

ABSTRACT

Symbols of Religious Transformation in Willa Cather's Southwest Novels

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Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* treat the transformational effects of visits to the undeveloped southwest United States by European men. This thesis discusses the religious nature of those transformations. In *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland discovers a pre-Christian, remote, and archetypal world in the Blue Mesa which fascinates him and which he relates to Professor St. Peter, who, in turn, confronts his own beginnings. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, missionary priest Jean Marie Latour must face the alien and terrifying southwestern culture as he takes shelter in the Stone Lips cave. His "ingestion" into the lips is a Eucharistic symbol which will perfect Latour's transformation into his own purified character and ultimately into his cathedral. The two texts depict divergent transformations, one failed and one fruitful; the difference is due to Cather's skepticism of the modern world in which St. Peter is immersed.

Symbols of Religious Transformation in Willa Cather's Southwest Novels

by

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A Thesis

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

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Accepted by the Graduate School
August 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has evolved as it has only through the help I received, direct and indirect, from my professors, colleagues, and friends here at Baylor University. I first conceived of the project in Dr. Nancy Chinn's Modern American Literature seminar. Under her direction, what started as a minor presentation over *Death Comes for the Archbishop* became a fascinating, consuming project which resulted in a longer paper and finally in the idea for this thesis. I credit this transformation of my first work to Dr. Chinn's perceptive and thorough classes on Cather, and most of all to her love for Cather, which would spark the interest of any student. I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to Dr. Luke Ferretter, whose exacting advice on my chapters improved and sharpened my argument more than I ever expected. I would also like to thank the English Department, headed by Dr. Dianna Vitanza, and the English Graduate Program, headed by Dr. Jay Losey, for their constant support, financial and otherwise, during this sometimes intimidating thesis process.

Finally, I wish to mention with deepest gratitude my graduate student colleagues, especially Robert Hamilton, whose friendship, encouragement, and advice sustained me during the most difficult parts of this process. Your inquisitiveness and generosity inspire me. This work could not have developed without the loving support of my family, and I thank them for always believing in my academic ability, even when I did not. This work is a tribute to the love you gave me.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In December of 1922, Willa Cather knelt before Bishop George Beecher and, alongside her parents, was confirmed into the Episcopal Church. The year had been a momentous one. In Cather's own words, "The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (Robinson 232). The brutal innovations of World War I deeply shook Cather, and indeed it must have seemed as though gentleness and repose in nature would never reign again as the world tried to recover. For Cather personally as well, 1922 proved remarkable. She saw her novel *One of Ours* both garner harsh critique and become a best-seller, thrusting her into the cruel critical world and at the same time allowing for her financial security. Amidst this global and personal turmoil, Cather exchanged her Baptist heritage for membership into the liturgical and influential Episcopal Church of Red Cloud. Biographer Phyllis C. Robinson posits two main reasons for the conversion: Cather felt attracted to "the beauty of its ritual" and its "sense of continuity with the past" (233). Whether Cather hoped to capture and cherish the past by her conversion or simply enrich and sanctify her accelerating life, the structured journey into the interior life would prove to preoccupy Cather for years to come.

At the same time Cather was exploring a religious formality not known to her, she found herself inspired by the southwest. With Edith Lewis, Cather had visited the southwest in 1916 and spent entire afternoons hiking through mesas and rocky southwest landscape. The visit left a profound impression on Cather.

In 1917, Cather published *The Song of the Lark*, in which Cather depicts the southwest as transcendent and transformative. Thea Kronborg, a talented but tired singer, visits the southwest with Ray Kennedy. As she rests and reflects amid fragments of ancient pottery, Thea realizes that “one ought to do one’s best, help to fulfill some desire of the dust that slept there” (380). Thea’s new awareness of the past and her rejection of the young man’s romantic advances within the dank Panther Canyon cave liberate and form Thea into an authentic artist who will transcend her time and geography.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather recognized the southwest as a catalyst for art. In later works, she would come to portray the southwest as a catalyst for the entire interior life. Cather revisited the southwest in 1925, and, according to Robinson, “of all her experiences during the twenties [...] none was more important to Willa than her rediscovery of the southwest” (246). During this trip, Cather found herself intrigued by Roman Catholicism. Cather befriended priests and found, in many of them, men who, like herself, treasured the past and a life of contemplation. In particular, she was intrigued by the stories of French missionaries Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy and Father Joseph Machebeuf, figures who would later become protagonists in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather’s physical journey to the southwest intertwined with her spiritual journey, and the enigmatic mesas and pueblos of the southwest became mystical landscapes which could instigate religious transformation.

The Professor’s House and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, published in 1925 and 1927 respectively, are Cather’s “southwest novels.” In both, the southwest landscape prompts a confrontation with raw religious symbols which will act as an exigence of faith for the novels’ protagonists, Professor Godfrey St. Peter and

Father Jean Marie Latour, both displaced men who will be fundamentally touched by the ancient southwest. In *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland discovers a pre-Christian, remote, and archetypal world in the Blue Mesa which fascinates him and which he relates to Professor St. Peter, who, in turn, confronts his own beginnings. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, missionary priest Jean Marie Latour must face the alien and terrifying southwestern culture as he takes shelter in the Stone Lips cave. His "ingestion" into the lips is a Eucharistic symbol which will perfect Latour's transformation into his own purified character and ultimately into his cathedral. The two texts depict divergent transformations, one failed and one fruitful; the difference is due to Cather's skepticism of the modern world in which St. Peter is immersed.

CHAPTER TWO

The Professor's House: Religious Quest in the Face of Modern Anxiety

Introduction

Since first publication in 1925, *The Professor's House* has been an unusually controversial member of Cather's novel cycle. Several early critics, including Leon Edel, Alfred Kazin, and J.B. Priestly, reacted violently to the experimental form of the novel, arguing that the "Tom Outland" section of the novel unnecessarily interrupts the Professor's tale, which they also criticize as being too lengthy. Kazin writes, "The violence with which she broke the book in half to tell the long and discursive narrative of Tom Outland's boyhood in the Southwest was a technical mistake that has damned the book" (22). Cather defended herself against these charges by invoking her inspiration for the novel, a Dutch painting she had seen in Europe of an open window through which wild sea breeze freshened a cluttered domestic room. "Tom Outland's Story," Cather explained, functions just as the open window in the painting. Even so, she later wrote that the novel was a "nasty, grim little tale" which she herself seemed to sometimes dismiss by admitting it was written in a "middle aged mood" (Robinson 240).

Some modern critics, though they may accept Cather's innovative form, still condemn the novel based upon the character of Professor St. Peter. St. Peter's conflicted relationship with his family leads many critics to accuse him of misogyny. Alice Bell carefully traces all of the allusions in *Professor's House*, taking the references to Euripides, et al. not to indicate playfulness on the

Professor's part, but to reveal thinly veiled violent hatred of his wife and daughters. Ian Bell argues that the female is completely "excluded" from the text until Tom penetrates the "vaginal canyon" leading to the mesa (24), and Thomas Strychacz makes a similar claim as he discusses the exclusively male "paradise" of the blue mesa. Moreover, some argue that St. Peter's misunderstandings of the women around him are echoed throughout the novel in the attitudes of Father Duchene and finally in Cather herself, so that the entire novel is written in patriarchal ignorance. Margaret Doane's "In Defense of Lillian St. Peter" attempts to trace and prove the "anti-feminine" bias Cather allows to infiltrate every corner of the novel. In "This is a Frame Up," Jean Schwind treats this theme as well, defending Mother Eve and Virginia Ward against their paternalistic authors and interpreters.

Luckily, for all those who censure St. Peter and ultimately Cather, there are just as many critics who defend Cather's characters and art. Stephen Tanner, for instance, admirably probes the nuances in St. Peter's character and notes that his fond memories of the past prove that he is not anti-feminine but only a victim of the universal malady of loneliness and self-isolation. To further defend the structure of the novel, critic Robert Giannone exposes to what a remarkable degree the novel follows sonata form with a careful treatment of musical motifs and allusions. Similarly, Hart Clive's *"The Professor's House: A Shapely Story"* traces the repetition of color motifs to prove that the novel is reflexive and unified.

Ultimately, the novel's structure and the Professor's enigmatic character must go hand in hand. "Tom Outland's Story" is not an isolated portion of the novel; rather, the exterior and interior themes found within it are enacted in the

other sections of the text. Clive has explained the exterior actions which can be found in the mesa and in the Professor's house: conversations, dinner parties, certain colors, and even certain words. Expanding his findings, this chapter explores one of the foundational interior movements of character which occurs in both the mesa in the Professor's world. Tom undergoes a religious transformation within the mesa, and the Professor later undergoes a religious transformation of similar character. These twin religious encounters can provide us with further insight into St. Peter's despondency, which indeed not only involves sexual confusion and tension, as several critics have competently explored, but also involves a fundamental confusion of religious identity.

A Religious Experience

"For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion," Tom Outland insists as he recounts his exploration of the mysterious Blue Mesa (206). Outland's remark merits further scrutiny. The young travelers who first encounter the mesa are transformed by its discovery, and they in turn transform others by reporting and sharing the experience. What is most odd and shocking about *The Professor's House* is that the discovery of the mesa, which contains within it a rich, beautiful, and pure world, seems ultimately to transform those who encounter it into maladjusted and misunderstood persons who can no longer abide their own modern world, leading to the "nasty, grim little tale" with which Cather never fully reconciled herself and which horrified many critics. Following the careful distinctions outlined by Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, we can trace Tom Outland's "religious emotion" as he penetrates the mesa as a journey to the primal religious hunger of the

human person. Tom's mesa experience is a return *ad originem* which will ultimately transform not the soul itself, but instead will force Tom and the Professor to confront the tension between their modern surroundings and the primal religious appetites within them.

After a lengthy first section entitled "The Family" during which we are introduced to jealousy, competition, greed, and inability of humans to connect, *The Professor's House* changes setting and tone as it gives space to "Tom Outland's Story," an oral record of his discovery of the preserved Native American cliff city inside the Blue Mesa. According to the narrative, though not according to the historical exploration of the mesa by Richard Wetherhill on which Cather based her novel, the mesa which Tom and his companion Roddy Blake feel pulled to infiltrate is hitherto unseen and unexplored by Western eyes. The foreman John Rapp informs the pair, "Nobody has ever got into it yet [...] The only way into it is through that deep canyon that opens on water level [...] You can't get in by that" (154). Tom himself apprehends the mesa's inaccessibility: "The north end we could easily believe impassable – sheer cliffs that fell from the summit to the plain, more than a thousand feet" (155). The one entrance point Tom locates which appears in any way accessible is still treacherous and serpentine, "like a mouse track winding into a big cheese" (155).

David Harrell extensively treats the mesa narrative alongside what Cather actually heard about the mesa's "discovery." Cather had interviewed Dick Wetherhill herself, and Wetherhill informed Cather of his trip into the mesa; this story would become the prototype of Tom's story. As Harrell explains, the mesa was hardly unexplored, but rather the inside of the mesa was "already familiar to a great many people" (135). Furthermore, not only had the mesa already been

“surveyed, mapped, sketched, photographed, and described” (136), but Wetherhill himself conducted “paid tours” of the mesa on a frequent basis (137)! Clearly, Tom’s solitary and difficult entry into the mesa is a narrative detail deliberately constructed by Cather.

By changing these details in the story to heighten the danger and difficulty of entry, Cather includes a narrative element which, according to Eliade, is a hallmark of religious feeling and experience. The movement of the religious person, Eliade explains, is characterized by passage over a “threshold” or “narrow gate” which “suggest the idea of a dangerous passage” and, after crossed, “bring about a veritable ontological mutation” (181). Tom’s mysterious, unentered, labyrinthine paths certainly fit alongside Eliade’s examples of bridges “narrow as hair” and paths as difficult as “a sharpened edge of a razor” (182-183). Cognizant of this symbolism, we are aware that Tom is embarking upon a journey which will likely end in some sort of religious transformation.

Upon successfully entering the mesa, Tom enters a primal and remote world which will lead Tom to face his own beginnings. After a difficult and solitary hike into the mesa, Tom is awed by his discovery of a perfectly preserved “little city of stone, asleep” (163). The city is surrounded by a tower, the description of which is worth quoting in full:

It was beautifully proportioned, that tower, swelling out to a larger girth a little above the base, then growing slender again. There was something symmetrical and powerful about the swell of the masonry. The tower was the first thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something. It was red in color, even on that grey day. (164)

Tom immediately reports the tower as central to the stone city, even foundational to its meaning and essential for its existence and character. To

appreciate the full import of this image, we must again turn to Eliade. As religious imagery, the tower serves two functions. As a tower, the structure directs human attention upward and carries the human to contemplation of the gods, continuing Tom's journey and initiation into the religious realm. Essential to the creation of a sacred space, according to Eliade, is the idea that "the three cosmic levels – earth, heaven, underworld – have been put in communication" (36). This is often achieved "through the image of a universal pillar, *axis mundi*, which at once connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below" (36). Of course, we cannot either escape the inevitably phallic nature of the tower; as Carl Jung reminds us, the phallus is "the way that God enters his devotees" – the tower, therefore, does not only lead humanity to the divine, but brings the divine down to earth in a primal, "seminal" act that reminds one of the first creation (*Symbols* 342).

The tower connects Tom to a heavenly realm, but, perhaps more importantly, the tower also reconnects Tom to an awareness of origins. Eliade notes that "such a cosmic pillar can be only at the very center of the universe, for the whole of the habitable world extends around it" (37). Tom's tower therefore acts as an *omphalos* or "navel of the earth," a place of birth, nourishment, and connection. "A universe comes to birth from its center," Eliade continues, noting that cities grow around an *omphalos* as does an embryo and that the creation of the human person likewise always occurs at the navel of the earth. Thus, Eliade concludes, "it seems inescapable [...] that the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World" (43). For Tom, who is an orphan, this pull to natal realities is all the stronger. Tom's attraction to the mesa and the tower that holds it all together is therefore existentially an attraction to origins, a point

which will become essential as we explore Professor Godfrey St. Peter's own reaction to the story of the mesa.

Tom continues to be confronted with primal religious symbols as he further explores the mesa's rich interior with his companion Roddy Blake and finally with Father Duchene. The religious encounters are always remote, from a time buried in mystery. The mesa's imagery lies outside of Christianity; while it could be read as a sort of post-Christian, and distinctively American, experience of "transcendence," the wealth of Old Testament archetypes with which Cather populates the scene indicates an older, *pre-Christian* experience. Tom mentions a "Christmas Eve" spent in the mesa when the moon was "almost full" (165). Christmas, or the dawn of Christ's birth and thus the possibility of Christianity, has not yet arrived. The moon is developing its fullness and does not yet resemble the perfectly shaped disc which is an iconic symbol of the Christian Eucharist. The "priest"-like "mountain sheep [...] out on a ledge hundreds of feet above you, with his trumpet horns" which Tom considers shooting for meat resembles an Old Testament priest emerging from Sinai more than an elegantly vested, clean, ascetic Christian cleric (174). The inability of the pair to sacrifice a sheep also indicates an inability to process Christianity, which is centered upon the "lamb that was slain." The female remains Tom and Roddy discover are dubbed "Mother Eve," another ancient image. Christianity, an outgrowth of Judaism, would not be an appropriate experience here in this subterranean world so rife with raw and undeveloped imagery of the primal religious experience. The Old Testament religious encounters induct Tom and Roddy into not only a spiritual experience, but a religious experience which has its roots in

ancient human history. The images in the mesa are mysterious and ancient, but they have been meaningful to humans for thousands of years.

The Mesa Repeated in St. Peter: Attempts at Transformation

Tom's experience, terrible and transcendent, fascinates and thrills him. His initial attraction to the mesa proves warranted as Tom discovers richness after richness in the form of pottery, human remains, and various dwellings. The place is so fantastic that Tom cannot keep it a secret for long. Tom considers "keep[ing] the secret as the mesa had kept it" (164), but the very night of his discovery he shares the whole story with Roddy Blake and soon brings him into the mesa. Ultimately, all surrounding townspeople, Father Duchene, the Smithsonian Institution, others in Washington, DC, and the entire St. Peter family are privileged to hear the fantastic story of the discovery and riches of the mesa. Fantastic and charming as the story is, the pristine and fresh experience does not bring calm and happiness to those who see or hear of it. While the pair encounters ancient order in the mesa, outside the mesa there is chaos, disorder, unpredictability, and a loss of control. The Smithsonian remains uninterested in Tom's findings, while Roddy sells many of the artifacts to a Frenchman who is very interested in them. Tom and Roddy quarrel as a result, and never reconcile due in part to Tom's untimely death, a briefly mentioned but poignant tragedy in the novel.

The chaos extends beyond Tom and Roddy; the St. Peter family also dissolves into discord. Rosamund and Kathleen, once close sisters, are now constantly entangled in suspicious jealousies due to the unexpected fortune Rosamund receives from Tom's successful innovation of a vacuum. Professor St.

Peter's relationship with his colleague Crane, once an ally, is now strained, also due to the money resulting from Tom's work. Professor St. Peter's marriage is threatened as well, since Lillian over time grew "jealous" of the attention St. Peter gave his promising and exotic scholar. Clearly, hearing of the mesa has not brought successes or harmony into the St. Peter family.

The effect of the mesa on Godfrey St. Peter, whose inner thoughts are revealed in the first and third sections of the text, is the most telling. St. Peter is not only charmed by the story of the mesa, but is so enamored of it that he begins work on an annotated edition of Tom's mesa diary. His immersion in the mesa text reaches its summit in the final section of the novel wherein St. Peter's family travels to France without him and he is left in his study to work on his book and meditate in solitude. These circumstances result in a painful and dangerous transformation in St. Peter, a crippling depression. In the throes of his anguish, St. Peter has the following meditation centering upon himself as "the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter":

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Whenever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been – and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. (220)

We should recognize in much of St. Peter's meditation the same spirit of origin and transcendence which Tom Outland found in the Blue Mesa through his entry into the mesa. Like the raw but spiritually charged images in the mesa, what St. Peter yearns for is an "unmodified" and "not nearly so cultivated" existence. He

constructs his own mental bridge to the divine and arrives at the “Truth under all truths.” In his realization that “he was earth, and would return to earth,” St. Peter echoes Yahweh’s words to Adam that “thou art dust and to dust you shall return” in Genesis and identifies himself with the beginnings of humanity, just as the ancient corpse of “Mother Eve” brought Tom to that same point.

St. Peter is attracted to Tom’s mesa and the religious experience undergone there. His attraction and immersion in the diary results in a meditation which parallels Tom’s mesa experience in its reaching toward origin. The symbolic religious experience of the two men is similar; indeed the twin experiences are further examples of repeating themes in the novel, themes which tie the anomalous “Tom Outland’s Story” section with the rest of the novel. But is the Professor’s religious experience the same as Tom’s? The same symbols surface, and St. Peter seems to be seeking the same encounter with beginnings which Tom experienced. Ultimately though, the Professor’s vision is thwarted; he cannot truly experience the mesa.

The mechanics of the Professor’s vision are of course markedly different from Tom’s discovery of the mesa. Tom sees the mesa, feels pulled to explore it, and undergoes an arduous entry into the mesa village. In contrast, the Professor’s reverie is unexpected and passive. Turning to Carl Jung, we can understand how this might occur. In thinking, reading, and writing about Tom’s mesa, the Professor is faced with the symbols of the tower, the *omphalos*, and raw pre-Christian spirituality which is terrible and enticing. In so doing, the Professor recognizes these symbols within his own consciousness. The archetypal symbols contained within the cave are also contained in the collective unconscious of the human mind, according to Jung. The collective unconscious

is simply “a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind” (*Spirit* 80). Immersion in Tom’s experience could likely cause the Professor’s symbolic and religious mind, long suppressed by the domestic turmoil infecting his home, to burgeon out from the recesses of his consciousness into a full vision.

Visions such as the Professor’s are rare, powerful, and fascinating to psychologists like Jung. He describes a *visionary* experience thus:

It is something strange that derives its existence from the hinterland of man’s mind, as if it had emerged from the abyss of prehuman ages, or from a superhuman world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man’s understanding and to which in his weakness he may easily succumb. The very enormity of the experience give it its value and its shattering impact. Sublime, pregnant with meaning, yet chilling the blood with its strangeness, it arises from timeless depths; glamorous, daemonic, and grotesque, it bursts asunder our human standards of value and aesthetic form, a terrifying tangle of eternal chaos, a *crimen laesae majestatis humanae*. (*Spirit* 90)

The Professor’s vision of his “original, unmodified” self is a classic example of such a vision. Tom’s relation of his mesa experience brings forth in St. Peter a confrontation with primordial images of origins. As Jung asserts, “what appears in the vision is the imagery of the collective unconscious” (97). When these are brought into the Professor’s consciousness, the result is a vision which enthralls the Professor. He certainly “easily succumbs” to the images; reflecting upon them becomes his new favorite pastime:

He found he could lie on his sand-spit by the lake for hours and watch the seven motionless pines drink up the sun [...] He was cultivating a novel mental dispensation – and enjoying a new friendship. Tom Outland had not come back again through the garden door (as he had so often done in dreams!), but another boy had: [...] the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter. (218)

The Professor's visions of such pure and primordial quality are so attractive because according to Jung the vision's contents are both "terrible" and the "greatest hope" of the person who experiences them (96).

St. Peter seeks a symbolic religious experience which will provide him with the same return to the origins as the mesa. According to Eliade, this impulse is common within the "profane man" who has shed all ostensible religious practice but who still craves ritual and meaning: "To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior" (23). St. Peter has certainly attempted to distance himself from organized religious behavior. He chuckles when Augusta chastises his misquotation of the Magnificat, "Surely she had said that the Blessed Virgin sat down and composed the Magnificat!" (78). He forgets important feast days without Augusta's help, and he grew up "without religious education." However, as Eliade would predict, we see hints of his craving for religious experience. Though he is without religious education and has rejected traditional faith in favor of learning and art, his encounters with his Catholic sewing lady Augusta always leave him "more cheerful than when they met" (78). He laments that after the move to the new house she will no longer be around to remind him of important feast days. In fact, the Professor builds much of his memory upon the liturgical calendar. The Professor often reflects fondly upon his time in France as a youth. Once such reflection reads, "There was one All Soul's Day when he had gone in to Paris by an early train and had a magnificent breakfast on the Rue de Vaugirard" (79-80). The narration of the same chapter begins "For Christmas day..." and a few paragraphs later, "It was

late on Christmas afternoon when...." (76, 83). The Professor obviously has some level of attraction to the faith which Augusta so enthusiastically espouses; however, the Professor does not attempt to access the divine through Catholic liturgical means, due either to a natural skepticism of formal religion or simply to his lack of religious upbringing.

Instead, the Professor's innate religious longing manifests itself as a desire for Tom's mesa experience. Tom's exploration provides a method for experiencing transcendence in an individual and powerful way, through encountering nature and ancient culture. The Professor, through his vision of his younger self exploring nature, hopes to arrive at a symbolic religious experience. Eliade posits that a yearning for a return to beginnings is a yearning for religion itself:

Now, what took place 'in the beginning' was this: the divine or semidivine beings were active on earth. Hence the nostalgia for origins is equivalent to a *religious* nostalgia. Man desires to recover the active presence of the gods; he also desires to live in the world as it came from the Creator's hands, fresh, pure, and strong. It is the nostalgia for the *perfection of beginnings* that chiefly explains the periodical return *in illo tempore*. (92)

In Tom's mesa, St. Peter apprehends a way to satisfy the religious craving that has resided within him for so long.

St. Peter instinctively seeks his encounter with primordial origin through an acceptance of death when he notices a gas leak in his study. Alongside his visionary meditations "came a conviction (he did not see it coming, it was there before he was aware of its approach) that he was nearing the end of his life" (221). Returning to origins and death are related in St. Peter's mind. In his visionary experience, he finds the "Truth under all truths" (220). When he meditates upon death, he views it as "a release from every obligation, from every

form of effort. It was the Truth" (227). The Professor desires complete envelopment in the spiritual vision introduced to him by Tom. Demaree Peck goes so far as to assert that St. Peter believes that his death will result in a new birth into a more authenticated existence. Astutely noticing that the Professor lies on his "box-couch" just as Tom lies in his "box-canyon," Peck continues, "When the Professor yields himself to the chance of accidental extinction from the gas stove in his study, he is motivated by a subconscious wish to recover his essential self through death also [...] He can experience either a life-in-death or a death-in-life" (215). Yet, however desperately sought, the Professor's acceptance of death and hope for spiritual transformation does not succeed.

St. Peter's descent into what he thinks will provide him with birth of the life of the soul is easy and nothing like the "narrow path" which Eliade notes typically begins most religious transformations. The Professor simply awakes from sleep and makes a decision *not* to "exert himself" (231). Augusta saves St. Peter just in time, and St. Peter hopes that the experience has changed him. The final pages of the novel contain promising developments, but ultimately St. Peter emerges from the ritual return to the womb in the same state of ineffectual depression with which he entered. St. Peter reflects on what might have been his "mistake," and he feels himself "letting something go" (236). Despite this, his final thought is "If his apathy hurt [his family], they could not possibly be so much hurt as he had been already" (237). The Professor remains self-absorbed and unwilling to consider with any seriousness the needs of others. Hardly a "veritable ontological mutation," we find instead a descent into death and then back out of it with only flickering indications of change.

Eliade is quick to point out that a desire for contact with origins and with the gods will not always translate into success at this endeavor, especially when the person attempting the ritual beginning is non-religious or has been immersed in a “desacralized” world. “When, in certain more highly evolved societies, the intellectual elites progressively detach themselves from the patterns of traditional religion [...] the religiousness of the cosmos becomes lost” (107), leading to Eliade’s ultimate assertion that “The transhuman quality of liturgical time is inaccessible to a nonreligious man” (71). Eliade would argue that no matter what methods St. Peter enacted to achieve a transformative vision, he would never succeed because he is not sensitive enough to those primal religious patterns within the human mind.

Perhaps even more important in St. Peter’s failure to achieve transformation is the lack of *material* through which to access the divine. Both Tom and the Professor reject organized religion, and both accept the power of nature to transform. Tom, however, has explored the mesa and seen, touched, and smelled the physical signs of religious transformation. His experience is powerful and his story touches all who hear it. However, his auditors are unable to be transformed in turn, because they are not surrounded by nature but by machine technology, shops, and pettiness. Without the materials, transformation is impossible. The transcendent cannot be accessed through the mind alone. Thus, though formal liturgy may be discouraged in this text, sacramentality, the ability of physical objects to connect one with the divine, is not.

A sudden, uncontrolled encounter with the collective unconscious, as St. Peter experiences when he tries to apprehend the mesa without the mesa materials, can be disastrous for the human psyche. Jung’s *Symbols of*

Transformation explains how a visionary experience can quickly develop into mental chaos:

The libido has now sunk to a depth where 'the danger is great.' There God is near, there man would find the maternal vessel of rebirth, the seeding place where he could renew his life. For life goes on despite the loss of youth; indeed it can be lived with the greatest intensity if looking back to what is already moribund does not hamper your step. Looking back would be perfectly all right if only it did not stop at externals, which cannot be brought back again in any case; instead it ought to consider where the fascination of the past really springs from. The golden haze of childhood memories arises not so much from the objective facts as from the admixture of magical images which are more intuited than actually conscious. [...] If the unconscious mind proves incapable of assimilating the new concepts pouring in from the unconscious, then a dangerous situation arises in which they keep the original, chaotic, and archaic form and consequently disrupt the unity of consciousness. (408)

St. Peter's reverie, his "envy of his own youth" (406), cannot be assimilated into his desacralized life. He lacks the materials through which to comprehend the "magical images" that appear in his mind. Instead of "renewing his life," the visionary experience causes St. Peter to feel further alienated from his actual life, and he ultimately chooses stoic detachment over living "with the greatest intensity." Jung's final diagnosis of the ill-fated visionaries reads thus: life is characterized by "steady withdrawal and estrangement from life, his gradual submersion in the abyss of memory" (407). This is certainly of true of St. Peter, whose diffidence in the wake of his daughter's pregnancy is coupled with an intense immersion in Tom's mesa text, and the memory of Tom.

Conclusion

Tom volunteers for the Foreign Legion and dies shortly after leaving the mesa, a testament to the impossibility of continuing the spiritual experience without the physical presence of the mesa. Similarly, other residents of the

desacralized world are unable to understand what Tom has accessed. The Smithsonian remains uninterested, another aberration from the actual Wetherhill story, and the Professor cannot achieve his desire for transcendence in the midst of his circumstances. The transformation here is thwarted; Tom's religious experience does not transform the human soul itself, but rather the experience awakens an awareness that such transformation is impossible. Thus, the frustrated characters can only embrace the desacralized world of profit and machinery, or succumb to depression and ultimate death. Tom's death and St. Peter's welcome of suicide are not surprising when read alongside Eliade's observation that "definitively desacralized, time presents itself as a precarious and evanescent duration, leading irremediably to death" (113).

CHAPTER THREE

To “Become his Story”: Transubstantiation of Character in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Introduction

Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, inspired by the static and peaceful paintings of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, boasts the unique form of “narrative” rather than novel (Cather 379). Based upon, but not limited to, the history of the development of the southwestern dioceses of the United States, the narrative is a carefully wrought exploration of the characters and accomplishments of the southwest's first priests. Because of the narrative's slow pace and almost exclusive emphasis upon description of external settings and actions, the text is difficult to classify and evaluate. The narrative's nine sections have been compared to a “triple triptych” or “the sound of the angelus bell,” and the somewhat flat characters have been labeled two dimensional, much like figures in a medieval “morality play” (Keeler 253-4). Beneath the calm narrative veneer, however, are interior changes, gentle but profound. Faced with a new landscape and new position, Bishop Jean Marie Latour and his companion Father Joseph Vaillant must learn the ways of the native peoples whom they encounter and how to work with each other. As he fulfills his duties as Bishop, Latour is gradually and profoundly transformed as he crosses boundaries and embraces alien cultures and lands. Latour is invited to transform his priestly energy into a true life of sacrifice through the deeply liturgical experience he shares with his guide Jacinto in the Stone Lips cave. Like the Virgin Mary who inspires him,

Latour finally achieves permanence when he builds a new cathedral for the people. The interior transformation that Latour achieves in the cave manifests itself in exterior transformations which bridge cultural gaps and dignify the marginalized. Latour's exterior experiences catalyze and symbolize his interior transformations, which he then, in turn, transforms back into an external sign. Latour's transformations carry deep spiritual significance. This union and symbiotic relationship between the physical and spiritual is sanctioned by the southwest landscape, which constantly renders the heavenly into the earthly so that our "human vision" can be "corrected by divine love" (50).

As French priest Jean Marie Latour voyages through the west, he continuously encounters a culture foreign to his own. Many critics, such as Janis P. Stout and Deborah Lindsay Williams, identify the "Stone Lips" chapter, where Latour and guide Jacinto retreat to a primeval cave to escape a storm, as a place of confrontation between the culture of the two priests and the ancient culture of the native inhabitants of the southwest. Fascinated by the sexual imagery in the chapter, many critics describe the chapter as an encounter with the feminine or with the pagan which results in the female or pagan ways being subsumed by the new European ideas and practices. Williams, for instance, writes that within "the strong, devouring femaleness of the cavities [...] Latour will encounter something he cannot name or control, something akin to the sublime" (85). She then proceeds to argue that with the "virgin snow" which covers the cave "the European's Virgin obliterates the stone lips of Jacinto's cave" (88). Taking a somewhat different approach, John J. Murphy compares the cave to the underworld as visited by Aeneas and Dante: "Aeneas suffers chilling experiences in the underworld during his search, [...] experiences Dante

would employ in his own great poem. [...] The foul smelling cave, where he witnesses Jacinto flattened against the wall and listening at the oval hole [...] provides Latour with underworld experiences" (263). These readings are well supported; however, the stone lips can also be taken at face value, literally, reading the cave as a mouth which ingests a transformed Latour. The mouth imagery, together with strong parallels between the cave scene and the mass which Latour celebrates just before the cave encounter, suggests a Eucharistic reading centered on sacrifice. In the cave, a confrontation occurs between Latour and God, and Latour is challenged to embark on a journey of deep self-sacrifice which results in Latour's purification and permanence.

"Stone Lips": A Eucharistic Reading

The much analyzed cave scene is prefigured by Bishop Latour's mass at Ácoma. Latour and his guide Jacinto travel far west and encounter new terrains. The Bishop reflects that he "had seen no country like this," with its "red sea of sand and great rock mesas" (94). After arriving in Ácoma, the Bishop is confronted with the "two stone towers" of the "gaunt, grim, grey" church of Ácoma. Latour performs mass with difficulty:

He had never found it so hard to go through the ceremony of the Mass. Before him, on the grey floor, in the grey light, a group of bright shawls and blankets, some fifty or sixty silent faces; above and behind them the grey walls. He felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures. (100)

Latour is uncomfortable with this encounter with the extreme past, but he nonetheless offers the native people the "sacrifice of Calvary" (100).

In the "Stone Lips" section of "Snake Root," Latour is again made to feel uncomfortable in a scene which parallels the mass at Ácoma. Faced with a

violent storm, Jacinto leads Latour to a cave, “a particular formation in the rocks; two rounded ledges, one directly over the other, with a mouthlike opening in between” (126). Once in the “throat of the cave,” Latour is “struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place,” for it is filled with “grey daylight” and is “shaped somewhat like a Gothic chapel” (127). At night, Jacinto shows Latour the underground river and Latour hears “one of the oldest voices of the earth.” Wrapped “in his blankets,” he falls asleep in the “ribs of antediluvian rock” (130), all the while ill at ease.

The two towers of the church at Ácoma parallel the two lips of the stone cave, and both structures are described as dominantly grey. Both spaces recall Latour to the “antediluvian,” and both make him severely uncomfortable. Something similar is occurring in both instances, something deeply intense and transformative. Indeed, what binds the two scenes so closely is the idea of the mass itself. The ceremony of the mass is centered upon the Liturgy of the Eucharist, during which an unleavened wafer is “transubstantiated” into the Body of Christ, which is consumed by the faithful to strengthen them spiritually. The ceremony reenacts mystically the death of Jesus on Calvary, the embodiment of Jesus’s self-sacrificial love for humankind.

Latour celebrates the mass in the “Mass at Ácoma” chapter, but in the “Snake Root” chapter, he participates in a much larger mass. Cather describes the cave in such bodily terms as “lips,” “throat,” and “ribs,” strongly evoking the image of Latour being ingested into the earth, just as the transubstantiated Christ is ingested by the faithful. Furthermore, just as Christ in the Eucharist and on the cross is helpless, so is Latour helpless in the cave. It is not he, but Jacinto, who knows the cave: “This place is used by my people for ceremonies and is

known only to us" (128). By comparing the cave to a gothic cathedral, Cather furthers the liturgical significance of Latour's sojourn underground.

Throughout the two parallel chapters, images of birds, such as Padre Jesus's parrot and the Snow-Bird mountain, and the image of fire which Jacinto builds in the cave, evoke the Holy Spirit, who through these liturgical sacrifices will purify and sanctify Latour. As the cleansing fire burns, "the heat seemed to purify the rank air at the same time it took away the deathly chill" (129), hinting that Latour's distaste is temporary and will be removed by full participation in the mass. The next morning, Latour emerges to see the mountains covered in "virgin snow," symbolizing the purification that will occur if Latour lives out self-sacrifice. He is also greeted with the "rising sun" (132), that burning disc which resembles the round communion wafer which Latour will strive to embody.

Here Latour is being called to embrace a self-sacrifice which is more difficult and more self-effacing than what he has before undergone. Always an eager servant of the church, Latour longs to sacrifice himself for his missions. During his first journeys through the southwest, at the very beginning of the novel, Latour is lost and thirsty. "*J'ai soif!*" he cries, reflecting, "of all our Lord's physical sufferings, only one, 'I thirst,' rose to His lips. Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord" (20). However, the events of the novel reveal that he is still somewhat immature in his journey towards imitation of Christ. When he finally arrives at the *Agua Secreta* community and is greeted by water and a friendly family, Latour immediately feels "a kind of peace" (25). This relief is markedly different from the distaste that Latour feels in Ácoma and

in the cave. The “hidden water” that he finds at the settlement is visible on the surface of the earth and easily accessed. In contrast, the underground waters in the cave are concealed and deep, suggesting a spirituality which is at once more meaningful and more difficult to achieve.

Latour’s travels and religious epiphanies are somewhat superficial at the point of the “Stone Lips” chapter, as is his capacity for self-sacrifice. As Patrick W. Shaw astutely notices, though Latour is able to discourse and teach about the necessity of human vision to be “corrected by divine love” (50), Latour is unable to enact these principles when he and Father Joseph encounter the murderer Buck Scales. His abused wife Magdalena saves the pair of priests with her warning, but the priests nonetheless make no efforts to rescue her from domestic abuse. As quickly as possible, the priests “trot quickly along the road” (69), saving themselves, but leaving Magdalena in the murderer’s hands with the passing comment, “Poor woman! He will suspect and abuse her, I am afraid” (70). Clearly, Bishop Latour does not yet fully understand the implications of his beliefs.

By thus portraying Latour’s imperfections, Cather succeeds in avoiding an overtly imperialistic and propagandist piece of literature in which the superior and perfected Europeans dominate and subjugate an inferior race of natives. The novel is not about a supreme and perfect Bishop Latour dominating his American flocks. Rather, Bishop Latour is the one who must undergo an interior journey and change, and the only way for him to achieve this change is to learn to truly serve the Mexican, Native American, and Euro-American people. Cather does not present Latour as a divinely sent savior to the Americas; he is more like the renegade prophet Jonah, who after a storm was swallowed into the

belly of a whale, just as Latour, after enduring “wind [that] was like a hurricane at sea” (125), is swallowed by the Stone Lips for transformation. Just as Jonah emerges from the whale’s belly renewed and ready to prophesy, Latour exits the distasteful hours in the darkened cave prepared to truly serve his people.

The process of interior purification is slow, but Latour increasingly becomes a servant as the second half of the novel progresses. Latour not only recognizes, but also confesses and names his weaknesses. He confides to Father Joseph, “I sent for you because I felt the need of your companionship. I used my authority as a Bishop to gratify my personal wish. That was selfish” (251). Not only is Bishop Latour now able to recognize and articulate his own faults, but he also begins to take steps to rectify his selfishness. When Father Joseph passionately begs him for the opportunity to leave and engage in further mission work, Latour finally decides after painful deliberation that he must sacrifice his wish for companionship to the greater needs of the church: “There was but one thing to do,— and before he reached the tamarisks he had done it. He broke off a spray of the dry lilac-coloured flowers to punctuate and seal, as it were, his renunciation” (208). These scenes culminate in the farewell scene between the two priests, when Latour humbly acknowledges Father Joseph’s superiority to him in certain areas and asks for his blessing:

‘*Blanchet,*’ said the Bishop rising, ‘you are a better man than I. You have been a great harvester of souls, without pride and without shame – and I am always a little cold – *un pedant,* as you used to say. If hereafter we have stars in our crowns, yours will be a constellation. Give me your blessing.’ He knelt, and Father Vaillant, having blessed him, knelt and was blessed in turn. (260)

Here Latour becomes a servant rather than an authoritative Bishop, subjecting himself and learning from his friend and fellow priest.

As his final days near, Bishop Latour becomes increasingly attracted to service. Although Latour struggles with homesickness throughout the novel, in the end, he chooses to die in the southwest rather than return to France. He reflects, "He did not know just when it had become so necessary to him, but he had come back to die in exile for the sake of it. Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart" (273). Drawn to the site of his lifetime of service, Latour prefers to die among the poor and powerless rather than return to his developed homeland. Service is sweet to Latour, and remembrance of it occupies his final moments on earth. On his deathbed, the Bishop is absorbed in flashback:

In reality the Bishop was not there at all; he was standing in a tip-tilted green field among his native mountains, and he was trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay. He was trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest; and the time was short, for the *diligence* for Paris was already rumbling down the mountain gorge. (297)

Latour's final memory is one in which he is serving another. When Latour and Vaillant were young priests, it was Latour who fortified Vaillant and gave him the courage to leave his family. According to Vaillant, "my purpose broke,-- he saved me" (204). After a life of struggling for true self-renunciation, Latour at the end of his life revels in a moment in which he served a friend in need.

"To Become His Story": The Bishop's Cathedral and American Culture

The act of service to Vaillant is performed in Latour's youth. These inclinations are an indication of what he would achieve more fully later with life, after much interior growth. Latour's truest accomplishment of self-giving is his cathedral. The idea to build a cathedral comes to Bishop Latour just after the

cave scene, in the “Doña Isabella” section. The cathedral, he reflects, will be “a continuation of himself and his purpose” (175). Therefore, the cathedral must be aesthetically appealing. As he explains his plan to Father Vaillant, Latour holds a “beautiful...chip of yellow rock” (239) and maintains that the new church not be “one of those horrible structures they are putting up in the Ohio cities,” but “Midi Romanesque,” which is the “right style for this country” (240). The cathedral will evoke Latour himself, who is “a man of severe and refined taste” (13), but it is not for Latour. Latour reminds Vaillant, “The Cathedral is not for us, Father Joseph. We build for the future” (241). By building the Cathedral, Latour asserts his individuality, but in a way which will help others. The Cathedral is completed just before Latour’s death. After his death, “the old Archbishop lay before the high altar in the church he had built” (297). His placement at the foot of the altar signifies his life of sacrifice. Now, finally, he is enveloped in the church, and the building signifies his whole identity. Bishop La Tour, “the tower,” has become a physical cathedral tower, steadfast and beautiful. In this way, Latour has “become his story” (182).

Thus, Latour achieves the ideals of his religion. Just as Mary, whom the priests invoke as protectress throughout the novel and who is invoked in the aspiration “*Auspice, Maria!*” on Vaillant’s signet ring and in the novel’s epigraph, transfers her image onto Juan Diego’s *tilma* in the Guadalupe apparition and provides the native and illiterate people with “something we can hold in our hands and love” (50), so Bishop Latour transfers his image of stability and beauty onto his cathedral, leaving it as a permanent beacon of the church for generations to enjoy. To purify and offer as a sacrifice one’s own individuality is the crowning spiritual achievement in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The Blessed

Virgin Mary offers her beauty and protection in the form of a *tilma* to the Mexican people, and Bishop Latour offers his faithfulness and refined tastes in the form of a beautiful cathedral. These figures have truly embodied the Eucharist by allowing the raw materials of their characters to be transfigured into permanent objects of devotion.

While preserving their individuality, Latour and the Virgin of Guadalupe succeed primarily because of their ability to adapt to and respect the cultures they serve. The Guadalupe apparition is an actual event in Mexican history, one of many that Cather chooses to include in this unique novel. The Guadalupe apparition has attracted much attention from not only historians, but scholarly and spiritual writers alike during the past century, precisely because of the progressive behavior exhibited by the Virgin towards the peasant Juan Diego.

Eric Stoltz explains:

On Tepeyac Mary did not threaten calamity [...] She promised only to listen to anyone who would come to her. She offered only companionship, compassion, and consolation [...] The second gift we experience at Tepeyac is that she comes to us as we are and speaks our language. Bishop Zumarraga could not believe that Mary would speak the 'pagan' Nahuatl language of Juan Diego. When he told the bishop the lady called herself *Tequantlaxopeuh* ('she who crushes the serpent's head'), the Spaniard assumed he meant '*de Guadalupe*,' referring to a shrine in Spain. At that time Bartolome de Las Casas was still debating the theologians of Europe's most prestigious universities to prove indigenous people were human beings [...] The third gift of Tepeyac deals with issues of authority. In the story, the bishop is the obstacle, and the conquered peasant carries the world-changing message. (131-33)

Clearly, the Guadalupe story is a monumental testament to the respect and gentleness which truly holy people hold for the marginalized. The Bishop, like Mary, adopts the language of the people he serves and demands that the priests under him do the same, though he is not without compassion for those priests

too: "When a priest received bad news from home, or was ill, Father Latour would converse with him in his own language; but at other times he required that all conversation in his house should be in Spanish or English" (267). Faced with the dissident Padre Martinez, who vocally opposes priestly celibacy and who has a son, Latour takes no disciplinary action: "For the present I shall do nothing to change the curious situation at Taos. It is not expedient to interfere. The church is strong, the people are devout. No matter what the conduct of the priest has been, he has built up a strong organization, and his people are devotedly loyal to him" (156). Like Mary, who bypassed discourse with the bishop in consideration for the needs of the Mexican people, Latour subjugates strict unity with Rome to the welfare of the peasants whom church conflict would most negatively affect.

When the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, she appeared as "a young Indian woman, dark like him, wearing traditional Aztec garb, including the black sash around her waist indicating she was pregnant" (Stoltz 130). Mary has integrated herself seamlessly into the community, embodying the extreme humility displayed by Christ himself when he condescends to be present in the unleavened Eucharist wafers which will nourish the faithful. Latour too, is a humble part of his community, adapting to the culture like Mary and extending his respect for them to dependency. During the mass at Ácoma, the faithful attended mass sitting on a "group of bright shawls and blankets" (100). The congregation passively accepts the services of Latour, the priest and authority figure. In the Stone Lips cave, however, it is Latour who "rolled himself in his blankets" (131), accepting the hospitality and service of Jacinto in a place unfamiliar and even distasteful to him. Latour willingly submits to an

inversion of the usual power structure, in which he needs Jacinto and is served by him.

Without the help of Jacinto, Latour could not have entered the Stone Lips cave at all. It is Jacinto who knows the way to the cave, and upon arriving, “Jacinto climbed quickly by footholds well known to him. Having mounted, he lay down on the lower lip, and helped the Bishop to clamber up. He told Father Latour to wait for him on this projection while he brought up the baggage” (126). The Catholics in the Americas cannot grow in their spirituality without Latour there to administer sacraments and manage the diocese, but neither can Latour achieve spiritual growth without the community’s help and support. In the Stone Lips cave, wherein Latour is forced to rely upon someone else, Latour, in being made helpless, more perfectly imitates Christ who in the mass is again immolated and fed to the faithful. Continuing in his ministry what he learned in the cave, with the same humility as he serves the people, Latour allows himself to be served by them, trusting them just as the Virgin of Guadalupe “trusts [Juan Diego] to carry a message without having a fancy title” (Stoltz 134).

The story of Fray Balthazar, which Cather places in between her account of the mass at Ácoma and the Stone Lips, highlights how remarkable is Latour’s attitude. John J. Murphy argues that Fray Balthazar’s dinner is “an orgy of food and eating” which “parodies the mass when the Indian serving boy is sacrificed to the Padre’s anger” (315). The dinner, prepared by the expert cook Fray Balthazar who used “the choicest portions when [the Ácomas] slaughtered a sheep,” is yet another viewpoint on the mass. Murphy labels it as a “parody” because the dinner served by the priest is antithetical to the true spirit of the mass. Instead of serving and denying themselves, the group of priests invited to

the elite dinner “had never sat down to food like that” and were “laughing uproariously” throughout the meal (109). Cather writes that “the serving boy [...] was trying to get the point of the recital” (109) when he spills the carefully prepared dish of hare. Balthazar throws a mug at the unfortunate servant, and the servant is killed. This presentation of a mock mass is a presentation of the worse abuses of the Catholic clergy. The priests abuse their power, ordering their flock to serve them as they live in luxury. Meanwhile, the people whom the priests are supposed to be serving cannot even comprehend what is going on.

That Cather places this tale directly after the mass at Ácoma and directly before the Stone Lips episode is significant. In so doing, Cather contrasts Latour with the unscrupulous Fray Balthazar and depicts Latour’s virtue. In contrast to the full moon which greets Latour as a symbol of Eucharistic immolation, Balthazar’s meditation upon the rising of the moon reveals a reluctance for sacrifice: “Moonrise from the loggia was an impresisve sight [...] But tonight he wished he could keep the moon from coming up through the floor of the desert [...] He watched with horror for that golden rim against the deep blue velvet of the night” (112). When Balthazar is confronted with the reality that he will have to face a reckoning for his actions and sacrifice himself the following day, a sacrifice which is symbolized by the rising of the moon, Balthazar reacts with horror and wishes to keep the sacrifice from taking place. The image of the bird, which appeared in the Stone Lips as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, also appears in this section, but symbolizes something quite different. The morning after the murder, Fray Balthazar retires to his loggia to say his breviary, “which he had neglected for several days,” another contrast from Latour, who faithfully recites his daily prayers. Cather writes that “The airy loggia, where he customarily took

his afternoon repose, was like a birdcage hung in the breeze" (111). Here Balthazar himself is identified as bird. Later, when the townspeople hurl Balthazar over a cliff and he "flies" to his death, the bird image is solidified. In light of the bird as Holy Spirit imagery, the difference between Balthazar and Latour is clear. Balthazar considers himself a god, above service and able to make decisions unilaterally. Latour, on the other hand, serves the people and God, and thereby becomes more truly like the sacrificed Christ and the Virgin Mary.

Cather writes of the Virgin Mary that she "took pains to arrange" (48) beautiful roses on Juan Diego's *tilma*, creating the striking portrait which drew thousands of pilgrims and inspired many, including Vaillant. Latour is described similarly, for his name is suggested just after Cardinal Maria de Allande observes that "Our Spanish fathers made good martyrs, but the French Jesuits accomplish more. They are great organizers" (8). Latour is adept at arranging what elements are already there, aggressively imposing nothing, but gently expressing himself through available native elements. Through quiet sacrifice and effort, Latour serves and finally arranges the elements of the land to construct a cathedral which will continue to benefit the people of his diocese. In contrast to Balthazar, who stands atop a mesa administering orders to his subjects, Latour relies upon those he serves and vanishes among them, working with them and the natural elements around him to gently serve the area over which he has been given charge.

The Role of the Southwest Landscape

The southwest landscape is fully complicit in making possible these transformations which occur through acceptance and sacrifice. Mesas, after all, resemble altars, and perhaps are a constant reminder to Latour of the many opportunities for self-sacrifice throughout his time as Bishop. During his most wrenching moods, Latour describes his state of mind with this very language of sacrifice and altar imagery: "He was naked on a rock in the desert, in the stone age, a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams" (103). Recalling the Old Testament image of baby Isaac laid upon a high rock to be sacrificed by his father, Latour feels as helpless as a sacrificial victim. Though at his death he is placed literally at the foot of the cathedral altar, the Bishop has been constantly living in metaphorical sacrifice for many years, during each uncomfortable journey and each service rendered.

The Bishop's discomfort in the southwest desert is a function of its difference from the Europe he is used to. However, though he loses familiarity, the Bishop gains an immediate access to the spiritual through his direct encounter with the land. Journeying to Ácoma, the Bishop finds "the sky more a desert than the land; a hard empty blue, very monotonous to the eyes of a Frenchman" (95). Here Latour receives a taste of the sense of immutability that he encounters at the mass at Ácoma where he meets his "antediluvian" parishioners. Immutability is a feature of heaven and of the eternal, while the temporality that Latour is more accustomed to is a distinct feature of earth and human life. Heaven seems to be present on earth, a conclusion further supported by Latour's preliminary observations of the mesa country:

One thing which struck him at once was the way that every mesa was duplicated by a cloud mesa, like a reflection, which lay motionless above it or moved slowly up from behind it. These cloud formations seemed to be always there, however hot and blue the sky [...] The great tables of granite set down in an empty plain were inconceivable without their attendant clouds, which were a part of them, as the smoke is part of the censer, or the foam of the wave. (95)

Here the heavenly bodies mirror the earthly bodies; they cannot be experienced separately. The spiritual is immanent, and Latour participates in the spiritual each time he engages the physical.

This unity, foreign to Latour, has been experienced by the native people for thousands of years. Reflecting upon the image of the Rock, Latour notices the following similarities and differences between the two cultures:

The rock, when one came to think of it, was the utmost expression of human need [...] It was the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship. Christ Himself had used that comparison for the disciple to whom He gave the keys of His Church. And the Hebrews of the Old Testament [...] their rock was an idea of God, the only thing their conquerors could not take from them. Already the Bishop had observed in Indian life a strange literalness, often shocking and disconcerting. The Ácomas, who must share the universal human yearning for something permanent, enduring, without shadow of change, -- they had their idea in substance. They actually lived upon their Rock; were born upon it and died upon it. (98)

Spiritual concepts are experienced in a direct and physical way by the native people; they can touch, see, smell and encounter the Rock and the sense of timeless immutability which European spiritualities can only explain in grandiose and abstract metaphor. Latour ultimately adopts this mode of physical spirituality when he builds his cathedral. By incarnating his essence into a thing, Latour places his "idea in substance." The Virgin of Guadalupe, too, transfers her image onto a physical piece of clothing and is ever present to the people. The crowning spiritual achievement in the novel is for Latour to

“become his story” because in so doing, Latour has learned to express his purified selfhood in a material object which is lasting, permanent, useful, and still uniquely like him. He, like the landscape, must become literal; only after this final transformation can he truly become a legend.

That the cathedral represents what is uniquely Latour is worth exploring further. The characteristics of the cathedral are not different from Latour; rather, they are the perfection of Latour. The Stone Lips did not cause Latour to become transformed into someone different; his journey to holiness does not involve shedding his own personality. Latour’s attraction to Marian spirituality, to beauty, to quiet steadfastness, and to the native southwest culture are present from the beginning of the novel and, as Latour becomes purified through the Stone Lips, these traits become perfected until they all coincide in the construction of the cathedral, a building which is made of native stone, is beautiful, is quiet, and which will serve the area for centuries. Latour’s character is atypical and may not be attractive to all, but Cather insists that there is a place for him in the church. To emphasize both how ahead of her time and how orthodox this spirituality of purified individuality is, consider this passage from spiritual writer Thomas Merton:

It is true to say that for me sanctity consists in being myself and for you sanctity consists in being *your* self and that, in the last analysis, your sanctity will never be mine and mine will never be yours, except in the communism of charity and grace. For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. But the problem is this: since God alone possesses the secret of my identity, He alone can make me who I am or rather, He alone can make me who I will be when I at last fully begin to be. The seeds

that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God's will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity. (10-11)

Cather's meditations on the southwest allowed her to see in 1927 what Merton would see in 1949 in *Seeds of Contemplation*. In the southwest, Cather saw a varied world which was in harmony with the heavens. The holiness of Latour then, would be achieved through his transformation of himself in all of his individuality into the Santa Fe Cathedral itself.

Conclusion

The placid prose and still imagery of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* subtly veil deep and monumental transformations. Bishop Latour travels far from home and encounters a foreign and mystical culture. Through uncomfortable masses at Ácoma and a transformational cave experience, he is called to deepen his level of self-sacrifice to the people he serves. Adapting to the culture of those he serves, Latour is able to reach the ideals of his religion and offer himself in a permanent way to the Americas. The process of self-sacrifice that begins in the mystical mesas of the southwest concludes at the altar of the Cathedral, where the Archbishop lies after having learned to renounce himself and transform his purified self into the substance of the Cathedral. Far from the comfort of his familiar European gardens and rolling green hills, Latour approaches the southwest with new eyes and can fully perceive the spiritual possibilities available to him. Throughout his journeys, he finds his "human vision corrected by divine love" (50) until the miracle of his Cathedral and unified diocese is a reality.

CHAPTER FOUR

Looking In versus Looking Out: A *Commedia* and a “Nasty, Grim Little Tale”

Introduction

Godfrey St. Peter's dalliance in religion and symbolic beginning is doomed, but in contrast, Jean Marie Latour's religious experiences are fruitful and permanent. The difference between the tones of these two texts could hardly be more pronounced; the *Professor's House* is undeniably melancholy, while *Death Comes to the Archbishop* is optimistic and placid. Mysteriously, the two texts also share much in common. Latour and St. Peter seem almost twins temperamentally, and both novels do contain central and transformational journeys to the southwest which are pivotal to the novel. Critical side-by-side comparison of the two novels is scant, but such comparison illuminates the transformations in both. Ultimately, Godfrey St. Peter is, in many remarkable and fundamental ways, the same temperamentally as Jean Marie Latour, and that therefore his failure to access the divine is not due to his own temperament, but rather to the world in which he is immersed. This world is the desacralized world of modernism and technology, from which the deep and sensitive individual can only gaze out of longingly towards some more pure, holistic experience.

Latour and St. Peter

Professor St. Peter, whose life seems to be opposed to Latour's, shares much with the missionary priest's temperament and background. When the

cardinals seek a Frenchman to revitalize the See of Durango, Latour's name surfaces first. Latour is first characterized as a "Frenchman," one who can "organize" and "arrange" (9), and perhaps achieve the odd task of recapturing a lost El Greco painting due to his superior artistic sense. France continues to infiltrate Latour's thoughts even as he navigates his new position in America, most notably in his recurring memory of leaving France with Vaillant to "achieve the dreams of [their] youth" (243). Hardly a person of misdirected energies, Latour is noble in form: "He walked slowly, with even, unhesitating pace, with that slender, unrigid erectness, and the fine carriage of head, which always made him seem master of the situation" (208).

Though an American, Professor St. Peter also spent his youth in France, and remembers that "the happiest years of his youth" were in "a house at Versailles" (4). As Latour leaves France exhilarated for what will come in the future, so the Professor similarly remembers courageously deciding, "I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, the utterly impossible thing!" (55). Like Latour, the Professor has a keen aesthetic sense and appreciates fine singing at the opera with his wife, enjoys well-prepared food, and even exclaims in a moment of excitement, "They might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, *Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven*" (53). Also like Latour, the Professor's energies and zest for beauty reveal themselves in a noble physiognomy: "The modeling of his head [...] was high, polished, hard as bronze, and close-growing black hair threw off a streak of light along the rounded ridge where the skill was fullest" (5).

Aside from their backgrounds, the two men also share a similar temperament. Both men are somewhat solitary by nature, value privacy, and

cling to those who are familiar and dear to them. Latour shamefacedly remembers his inability to be gregarious: "In Ohio, when they used to travel together in stage-coaches, Father Latour had noticed that every time a new passenger pushed his way into the already crowded stage, Joseph would look pleased and interested, as if this were an agreeable addition – whereas he himself felt annoyed, even if he concealed it" (227). To strangers, Latour may come across as cold and aloof, but to his beloved Vaillant he is a constant and loyal partner. The Professor likewise craves solitude: "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" (248). Yet, the Professor clutches onto Augusta and her dressing "forms," craving both solitude and familiarity at the same time.

Finally, both men enjoy gardening as a hobby. The Professor's assertion that "his walled in garden had been the comfort of his life" (5) is harbinger to Latour's repeated and loving references to his own expertly tended gardens. For his "recreation," Latour grows Californian fruits and native flowers which he shares with visitors. Their shared pastime is seminal to understanding their shared religious temperament. Eliade writes of the garden as the final remnant of religious feeling, even present in the most desacralized society: "Gardens, which became objects valued by esthetes, had a long history, or even a pre-history, which reveals a profound religious feeling the world" (153). The garden is a "miniature" world, "the perfect place, combining completeness with solitude," which will lead humans "through meditation, to re-establish harmony with the world" (153). Both men, therefore, are "religious" men, in Eliade's sense.

So, St. Peter's religious disaster is not due to his temperament, which is so akin to Latour's, but to his surrounding secular and modern world. So many critics have noted the disdain for modernity and consumerism in *The Professor's House* that the observation is now an assumption. David Stouck delineates the issue at length:

In *The Professor's House* [...] she [Cather] presents us with a despairing view of history after the Renaissance, a rejection of the age of progress dependent on science and technology, with no reassurance any longer that history is cyclical. In this novel we come to realize that Cather is conservative in a historically profound sense of the word. [...] After the Renaissance [...] human beings were no longer content to adjust to the rhythms of the natural world; the goal of living was no longer content to adjust to the rhythms of the nature, but to master and control its energies [...] From this "progressive" course of history Willa Cather withdrew. (203)

Cather's characters in *The Professor's House* are deep, contemplative, sensitive people who have been thrust into the modern, technology-driven world characterized above. Their surroundings have been desacralized to the extent that they can no longer apprehend religious emotion and remain within their world; death and withdrawal are the only results of profound and pristine experience.

Godfrey St. Peter is at once attracted to religious experience but has also been conditioned to repudiate it, a dichotomy which is revealed by his unusual name. God-free he is, having grown up without cultivating any formal liturgical practice of his own and embracing instead academia, but his surname of "St. Peter," evocative of the prime apostle, reveals the vestiges of religious culture and religious longing. He is God-free, but at the same time is "God's friend." With such a tension within himself, the Professor has little chance of resolving his ontological state. His brother in temperament, Jean Marie Latour, meets quite

a different fate. His world is harmonized and nature is intelligible. Latour's life revolves around liturgical celebration and he moves through spiritual stages with ease, in part because of his complete possession of the original, unmodified self which St. Peter so desperately seeks. Here it is important to recall the tower in the *Professor's House* mesa and the *axis mundi*: "The religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World" (Eliade 44) To achieve this, primitive religious persons "always carried the sacred pole, the *axis mundi*, with them, so that they should never be far from the Center and should remain in communication with the supraterrrestrial world" (44). Latour himself is La Tour, "the tower," constantly accessing within his own person the *axis mundi* and transforming wherever he is into a site of divine intercourse. Latour possesses an awareness of his origin in a way that St. Peter never will, and as a result Latour can go on to transform and sanctify all that surrounds him.

Throughout Latour's travels, he is in complete possession of that *axis mundi* which allows him to connect to God and to his own origins. As he travels to Ácoma, Latour meditates in awe upon the mesas of the west: "This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, and plateau" (95). Latour's wonder continues when a storm-cloud breaks and rain pours over the mesa, which Latour has begun to ascend: "Looking out over the great plain spotted with mesas and glittering with rain sheets, the Bishop saw the distant mountains bright with sunlight. Again he thought that the first Creation morning might have looked like this, when the dry land was first drawn up out of the deep, and all was

confusion" (99). Latour immediately connects the chaos around him to creation; his saturation with religious imagery allows him to immediately recognize the spiritual import of the striking scene around him. He returns to the origins of the world, and shortly afterward, in the mass at Ácoma, the native people gather around him, as if he were the *axis mundi* itself, to hear him offer mass and connect them to the divine through liturgy.

A Commedia and A Nasty, Grim Little Tale

Jean Marie Latour carries an awareness of spirituality and the divine within his very being, while Professor St. Peter is attracted to such depth but is unable to process and attain it due to his immersion in a modern and desacralized world. This difference explains one of the most puzzling disparities between *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, the marked difference in characters' reactions to their similar subterranean encounters. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the small but intense "Stone Lips" experience occurs in the center of the novel and transfigures Latour's understanding of the culture he serves and the priest himself. The guide Jacinto must lead Latour into the underground cave, for as Jacinto explains, "this place is used by my people for ceremonies and is only known to us" (128). Among the many unfamiliar and frightening experiences Latour confronts is an underground river, unseen but known by "the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power" (130), a "dizzy noise" (129). "Tom Outland's Story," placed in the middle of the novel *The Professor's House*, is longer and more obviously pivotal than the shorter but also central "Stone Lips." Like Latour, Outland and Blake have stumbled upon one of the secrets of the Native American culture to which they will always be

strangers. After combing through the riches of the mesa city, Outland hears a “soft trickling sound” and discovers a spring which provides water “as cold as ice, and so pure” (170).

Though these two circumstances are related, the reactions of the protagonist explorers are opposite. Latour feels “reluctance, an extreme distaste” as he surveys the Stone Lips cave; he feels uncomfortable within its walls and when he afterwards remembers his sojourn there, it is “always with a shudder of repugnance quite unjustified by anything he had experienced there” (132). Perhaps partly because of his distaste, but primarily because of his promise to Jacinto, Latour “never spoke of Jacinto’s cave to anyone” (132). The memory of the “terrible” (130) roaring waters and foreign odors are forever locked into his own being. Despite Latour’s fear of the cave and secretive behavior regarding it, Latour lives a fruitful life of service after his encounter with the cave, a life which is indeed made possible by his seamless assimilation into the very culture which had made him so uncomfortable. His respect for those “terrible” alien waters and Jacinto’s secrets somehow allows Latour to preserve them and eventually incorporate them into his own being so that he can more effectively serve that culture.

Conversely, Tom never feels threatened by the mesa. He is drawn to it, and when he finally enters its walls, he feels nothing but exhilaration and “exaltation” (162). While he briefly considers “keep[ing] that secret as the mesa had kept it” (164), Tom quickly shares his experience with Roddy and Henry, the Smithsonian museum, and finally with the St. Peter family. Shortly following his departure from the mesa, Tom dies. Though Latour’s final years are marked by reconciliations and accomplishments which express the distilled essence of his

personality, Tom achieves none of this. He never reconciles with his companion Roddy Blake, and his life's work has been converted into impersonal monetary funds, not an enduring monument to his best self. In the words of Kathleen, Tom has "turned out chemicals and dollars and cents" (104), and according to the Professor, those who loved Tom most are trying to "convert his very bones into an asset" (34). While Latour transformed first his character and then transferred it into a lasting cathedral, Tom dies before he has the chance to remedy his quarrel with Roddy, for which he was at some fault. After his death, nothing is left but money, his diary, more quarrels, and the new vacuum for which Outland holds the patent.

The mesa has a similar effect on Godfrey St. Peter, who experiences the mesa vicariously through Tom's stories. Ruminating about Tom and the mesa, the Professor seems to grow more and more estranged from his family and the world around him, not more assimilated, as was the trend in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The Professor declines a trip to Paris with his family, and even the promise of a new grandchild does not bring St. Peter out of his depressed stupor. He sequesters himself in his old study, and eventually becomes detached even from his own life and achievements: "He did not regret his life, but he was indifferent to it. It seemed to him like the life of another person" (221). While Latour is proud of his cathedral, the Professor warily dismisses his own achievements: "His histories, he was convinced, had no more to do with his original ego than his daughters had; they were a result of the high pressure of young manhood" (219). Latour's life slowly crescendos to his greatest achievements, but St. Peter's is "chance" after chance (213), leading to nowhere but his desire for death.

Latour is terrified by his sojourn underground but the experience ultimately makes him a better priest, while Tom and the Professor feel attracted to the mesa but end their lives in solitary depression. The difference here is that Latour dwells constantly in a sacralized world and receives a brief glimpse into a chthonic mystery which terrifies him. Here John J. Murphy's work in comparing *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with Dante's *Divine Comedy* becomes important. Murphy argues that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a "comprehensive journey from Hell to Paradise" (23). According to Murphy, Latour's midlife journey begins as he is "lost in a maze of trails and conical hills" and continues through arduous and penitential voyages (25). Murphy mentions that "Dante's journey into darkness has its counterpart in Latour's visit to the 'Stone Lips' cave, where earth's mysteries challenge the patriarchal order the priest represents" (25). In other words, Latour's "looking in" to the foreign and frightening cave can be understood in the same way as Dante's "looking in" to the horrors of the inferno. Dante begins his poem having lost his path in life, and through a guided glimpse into the majesty of God manifested in his wrath and power, Dante understands evil, regains his path, and understands how to ascend to Paradise. Latour, guided by Jacinto, apprehends the powerful waters and overwhelming odors and sounds. These phenomena frighten him, but his transformation in the cave enhances his work in the southwest, which he sacralizes through his work.

Evelyn Hively sees similar parallels with Dante in *The Professor's House*, writing that "It is also impossible to dismiss the correlation of *The Professor's House* with *The Divine Comedy*. Certainly the solitary middle-aged man's search for his soul parallels Dante's theme" (114). She proceeds to argue that as St. Peter descends into his own home he is granted a view of the inferno and through

vicariously experiencing Tom's mesa he is purged and ready to enter his paradisiacal vision at the end of the novel. Perhaps Hively is correct in spotting parallels, but this "nasty, grim little tale" is hardly a *commedia*. Professor St. Peter is not a Dante figure, but a reverse Dante figure. He is not a visitor of the inferno, granted a one time glance of horror in order to grow; rather, he is *in* the inferno, granted a glance *out* at a sacralized world, a glance which will depress St. Peter, who can never possess such depth.

St. Peter's mindset in the final scene of the novel is one of quiet and hopeless acceptance. As he recovers from his unconsciousness, he muses,

He had never learned to live without delight. And he would have to learn to, just as, in a Prohibition country, he supposed he would have to learn without sherry. Theoretically, he knew that life is possible, may be even pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs. But it had never occurred to him that he might have to live like that. (236)

Shortly afterward, as he muses upon his family's return from Europe on the ship *Berengaria*, the Professor resolves to "face with fortitude the *Berengaria* and the future" (237). These thoughts are no beatific vision, but are the gentle lament of one who has "abandoned all hope." Here it is helpful to consider Virgil's description of the damned souls in the first circle of the Inferno, the circle of the "virtuous pagans":

There, as it seemed to me from listening,
Were lamentations none, but only sighs,
That tremble made the everlasting air.

And this arose from sorrow without torment,
Which the crowds had, that many were and great,
Of infants and of women and of men.

To me the Master good: "Thou dost not ask
What spirits these, which thou beholdest, are?
Now will I have thee know, ere thou go farther,

That they sinned not; and if they merit had,
Tis not enough, because they had not baptism
Which is the portal of the Faith thou holdest;

And if they were before Christianity,
In the right manner they adored not God;
And among such as these am I myself.

For such defects, and not for other guilt,
Lost are we and are only so far punished,
That without hope we live on in desire" (*Inf. IV, 27-45*)

St. Peter, immersed in a desacralized world, finds himself "without hope" and "living on in desire" for what Tom was able to access on the mesa. His glimpse out into the fresh southwestern, sacralized world seems only to have heightened St. Peter's awareness that he will never access such bliss. Even Tom, who explores the mesa physically, must inhabit an inferno as soon as he emerges into the desacralized world. He leaves Washington, DC disillusioned and never enjoys the company of his best friend Roddy again. When he recites Latin for Professor St. Peter, he begins with "*Infandum, regina, jubes renovare dolorem,*" Aeneas's words to Dido meaning, "Queen, you order me to recount unspeakable sorrow" (89). Like the souls Dante encounters in the Inferno, who always first lament their misery, Tom's first Latin to St. Peter expresses the lost fate of his soul while he dwells in the modern world which Cather was so wary of. If we are to find Dantean echoes in *The Professor's House*, we will only find infernal ones.

Conclusion

Godfrey St. Peter is Jean Marie Latour's prototype, a man of religious feeling but trapped in a modern, technology-driven, desacralized world. He is surrounded by clutter, jealousies, and quarrels, but yearns for something more

transcendent. When he meets Tom, he finds this transcendence vicariously through Tom's story of the Blue Mesa. In the Blue Mesa, Tom stumbled upon "a religious feeling," characterized by his return to the *omphalos* and the first stretchings of the human heart towards the divine. St. Peter, permanently touched by the story, immerses himself in it and finally attempts to recreate it through his own symbolic beginning in his study. His *ad hoc* religious experience fails him, however, for in a desacralized world, full apprehension of the divine is not possible. Instead, Tom dies after his mesa encounter and his work is transferred to impersonal cash, and St. Peter attempts death only to be forced to live out the rest of his life in a detached and melancholy stupor. The characters are ensnared in a world hostile to the religious feeling they crave; they are hostage in a "cluttered room," and looking out the window, even briefly, only heightens their awareness of being confined.

The difference between the two novels is perhaps best illustrated by the two paintings which Cather claimed served as their inspiration. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is gentle and meditative like the static paintings of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and thus its characters can grow slowly and transform silently. Inspiration for *The Professor's House* came in part from a Dutch painting of an open window within a cluttered room. By inhabiting the Chavannes painting, Latour navigates a sacralized, intelligible world in which he plays a major role. The Stone Lips experience is a powerful and transformative encounter which frightens Latour but makes his already harmonious world brighter. In contrast, St. Peter is trapped in a cluttered, human made room and can only look longingly at the outside. The fresh scene outside can never transform the clutter inside, and St. Peter can never escape to the outside. The room is an inferno of

jealousy and money from which St. Peter can never leave. Viewing a more pure outside world will only make St. Peter more cognizant of the disgusting nature of his surroundings. Read thus, the depression which permeates the novel is hardly surprising.

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