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Western American Literature, Volume 18, Number 1, Winter 1984, pp. 303-312 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1984.0114*

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I fear we have been imposed upon by Miss Cather in *The Professor's House*. Mr. Moses Harper, writing in the *New Republic*, assures us that "Here, as in all her work, is a fine ringing clarity. . . . She does not strain, or hurry, or attempt anything which cannot clearly be carried out,"[1] but surely S. P. Sherman of the *New York Tribune* comes closer to the truth by writing "*The Professor's House* is a disturbingly beautiful book, full of meanings, full of intentions — I am sure that I have not caught them all."[2] And closest of all to the facts is A. H. Gibbs of the *Literary Review* who says, with smug self-satisfaction, "while Tom Outland's story flows right along, Miss Cather leaves it to her readers to fit together the various clues in the Professor's."[3]

I cannot deny that Miss Cather was an intelligent and well-read author. I do, however, question the assertions of her biographers that she was an editor as well. An editor, you see, knows two essential aspects of writing that seem to have completely escaped Miss Cather. The first is that famous precept of Aristotle's: "when you bring a cannon onto the stage, you are obliged at some point to fire it off."[4] The other editorial principle is that words cost money, and if one is paying out twenty-five cents per syllable to have a work written and printed, one can little afford twenty-five hundred dollars' worth of "various clues."

Any resemblance between the present essay and a scholarly article is purely coincidental.

[1]Moses Harper, "*The Professor's House*," *New Republic* 44 (September 16, 1925), 105.

[2]S. P. Sherman, "*The Professor's House*," *New York Tribune*, September 13, 1925, p. 1.

[3]A. H. Gibbs, "The Professor's House," *Literary Review*, September 5, 1925, p. 1.

[4]The quotation is so well known as to render documentation unnecessary.

In teaching the novel, confusion comes from three distinct directions. These involve Miss Cather's extensive literary allusions, her preoccupation with color, and her ill-advised assumption that her readers have passed their History of Civilization course.

When we find an author making allusions to other authors' works, I think we are well within our rights to expect that the allusions be accurate (like Hawkeye's famous rifle shot in Hawthorne's *The Prairie*), and that they shed some light on the subject at hand (like the burning of Atlanta in Chekov's *War and Peace*). Miss Cather hurries to violate the first of these requirements when she quotes the Longfellow poem on page 272.[5] She is careful to tell us that it comes from "a little two-volume Ticknor and Fields edition . . . in blue and gold." That information is correct, but inconsequential. With the consequential she is less accurate. Mr. Longfellow tells us that the translation is from the Anglo-Saxon: Miss Cather informs us it is from the Norse. Mr. Longfellow wrote "For thee was a house built": Miss Cather prefers to re-invert the inversion, thus getting "For thee a house was built." Mr. Longfellow wrote "For thee was a mould meant": Miss Cather's version is "For thee a mould was made." Finally, where Mr. Longfellow intended to say "Ere thou of mother camest," Miss Cather has "Ere thou of *woman* camest."

Picky perhaps I am, but such editorial modifications do little to establish credibility. And I hardly need point out that the poem has no connection with the story of the Professor's house, since the novel concerns an actual house and the poem is an Anglo-Saxon riddle about graves and coffins.

The high aim of literary allusiveness, as I understand it, is to remind the reader of some greatly significant theme of a past literary piece.

One such allusion in *The Professor's House* is mildly successful. Godfrey (Peace of God) St. Peter, the Professor, has a name which echoes that of the St. Peter in Matthew XVI:18, the name which Jesus puns upon by saying "upon this rock I will build my church." Thus is Professor St. Peter a sort of "Rock of Ages" (see p. 270) to the lesser and more doubtful disciple, Thomas. As in Thomas Outland.

While on the subject of Tom Outland, however, let us consider that young man's own literary tastes to see whether they, too, may be allusive. Why, for instance, does Cather give Tom the *Aeneid* to read at Mesa

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[5]This and subsequent page numbers refer to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, Vintage Books edition (New York: Random House, 1973).

Verde? Is it to suggest a parallel between Outland and Aeneas, who both flee from walled cities under seige? Earlier, as Roddy and Tom are settling in to begin their stint of cattle-herding, we have Tom telling us, "We had *Robinson Crusoe* with us, and Roddy's favourite book, *Gulliver's Travels*, which he never tired of" (p. 188). A writer such as Andy Adams makes his characters struggle by with no more reading than the label on a jam can — but at least a jam can label seems a likely thing to find in a cow camp, and does not inconvenience the reader. But here is the intelligent Tom Outland, about to establish a cosy little home on the Cruzados River for himself, cut off from civilization, accompanied by his man Roddy, who does most of the work and none of the thinking, and he is reading *Robinson Crusoe*. What's the connection?

Gulliver's Travels is, from start to finish, a tale of warped perspectives and blatant attempts — by all the characters concerned — at profiteering and exploitation. Gulliver does not see the city of the Lilliputians in proper perspective. Roddy will not see the city of the Blue Mesa in proper perspective. Shall we labor over the allusive possibilities of this odd addition to the cow camp library, or try to ignore it?

I choose to ignore it. I do so because when it appears, on page 188, I am still working on an allusion which occurs on page 126:

> When a man had lovely children in his house, fragrant and happy, full of pretty fancies and generous impulses, why couldn't he keep them? Was there no way but Medea's, he wondered?

Now Medea, we recall, was the misguided goddess who convinced Pelias' daughters that she could rejuvenate him if they would cut him up into little pieces for her. Alcestis refused to do so, but the other two girls proceeded with the treatment. The results only went to prove that although making mincemeat of a man is not a reliable cure for male menopause, it is a sure cure for senility.

I could go on and on at length with this, for it seems as if Cather no sooner gets a good juicy domestic crisis going than she remembers some old book she has read and starts working up an allusion. Never mind that the character is busy painting the bathtub, or advising his daughter on furs, or sniffing away at the gas jet in his study: if Miss Cather takes it into her mind to have an allusion at that point, he must drop everything and go find one.

This is not easy for the Professor, either. Do you remember those dressmaker's dummies in his study? St. Peter has been put to considerable

trouble over those. First, we assume, he had to trundle over to Augusta's house and lug the stiff sawdust form back to his place. Then he made another trip for the iron form, carrying it through the streets in broad daylight, much to the amusement of the town's other residents. What can he be up to, they must have wondered, with these artificial women? And naked ones at that.

Well, having got those two mannequins back home, he had to manhandle them up the stairs — two flights—to the study. Then he had to find room for them among all his scholastic apparatus. And Miss Cather is not through yet: the Professor now must persuade Augusta to leave the old forms where they are, and must spend several weeks' worth of his own allowance to buy her some replacements.

What for? What is all this dummy business good for? Why, to give Miss Cather a chance to drop an allusion, of course. But since she feels a little guilty about putting the Professor to all the trouble, the author *does* allow him to pull the string on the allusion. "Not at all, Augusta," the Professor says, "if they were good enough for *Monsieur Bergeret*, they are certainly good enough for me" (p. 19).

That's it. All that carrying of dummies and public embarrassment and risk of hernia and argument and expense just so we could learn that Miss Cather had read Anatole France's *Le Mannequin d'Osier*, or, "The Wicker Mannequin." We can now surmise *why* Professor St. Peter let himself succumb to gas in his study: he had discovered that Miss Cather was planning to use him in another book.

All of Miss Cather's characters should consider it very fortunate indeed that she had never read *Moby Dick*: the thought of lugging a stuffed sperm whale up and down stairs, on the off chance that Miss Cather may need it for an allusion, is hardly a pleasant one.

I said "Moby Dick" by design, for never read professors such as you this paper but to myself they turn and ask how such a transition came there. Moby Dick's main identifying feature is his color. That reminds me that Willa Cather also employs a good deal of symbolic color in her novel. Her most persistent color is, of course, purple or violet. That this is a fairly common symbolic color in western literature is evidenced by such titles as Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Manfred's *Purple Riders of Judgment*, Frank Norris' *The Octopurple*, and Waters' *Purple of the Valley*. I hardly need mention *The Grapes of Wrath*.

According to my source, violet "represents nostalgia and memories,

made up of blue (devotion) and red (passion)." Purple, in the same source, "provides a synthesis comparable with, yet the inverse of, violet, representing power, spirituality, and sublimation."[6]

In *The Professor's House*, Miss Cather loses few opportunities to shade things in violet and purple. Particularly purple. And lilac. Rosamond has a lilac sunshade (p. 59) to match her lilac suit (p. 58). Her fur coat is purple (p. 82). The Blue Mesa — which Miss Cather changes from green, as in Mesa Verde — is actually purple (p. 168). Louie and Rosamond bring violets for Lillian — jamming the rose, the lily, and the violet into a single snug conundrum, by the way — which are, presumably, purple. The sky, at various intervals, turns purple (p. 200), violet and purple with just a hint of orange (p. 240), and purple-orange (p. 275). In fact, it seems to be an unusual day when the sky or the rocks around the Blue (formerly green) Mesa do *not* turn purplish. The weather report generally calls for it. "Mostly violet today, with lilac out of the SSW and scattered lavenders expected, turning purple with a chance of orange in late afternoon."

The water off Spain is purple (p. 106), which might start one to thinking that Spain somehow represents — to the Professor — that symbolic combination of power, spirituality and sublimation. But one has only fifty-nine pages in which to make *that* symbolism work out, for on page 165 the author provides good old Louie Marsellus with a fine purple jacket. And on that *very same page* we find Tom's blanket as an object of memory and veneration in the Professor's study, and if you can't by now guess the color of that particular bit of bedding, you simply aren't paying attention.

Some of you who are paying attention may be, by this point, reasonably confident that you can explain the purple passages of *The Professor's House*. I once thought so, too, until arriving at the scene in which old Henry peers over a ledge of rock and is bitten by a rattlesnake. Between the eyes. Now, if Miss Cather wishes to do away with her secondary characters in this careless fashion, that's fine with me. But *how* does she do it? By letting him fall down the infamously dangerous tree-and-chain ladder? By liver failure brought on by his excessive drinking? (Although any character who can stay in one of Willa Cather's books for more than ten pages has earned the right to be blitzed half the time.) By falling rock, of which

[6] J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 54.

there is plenty around? By drowning in the raging Cruzados River? Of course not. Poor old Henry has to poke about the ledges and crevices until he finds a snake with a mouth big enough, and encounters it in a position awkward enough to provide him with the *one death-wound that is absolutely guaranteed to turn his face purple in death.* Sublime, what?

Let's turn to green for a moment. We begin to suspect that something is up here when we discover Lillian and Louie selecting some jewelry for Rosamond. Louie chooses emeralds, saying "To me, her name spells emeralds" (p. 86). In Hebrew, perhaps, her name spells emeralds. But I have taken the name "Rosamond" apart and have reassembled it every way I can, and *I* can't make it spell anything but Amnodorsa or Samdoor, or Mansdoor.

Speaking of doors. The door to St. Peter's house, through which the symbolic Mr. Outland enters the novel, is noticeably green. Lake Michigan, which someone says is blue, is said by the Professor to be "toujour plus naif" (p. 31) — always more green. But getting back to Outland, we do discover what causes him to be a bit late in entering the book: his hankie. Up at Mesa Blue, he may have run more toward the gray or brown in nose-accessories. In Washington, white pocket squares are *de rigeur.* But before she will let him arrive at the Professor's door, Miss Cather has Tom hie him to the haberdasher's for a blue one. There is a reason. Perhaps.

Green, "the colour of earthly, tangible, immediately perceptible growing things, represents the function of sensation."[7] But since we cannot have even a hint of anything smacking of earthly sensationalism passing between Tom and Godfrey, we need blue, "the colour of the rarefied atmosphere, of the clear sky, [which] stands for thinking."[8]

Shortly after he of the blue hankie appears before him of the green door, our novelist begins setting things up for what are perhaps the greatest riddle-tricks of the entire book. From somewhere — and I can from experience defy you to discover from where — Miss Cather digs up the amazing fact that turquoises are blue "before the jewellers have tampered with them and made them look green" (p. 120). Meaningless trivia? *Not* if you consider that, for no apparent reason, Miss Cather chooses as her setting Colorado's much-tampered with Mesa *Verde* and changes its name to The *Blue Mesa.*

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[8] *Ibid.*

Well, as Chingachgook says to Queequeg in Michener's *Centennial*, what's in a name? Conundrums, I suspect. I suspect so because of a hint provided by the author herself. Through the Professor, she informs us that in the Age of Chivalry, "some feeling grew up that a man should do fine deeds and not speak of them, *and that he shouldn't speak the name* of his lady, but sing of her as a Phyllis or a Nicolette. It's a nice idea, reserve about one's deepest feelings: keeps them fresh" (p. 48).

This chivalrous changing of names certainly happens in *The Professor's House*. I have mentioned the change of Mesa Verde to The Blue Mesa. The principal river there, which the Wetherills crossed in order to get to Mesa Verde, is the Mancos, meaning "one-armed" or "crippled." Apparently in honor of the Professor's preoccupation with the Spanish conquistadores, however, Miss Cather re-names it the Cruzados, or "crusader." The town of Mancos she re-names "Pardee." Then, ignoring the perfectly good town of Cortez nearby, she gives the mesa explorers a railroad town in New Mexico (probably thinking of Farmington) and names it "Tarpin."

I admit that I puzzled over this for some time. Then I remembered that, when Roddy Blake is hauling artifacts down from Cliff Palace, the Mother Eve mummy goes hurtling off the cliff into oblivion. Put the names "Tarpin" and "Pardee" together — names which never existed either in Colorado or in New Mexico — and you *can* with very little effort of imagination come up with the name "Tarpeian," which as you recall was the cliff on the Capitoline Hill in ancient Rome, used in ancient times to hurl the condemned into oblivion. Miss Cather will have to get up a bit earlier in the purple dawn if she intends to fool us average readers with *that* one.

There are many more such pointless riddles to be found in the novel, but it is time we moved on to Willa Cather's *piece de resistance*. I refer, as I am sure you hoped I would, to the Riddle of the Two Richards. First we must get rid of the awkward fact that it was Richard Wetherill who "discovered" the ruins of the Mesa Verde by re-naming him Tom Outland. Now the way is clear to do some subtle literary and historical allusions.

Cather makes quite a point of telling us that the Professor drinks large quantities of sherry, which he keeps in a sort of couch-chest combination that he refers to as a casket. In literature, I know of two types of sherry. Looking at the name "Richard" and that type of sherry known as Malmsey, we are reminded of Richard's poor brother Clarence who

drowned in a butt of the same. The Professor does not drown anything — except his troubles from time to time — in his Malmsey, but since it is kept inside his couch, he does rest his butt on it.

That is probably not the allusion.

At Blue Mesa, there are old forgotten, elderly people — or the mummified remains thereof — entombed in a walled-up niche. In a symbolic or at least suggestive manner, Professor St. Peter is "entombed" in a little chamber at the end of the stairs. What, I ask you, if his favourite sherry would turn out to be Amontillado?

Before you laugh at that probable allusion, remember that it is a betrayal that leads to the climax of Poe's story. And remember the betrayal of Tom Outland by Roddy Blake. And while your memory is still in gear, remember what the Professor wears while swimming: a vermillion rubber visor called a "casquette" — possibly the largest conundrum ever found in any novel.

Realizing that even the least perceptive of her readers would see the allusion to the "Casket of Amontillado," Miss Cather quickly changes allusions on us by bringing in the second Richard — Richard Coeur de Lion. Now the clues come thick and fast. First, the rubber visor which gives the Professor the appearance of a knight in chain-mail. Indeed, the very term "casquette" was once used to describe that piece of metal headgear worn beneath the helmet or "casque." And consider the Professor's interest in the crusades and conquistadores, both of whom wore casquettes.

Now, the tableau. If anyone of my acquaintance understands the tableau created by St. Peter at the historical pageant, they have been modest enough not to discuss it.

> He posed his two sons-in-law in a tapestry-hung tent, for a conference between Richard Plantagenet and the Saladin, before the walls of Jerusalem . . . the tableau had received no special notice, and Mrs. St. Peter had said dryly that she was afraid nobody saw his little joke. But the Professor liked his picture, and he thought it quite fair to both the young men. (pp. 73-4)

Some little joke. Richard was never any friend to the Jews, and it was at his coronation that the "disturbance" began which ended in the killing of hundreds of English Jews and the burning of their houses. Taking refuge in a York citadel, the main body of survivors killed their own wives and children and then threw themselves and their belongings into a huge funeral pyre. Richard regarded all property in the kingdom

as his own, to dispose of at will, once remarking that he would sell London itself if he could find a buyer.[9] This compares to the way in which Blake sells the Blue Mesa artifacts, or the way in which Louie profits from Outland's invention. The Saladin (played by Louie, in St. Peter's tableau) keeps Richard from seizing and selling Jerusalem. It is a family joke at best, and hardly amusing.

Now consider Tom Outland and the other famous Richard Coeur-de-Lion story. While the parallels are obvious, the point seems strained to say the very least.

Richard reaches Jerusalem, his goal, but is turned back because of insufficient funds and manpower. Tom Outland finds his Cliff City, but lacks the funds and manpower to keep it. Richard goes in search of allies, and is taken hostage in Austria. Tom goes in search of government assistance, and is taken hostage in Washington, D.C., by the bureaucrats.

Meanwhile, Richard's brother John sets about to raise the ransom money, but does it with cruel measures and with no real intention of ransoming Richard. Roddy Blake begins selling off the Blue Mesa treasure. Later, Prince John is sent into exile. And Roddy Blake, too, flees the Blue Mesa country, never to be heard of again.

You may think, if you like, that you have had enough. The character Tom Outland is identified in St. Peter's mind with Richard Coeur de Lion (partly due to the Professor's professional interest in chivalric and crusade history), who jokingly identifies that same dignitary with his son-in-law Scott McGregor. But due to his professional interest in the conquistadores, with whom the Professor cannot fully feel sympatico because he did not, like Outland, experience the Blue Mesa country soon enough, St. Peter also identifies himself with Outland. Or, donning his casquette and taking a healthy shot of sherry, with Richard.

By this time, Miss Cather has managed to work most of her library into this one simple story. And in so doing, has nearly managed to drive the reader to a madness like that of Lear's (who, you remember, also had three troublesome women in his life . . . like Pelias . . . but forget it . . .). The best we can hope for at this point is that Miss Cather will allow the story to end on a happy note. The three women will come back, glad to be home, rid of the wanderlust and shopping-lust for a time, ready to give old St. Peter a break from his own cooking. A simple, non-allusive ending.

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[9]M. Guizot, *Popular History of England* (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, n.d.), Volume I, p. 186.

But turn back the page a little. There, a scant nine pages away from that hoped-for ending, we find the Professor contemplating a suitable heraldic device for Lillian, *in* his study with the two mannequins, while outside the green lake turns black in a storm and the pine trees and cypress trees "await something." (We all know, I guess, what the symbolism of pine and cypress is.) Oh, yes: the great clouds blowing up from the lake are purple. I had almost forgotten that.

Soon the flame will blow out and the gas will begin to overcome our hero. But wait! Stay! What's this? The news that has depressed the Professor so is that his family is returning on the good ship *Berengaria* (p. 273). And again on the next page, the *Berengaria.* And finally, just four words from the end of the novel, the *Berengaria.* Search the steamship lists of the past century all you wish, you will not find the *Berengaria* on them. Berengaria, you see, was the name of the Princess of Navarre — brought from that Spanish district in 1191 to become the wife of none other than . . . Richard Coeur de Lion!

History, Professor Etulain tells us, "should be the tissue of fabric separating the actual from the authentic, the drama from the play, or the whey which is the essence of that manifestation from an overdue overbearing upon the under-stratum of the chaff."[10] In contrast is fiction, which in the words of Professor Westbrook, is "untrue but not highly implausible degrees of well- or ill-founded optometric devices put in archetypical patterns of reminiscent folly not unlike those of the ancient Joad mythic elements in my previous article."[11] But when an author gives us, as Willa Cather has done, such an amalgam of symbol, history, and allusiveness as we find in *The Professor's House*, it is surely time for all good persons of the literary persuasion to rise as one and to echo the words of the Professor: "I never heard of such a thing!" (p. 21).

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[10]Richard Etulain, "Why John Milton Never Published Our Conversation," *Journal of the Smooth Wire Collector's Society* XIV (February 31, 1951), 286-411.

[11]Max Westbrook, "Falling Archetypes," *Orthopedagogic Quarterly,* (Spring 1981), p. 524.