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Alexandra D. Debiase  
*Cleveland State University*

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LIMINAL IDENTITY IN WILLA CATHER'S "THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE"

ALEXANDRA D. DeBIASE

Bachelor of Arts in English

John Carroll University

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This thesis has been approved  
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and the College of Graduate Studies by

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Thesis Chairperson, Frederick J Karem

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Department & Date

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Adam T Sonstegard

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Department & Date

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James J Marino

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Department & Date

# LIMINAL IDENTITY IN WILLA CATHER'S "THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE"

ALEXANDRA D. DeBIASE

## ABSTRACT

Willa Cather develops the Professor and Tom Outland's identities in the novel *The Professor's House* through the lenses of domesticity, masculinity, and memory. For the Professor and Tom Outland, these identities are liminal and influenced by the landscape and space around them. Although both liminal, these identities are ultimately different, as the Professor's liminality seems to artificially have an affect on Tom as the novel reads on.

Through defining the two main characters in the novel 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. *The Professor's House* is an ontological study, filled with ambiguities and open to many readings. The liminal is the best explanation of what happens to the Professor and Outland throughout the novel, and one that enables the reader to not only understand more about contemporary trends in Cather studies, but also understand more about the nature of being.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Throughout Willa Cather's novel *The Professor's House*, both the Professor and Tom Outland are defined by the spaces they are in and the landscape that surrounds them. The Professor exists in a liminal space, moving back and forth from the old house to the new and constantly thinking about his time spent abroad, and Tom Outland is viewed through his movement from the Southwest to the Professor's house, which is the source of his liminality as well. In their essay "Mothers in the Making? Exploring Liminality in Cyber/Space," Clare Madge and Herietta O'Connor define liminality as a threshold, or a sense of being in-between. They write:

The term liminality derives from the Latin *limen*, or threshold, and was first used by Arnold Van Gennep (1909 but translated to English in 1960) in *Les rites de passage*. Victor Turner (1967) 'popularized' the use of the term in his classic work *The forest of symbols*. Here liminality denotes rituals of transition, a 'time out of time' where one is 'betwixt and between' social status. 84

Throughout life, the Professor seems most content living within the vast horizon of Lake Michigan, as Outland does amidst the Blue Mesa, but in the end these horizons lie just beyond their reach, leaving them in states of liminality. After death, the Professor's drafty office seems to be the only thing that will remain of his existence, just as "Outland" exists as nothing more but a name on a house. Both of these spaces hold memories of their scholarship and life's work, yet not their bodies; even in death they remain liminal. Their life's work forces them into these cramped spaces, and therefore into liminal states, as they are constantly engrossed in their studies, yet always focused on their horizons. But does scholarship force the individual into a state of alienation, which therefore makes the scholar look to their horizon for escape? In the end, is this horizon in and of itself an empty and alienated place? After death, every person leaves behind material objects, memories, and family, though what Tom and the Professor leave behind is not only their scholarly work, but spaces within houses. Tom leaves behind the house "Outland," while the Professor leaves behind the office in a house that is no longer his—both of which are physical spaces that almost seem to tell the reader more about these characters than anything else.

With all of the ambiguities in the text, it is only natural that Cather utilizes the liminal in her character development, but it also may be a direct relation of her own self at the time the novel was being written. In her essay "On *The Professor's House*," Cather writes:

In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, pretty 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 behaviour.

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In fact, Cather's entire essay reflects and focuses on how the landscape in *The Professor's House* acts as the text for the novel, but what fails to be explained to the questioning reader is how these landscapes relate to the passage of time, i.e. what happens to Tom after death, or to the Professor after his near-death experience, but moreover, what do the readings of space and landscape in the novel tell us about modern American identity, and how does this relate to society today? Cather also fails to mention her relationship to the characters in the novel, or anything much else under the surface of the text, leaving ambiguities throughout the novel that force the reader to have to make his/her own assumptions, in turn putting them in a state of liminality as well. In James Woodress' historical essay on *The Professor's House* he makes Cather's connection to her characters clearer where he writes, "About the same time that she had won the Pulitzer Prize, as she later wrote, she had felt that for her the world had broken in two. The story of Godfrey St. Peter, Cather's professor in this novel, reflects this troubled time in its author's life" (292). Just like her characters, Cather may have been living in the liminal just as well at the time she was writing the novel. This becomes clearer as Woodress goes on to write, "Professor St. Peter's life in many ways parallels his author's. Almost the same age as Cather, the Professor was born on a farm on the shores of Lake Michigan, which has for him the same emotional pull that the mountains of the Shenandoah Valley had for



Cather” (299). This not only suggests the possibility of there being a relationship between landscape and liminality within the novel, but also landscape and time. In other words, a relation to a change in American identity that Cather was witnessing firsthand in the early twentieth century.

Scholars have recently shifted the focus of their studies on *The Professor's House* to the implications of the Professor and Outland's relationship. In his article “Outland as Motherland: Maternity and Homosexuality in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*,” Peter Nagy writes, “Evidencing the coalescence of maternal and homosexual significations within these spaces, I argue that St. Peter's past romance with Outland, who had ‘brought him a second kind of youth,’ marked his failed attempt to recapture primary harmony through male-male intimacy” (4). Nagy continues by exploring how Cather's use of space and landscape throughout the novel suggests a deeper, potentially homoerotic relationship between Outland and the Professor. Nagy is not alone. John P. Anders recently tackled the topic in “Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literacy Tradition,” arguing that the relationship between males in her works are shaped by homosexuality because she spent so much time reading homosexual texts. In “Remaking the Masculine Self and Coping in the Liminal World of the Gay ‘Scene,’” David Peasley, David Plummer and Damien Ridge explain how homosexuality can be understood through understanding liminality. They write:

...notions of selfhood are challenged and men enter various states of liminality as they (re)construct themselves... The emotional dangers to selfhood lurking in performance and ritual are explored, as well as the ways that men find to prevail.

Invariably, liminality ends, and the men who do well approach themselves, the rituals and the performances with insight. 501

We see these various states of liminality evolving in both the Professor and Tom Outland throughout the movement of the novel, i.e, if we take the ending at face value, the Professor's liminality "ends." While homosexuality is one answer to the Professor and Tom Outland's relationship, taking a closer look at how masculinity is challenged by liminality within the text is even more telling. Moreover, the Professor and Tom Outland's relationship forces a liminality on Tom that he may not have otherwise.

What the current trends in *The Professor's House* criticism fail to examine is the liminality that rests at the core of the Professor's identity, and thus Tom Outland. While many critics have studied Cather's manipulation of space and landscape as a way of defining her characters, throughout this text I will focus on how these spaces are always liminal in *The Professor's House*. More specifically, I will focus on how this liminality shapes the Professor and Tom Outland's identities throughout the novel in an almost organic way through the lenses of domesticity, memory, and masculinity, albeit in different ways. The Professor is the ultimate liminal character in the text, while Outland seems to slip in and out of liminality as he travels and wears many hats throughout the novel. Perhaps we would understand his character more if we knew more about his newly famed engine, or if we were given a more reliable version of his story. Not only does the above homoeroticism, gender, or masculinity, often reappear in contemporary Cather studies, but through the novel domesticity, memory, and identity are reoccurring themes as well. Domesticity, memory, and masculinity are all driving forces behind

identity, and in *The Professor's House*, the Professor and Tom Outland's identities become liminal when exposed to these elements. Through developing the Professor and Tom Outland's characters, Cather performs an ontological study, showing these liminal spaces in relation to these three elements to make a comment on a modern shift in the concept of identity. Cather suggests that as time goes on and values change, not just the scholar's identity will become liminal; perhaps we all will exist in various states of liminality.

## CHAPTER II

### DOMESTICITY

Cather begins the novel by describing the Professor's old home, where everything seems somewhat out of place and worn out. She writes, "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," and then dwells on the house by writing, "...the stairs that were too steep, the halls that were too cramped, the awkward oak mantles with thick round posts crowned by bumptious wooden balls, over green-tiled fire-places" (3). The house immediately parallels the life of the professor in this initial description. Just as the house has served its purpose as a place of habitat and study, the Professor has lived his life and completed all of the work he has meant to; both are on their last leg. The house is not even his anymore, but he cannot help but hang on to it, and the same goes for his scholarship that was created within the walls. Cather writes, "The two last volumes brought him a certain international reputation and what were called rewards—among them, the Oxford prize for history, with its five thousand pounds,

which had built him the new house into which he did not want to move” (23). In his old age, the Professor and his life’s work have both faded into the walls of this house, yet his work is what is to blame for the new house that he cannot call home. Throughout these lengthy descriptions, the house and Professor are both ultimately difficult to read because Cather’s language leads us through a sort of awkward labyrinth to try to understand exactly who and what we are reading about. These similar descriptions of the Professor and the house show Cather’s way of conflating the two to a point to where the Professor will be headed to in his death; a liminal space. This is also how Cather is able to keep her characters in a constant state of liminality, because even though both the Professor and Outland seem to be defined domesticity, their hearts remain on the horizon.

The Professor generally occupies two spaces; his garden and his study. Cather writes, “From one of the dismantled windows the Professor happened to look out into his back garden, and at that cheerful sight he went quickly downstairs and escaped from the dusty air and brutal light of the empty rooms. His walled-in garden had been the comfort of his life—and it was the one thing his neighbors held against him” (5). Although Cather notes the Professor was “born on Lake Michigan,” (4) he seems to spend all of his time either in the small, dark enclosed space of his study where he only opens the window so that he does not become asphyxiated, or amidst his walled-up garden that barely seems to represent any form of nature. Even in the garden he is still alone and usually engaged in his studies. In “The Genius of Willa Cather,” Robert Footman writes, “Miss Cather, then rejects emphatically those values which can roughly be called ‘communal,’ and accepts those which are ‘individualistic’” (126). While individualism

can be valued in that it brings forth creativity in new ideas and thoughts, this is taken to a negative extreme for the Professor. Even in a garden, which is typically a wide open space filled with nature, the Professor finds a way to be alone by walling it off. In a moment in the novel while engaged in scholarship in his garden, the Professor even tries to bring nature down with him. Cather writes, “It struck him that the seasons sometimes gain by being brought into the house, just as they gain by being brought into painting, and into poetry. The hand, fastidious and bold, which selected and placed--it was that which made the difference. In Nature there is no selection” (61). This odd narrative moment highlights the strange relationship that the Professor has to domesticity and the world around him, because he thinks that a flower would be better inside a house or painting rather than its natural state.

The space that the Professor occupies most throughout the novel is his drafty office up in the attic of his old house. While it can be said that any professor cherishes his study space, the Professor takes it to the extreme in that his study becomes the antitheses of what lies below it, until the study is not a definite part of the familial house, yet not a definite part of the University either. It is a liminal space. Cather writes:

On that perilous journey down through the human house he might lose his mood, his enthusiasm, even his temper. So when the lamp was empty—and that usually occurred when he was in the middle of a most important passage—he jammed an eyeshade on his forehead and worked by the glare of that tormenting pear-shaped bulb, sticking out of the wall on a short curved neck just about four feet above his table. 18

By distinguishing the Professor's study from the "human house" and noting how uncomfortable the Professor allows himself to get just to avoid making a trip down a flight of stairs, Cather is making the case even stronger that the Professor is nothing more but a fixed object in this old house. By leaving the study less and less, he is slowly turning into this space. It is even stranger when Augusta comes into the picture and it is revealed that the Professor's study also doubles as a sewing room, and he refuses to let Augusta take her forms to the new house. Cather writes, "...the sewing-room was the most inconvenient study a man could possibly have, but it was the one place in the house where he could get isolation, insulation from the engaging drama of domestic life" (16). Even in his own study the Professor is in a state of liminality, as the space around him is not quite a study, sewing-room, or even a part of his house, just as Augusta's forms are designed to be the exact dimensions of his daughters, but are not exactly them although he seems happier with this version of them. The forms are themselves, with the power of artistic or scholarly imagination, liminal. Forms on the threshold of becoming animated, but forever fixed in domesticity. Is the Professor more happy with the forms than his daughters/wife because they are in the old house, because they remind him of the past, or because they are more akin to the realm of the liminal, to "possibility?" At one point in the novel, the professor ponders, "'I was thinking,' he answered absently, '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). It is obvious the professor is pondering Euripides as a metaphor for his own life wherein the

cave is his library in his insupportable house, where he is able to observe forms of his wife and daughters without having to observe the real thing. In his book *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House*, David Harrell writes, "Before, when Tom Outland offered him the keys to the Kingdom of Art, St. Peter felt even more torn between two worlds just as he was torn between two houses. Now, the Kingdom of Art is 'gone,' and Augusta holds 'the keys of the new house'" (180). The Professor's refusal to move his office and Augusta's forms to the new house shows his obsession for the liminal, because he is more comfortable with what appears to be a study, sewing room, and his daughters, than having these become reality at his new house.

Even though the Professor believes he is in a steady, justifiable routine for his old age, his very words themselves show that he is in a state of liminality. He says, "For the present I'll plod on here. It's absurd, but it suits me. Habit is such a big part of work" (47). The Professor has become part of the study because of all of the time he has spent there, just as his work is attached to the space and seems to have little worth outside of it. He even wishes that the study were in the new house, because it would save the time that it takes him to cross the street. Cather writes, "St. Peter awoke the next morning with the wish that he could be transported on his mattress from the new house to the old" (35). It is almost as if throughout the Professor's daily life he remains liminal because of his fixation on the study, which he sees as a reliable place of habit, even though the study itself represents liminality. His life's work has been completed, so why does he still have to spend so much time in his study? This in itself keeps him in a space that is neither here nor there, though like a Freudian repression, the new house keeps



coming back to him. His wife realizes his conundrum and suggests, "...it is much more dignified at your age, to have a room of your own," (24) not realizing that he always has had a room of his own, or the fact that he has turned into that room itself, but it is across the street. It would only seem perfect if he could sleep there forever. Further in his article, "The Genius of Willa Cather," Robert Footman goes on to state that, "This individualist does things for society, yet society is seldom consulted about what it wants done; the individual with communal coordinates, on the other hand, has an eye on the commands and needs of his society, and directs his endeavors to fill them" (124). Both the Professor and Tom have spent their lives engaged with their scholarship, but in the end their seclusion has only created things that seem to have a negative affect on society. In fact, Outland's invention only seems to cause turmoil in the Professor's family, as neighbors begin asking for Rosamond's money from Outland's will. The Professor's work also has a negative effect because it bought the house he does not even want to live in, not to mention he seems to be uncomfortable in his own marriage and his own skin. The study becomes a kind of domestic threshold, like a kind of self-inflicted Plato's Cave where art and scholarship become the preferred kind of real.

## CHAPTER III

### MEMORY

When Tom Outland's narrative begins, he immediately focuses on the Blue Mesa and explains it in a way incredibly similar to how the Professor describes Lake Michigan. Outland says, "The Blue Mesa was south of us, and was much stronger in colour, almost purple. People said the rock itself had a deep purplish cast. It looked, from out town, like a naked blue rock set down alone in the plain, almost square, except that the top was higher at one end" (166). This parallels how the Professor can see Lake Michigan from his study and that it, too is a giant blue horizon. Cather writes, "No wonder the thing bothered us and tempted us; it was always before us, and was always changing" (171). Lake Michigan, too, can always be seen as changing with the tide and temperature. In relation to human beings such as the Professor and Outland who are going through their lives completely static and unchanging, these horizons do not actually have much to offer. In fact, this makes it even more ironic that they are unreachable and seemingly unobtainable. While giving an incredibly vast amount of explanations of the horizon,

Cather goes on to write, “The mesa was our only neighbour, and the closer we got to it, the more tantalizing it was” (170). Just like the Professor’s inability to fully embrace the lake that lies so close within his reach, Outland finds the mesa almost infuriating because it always lies just on the horizon. In “The Indian-Detour in Willa Cather’s Southwestern Novels,” Caroline Woidat writes, “While the beauty of the ‘empty’ landscape was certainly responsible in part for luring outsiders to the region, many other factors contributed to this phenomenon... the Southwest was perceived as an escape from the pattern of life somewhere else” (23). Just as the lake offers an escape from the confines of the Professor’s office, the Blue Mesa offers the same, but both are still pretty empty within themselves. In her article “Speculation, Tourism, and The Professor’s House,” Paula Kot writes:

For Cather, the tourist gaze—as a modern form of ritual that restores the relation between landscape, aesthetic value, and cultural heritage—could heal the alienation from the land that Americans had suffered through the dominance of speculators, who treated the land as a commodity. 393

While the Professor and Tom constantly gaze upon these horizons, it is alienating them into their states of liminality. Even though they believe that if they could obtain what exists on the horizon, they would suddenly have a feeling of contentment, this does not seem to work. In the end, the Professor and Tom even ruin this connection to their horizons and make them into liminal spaces. Cather writes, “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” (20). Both the Blue Mesa and Lake Michigan represent the same

thing for both Outland and the Professor, because they never seem to be able to fully embrace these places, as they are always confined within their studies. Although their entire horizons are filled with these objects, they are just far enough away and vast enough that they are seemingly unattainable. Memories of these places leave both the Professor and Outland in states of liminality in the perception of and relation to the world that Cather has created for them. Outland also takes note of the Blue Mesa in that, “It was the sort of place a man would like to stay forever” (168). Surely this is how the Professor feels about the lake, or even France, but these memories still do not keep him out of the confines of his study and walled-up garden, just as it does not keep Outland out of these spaces either. While their work leads them to the solitary and confined space of their studies, they remain liminal within them because of their memory. They are always wishing to be out amongst what fills their horizons and what represents something beyond the liminal threshold.

Tom’s meditation on the Blue Mesa continues to parallel the Professor’s with Lake Michigan. Tom ponders, “After the burst in the sky was over, the mesa went on sounding like a drum, and seemed itself to be muttering and making noises,” and later, “I kept telling myself that it was very different from the air on the other side of the river, though that was pure and uncontaminated enough” (172-9). By constantly living with a sense that there is something better beyond their horizons, the Professor and Outland are alienated and existing in liminal spaces. While both the lake and the mesa are silent, empty spaces, they still represent more of a sense of life and possibility to the Professor and Outland than their studies do. Are ruins not the perfect liminal space? This is why

Tom hears noises on the mesa, but never finds the source of them even as his discoveries reveal a long abandoned village. The noises and his dream for purer, less contaminated air show that he is uncomfortable with himself and in search for something more pure. In “From Mesa Verde to The Professor’s House,” Daniel Harrell writes, “As many readers have observed, the ancient cliff dwellers represented for Cather an ideal society more stable and harmonious than her own” (32). While the cliff dwellers lifestyle remains mysterious, yet is known to be civilized and perfected in its own way, it challenges the role a scholar as an individual plays in our society. Unlike the cliff dwellers who live in the open air with a vast horizon of beauty and the natural cliff environment around them, the scholar is confined to a small, unimaginative space which results in only existing in a kind of purgatory of the page/text. Tom’s experience also molds his sense of family, which is quite similar to the Professor’s. Harrell writes:

For Tom and his family, however, the happiness is short-lived, first through the tragic loss of Henry and then the heart-breaking disruption of the friendship between Tom and Roddy. This dissolution is in keeping with the tone of The Professor’s House as a whole, a book in which happiness remembered as opposed to happiness currently enjoyed is the state of the family. St. Peter’s nostalgic recollection, ‘Oh, there had been fine times in this old house then’ (125), would do nicely as a subtitle to the novel. 67-8

For both the Professor and Outland, this family tragedy builds even more on their sense of being in-between. The Professor’s “nostalgic recollections” seem forced as if he is

attempting to make an excuse as to why he has never felt a sense of belonging in his house or family.

Even after Tom finds the mesa and seems to be content with the discovery and that he has found some sort of meaning in his life, he ends up leaving it and finally ending up alienated in his study, and then as nothing more than a name on a house. He says:

I could see our mesa bulking up blue on the sky-line. I hated to leave it, but I reflected that it had taken care of itself without me for a good many hundred years. When I saw it again, I told myself, I would have done my duty by it; I would bring back with me men who would understand it, who would appreciate it and dig out all its secrets. 202

Just like the Professor wishes to bring nature inside the house to make it better, Outland wishes to take the mesa out of its beautiful and natural state to somehow give it more meaning. In “The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather’s Search for Value,” John Randall writes, “Tom likes the cliff dwellings because they form a symmetrical pattern which is held together by the centrally located round tower. They remind him of sculpture because of the feeling they give of rest, of ordered tranquillity. But that is not all he gets from observing the ruins” (206). Indeed, he does get more from observing the ruins, but in a negative way. Both Tom and the Professor are forcing even their surroundings to become liminal by making them something they are not, just as both the Professor and Tom’s scholarly work has taken them out of the natural human state and made them into a fixture in a house. In “Harvesting Willa Cather’s Literary Fields,” Beth

Rundstrom writes, “Through the juxtaposition of houses and plains Cather created descriptive landscapes wherein humans and the environment interact. House and home invariably join earth and sky, human to earth, human to human” (225). In *The Professor’s House* this is true of Cather’s writing, but in a more unique way. While Cather has certainly juxtaposed these places, the interaction of Tom and the mesa as well as the Professor and the lake are so rare and disconnected because of their liminality, that the human is not connected to the earth, let alone themselves.

As the novel comes to an abrupt close, the reader is suddenly shocked to find the Professor admitting that there may be something wrong with him through a trip to the family doctor. This results in a last chapter, and especially a last paragraph that can easily question any scholarly work on the text, as the Professor finally seems content with himself. Cather’s prose takes a turn from the rest of the novel as well, with images of death and loneliness that were non-existent in the rest of the text. She writes:

He could remember a time when the loneliness of death had terrified him, when the idea of it was insupportable. He used to feel that if he wife could but lie in the same coffin with him, his body would not be so insensible that the nearness of hers would not give it comfort. But now he thought of eternal solitude with gratefulness; as a release from every obligation, from every form of effort. It was the Truth. 248

It is not shocking that soon after the Professor begins pondering death with these heavy words, Augusta wakes him and saves his life from what appears to be a faulty suicide attempt. Through his first thoughts after regaining consciousness, it appears as if the

Professor is suddenly content and whole within his study, returning from the liminal space he has been in throughout the entire novel. Cather writes:

His temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go—and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably. He doubted whether his family would ever realize that he was not the same man they had said good-bye to; they would be too happily preoccupied with their own affairs...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. 258

This passage is truly the culmination of the novel and where the Professor's appears to have crossed over the liminal threshold, not just because it is the last paragraph of the text, but because of the extreme shift in tone from what the reader has been given throughout the rest of the novel. It is also a point of confusion, because it is the last paragraph of the novel and the reader is led to believe that the Professor has essentially "found himself" and is therefore no longer living in the liminality that he has throughout the rest of the novel. The Professor does still exist in a liminal space at the end of the novel, for this reason exactly: the reader has no evidence of any true change in his character other than these final words. In Pam Payne's article "Liminal Mind, Creative Consciousness: From the Artists' Vantage Point," she writes of liminal time, place, transformation, and mind. She writes, "Those with the temperament, skills or stamina to traverse the threshold, to withstand the uncertainty of this purgatory limbo; those willing to risk diving into the chaos of the primordial stew will, if all goes well, emerge



transformed and enlightened” (191). Since the Professor is so stuck in his ways, it is hard to believe that he will change even after his near death experience since his character has remained static throughout the entire novel, and has consistently maintained a sense of seclusion and delusion even in his brief moments of near transformation. It is even more difficult to believe the Professor has changed because he has just woken up from almost being completely asphyxiated by gas. It does not seem as if he has indeed crossed the liminal threshold. The gas makes these lines almost humorous, and it is safe to say that in this moment he is indeed not thinking very clearly. While the Professor may have indeed let something go, it is only that he is ready to face death more than he was before his failed suicide attempt. What he does not realize is that what he has let go is the memory of his life as he knew it. This is obvious through a bit of the narrative that comes before this moment. Cather writes:

He used to say he didn't mind hearing Augusta announce these deaths which seemed to happen so frequently along her way, because her manner of speaking about it made death seem less uncomfortable. She hadn't any of the sentimentality that comes from a fear of dying. She talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy March, or any of the sadnesses of nature. 256

It is obvious that though it may be easy to argue that the Professor finds himself in a state of contentment after his botched suicide attempt, through his words and the irony of the gas stove, we can see quite the opposite.

CHAPTER IV  
MASCULINITY

When Tom Outland shows up on the Professor's doorstep, we see him entering the Professor's life in an interesting way. Tom immediately has dinner with the family and begins to tell his story. Cather writes, "...after a while, through the open windows, the Professor would hear them in the garden: the laughter and exclamations of the little girls, and that singularly individual voice of Tom's... He couldn't have wished for a better companion for his daughters..." (107) Tom's relationship with Rosamond and Kathleen portrays him as the son the Professor never had. In this light, the reader begins to question what we read as Tom Outland's Story in Book Two. It almost seems out of character that the Outland we read in Book Two is the famed inventor. The reliability of Book Two is questionable also in that it appears in the text as the Professor is working on annotating Outland's journal. Outland fills the role of the Professor's long lost son, Outland looks up to him as an experienced scholar and a father figure, and thus the Professor's liminal identity is forced upon him in the account we are given.

Early in the novel, the relationship between the Professor and Tom Outland seems deeper than just a friendship as we see the Professor becoming nostalgic over the summers where his family went to Colorado and he was able to stay home and spend time with Outland. His nostalgia reads as more romantic than any discourse between he and his wife in the novel. Cather writes, “In those months when he was a bachelor again, he brought down his books and papers and worked in a deck chair under the linden-trees; breakfasted and lunched and had his tea in the garden. And it was there he and Tom Outland used to sit and talk half through the warm, soft nights” (7). As similar narrative moments become trends throughout the novel, the relationship between the Professor and Outland becomes yet another ambiguity in the text, and another aspect of liminality. Even outside of their relationship, there seem to be hints of homoeroticism in the Professor’s words. He says, “‘I was thinking,’ he answered absently, ‘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). There are many parallels here not only between the cave and the Professor’s office, but also the reflection on Euripides observing women. The only women we see the Professor observe are the forms in his study.

As the professor travels to Chicago, we see him focusing on the landscape yet again, though ironically more than anywhere else in the novel the Professor feels most at ease and content in this hotel in Chicago. Cather writes, “Tea was served in Louie’s suite on the lake front, with a fine view of the falling snow from the windows. The Professor

was in a genial mood; he was glad to be in a big city again, in a luxurious hotel, and especially pleased to be able to sit in comfort and watch the storm over the water” (75). This trip also sparks one of the sparse conversations we get to see between the Professor and his wife, which gives us some more insight into the Professor’s liminality. Later that evening he reflects:

That night, after he was in bed, among unaccustomed surroundings and a little wakeful, St. Peter still played with his idea of a picturesque shipwreck, and he cast about for the particular occasion he would have chosen for such a finale.

Before he went to sleep he found the very day, but his wife was not in it. Indeed, nobody was in it but himself... 79

Cather makes it a point in these lines to highlight the fact that the Professor feels more content being alone than being with anyone; even his wife. The only person for the Professor is himself and his intellectual, not physical stimulation. Physical or sensory contact with a person past the threshold is not permitted. These lines also show how the Professor’s mind is always in danger of slipping into the past, future, or into a space different than which he really resides. This space is not the functioning present, but a liminal present. After this trip to Chicago, it is easy to see that while the Professor can be happy and content within a space that is not his small, drafty office, his masculinity poses another liminal threshold. This is seen through his interactions not only here with his wife and at the dinner table, but also in his own mind as he realizes he rather be alone than with anyone else at all.

## CHAPTER V

### IDENTITY

Even within the time of the Professor's near-death experience, he exists only in the liminal, still dreaming of what was not actually his life. Cather writes, "The sight of it from his study window these many years had been of more assistance than all the convenient things he had done without would have been" (22). The Professor has spent his entire life in a daze within his tiny office, only interested in the scholarly work he was putting out, and it is only in the last of his days where he can justifiably gaze upon Lake Michigan and think about what his life would have been without his scholarly work. What used to give him a sense of guidance and a passion for his goals now represents all of the time he wasted by sitting in his study above his active, growing family. Cather writes:

What he had not known was that, at a given time, that first nature could return to a man, unchanged by all the pursuits and passions and experiences of his life; untouched even by the tastes and intellectual activities which have been strong

enough to give him distinction among his fellows and to have made for him, as they say, a name in the world. 242

Although a professor usually makes a name for his or herself through scholarly work, in his last days the Professor sees this as quite the opposite. Instead, his work has brought him back to where he was upon his birth, and only made him regret his past drive to make a name for himself, as he sees this as not the most important thing to do in life. In Julia Kristeva's "Powers of Horror" she writes that after death we are both a "radically excluded" (2) object and "The border of [the subject's] condition as a living being" (3). Even in death the Professor remains liminal because throughout his confined life within his study he has never found a comfortable self. Instead of leaving a legacy through his work, he has only left the physical space of his study.

While the Professor is finally able to come to terms with the reality of his nearing death by the end of the novel, it is not safe to say that he has escaped the state of liminality he has been in throughout the rest of the novel. In her article "In the Name of the Self: Cather's The Professor's House," Alice Petry examines these final words in a unique way. She writes:

What was the "something" he had "let go," and is the feeling that "the ground [is] under his feet" meant to be ironic or affirmative? One key to understanding that final paragraph—indeed, the entire novel—is the professor's full name: Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter. Ultimately, Cather's handling of that complex name reveals her instinctive understanding of what modern psychology has come to perceive as the interrelationship of a sense of self and religious faith. 26

Interestingly enough, Petry describes the Professor's liminality through how Cather uses his name throughout the novel, but she is on to something else through studying whether or not these last lines are ironic. Petry studies the unstable relationship between the Professor and his faith, but the same goes for his relationship to space and landscape. This builds on the previous pattern of ambiguity in the novel and frankly it is nothing more than ironic to finally see him happy and content only in the final words of the novel. In his article "Music in the Professor's House," Richard Giannone examines the relationship between the novel and music, specifically comparing the text to Brahms' Requiem. In this fashion, he sees this final scene in an interesting light. He writes:

...Willa Cather does nevertheless convey through music a veiled hope that a higher justice will give lasting meaning to this world of daily strife. This hope is submerged in the last section of Brahms's Requiem which proclaims:

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth.

Sayeth the spirit, that they rest from their labors, and that their works follow after them. (469)

Whether or not the last lines of the text are meant to be "ironic or affirmative," it is interesting to look at both Giannone and Petry's focus on the religious imagery in these last lines and see how they relate to the Professor's liminality. While the Professor will indeed leave behind his studies, this can indeed be seen as a "veiled hope." Throughout the novel it does not appear as if the Professor has any connection to religion, which makes the reader question the Professor's identity yet again.

CHAPTER VI  
IDENTITY MEETS THE LIMINAL

By setting the Professor and Tom Outland in fixed and alienated, liminal spaces, Cather comments on the transformation of the concept of American identity as America shifts from the rural to industrial, and therefore, natural to unnatural. In “Re-writing America: Origin and Gender in Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*,” Ian Bell writes:

The Indians presented a different sort of threat to native tribes: a double threat of collectivity and ownership... as a harmony between the land and its inhabitants.

Such harmony is a principal feature of the culture of the Mesa Verde for both Tom Outland and Cather herself... and provides a telling site for the novel’s negotiations of community and Individualism, of public and private responsibilities, through the urge for the purity of origin. 13

Through the Blue Mesa we see a civilized nation in which each individual had their own dwelling, yet was able to function communally with the entire population. They perfected living by studying things that had effects on their quality of life, unlike Tom or



the Professor's studies which could easily become a thing of the past in the years to come. The Professor's horizon is vast and beautiful, just as the mesa, but it is an alienated lake. Human advances through the study of science and technology have no place upon either of these horizons, and yet, like the Cliff Dwellers, humans could live well enough stranded amongst the everlasting resources they provide. In "Willa Cather: Landscape and exile," Laura Winters writes, "In Cather's fiction, the sacred place is not always a place of peace and contentment. In fact, it may be the place in which one must come to terms with the most difficult unresolved impulses. The sacred place can be a place of danger because it is a place of transformation; it is liminal space" (9). The Professor and Outland are forced inwards even with their appreciation for their horizons, to a state where individuality is defined by domesticity, memory, and masculinity. This alienation leads to both the Professor and Outland as living in constant states of liminality, and in the end they are not themselves, but mere extensions of the cramped spaces that surround them. For Outland this turns out to be "Outland," the house, as his study has been transferred there, and for the Professor it is his drafty office in his old house. In her article "Harvesting Willa Cather's Literary Fields," Beth Rundstrom writes, "Literary geography examines relationships between landscape and its portrayal in literature... Interpretations vary because individuals bring different mind-sets and affinities to the same landscape" (218). Cather manipulates the literary landscape and the space that lies within it to show how the shift in American culture is creating a society where identity has become liminal through a liminal threshold that challenges domesticity, memory, and masculinity.

When the novel was written in 1925, just after the war, one of the major shifts in American society was the strive for wealth. While novels like *The Great Gatsby* tackled this issue directly, in *The Professor's House* Cather uses the liminal to portray this shift. In his text "Re-writing America: Origin and Gender in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*," Bell writes, "While 'chemicals and dollars and cents' are seen to have no significance for the removed and preserved world of the mesa, they are extremely important for the material world which constitutes the rest of the novel, a world which, although possessive and greedy, is the one in which people suffer" (15). The growing importance of money, which we also see in the struggle surrounding Outland's invention, increases a sense of tension in the new American identity. Where one once may have strived to succeed to build wealth for their family, money suddenly becomes more frivolous in Cather's time. We see this with the Professor being uncomfortable about his daughter buying such expensive clothes. In his essay "*The Professor's House: A Shapely Story*," Clive Hart examines the Professor's behavior surrounding money. He writes, "The most important theme to emerge from Book I is the relationship of St. Peter to his family, and particularly to those aspects of his family's behaviour which directly reflect the pressures of the new money-minded society" (275). This shift in American mind-set surrounding money around the time the novel was written is yet another source of the Professor's liminality in the novel, and speaks to Cather pointing forward. In "The Genius of Willa Cather," Robert Footman writes of this, citing Cather's feelings towards the shift in American mind-set. He says, "Miss Cather, then, rejects emphatically those values which can roughly be called 'communal,' and accepts those which are

“individualistic.” Since the modern, realistic novel often has its primary concern industrial, communal life, she naturally opposes it” (126). What will be said of the Professor’s money after he passes away? This is another one of the issues weighing on his mind and contributing to his sense of liminality.

Comparing and contrasting the liminality of Outland and the Professor not only with one another, but also with the rest of the characters in the text also confirms the importance of understanding Outland and the Professor’s liminal identities. Throughout the text we continually see the Professor’s discomfort in accepting Louie and Scott as part of his family. Cather writes:

With Louie, Lillian seemed to be launching into a new career, and Godfrey began to think that he understood his own wife very little. He would have said that she would feel about Louie just as he did; would have cultivated him as a stranger in the town, because he was so unusual and exotic, but without in the least wishing to adopt anyone so foreign into the family circle. 64

Through his ethnicity and social status, Louie may be the only character in the text other than Outland or the Professor who shows some liminal traits, but these are threatening to the Professor. Perhaps even more threatening is Scott, who is comfortable in writing jingles and shows no competition with Louie. In understanding these two characters as well as the women in the text who surround them, the Professor and Outland’s identities become more defined as liminal. While taking part in the normal drama of every day life, Lillian, Rosamond and Kathleen are all predictable and seemingly comfortable with themselves. The same cannot be said for the Professor and Outland.

Certainly there is difficulty in distinguishing between liminality, negativity, stasis, stagnation, and inaction, but in *The Professor's House* the significance of the liminal is found throughout the text and it appears to be much different than all of the above. In Sean Kelly's "Hawthorne's 'Material Ghosts:' Photographic Realism and Liminal Selfhood in *The House of the Seven Gables*," he studies the significance of the liminal in Hawthorne's text. He writes, "Uncovering the spiritual meaning beyond the appearance of the actual is central to Hawthorne's thinking about the role of the writer and artist." In *The Professor's House* this meaning appears through uncovering Cather's use of the liminal in terms of domesticity, memory, and masculinity forming the Professor and Tom Outland's identities. While Hawthorne's text gets the reader "thinking about the role of the writer and artist," here the reader is thinking about the challenges posed to the scholar. Later he writes, "...Hawthorne presents a complex view of the self as both ontologically emergent and bordering on ontological destitution--at once a "material ghost" [*House* 105] and an animate corpse" (233). As Kelly examines Hawthorne's use of the liminal in defining the self, the Professor stands in obvious comparison. While Hawthorne's works were written nearly a century before Cather's, the significance Kelly attributes of the liminality in them can also be attributed to *The Professor's House*. Rather than just seeing the Professor and Outland as existing in "in-between" spaces, this seems a better explanation. The spaces in the text are never completely retrospective, entirely all-male, nor are they entirely pedagogical. Just like Hawthorne, Cather's text is an ontological study, which has many angles of study such as the homoerotic, but is not limited to just that.

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

Throughout *The Professor's House*, both the Professor and Tom Outland exist in various states of liminality that can be seen through the lenses of domesticity, memory, and masculinity. This becomes much clearer upon studying the spaces and landscapes that surround the characters. When comparing this liminality to Cather's life at the time the novel was written, one can then start to see the text as Cather's comment on a shift in early twentieth century American identity. Various ambiguities in the text as well as contemporary Cather criticism support this in showing that these three reoccurring elements always tie back to the Professor and Tom Outland's liminal identities. As we are given Outland's story through unreliable means, it becomes questionable whether or not Outland's liminality is the same as the Professor's, or just the Professor's liminality rubbing off on him. Just as the Professor and Outland become fixed objects after their deaths through their studies, "Outland," and the Professor's drafty office, Cather suggests that we have the same fate as Americans. In "The Genius of Willa Cather," Robert

Footman writes, "...Willa Cather consciously looks back to the pioneer days of Nebraska and since she writes reverently and longingly of the life there, one can only conclude that she has accepted the values learned then as the values to be followed now" (124). With the rise in technology, even the scholar need not exist confined within the walls of a stuffy study. We are much further from the Nebraskan pioneer days than Cather was nearly a century ago. Regardless, Cather's text demonstrates a necessity to look back while also looking forward so that we might just truly feel the ground beneath our feet, know where we are, and face the future.

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