

"I think your ideas were best when you were your most human self."

St. Peter sighed. "I can't contradict you there. But I must go on as I can." (158)

Lillian emphasizes that it is these two years that he ceased to be "an impetuous young man" and began "shutting himself away from everybody." This is the age he comes into his fifties. What really happened in these two years are the completion of the Spanish Adventurers in North America, his receiving the Oxford prize and the construction of the new house by the prize money. With these as momentums, his dejection comes to the surface. Thus, his plight as a man trapped in the paradox of success is one of the greatest reasons for his dejection.

Incidentally, the Professor sets forth a crucially important thing in this argument.

"... A man has got only just so much in him; when it's gone he slumps." (159)

The professor, like Willa Cather's former protagonists, had a faith in the power of human will when he was young, and working "like a miner under a landslide."

A man can do anything if he wishes to enough, St. Peter believed. Desire is creation, is the magical element in that process. If there were an instrument by which to

17) Richard Giannone, *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p.156

measure desire, one could foretell achievement. (23)

Willa Cather has often expressed this idea in various scenes in the former novels. But now, the Professor, as well as the author, comes to the conclusion that "a man has got only just so much in him." In the critical period when he is about to go into an old age, he has resigned his confidence in human will, although his wife, quite understandably, says, "You are not old enough for the pose you take." This is no doubt his defeatism and, in a way, his self-pity. J. B. Priestly points out that the Professor has a shortage of the denser masculine material. But what should be noted here is the important fact that Willa Cather had confirmed her own belief in her art now that she set a protagonist who is trapped in the paradox as the material for creating a work of art, for she had taken great efforts to make the former protagonists exempted from the paradox. She had the same kind of fatigue as the Professor, but from that fatigue she created *The Professor's House*.

Near the end of BOOK I: THE FAMILY, his dejection becomes so great that "the university, his new house, his old house, everything around him seemed insupportable." After a long insertion of BOOK II: TOM OUTLAND'S STORY, the story goes into the chapter BOOK III: THE PROFESSOR in which, as Susan Rosowski says, "the windows open inward."¹⁸ It is centralized to the Professor's introspection in the old house where he spends his summer time alone after Lillian and the Marselluses have left for France. This is the chapter that has been so controversial and given so various interpretations though it occupies only one tenth of the *The Professor's House*.

Now that even his wife has surrendered to Louie and come to follow the materialistic values, there is only the Professor himself left to defend. It is for this reason that he excuses himself from Louie's invitation to go to France.

He liked Paris. He liked Louie. But one couldn't do one's own things in another person's way; selfish or not, that was the truth. (155)

After Lillian and the Marselluses left for France for summer he gets a release from the responsibility for his family, and goes to the old house without any restraint from anyone.

... his garden had never been so beautiful as it was that June... He realized that he ought to be getting to work. (166)

18) Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p.131

He finds an enjoyable work of annotating a diary Tom kept on the Blue Mesa. He recovers a temporary poise which he had not experienced for years. It is at this time that "the Kansas boy", which has annoyed readers since the publication, comes home to him in his "half-awake loafing with his brain."

We must remember here the professor's own word of "second wind" is ready to blow in an unexpected way. This boy is the one he had long ago left behind him in Kansas, namely, "the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter." Then, what is the meaning of this Kansas boy, whom he had long forgot since his adolescence, since he met Lillian Ornsley?

In BOOK III he finds a way to protect "his self." It is imaginable how the encounter with the Kansas boy was his salvation. That is, coming back to the Kansas boy is the way left for him to change himself—without impairing his own ego. He can change his personality, "the personality his friends knew," and can still keep his own self. By retrieving it, he can transcend his life and protect himself from all the things around him.

Speaking conversely, however, coming back to the original ego makes the life he has led after he left it, meaningless.

He did not regret his life, but he was indifferent to it. It seemed to him like the life of another person. (265)

In order to lead a life in this state of mind, he is obliged to resign his role as a "lover" and renounces the delights human relationships bring about. He would have to "learn to live without sherry in a Prohibition country." This almost equals to death. And in fact, his encounter with the Kansas boy is at the same time a premonition of death. He realizes as "an instinctive conviction" that he is nearing the end of his life.

Now, a letter comes to him from Lillian in France to the effect that, changing all plans, they are hurrying home "to prepare for the advent of a young Marsellus." His letter telling him "the happiest of expectations", curiously, leads him to a kind of panic.

There must, he was repeating himself, there must be some way in which a man who had always tried to live up to his responsibilities could, when the hour of desperation came, avoid meeting his own family. (272)

This is one of the crucial passages for the interpretation of *The Professor's House*. The advent of a young Marsellus and the return of his family including his wife are regarded by him as "the hour of desperation," despite the fact that he so loves his family as to "make any sacrifice for them." Where does this seemingly curious contradiction come from ?

One reason comes from the fact that he is expecting his death, so that it is difficult for him to meet his own family. And the next, greater reason is that "a young Louie

Marsellus," who is to be among even newer generation than Louie's, is coming to the world. It means that Louie's victory over the Professor is made absolute. Louie's domination in the Professor's family will be stronger, and the control of his generation over the society will be completed. Quite understandably it is the irrecoverable shock to the Professor, who has been desperately trying to keep his own values in the changing world.

And there is the greatest reason, suggested by the following passage :

He could not live with his family again—not even with Lillian. Especially not with Lillian ! (272-273)

He cannot approve of his wife's change. His wife, who ought to be among his generation but has given up to the new age, does not belong to him. She is content with the domination of Louie, from which the Professor is struggling to escape. It is natural that he begins to have apathy to his wife, just as he does to the new house, which is hers, not his.

Also, by the return of the Kansas boy, who had been forgotten since he had got the role as the "lover", he now considers his life after adolescence to be "not his life at all, but a chain of events which had happened to him." In short Lillian is the enemy of the Kansas boy because she had the decisive role of banishing and confining him in darkness. The greater part the Kansas boy comes to occupy in the Professor's mind, the more she becomes the being to be afraid of, to escape from. He even feels unwilling to lie in the same coffin and hopes to have the "eternal solitude" after death.

In this way the two causes of the Professor's dejection are symbolically described in the advent of a young Maresellus, which represents the abominable prosperity of materialistic society, and in the reference to Lillian, which represents building of a family and creating the family responsibility.

As for one other reason, the one that comes from his own problem concerning the paradox of success, the author proposes a scene suggesting that the Professor got out of it for the time being. This is the scene where he begins to annotate the diary that Tom Outland kept on the Blue Mesa. He "pleasantly trifled away" in doing the work. He found the work that gives him pleasure. Ironically, it is at the time of this little equability of mind that he receives the letter from France, which leads him to despair.

He must be alone. That was more necessary to him than anything had ever been, more necessary, even than his marriage had been in his vehement youth. (272)

At this very moment he is aware that protecting himself should be the highest priority for him, higher than his family responsibility or any other.

In this deadlocked predicament there is no other way left for him than waiting for the "instinctive conviction" of "being near the conclusion of his life" to come true, or than

REBIRTH THROUGH DEFEAT
— An Approach to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* —

becoming another person.

On the day he received the letter, a rainstorm breaks out and the violent wind shuts the windows, so that the stove, whose danger is foretold in the very early stage of the novel, is blown out. He doesn't exert himself against this accident, but let the thing go by itself.

It is Augusta, the seamstress, who saves him from asphyxiation. She comes to the Professor's study "for the keys of the new house" after having read a letter Lillian sent from France. These events, namely, the near suicide and asphyxiation and the rescue by Augusta, have the thematic meaning.

Practically it equals to death for a person to throw away his personality. In order for the professor to continue to live in that world to which he feels dislocation, he needed to do it, he needed to die once and become another person. However, this is "the personality his friends knew," the one that had been shaped through the years of adolescence when "the design of his life had been the work of this secondary social man, the lover." Even if he leaves this personality it does not mean he has thrown away his self. He tells himself :

Surely the saddest thing in the world is falling out of love—if once one has ever fallen in. (273)

But he succeeded in doing that. By the temporary release from consciousness he could be reborn without changing his original ego. He has finally relinquished all domestic and social relations.

He had let something go—and it was gone : something very precious, that he could not consciously relinquished, probably. (281)

He succeeded in rebirth by undergoing the death as "a spiritual experience,"¹⁹ to put in McFarland's expression. Even though he is "not the same man they had said good-bye to." he is keeping "the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter." It should be noted that his change for coping with the new age is fundamentally different from Lillian's. Regardless of her age Lillian changed to be among the new materialists. Her attitude, her viewpoint and her concern are those of the new generation. On the other hand, his attitude to the new age is indifference and apathy.

This is no doubt the attitude of the "vanquished." As a matter of course, however, he, as well as the author who created him, knows it. He thinks :

If his apathy hurt them, they could not possibly be so much hurt as he had been already. (281)

19) Dorothy T. McFarland, *Willa Cather* (New York : Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972), p.84

Even if this is defeatism or escapism, there is no other way left for him if he is to continue to live at all.

He has finally found the kind of life he could live even in this plight; the life that Augusta is already living. She is the woman who has known "none of the pleasures of marriage, family and possessions."²⁰ She is "the bloomless side of life" that he has always run away from. But it is this kind of life that he must learn to live. He even feels "a sense of obligation toward her," while, "on being quite honest with himself," he doesn't feel any obligation toward his family.

As to Augusta, S. Rosowski says that "her presence is the last narrative window."²¹ Augusta in fact opens the windows of the Professor's old attic study, pulling him out to life. It occurs to him that he would rather have Augusta with him just now than anyone else. Readers cannot help feeling it a little strange that he is going to live like this "unquesting and unquestioning German Catholic seamstress."²² John H. Randall calls this last state of the protagonist "spiritual suicide,"²³ and it is not entirely deniable if we turn our eyes only to the fact that his life will be a life "without joy, without passionate grief." But the important thing is that he gained a receptive capacity of his life and the outside world as they are. In the deadlocked situation caused by all the things we have seen, he thought intuitively that death is the only salvation. But having returned to life, reborn, and learned that there is "still Augusta... a world full of Augustas," he has gained energy just enough to live in the new age, to say the least. He has got the courage to meet his family coming home on the *Berengaria*.²⁴ He has finally got over the crisis.

In this way he gained his salvation. For Willa Cather, the creator of the protagonist, it was really the "letting go with the heart." Edith Lewis, who is Willa Cather's friend and biographer, says the novel is "the most personal"²⁵ of her writing. Through the creation of the Professor St. Peter she gained her own salvation. She also got over her uneasy, critical period by completing a work of art out of the crisis, out of her own introspection.

At the very last we must decide on what has not been paid much attention to, for critics have been too attracted to the importance of the Professor's old house where all the past things happened and also because they have been too attracted to the E. K. Brown's interpretation of death as the final house of the Professor. It is true his place was in the old house, and moving to the new house would mean to separate from all the important things that happened to him in the past and to assimilate himself to the new again

20) David Stouk, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p.103

21) Susan J. Rosowski, *op. cit.*, p.135

22) James Schroeter, *op. cit.*, p.152

23) John H. Randall III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973), p.233

24) The *Berengaria* is the name of a ship.

25) Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p.137

REBIRTH THROUGH DEFEAT
— An Approach to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* —

which he thinks he cannot live. But it seems that no one has ever discussed in which house the Professor is going to live from now. Answering this question determines the interpretation of *The Professor's House*. The author gives us no definite answer, but it is possible for readers to guess it.

In a very early scene of BOOK I: THE FAMILY, the author refers to the "rusty round gas stove without no flue." He did not look for a better stove because he was "terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them." He got "delight" by "neglecting negative comforts." But at the last stage of the novel he has thrown away all the attachment to the past life and is going to live "without delight," just like Augusta. It can be easily imagined that he no longer has tenacity for the old house where he fought for personal pleasures.

And also, readers are given the fact that it was "for the keys of the new house" that Augusta came over to him and saved him from asphyxiation. In the letter to the Professor, Lillian adds a postscript to the effect that :

She (Augusta) would be the best person to open the house and arrange to have the cleaning done. She would take it entirely off his shoulders and see that everything was properly put in order. (272)

Here is again the author's suggestion that Augusta will prepare for him to live in the new house. It is true "the Professor will go on living in isolation amid his family,"²⁶⁾ as Leon Eden says. However, the passage of the very end is as follows :

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. (281)

Rotten world as it would be, he has already had the courage to live in the actual world, move into the new house. Anyway, Augusta, as well as his family, will never admit him to live in the old house with this dangerous gas stove.

26) John J. Murphy, *op. cit.*, p.205