2020

Love and Loss in Willa Cather's Novels

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An Honors Thesis presented by Sara Abbazia to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
May 2020

Acknowledgements

I have a long list of people who deserve thanks for this project. First and foremost, I am so grateful for the Connecticut College English Department faculty and staff, who continually make me feel proud to be an English major. I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Professor Rivkin, who dedicated so many hours a week to advising me, as well as my readers, Professor Gaubinger and Professor Cook, who helped challenge me to the fullest extent of my abilities. I am grateful for Professor Wilder, who always provides excellent essay feedback and who gave me extensions on my coursework when I needed to devote more time to my thesis. I would also like to express gratitude toward Professor Shoemaker, who helped me expand upon my writing skills and who always asked me how my thesis was going when I came to tutor at the Writing Center. Professor Neely also deserves my thanks, as she allowed me to cite her book draft in my work. I would like to thank Professor Ostby for expanding my appreciation for theory, and Professor Boyd for challenging me to seize my authority. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Strabone, who helped me catch up when I missed the initial honors thesis informational meetings.

My minor advisers also deserve recognition for inspiring me as a writer and thinker. I would like to thank Professor Egan, my Gender, Sexuality, and Intersectionality Studies adviser, who introduced me to many important queer theorists that I used for this project. I would also like to thank Professor Heidi Henderson, my dance minor adviser, who made me feel right at home at college when I was in her First-Year Seminar and who encouraged my passion for writing.

I am thoroughly indebted to Sarah Lawler, Charlotte Williams, Julia Graham, Rachel Haines, Natasha Strugatz, and Sophia Angele-Kuehn, who spent countless hours in the library with me while I worked on this thesis. I would like to thank Ashley Hansen and Andrew Lopez, who organized an honors thesis trip to Yale during finals so that we could use Yale's library.

As always, I owe much gratitude to my family for their love and support during our time quarantined together. While writing a thesis during a global pandemic is far from easy, they helped me keep pushing forward.

I would like to thank Deb Brunetti, who read over part of my work, and Dot Wang, who made sure I balanced my academic duties with my own wellbeing. Finally, I would like to thank Summar West, who has seen me through my lows and highs of the year, who never stops believing in me, and who has advised me through every stage of this process.

Abstract

Past scholars of Willa Cather, the American writer known for her novels describing life on the frontier, go to great lengths to explore how colonial settlement, loss, and queerness play their separate parts in her narratives. This analysis seeks to go further and examine how these elements intermingle under the influence of nostalgia. The two works that are analyzed, *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*, feature main characters who experience the loss of a queer relationship and who try to regain their lost happiness through a nostalgic indulgence in pastoral memories. These memories, however, are inaccurate, and often erase the negative consequences of colonial settlement and appropriation. This paper ultimately seeks to reconcile the appeal behind Cather's nostalgic appropriation and metaphysical embodiment of the past with its negative consequences.

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Introduction: The Life and Literary Tradition of Willa Cather

> When you set out to write about [Cather], you feel she would not have liked what you are doing, and would not have liked you either. At times, reading yet more of her grumpy repudiations of the modern world, the dislike is reciprocated. And she does not invite interpretation. Her apparent simplicity, her authenticity and authority, her deep connections to places, her specific cultural histories, make her look straightforward and available. But she is no public monument, no laureate of rural America. The journey for Cather must be through her language, her obsessions, and her evasions.
>
> —Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*, 1989

While she is "no public monument, no laureate of rural America," Willa Silbert Cather stands as a notable figure in the American literary canon. Born in 1873 in Virginia, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *One of Ours* only one year after the first woman won the award (Lee 4). She graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1895, and spent most of her life working and supporting herself as a magazine editor, high school English teacher, and novelist (Lee 41; 56-57). Despite their straightforward form, Cather's novels contain complex and unconventional depictions of gender, sexuality, and nostalgia that one might not notice upon a preliminary reading of her texts.

Most of Cather's works are semi-autobiographical in nature, as they are inspired by the people and places she encountered during her life. One aspect of Cather's life, her sexuality, plays an especially prominent role in how scholars read her novels. James Woodress, one of Cather's biographers, notes that even though there is no surviving evidence that Cather had sexual relationships with women, she never married, and her closest friends were all women (Woodress 141). Cather even went through a phase in college where she wore masculine clothing, wrote passionate love letters to women, and went by the name William Cather Jr. (Lee 10). Later on, Cather lived a much more private life in terms of her relationships, and even

insulted Oscar Wilde when he was charged with sodomy in 1895 (Lee 10-11). Even so, she spent almost forty years of her adult life living with Edith Lewis in their shared apartment (Woodress 142). Some scholars reject labeling Cather as a lesbian because she did not label herself as such (Sharistanian xiii). My solution to this ambiguity is to use Cathy Cohen's definition of queer—the embodiment of resistance to the dominant and normalizing views of gender and sexuality—to define Cather, as she certainly defied the traditional sexual role of women of her time (Cohen 440). As Judith Butler says, "If identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of 'queer' will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent" ("Critically Queer" 230). While broad identity categories cannot perfectly define individual experiences, the use of the word "queer" can at least give one a starting point for discussion.

Cather's queer relationships with other women shaped her novels. Her intense infatuation with an older woman named Lydia Garber influenced *A Lost Lady,* and her trips to the Mesa Verde with Edith Lewis inspired a story that eventually made up *The Professor's House* (Woodress 340; Lee 232). Naturally, my forthcoming analysis of these two novels will focus on how Cather presents a queer longing for past relationships within her writing.

Both Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, two queer theorists, note the undeniably crucial role that queerness plays in the plots of Cather's novels. Most of Cather's texts deal with heterosexual relationships, so Butler argues, "To read Cather's text as a lesbian text is to initiate a set of complications that cannot be easily summarized, for the challenge takes place, often painfully, within the very norms of heterosexuality that the text also mocks" (**(**"Dangerous Crossings" 162). For example, Cather translates the love that she felt for Lydia Garber into Niel's devotion to Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* (Woodress 340). Butler also argues that

Cather plays into the body when translating this lesbian sexuality, where "Bodies appear as a collection of parts, and parts appear invested with an almost autonomous significance, thus figurally thwarting the ideal integrity of the body ("Dangerous Crossings" 162). Similarly, Sedgwick also argues that Cather translated her queerness into her characters. She states that in *The Professor's House,* Cather performs two "cross-translations" to transcribe her lesbian love toward Edith into Godfrey St. Peter's homosexual love toward Tom Outland (Sedgwick 174). Thus, while Cather's novels may seem heterosexual at a first glance, they are in fact transcribed lesbian experiences from her own life.

Another important topic to consider while examining Cather's works is her relation to the past—specifically, to pre-settlement America. In Cather's book *Not Under Forty,* she claims that "the world broke in two in 1922" (*Not Under Forty* v). At that time, writers were moving from more traditional forms of fiction writing into modernism, a movement characterized by self-consciousness, the decline of civilization, and experimental writing forms (Whitworth 11-13). Cather, in contrast, renounced modernism, and did not follow the trends of experimentalism or fragmentation of her time (Lee 189). Additionally, *Not Under Forty* repeatedly "expresses her disdain for the new, the cheap, the fast, the mass-produced, and the 'smart'" of the future (Love 72). Cather's characters likewise "struggle to find a place in a world that is rapidly shifting, not only in terms of mores, aesthetics, and social structure, but also in terms of geography, historical construct, and physical attributes" (Lawton 97). In her desire to return to a past status quo, Cather turns to narratives about indigeneity. Her main characters are never Native Americans, however; instead, she writes about pioneers who explore the prairies and abandoned Native American encampments. Lawton notes that in Cather's stories, "Indians

either are rapidly disappearing noble savages or they are picturesque disappeared cultures upon which one can stamp a heroic or tragic mythology" (Lawton 100). In *A Lost Lady,* the Native American encampment that Mr. Forrester wants to build his house upon is coincidentally abandoned by the time he returns to claim it. In *The Professor's House,* the Mesa pueblo is mysteriously abandoned, which makes it the perfect place for Tom to explore. In both instances, the white main characters are able to find sanctuaries away from the social world in places of indigeneity. However, these characters fail to realize that their appropriation of Native American land and culture constitutes "a desire for solace not only in a landscape that does not exist anymore but also in a landscape that one's own culture is complicit in disrupting and co-opting" (Lawton 109). While Cather's characters criticize materialism and pine after a natural past, they ignore the ways they benefit from the colonial project.

Furthermore, Cather does not fully acknowledge in her novels how her idealized vision of the natural past is flawed. Many authors of Cather's time held similar views of what nature was like before settlement. In *Against Sustainability: Reading Nineteenth-Century America in the Age of Climate Crisis,* Michelle Neely deconstructs how writers speak about sustainability as a return to a more environmentally-friendly past. Often, sustainability efforts critique the current capitalistic order and harken to an earlier pastoral time of environmental utopianism (Neely 29). However, Neely claims that this vision is largely false because it ignores the fact that earlier forms of sustainability also abused and appropriated the land (Neely 28). The "golden age" of environmentalism was truly just the beginning of capitalism, where the early pioneers exploited and destroyed indigenous territory in order to make it productive (Neely 27). Authors, such as George Catlin, validate this position by "primarily represent[ing] Native Americans as

interesting aesthetic objects rather than human beings whose interests should (or even, could) compete ethically with whites' own" (Neely 143). These authors do not write about Native Americans to help them or to raise awareness of their issues; instead, the writers want to preserve the cultural artifacts, modes of living, and general aesthetic of the Native Americans (Neely 148). Neely likens this process to taxidermy, where the life of the Natives is perfectly static and stable for future white use (Neely 145). I argue that Cather's aim to preserve Native American cultures in her writing similarly constitutes a metaphysical possession and embodiment of physical people and places.

Cather does not limit this kind of appropriation to indigenous cultures. Often, her characters idolize certain figures in their lives and vicariously live through them. In *A Lost Lady,* Niel uses Mrs. Forrester as his object of affection, and in *The Professor's House,* St. Peter lives vicariously through Tom's adventures out on the Mesa. If one cannot reside inside of the queer body, then one might find another person's life to reside within, or to appropriate. This appropriation often takes the form of the metaphysically disembodied hand. Katherine Rowe writes about the symbolic importance of hands in her book *Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern.* She explains that hands symbolize a person's agency, and that "at the heart of this trope is the perception of the hand as a separate piece of the body, linked to it by metonymy or synecdoche" (Rowe 2; 3-4). Rowe also introduces the concept of Augustinian double will, where "the hand and the rest of the body act at odds" (Rowe 8). In the upcoming chapters, I will examine how the role of hands plays a role in the queer appropriation of Cather's characters.

I have thus far delineated several topics that past Cather scholars have focused on: queerness, colonial settlement, nostalgia, and aesthetics. My aim in this thesis is to ascribe a chronological logic to these various topics to demonstrate how they are all interconnected. I argue that in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House,* the main characters enact a double appropriation and embodiment of both Native American cultures and the lives of their love interests in order to return to a more idealized, natural past.

Chapter 1 analyzes *A Lost Lady,* a story about a young boy's admiration for a woman named Marian Forrester and her husband, Captain Daniel Forrester. By the end of the novel, Ivy Peters, a pompous lawyer, has taken control of the Forrester estate, and Mrs. Forrester has severely disappointed Niel by not living up to his expectations of how a lady should act. I argue that despite his disdain for settler colonialists like Ivy Peters, Niel enacts the very same kind of appropriation by metaphysically embodying Mrs. Forrester's body. In Chapter 2, I will analyze *The Professor's House,* a novel about an elderly professor lamenting his unhappy marriage and the death of his student, Tom Outland. I argue that in St. Peter's pursuit of the queer opportunities found in arenas associated with nature, he ultimately appropriates and embodies the lives of others— Tom, Native Americans, and even his fictional Spanish Adventurers. This appropriation leads him to re-enact the same power structures that physically confine him in the domestic and social world. Through my analysis of these two novels, I hope to illuminate the differing ways in which hands and other forms of metaphysical embodiment are used as tools of queer colonial appropriation.

Chapter 1: Desire and Disappointment in *A Lost Lady*

> "Happy days!"
>
> It was the toast he always drank at dinner … It seemed a solemn moment, seemed to knock at the door of Fate; behind which all days, happy and otherwise, were hidden. Niel drank his wine with a pleasant shiver, thinking that nothing else made life seem so precarious, the future so cryptic and unfathomable, as that brief toast uttered by the massive man, "Happy days!"
>
> —Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady*, 1923

This moment in *A Lost Lady*[1] is so brief, so random, that the reader may feel quite tempted to just pass over it entirely. However, in this passage lies one of the main themes of the novel, an idea echoed throughout Cather's books, including *My Ántonia:* that "the best days are the first to flee" (*My Ántonia* 171).

Mr. Forrester's exclamation of "Happy days!" seems quite innocent enough. While the narrator interprets it as a "solemn moment," the words nonetheless send a "pleasant" shiver through Niel. His pleasure derives from the "cryptic" and "unfathomable" nature of the future, a time which is contrasted from the so-called "happy days" of the present. Why would Niel feel the urge to anticipate the loss of these happy days, though? Why does he predict that happiness is excluded from the realm of the future?

This passage is one example of many that demonstrates Niel's flawed rhetoric surrounding nostalgia and the past. The main gist of his logic is that the past will always be better than the present, and nothing that the future brings will ever be better than whatever has happened previously. Niel's romantic view of the past is not only dishearteningly pessimistic, seeing that he constantly feels disappointed when life does not live up to his grandiose

[1] I will refer to *A Lost Lady* as *ALL* when citing passages within the text.

expectations, but it also erases the fact that the past was not nearly as great as he remembered it to be.

On the one hand, Cather acknowledges to an extent the drawbacks of Niel's logic because even though Mrs. Forrester severely disappoints Niel, "her passions are not fatal to her, she gets away and survives" (Lee 204). In other words, Mrs. Forrester is not punished for disrupting Niel's idyllic vision of the past, and she lives happily ever after. On the other hand, the narrative structure of Cather's book relies on an unacknowledged colonial appropriation of an indigenous presence, which implies that she does not realize the extent to which Niel's logic is her own. Indeed, the story begins with the description of a house—the location of which was chosen because it was the site of a Native American encampment. The property originally belongs to Mr. Forrester and his wife, but eventually the space is owned by Ivy Peters, the novel's antagonist who represents everything Cather hates about the settlers of the industrial age. However, what Niel does not realize is that the Forresters are not nearly as innocent, exemplary, or wonderful as he remembers them to be. Niel's nostalgia, which is fueled by Cather's values surrounding America's past, will eventually serve as a destructive force that distorts his memories and ruins his life.

Both past and contemporary theorists note the undeniable role that loss, nostalgia, and the past play in Cather's novels. Heather Love's article, "The End of Friendship: Willa Cather's Sad Kindred," discusses the ways in which Cather's politics surrounding anti-futurism and the past influences the way she writes friendships in her novels. This article begins with a discussion of Cather's *Not Under Forty*[2], a collection of essays that Love describes as written "for the

[2] I will refer to *Not Under Forty* as *NF* when citing passages within the text.

backward," or "readers who are exceptional— those who disidentify with the culture of the present and whose attention is turned toward the difficult and outmoded" (Love 73). Love's portrayal of Cather's ideal audience as "exceptional" clarifies that Cather means to exclude some of her potential readers. This preference demonstrates a key aspect of Cather's value system: that exclusivity signifies value, and exceptionality indicates superior taste. Love notes that friendship is highly valued in Cather's novels, even though "Cather's understanding of friendship [is] marked by betrayal, disappointment, loss, and impossibility" (Love 74). "Unease and trouble" are at the heart of Cather's friendships, but it is precisely these negative elements that Cather tends to focus on. Cather's ideas about the past, queer friendship, and loss, which Love identifies in her essay, apply to the lost friendship between Mrs. Forrester and Niel in *A Lost Lady.*

Nina Schwartz also discusses how idealization follows from nostalgia in *A Lost Lady* with her article "History and the Invention of Innocence in *A Lost Lady*." She argues that the story of Mrs. Forrester and the history of Western settlement are paralleled in the novel. Mrs. Forrester represents the land that is developed by pioneers like Captain Forrester and then exploited by people like Ivy Peters. Schwartz also notes that both Mrs. Forrester and America are idealized and romanticized by Niel and Cather respectively. To promote the idea of a "glorious past" and a "fallen present," Cather's works mythologize events that might conflict with the story she wants to tell (Schwartz 34). For instance, she largely ignores the genocide of Native Americans via the pioneers. Similarly, Niel ignores past events that distort his vision of his lost lady. Ultimately, Schwartz debunks the myths surrounding Mrs. Forrester's and America's supposedly idealized past by examining how people rewrite history.

What past scholars of Cather have failed to fully explore is the ways in which love, loss, and disappointment caused by nostalgia intermingle in *A Lost Lady*. Schwartz's article is a comprehensive look into Cather's ideology surrounding the past, but she fails to delve into the reasons why such a worldview is so compelling despite the disappointment it inevitability brings. Bringing Schwartz's work into conversation with Love's book chapter will help illuminate the appeal behind nostalgia and settler colonialism as a whole. By analyzing the similarity between Ivy Peters' and Mr. Forrester's versions of settlement, one can see how Niel's differing opinions of the two men are extremely hypocritical and distorted by nostalgia. Furthermore, by following *A Lost Lady*'s allegory of women as the American frontier, one can see how Niel's romanticized view of Mrs. Forrester is equally problematic and dehumanizing. I argue that despite his disdain for settler colonialists like Ivy Peters, Niel enacts the very same kind of appropriation by trying to metaphysically embody Mrs. Forrester, thereby re-enacting and claiming the colonial legacy of both Ivy Peters and Captain Forrester.

SECTION 1: DISMANTLING THE FORRESTER PLACE

A Lost Lady opens with a description of a house that will come to represent everything Niel admires about the past. The "Forrester Place" serves as the main setting of the novel, and the house itself is just as important to Niel as much as its inhabitants are. This symbolic importance is manifested by the house's geographical location—the narrator notes, "Thus placed on the hill, against its bristling grove, it was the first thing one saw on coming into Sweet Water by rail, and the last thing one saw on departing" (*ALL* 10). The Forrester's house, placed upon a hill, is also placed above other establishments in terms of value. One might call to mind John Winthrop's "city on a hill," which identifies the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a model of

Christian charity for others to look up to. This house on a hill will act as a "city upon a hill" that the characters of the book look to as a place of pleasant memories and people. Of course, such an idealized view of a house is bound to be flawed. Just as Winthrop's "city on a hill" has been overly-idealized in America's history, the Forrester Place—and the memories its walls hold—will eventually be misremembered by Niel.

Ironically, one of the biggest similarities between the Forrester Place and Winthrop's "city on a hill" is both the places' complicity with the colonial project. The Forrester Place's problematic history is turned into a dinner table story by Captain Forrester to entertain his guests one winter's evening. After Mrs. Ogden asks him to, the Captain recounts the time he found the location where he eventually built his house:

> Once, when he was driven out of the trail by a wash-out, he rode south on his horse to explore, and found an Indian encampment near the Sweet Water, on this very hill where his house now stood. He was, he said, "greatly taken with the location," and made up his mind that he would one day have a house there. He cut down a young willow tree and drove the stake into the ground to mark the spot where he wished to build. He went away and did not come back for many years; he was helping to lay the first railroad across the plains. (*ALL* 50)

Mr. Forrester finds himself taken with the Indian encampment and decides that he wants to own the place for himself. He does not even wait for the Native Americans to leave the area before planning out what his new house will look like on their land. As he states, "When I came here a young man, I had planned it in my mind, pretty much as it is today; where I would dig my well, and where I would plant my grove and my orchard" (*ALL* 50-51). Essentially, Mr. Forrester

appropriates the indigenous people's living space for himself without considering the consequences of doing so, and this theme of appropriation will reoccur throughout the story.

By examining Cather's descriptions of houses in the book, one can deduce how the Forrester Place represents the mythical past. Love has examined the presence of houses in Cather's various essays that appear in *Not Under Forty.* Cather has a fascination with uncomfortable and old-fashioned homes. The house described in "148 Charles Street," for instance, is "not a convenient house to entertain in" (*NF* 841), and the hotel in "A Chance Meeting" "was built for the travelers of forty years ago, who liked large rooms and large baths, and quiet. It is not at all smart, but very comfortable" (*NF* 815). One might wonder why Cather repeatedly uses houses as a site for questioning progressive, future-focused politics, and why she finds ugliness in the excessive ornamentation of houses. These houses seem to have one thing in common: they are places that protect and are situated in the past. For instance, in "148 Charles Street," Cather writes:

> The unique charm of Mrs. Fields' house was not that it was a place where one could hear about the past, but that it was a place where the past lived on—where it was protected and cherished, had sanctuary from the noisy push of the present … The ugliness of the world, all possibility of wrenches and jars and wounding contacts, seemed securely shut out. It was indeed the peace of the past, where the tawdry and cheap have been eliminated and the enduring things have taken their proper, happy places. (*NF* 842-843)

Cather implies that 148 Charles Street was a place where one could avoid the present and indulge in memories of the past by talking to its inhabitants, such as Mrs. Fields. Love interprets the house of the past as shielding Cather from "the wounding contacts" of the present, which is

consistent with her anti-progressive and cynical views (Love 91). Cather's houses seem only important insomuch as they contain people and make it possible for them to connect with their pasts. It seems as though Cather would truly prefer a house if it was just in nature, like the little huts in *My Antonia.* Ultimately, Cather's houses tend to hold important memories of the past that shape their futures.

Similarly, the Forrester Place serves as a signifier of past pleasures and ideals. Although the characters in the book admire the Forrester Place, the narrator admits that it is a rather ugly building, which further signifies the façade of its romanticized appeal. When describing the house, the narrator first remarks, "It was encircled by porches, too narrow for modern notions of comfort, supported by the fussy, fragile pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous" (*ALL* 9). Here, the house is described as a waste of perfectly good wood, as something that turned "honest" trees into something "hideous." The narrator then goes on to say, "Stripped of its vines and denuded of its shrubbery, the house would probably have been ugly enough" (*ALL* 9). What makes the house beautiful, then, are signifiers of nature: the vines and shrubbery. If the house does not have indicators of natural growth ornamenting it, then one will notice something ugly about the house. This confession of ugliness thus indicates a confession to some knowledge that what the Western pioneers are building is not as beautiful as what is being displaced—namely, the original wildlife and the Native American encampment that lived there. What does make the house beautiful, the narrator states, is "the people who lived there," as they "made [the house] seem much larger and finer than it was" (*ALL* 8). The narrator is clearly referring to Mrs. Forrester, Mr. Forrester, and

the guests they entertain at their home. Despite its appeal, the Forrester Place ultimately signifies an effacement and idealization of the colonial past.

Niel is incapable of noticing the ugliness that the narrator does, which clues the reader in to his personality. Niel does not view the Forrester Place as ugly, and instead sees the house as beautiful because of its class signification. After he becomes injured in the garden and needs to be healed by Mrs. Forrester, Niel receives a sneak peak of the interior of the Forrester Place. The things he notices are the things of value. For example, he examines the "big, half-darkened room, full of heavy, old-fashioned walnut furniture" and "a white bed with ruffled pillow shams" (*ALL* 25). He constantly compares the Forrester estate to his own house. For instance, he notices, "The room was cool and dusky and quiet. At his house everything was horrid when one was sick" (*ALL* 25). The narrator also remarks, "The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again. The windows went almost down to the baseboard, like doors, and the closed green shutters let in streaks of sunlight that quivered on the polished floor and the silver things on the dresser" (*ALL* 26). Niel clearly views the Forrester Place as superior to his own house, namely because his own family is so poor. Immediately following the description of the Mrs. Forrester's home, the narrator describes Niel's homelife, saying, "Home was not a pleasant place to go; a frail egg-shell house, set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived" (*ALL* 27). The reason why Niel lives in such a poor place is because his father lost his fortune. Niel detests the "air of failure and defeat about his family," which is likely the reason he hangs around with the wealthy Forresters (*ALL* 27). Schwartz does an excellent job of tracing Niel's admiration of Mrs. Forrester through the lens of classism, and she states, "Niel's sense of his own family … reflects the snobbish disdain of the aristocrat for those less fortunate

or aesthetically sophisticated than himself" (Schwartz 40). In other words, Niel's appreciation of the Forrester Place reflects his class status and his familial history, which greatly influences the way he interprets present events.

SECTION 2: MATERNITY, CLASS, AND MARIAN FORRESTER

Niel's class status and familial history also subtly inform the reader why he is so obsessed with Mrs. Forrester. Niel does not have a particularly close relationship with any of his family members aside from Judge Pommeroy, and instead he seems to adopt the Forresters as his family. However, it would be a mistake to completely dismiss the importance of Niel's blood relatives to the plot. For instance, the narrator seems to imply that Niel's haughty personality came from his mother:

> Niel was proud, like his mother; she died when he was five years old. She had hated the West, and used to haughtily to tell her neighbours that she would never think of living anywhere but in Fayette county, Kentucky; that they had only come to Sweet Water to make investments and to "turn the crown into the pound." By that phrase she was still remembered, poor lady. (*ALL* 27-28)

Niel's mother is characterized as a haughty, money-oriented woman, and the narrator suggests that Niel is the same way. As Schwartz points out, "Niel identifies much more strongly with his dead mother, and his delusions of grandeur repeat hers" (Schwartz 40). The novel also portrays another older woman as epitomizing the very same "delusions of grandeur": Mrs. Forrester. Niel gravitates towards Mrs. Forrester as a replacement maternal figure because of the similarities she shares with his late mother. Niel tries to regain his lost childhood with his mother through his time with Mrs. Forrester, who acts as a supplemental maternal figure. It makes sense, therefore,

that Niel feels the loss so greatly when Mrs. Forrester disappoints him. Mrs. Forrester is clearly being objectified into a replacement for the lost maternal object of Niel's happier youth.

Mrs. Forrester also attracts Niel because of her class ranking, which is tied to her femininity and overall "ladylike" status. Throughout the novel, Niel constantly refers to the fact that Mrs. Forrester is not like other women, that she belongs to a mythical higher world. As Schwartz points out in her essay, that elevated world is obviously that of the upper class. The first time Niel sees Mrs. Forrester, he notices her expensive clothing: "a black silk dress all puffs and ruffles, and a black hat," along with "a parasol with a carved ivory handle," "a swirl of foamy white petticoats," and "a black, shiny slipper" (*ALL* 39). Afterwards, the narrator remarks, "He was proud now that at the first moment he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known" (*ALL* 40). Niel feels that Mrs. Forrester deserves special treatment because of her elevated status, and he balks at lower-class individuals, such as Ivy Peters, who try to interact with her. The other characters of the novel do not name the different world as the upper class—only the Blum boys, members of the lower class, see how Mrs. Forrester's class status makes her exceptional. As Schwartz points out, "The children of working-class Europeans recognize what Americans schooled in democratic ideals do not wish to know: that Marian's charm is the result of money and of the ease and privilege it affords to those who have it" (Schwartz 40). Schwartz points out how the democratic ideal of the American dream disillusions Americans by making them believe that wealthy people have money because they are virtuous and therefore deserve it (Schwartz 43). While Niel believes that Mrs. Forrester is inherently ladylike and needs money to support this way of life, her charm and grace is actually a product of her education and money (Schwartz 40). Later on, Niel becomes shocked

that Mrs. Forrester's economic downfall precipitates her downfall in character. He fails to recognize the artifice behind Mrs. Forrester's classed femininity, as well as the fact that the moral superiority he invented for her never existed in the first place.

Niel desires his lost lady as both a maternal figure and as a love interest. At the beginning of the novel, Niel experiences a kind of "love-at-first-sight" when Mrs. Forrester revives him. He remarks to himself, "What soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white throat rising and falling so quickly" (*ALL* 25). Niel's constant examination of Mrs. Forrester's beauty, the way he looks down her dress, and his jealousy of Frank Ellinger all point towards a thwarted romance. This romance is especially interesting considering that Cather says that she based Mrs. Forrester off a woman she knew in real life, Lydia Garber, and that Niel is a reflection of herself, a "peephole" into the novel featuring the "woman [she] loved very much in [her] childhood" (Woodress 341). Niel's attraction to Mrs. Forrester parallels a queer attraction that Cather felt towards this woman. If the relationship between Niel and Mrs. Forrester is indeed a reflection of the one between Cather and Mrs. Garber, then their relationship is queer coded. As a result, Love's writings on melancholic queer friendships in Cather's works apply here. Niel, Cather's stand-in, feels the loss of a queer friendship when Mrs. Forrester has an affair with both Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters. Consequently, he must look backward in order to supplement his lost desire.

SECTION 3: THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN IVY PETERS AND CAPTAIN FORRESTER

Just as Niel overdetermines Mrs. Forrester's character, he also showers Captain Forrester with an excessive amount of praise. If one compares the actions of Ivy Peters and Captain Forrester, one will discover that they are both enacting very similar versions of settler

colonialism that are nonetheless treated differently by Niel. Even though Mr. Forrester is, by definition, a settler colonialist, it seems that Niel does not define him as one—or, at the very least, he is not one of the "bad" ones. Instead, the villainous colonialist appears as Ivy Peters, who eventually gains control of the Forrester Place when Mr. Forrester dies. Niel spends a good portion of the book criticizing Ivy's actions. For example, he is not pleased when he finds out that Ivy drained the Forresters' marsh:

> He felt that Ivy had drained the marsh quite as much to spite him and Mrs. Forrester as to reclaim the land … By draining the marsh Ivy had obliterated a few acres of something he hated, though he could not name it, and had asserted his power over the people who had loved those unproductive meadows for their idleness and silvery beauty. (*ALL* 101-102)

There are two main points to glean from this passage: the first, that Ivy Peters is reclaiming the power Mrs. Forrester originally held and wielded over him as his class superior, and the second, that the beauty of the marsh lay in its "unproductive" and "idle" qualities. Niel upholds the inherent value of the aesthetic, and condemns actions that try to force nature's beauty towards a technological, progressive future.

In contrast, Niel views Mr. Forrester as a "good" colonialist who is a "native" inhabitant of the land. When Niel refers to people that settled the West, such as the old Captain, he uses overwhelmingly positive adjectives: they were "dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood" (*ALL* 102). Niel truly believes that Mr. Forrester is a hero for what he did. Furthermore, he listens to the Captain's "philosophy of life" with apt interest and without cynicism:

> Because a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader's and the prospector's and the contractor's. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water. All these things will be everyday facts to the coming generation, but to us—" Captain Forrester ended with a sort of grunt. Something forbidding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians. (*ALL* 52-53)

By describing the Captain's voice as the one of "old Indians," Niel likens the settler pioneers to Native Americans—meaning that the former has just as much of a claim to indigeneity and the land as the latter. One must note, however, that this "forbidding" grunt of an old Indian interrupts his speech about building railroads and settling the West. The absent figure of the Native American in Mr. Forrester's story muffles his speech and reminds the audience that his dream came at a cost.

Furthermore, Captain Forrester's aesthetic appeal as a pioneer has no real value except to the extent in which it promotes the classist status quo. Even though Niel appreciates the marsh for its natural beauty and uncultivated aesthetic, Captain Forrester retains the marsh for a very specific, class-based reason. The narrator states that "Any one but Captain Forrester would have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields," but because Captain Forrester just "happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture," he kept it in (*ALL* 9). The narrator explains, "He was well off for those times, and he had no children. He could afford to humour his fancies" (*ALL* 9). In other words, retaining the marsh demonstrates the Captain's wealth and power over the other citizens of Sweet Water. Schwartz argues that "though the

marsh may look as if it were a remnant of untouched prairie, its existence is an effect of the Captain's money and of the aesthetic pleasure he takes in its 'wildness' surrounded by cultivated territory" (Schwartz 43). Once again, the Captain demonstrates his ability to appropriate the wild indigeneity around him for his own purposes, which likens him more to a settler colonialist than a Native American.

Despite the qualities that the Captain shares with Ivy Peters, Niel refuses to acknowledge that Captain Forrester has done anything wrong ever. When Mr. Forrester took the hill that was originally the site of a Native American encampment to make his house, he was a "pioneer." When Ivy Peters tries to turn Mr. Forrester's "unproductive meadows" into a wheat farm, Niel describes him as a "shrewd young m[a]n, trained to petty economies by hard times" (*ALL* 102). The difference, then, between the "Old West" and the new one is a matter of class and aesthetic. The old pioneers were "dreamers" and "adventurers" who supposedly discovered the West for the first time, ignoring the fact that Native Americans had lived on that land centuries before the first white people came to America. The new settlers are "shrewd" and steal from old pioneers such as Mr. Forrester, just as those first settlers stole from the Native Americans. In this way, the struggle of the Native Americans is appropriated by the original pioneers to justify their anger at the new Western settlers. After all, according to the Captain's philosophy, "what you think of and plan for day by day, in spite of yourself, so to speak—you will get. You will get it more or less. That is, unless you are one of the people who get nothing in this world" (*ALL* 52). What Mr. Forrester fails to mention is that the reason some people in the world receive nothing is precisely because the people who receive everything take it from them. The reason Mr. Forrester received what he wanted—namely, his house—was because he stole it from Native Americans. When Mr.

Forrester dies, Niel does not remember the foolish old man that told him he would get whatever he wanted as long as he wanted it badly enough. Instead, he remembers the brave pioneer who settled the West before the "bad" settlers came along and ruined everything.

Even Mrs. Forrester cannot see the colonialist attributes in her husband. Later on, when Niel talks to Mrs. Forrester, she complains of Ivy Peters' shady dealings with Native Americans: "He gets splendid land from the Indians some way, for next to nothing … I don't admire people who cheat Indians" (*ALL* 117-118). Clearly, the characters in the book do not approve of cheating Native Americans—yet they fail to see how they themselves are complicit in the colonial project. Back in the day, when it was easier to cheat Native Americans without consequence, the old pioneers could get away with nearly anything. Now that the new settlers are stealing from both the old pioneers and the Native Americans, a problem arises. While people like Niel classify the problem of colonial settlement as "new," it has actually existed for centuries and has been enacted by the very people that he admires most. In this way, Niel enacts a purposeful overlooking, distortion, and effacement of the past.

SECTION 4: REVEALING THE FAÇADE BEHIND MRS. FORRESTER'S FEMININITY

Niel's distorted vision of the past also applies to his memories of Mrs. Forrester. Throughout the novel, Niel feels the need to protect Mrs. Forrester from unworthy, lower-class men, such as Ivy Peters or Frank Ellinger. To Niel, Mrs. Forrester represents the epitome of beauty, grace, class, and innocence—at least at first. Her "many-coloured laugh" haunts the pages of the novel, with Niel lamenting that "if he could hear that long-lost lady laugh again, he could be gay" (*ALL* 68). Niel's best memories from childhood are those featuring his treasured lady. One of these memories appears in the grove of the Forrester Place:

> The slender white figure was still, and as he hurried across the grass he saw that a white garden hat lay over her face. He approached quietly and was just wondering if she were asleep, when he heard a soft, delighted laugh, and with a quick movement she threw off the lace hat through which she had been watching him. He stepped forward and caught her suspended figure, hammock and all, in his arms. How light and alive she was! like a bird caught in a net. If only he could rescue her and carry her off like this, — off the earth of sad, inevitable periods, away from age, weariness, adverse fortune! (*ALL* 104-105)

Mrs. Forrester's white appearance is a motif in both this passage and in the book as a whole. Her pale skin represents her innocence and her youth—things that Niel cannot lose without feeling regret. The pleasure he experiences catching "her suspended figure" in his arms is an act of embodied possession. All Niel wants is to hold Mrs. Forrester and claim her as his own, both out of romantic love and to protect her from harm. The fact that Niel says that she looks "like a bird caught in a net" recalls the image of Ivy Peters, who earlier "held [a] woodpecker's head in a vice made of his thumb and forefinger, enclosing its panting body with his palm" (*ALL* 22). These two scenes both consist of men holding birds (or bird-like figures) in their hands. While the scene with Ivy is much more violent than the scene with Niel, both scenes consist of an act of possession and masculine strength. By comparing her to a bird, Niel demonstrates that he sees Mrs. Forrester as a helpless creature in need of protection; however, his idea of protection consists of entrapping Mrs. Forrester's body (and by metonymy, her agency) within his arms. Niel cannot stop Ivy Peters from detaining Mrs. Forrester within his hands, unfortunately. In Chapter 9, when Ivy Peters places "both arms around [Mrs. Forrester], his hands meeting over her breast," he has clearly claimed Mrs. Forrester as his prey (*ALL* 161). Just as Ivy exerted his

power over nature when he wounded the woodpecker, Ivy claims Mrs. Forrester as his property. Scholars of Cather, such as Schwartz, have interpreted the story of *A Lost Lady* as an allegory of American colonialism (Schwartz 36). Mrs. Forrester represents the land of the West, innocent and defenseless, which is subsequently assaulted by "bad" settlers such as Ivy Peters. Niel's version of the narrative thus mimics Cather's own view of the great West threatened by lower-class, immoral individuals.

Even though Niel thinks that Mrs. Forrester is a defenseless victim of male colonization, she is in reality a key player in the colonial project. If, as stated earlier, the Forrester Place represents a displacement of nature and indigeneity, then Mrs. Forrester's occupation of the house represents the colonizing control she wields over the world. A great example of this happens in Chapter 2, when Niel hits his head and needs to be taken care of. Mrs. Forrester commands control of the house, directing all the boys and controlling who can do what and when. Ivy Peters fully intends to remain inside the house to assert his dominance over Mrs. Forrester. He believes that her command to the other boys to wait on the front porch should not apply to him, and he prefers to remain inside, "taking in his surroundings with bold, unblinking eyes" (*ALL* 24). However, Mrs. Forrester easily overcomes his stubbornness by asking, "Will you wait on the porch, please? You are older than the others, and if anything is needed I can call on you" (*ALL* 24). Ivy does not want to go, but he notes "something final about her imperious courtesy" (*ALL* 25). The word choice of "imperious" is especially important. The Forrester Place is Mrs. Forrester's imperial domain, and she has complete control over who remains in her home. Ivy intends to disrupt this imperial claim and "sit down in the biggest leather chair and cross his legs and make himself at home; but he found himself on the front porch, put out by that

delicately modulated voice as effectually as if he had been kicked out by the brawniest tough in town" (*ALL* 25). Mrs. Forrester's delicate femininity is more powerful than the masculinity of Ivy Peters. While Niel may conceptualize her as weak and defenseless, Mrs. Forrester is more than capable of maintaining control over her own estate, at least in the first half of the novel.

Part of Mrs. Forrester's power comes from her class superiority. In Chapter 2, all of the young children are allowed into the Forrester house—everyone except the Blum boys, "who knew that their place was outside the kitchen door" (*ALL* 24). The narrator explains that this distinction is made because of their class status. The two brothers— "pale, freckled lads with ragged clothes and ragged rust-coloured hair"—appear especially self-conscious of Mrs. Forrester's superiority over them (*ALL* 12). The narrator juxtaposes the dull blandness of the Blum brothers to Mrs. Forrester's grand beauty to justify the segregation between the two. The Blum brothers seem to accept their place in this class hierarchy: "They regarded her humbly from under their pale, chewed-off hair, as one of the rich and great of the world. They realized, more than their companions, that such a fortunate and privileged class was an axiomatic fact in the social order" (*ALL* 17). Mrs. Forrester's specialness therefore hinges on this idea of exclusion: in order for some people to be fortunate, rich, and great, there must be people who are ragged, poor, and ordinary. Furthermore, part of the appeal behind Mrs. Forrester is that not everyone can approach her. The narrator always notes that there are certain groups of people, such as the Blum boys or Ivy Peters, who are not allowed to touch the greatness that is Mrs. Forrester. Niel regards Mrs. Forrester as special because he is one of the few people who can appreciate what she has to offer, who is refined enough to see that she is not like other women. If other men, who are coarser and more ordinary than Mrs. Forrester, try to access her time or her

body, Niel becomes outraged. To Niel, Mrs. Forrester is a rare and valuable jewel, one who cannot be handled by the ordinary commoner. Thus, Niel finds a lot of pleasure in feeling like he is the only one who should witness and appreciate Mrs. Forrester.

Mrs. Forrester's worth is also defined by her ability to serve as a civilizing presence in her community, which further cements her role in the colonial project. Mrs. Forrester's rare and beautiful personality allows her to occupy guests quite effectively. In fact, "Niel, who had been so content with a bachelor's life, and who made up his mind that he would never live in a place that was under the control of women, found himself becoming attached to the comforts of a well-conducted house" after staying with the Forresters (*ALL* 66). Later on, when Mrs. Forrester begins entertaining the next generation of young boys at her house, she says, "I hate to see them growing up like savages, when all they need is a civilized house to come to, and a woman to give them a few hints" (*ALL* 148). Thus, Mrs. Forrester's occupation of the house bears connotations of colonial settlement and the assimilation of savage natives under her control. Despite Niel's idealized view of Mrs. Forrester, the titular "lost lady" is still complicit in the project of settler colonialism.

The contradictions between Niel's memory of Mrs. Forrester and what her personality is actually like reveal the dangers of nostalgia in the novel. Niel's pleasurable feelings toward Mrs. Forrester come not from her actual person, but from what she could be. In other words, he is not in love with her, but the idea of her. Niel's view of Mrs. Forrester is doomed to disappoint him, as nothing she does can ever live up to his imaginary ideal. Nothing highlights this fact greater than the scene where he catches her in the midst of her love affair. On that glistening morning that Niel discovered Mrs. Forrester's secret, the world was filled with incomparable beauty. Niel

feels like "he was eavesdropping upon the past, being let into the great world that had plunged and glittered and sumptuously sinned long before little Western towns were dreamed of" (*ALL* 77). Here, traveling in the early morning is like time-traveling into the past, into a world before "little Western towns were dreamed of," a world pre-settlement. Niel's comparison of the early morning to the past reveals his feelings about nostalgia. He "wondered why he did not often come over like this, to see the day before men and their activities had spoiled it, while the morning was still unsullied, like a gift handed down from the heroic ages" (*ALL* 81). The specific word choices here— "spoiled" and "unsullied"—convey the idea that there is something pure and untainted about the past that the present has sullied and the future can never obtain again. Furthermore, the word "heroic" harkens back to the feudalism of antiquity, a romanticized past filled with the kind of "lost ladies" and "great landholders" that Niel so admires (Lee 197). These idealized images are also exemplified by Niel's descriptions of the wildlife: the wild roses "were stained with that burning rose-colour which is always gone by noon, — a dye made of sunlight and morning and moisture so intense that it cannot possibly last … must fade, like ecstasy" (*ALL* 81). To Niel, these early mornings, like the past, are special precisely because they cannot last—their intrinsic value arrives from their lost quality. While the idea that all good things belong to the past is not particularly realistic, Niel's aestheticization and fetishizing pleasure derives from this idea. His greatest source of pleasure in that moment is the imagined scenario he has dreamed up: he shall cut a bouquet of roses and place them on Mrs. Forrester's window sill, which she will discover with great joy.

Unfortunately, Niel must awaken from his dream. Just as he is about to fulfill his fantasy by placing the roses outside of Mrs. Forrester's window, "he heard from within a woman's soft

laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy, — ended in something like a yawn" (*ALL* 82). In this moment, Niel's vision of Mrs. Forrester is shattered and revealed as fraudulent. Instead of serving as the magical woman placed above all other women, Mrs. Forrester appears someone susceptible to the temptation of an affair. In other words, she is not perfect, not mythical, but human. Niel himself confirms that he is not upset because Mrs. Forrester cheated on her husband, but because she disrupted his idealized vision of her. He laments, "Grace, variety, the lovely voice, the sparkle of fun and fancy in those dark eyes; all this was nothing. It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal. Beautiful women, whose beauty meant more than it said… was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? Was that their secret?" (*ALL* 83). The biggest fallacy of this fantasy is that it is completely selfish and self-indulgent. Niel does not want to give a gift to Mrs. Forrester—he merely wants to worship an aestheticized idol.

Niel's classism further worsens the situation and reveals that he has succumbed to the same delusions of grandeur that his mother did. Niel plans to leave the bouquet outside of Mrs. Forrester's window because he wants her to experience "a sudden distaste for coarse wordlings like Frank Ellinger" (*ALL* 81). As stated earlier, Niel's issue with the affair is not a moral one, but an aesthetic one. Thus, the problem with Frank Ellinger is not his actions, but with his coarse normality. There is nothing mythic, romantic, or special about Frank. He does not have a melodic voice—he yawns and sounds "fat" and "lazy" when he speaks. He fits in perfectly with his time and place, and there is nothing about him that harkens back to a past age. In short, he is not the kind of refined gentleman that can "properly" appreciate Mrs. Forrester's majesty. Frank Ellinger cannot be aestheticized, and he represents everything that Niel does not want to be.

Nonetheless, Frank Ellinger has everything Niel wants—namely, Mrs. Forrester's attention. Frank's existence is a bother to Niel because he pursues that part of reality that Niel can only obtain in the world of fantasy. Frank Ellinger ultimately remains a disappointing reminder of everything Niel has lost and can never regain except from his daydreams.

These daydreams of Mrs. Forrester are fraudulent, however, and eventually reality must catch up to Niel. After discovering Mrs. Forrester's secret, Niel's body reacts very negatively. The narrator says, "Niel found himself at the foot of the hill on the wooden bridge, his face hot, his temples beating, his eyes blind with anger" (*ALL* 82). In his hand he still carried the prickly bunch of wild roses. He threw them over a wire fence into a mud-hole" (*ALL* 82). Unable to control the actions of Mrs. Forrester or the anger inside of his body, Niel's hand destroys a piece of nature to expel his anger and exert power over the world. This scene parallels the time when Ivy Peters mutilated the woodpecker to protest the fact that the Forresters protect instead of hunt the creatures in the grove (*ALL* 18). Both men express frustration over people they cannot control— namely, Mrs. Forrester. Mrs. Forrester uses her hand to direct Niel around: "She put her hand under his chin as if he were still a boy" to demonstrate the age difference between them, she pushes "her hand upon his arm, as she urged him faster and faster up the lane" when she wants him to leave, and "she push[es] his hand aside" when he tries to convince her to swallow medicine (*ALL* 105; 120; 123). While Mrs. Forrester's hand directs Niel, it caresses the arms of older men like Frank Ellinger, who is allowed to "put his hands under Mrs. Forrester's arms" and "[hold] her crushed up against his breast" (*ALL* 63). Niel's wish to physically hold and contain Mrs. Forrester parallels directly both Frank Ellinger's embrace with her in the woods

as well as Ivy Peters' embrace with her at the end of the novel. Niel's desire, however, is more similar to Ivy Peters' because he wants to control her as an object of affection.

SECTION 5: NOSTALGIA AS A COLONIAL FORCE

After Niel has grown up and Mrs. Forrester has fallen from his good graces, he reflects upon the past. His idealized vision of Mrs. Forrester becomes so tainted that he is even afraid to see her again, and wonders, "Was he afraid of his women-folk? Or was it another kind of cowardice, the fear of losing a pleasant memory, of finding her changed and marred, a dread of something that would throw a disenchanting light upon the past?" (*ALL* 144). Once again, Niel is not afraid of anything tangible, but instead he is afraid of losing his fantasy to reality. He is afraid that his entire worldview—that the past was much better than the present—will be proven wrong. Even so, Niel admits that he feels pleasure from imagining what Mrs. Forrester's life is like after he leaves her:

> He sometimes thought of the life she might have been living ever since he had known her, — and the one she had chosen to live. From that disparity, he believed, came the subtlest thrill of her fascination. She mocked outrageously at the proprieties she observed, and inherited the magic of contradictions. (*ALL* 75)

While spending time with Mrs. Forrester is nice, Niel experiences even more pleasure thinking about the difference between her life in Sweet Water and life she could have chosen to live. Of course, imagination is spoiled by reality in the end. Once the good old days with Mrs. Forrester are gone, Niel's attitude toward her turns sour. He states, "It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms" (*ALL*

138). It seems absurd that Niel does not anticipate that Mrs. Forrester will live a happy and fulfilling life without her husband. By "preferring life on any terms," Mrs. Forrester is able to survive many hardships and move on from the grief of losing her husband. However, Niel is unable to picture a brighter future than the pleasantries of the past.

Pleasure, in addition to sadness, is a part of nostalgia, and reflecting upon the past ultimately becomes Niel's only source of happiness. Once Mrs. Forrester disappoints Niel's fantasy, the only thing he has left to turn toward are his memories—namely, those of Mr. Forrester and his house. He states:

> All those years he had thought it was Mrs. Forrester who made that house so different from any other. But ever since the Captain's death it was a house where old friends, like his uncle, were betrayed and cast off, where common fellows behaved after their kind and knew a common woman when they saw her. (*ALL* 162)

For all intents and purposes, one can assume that Mr. Forrester was not actually the person who made the Forrester Place so special. He is a treasured person to Niel because he represents the "greatness" of the pioneers, but he does not leave that much of a lasting impression in the book other than in the section where he talks about his pioneering past. However, Niel refuses to invest his desire in a woman who fails to live up to his impossible standards, and he decides to place those desires instead onto something that can never change: a house, and the memory of a dead person. "No other house could take the place of this one in his life," Niel reflects—and it is quite true (*ALL* 136). While people may grow and change, houses can usually stay the same for a long time. The house's static nature is exactly the kind of stability that Niel desires in an idol. He yearns to worship something that cannot disappoint him, that does

not have desires of its own. Niel can project his own fantasies onto the house and remain satisfied because a house does not have feelings. The Forrester Place can substitute itself for Mr. and Mrs. Forrester, and can represent the realm of an idealized, perfect childhood, uncontradicted by the realities of the present.

Niel cannot reconcile himself to the idea of Mrs. Forrester until she is long gone. After she leaves for California, Niel once again finds himself thinking fondly of her, and "he came to be very glad that he had known her" (*ALL* 163). This sentiment greatly contrasts from earlier, when Niel wishes that Mrs. Forrester had died with the pioneer age. Once Mrs. Forrester becomes nothing but a memory, Niel is once again able to construe his own pleasurable fantasies about her. As long as Niel never encounters Mrs. Forrester again, he can retain this happy memory of her; therefore, Mrs. Forrester's death makes a perfect "happy ending" for the novel. After hearing that Mrs. Forrester is dead, Niel remarks, "So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end … Thank God for that!" (*ALL* 166). Quite surprisingly, Niel seems relieved that Mrs. Forrester is dead. He does not mourn the fact that he will never be able to see her again because he did not truly want to see her again. It was simply enough for him to discover that she managed to recover her reputation and live an aesthetically pleasing life with a wealthy man right up until her last days. As long as Mrs. Forrester is dead, she cannot disappoint Niel. Instead, as mentioned in Love's essay, he can continually "look backward" upon the past and remember his queer friendship with her fondly.

In trying to relive the past through his memories, Niel figuratively re-enacts the colonial settlement of Captain Forrester. Schwartz's essay on *A Lost Lady* concludes with the idea that Ivy Peters is the proper heir to, or "legitimate offspring," of Captain Forrester's legacy because

he re-enacts the same kind of settlement on the land (Schwartz 47-48). However, this reading of the text ignores the ways in which Niel is, for all intents and purposes, an adopted Forrester. After losing his mother and distancing himself from his father, Niel takes on Mr. and Mrs. Forrester as his parents. Most of the novel takes place in the Forrester Place, and most of Niel's time is spent taking care of the house and its inhabitants. In much slyer manner, Niel settles the Forrester Place and claims it as his own. Just as Captain Forrester saw the lovely Native American encampment and thought of it as the perfect place to live, Niel sees the picturesque life of the Forresters and tries to insert himself as much as possible into the family. The interruption of other men into the narrative, such as Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters, not only disrupts the idealized version of the Forrester family Niel wants to be a part of, but also removes the need for Niel in the Forresters' lives. Only one person can occupy the position of power in the metaphorical house of colonialism at a time, and Niel recognizes that these other men would not allow him to occupy the role he wants. Instead of possessing the house, he appropriates the lives of the Forresters for his own melancholic pleasure. *A Lost Lady* is a book about Mrs. Forrester told from the perspective of Niel. In other words, Niel even appropriates Mrs. Forrester's role as the main character, and relegates her to the title of the book. When Mrs. Forrester disobeys certain aesthetic rules, Niel becomes enraged. However, he does not comprehend that Mrs. Forrester has a life outside of his, and that her actions are not simply to please him. Niel's male gaze, born out of the trauma of losing his mother, causes him to act as a colonial settler, objectify the Forresters, appropriate their lives, and become the legitimate heir to Captain Forrester's colonial legacy.

SECTION 6: CONCLUSION

While many critics of Cather have analyzed love, loss, disappointment, and nostalgia in *A Lost Lady,* none have fully explored the ways in which these elements intermingle in Niel's character. Niel's classism causes him to treat Ivy Peters and Captain Forrester differently despite their similar enactments of colonial settlement. Additionally, these views cause him to worship Mrs. Forrester to such an unhealthy extent that when she inevitably disappoints him, he is glad for her death. Finally, these views point out the ways that Niel enacts his own version of colonial settlement by supplementing his own loss of a childhood with the lives of the Forresters. Thus, even though Niel disapproves of the actions of Ivy Peters, he reproduces the same kind of colonial possession by trying to control Mrs. Forrester's powerful, civilizing hand, thereby inheriting the colonial legacy of the Forresters. Change and progress are the very things that Niel fears most as a classist, anti-futurist man. These ideas threaten the main source of his pleasure: nostalgia. Towards the end of the novel, Niel laments the changes that have occurred in his life, noting, "The people, the very country itself, were changing so fast that there would be nothing to come back to. He had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer" (*ALL* 160). Niel fears the loss of a golden age that never was. It makes sense, therefore, that he worries about having "nothing to come back to," because it seems as though he never had something there to begin with. When one's greatest dreams and ambitions are built upon false ideals, one is bound to live a very melancholic life filled with hopelessness and disappointment.

Chapter 2: The Limitations of Nostalgia in *The Professor's House*

> When he remembered his childhood, he remembered blue water … the great fact in life, the always possible escape from dullness, was the lake. The sun rose out of it, the day began there; it was like an open door that nobody could shut. The land and all its dreariness could never close in on you. You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free … Even in his long, happy student years with the Thierault family in France, that stretch of blue water was the one thing he was home-sick for.
>
> —Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*, 1925

Godfrey St. Peter, the main character in Cather's novel *The Professor's House,*[3] has a particularly nostalgic relationship with places of nature. He claims that his happiest days in the past were spent outside, whether that was the on Blue Mesa with his protégé Tom Outland, by the lake in his early childhood, or in his garden writing about nature for his book *Spanish Adventures in North America,* often referred to simply as "The Spanish Adventurers." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "nostalgia" comes from the Greek word *nostos,* which refers to "a homecoming or homeward journey… *spec.* the return of Odysseus and the other Greek heroes of the Trojan War" (OED, nostos, n.). The fact that the word has to do with the homesickness of sailors is especially important to note, as one of St. Peter's blissful fantasies consists of being shipwrecked with "half a dozen spry seamen" on the coast of Spain (*PH* 42). Throughout the novel, the Professor does not feel homesick for his old house, but for the memories of writing the "The Spanish Adventurers" and spending time with Tom. At one point, he tells his wife Lillian, "We should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young," a desire that reflects the *nostos* felt by the characters in the *Odyssey* (*PH* 42). However, later that night, he dreams of being shipwrecked with a group of hardy sailors and not with his wife (*PH* 42). St. Peter's inability to be honest with himself and others about his

[3] I will refer to *The Professor's House* as *PH* when citing passages within the text.

innermost longings limits his ability to change his unhappy circumstances. As a result, he often finds himself trapped in corners that he places himself to, with no place of escape besides his imagination. The fact that the Professor can only enact his innermost desires by imagining himself in the role of a Spanish Adventurer also points to his politics of queer appropriation, where he must metaphysically possess other people to live out his fantasies.

This division between nature and the domestic world in the novel becomes a symbolic division between queerness and heteronormativity. Most of the time, the heteronormative social world restricts and upsets the Professor, while the realm of nature helps the Professor embrace his queer, "primitive" self. However, the natural world itself is full of artifice: man-made gardens and abandoned Mesas that exist because the pioneers came and extinguished the Native Americans. Additionally, the idea that queerness provides more freedom than heteronormativity is complicated, as the novel only allows queer characters to exist and find happiness in very limited ways. The Professor must ultimately hide his romance with Tom Outland, and Rodney Blake eventually leaves and disappoints Tom. Cather's novels are riddled with the idea that queer people can only exist within a limited, closeted space. Cather herself rarely expresses female-female desire, and only explores her homosexuality through male characters that ultimately lose their love interests. The materialism of society ultimately debases the value of queer relationships in her novels. The fact that Cather does not offer up a solution to this predicament, however, leads her characters to face death, disappointment, or both.

Many critics have previously analyzed the ways in which the Professor's queerness and grief for the past intersect. Eric Haralson's chapter "Gratifying the Eternal Boy in Us All: Willa Cather, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde" contains a section focusing on *The Professor's House*.

Haralson interprets the book as a critique of the institutional forces that constrain affective and embodied displays of homosexuality (Haralson 162). Haralson argues that St. Peter substitutes his academic work, something that is accepted by the social world, for his erotic affections for Tom Outland (Haralson 166). Before, the Professor admired "the muscular, many-lined palm" of Tom Outland; now, to prevent Tom from drifting off into evanescence, the Professor must commit the memory of Tom's body to an annotated diary (Haralson 167-168). Transferring his passion from Tom to the book is complicated, however, and the Professor eventually finds himself in the midst of a crisis of sexual identity even after Tom's death (Haralson 168). Haralson's analysis reveals the way that the Professor copes with the loss of Tom through substitution and sublimation.

Madoka Kishi also discusses how St. Peter copes with loss in her article " 'More than Anything Else, I Like My Closets': Willa Cather's Melancholic Erotics in *The Professor's House*." She compares St. Peter's closeted homosexuality with his attachment to enclosed spaces, namely his study. Kishi argues for the legitimacy of the Professor's study as a symbolic closet, noting how it becomes the place where he can safely indulge in his mental affair with Tom (Kishi 159). Instead of arguing that the Professor's seclusion into his office is repressive, Kishi claims that the Professor's isolation enables him to merge with his homoerotic lost-object through narcissistic and melancholic identification with Tom (Kishi 159). Kishi's article further supports the idea of the Professor's seclusion as a coping mechanism for his grief.

While the Professor retreats into enclosed spaces, he and Tom used to explore natural spaces together, as discussed in Jonathan Goldberg's article "Strange Brothers." This article reads the relationship between Tom and Rodney, a man Tom meets in the Southwest, as a

gender-crossed depiction of Cather's relationship with Edith Lewis (Goldberg 324). Goldberg sees the Professor's "double life" as "a recognizable term for gay life in the opening decades of the twentieth century" (Goldberg 332). Indeed, the Professor oscillates between his study and his new house, between Tom and his family, between homosocial bonding and heterosexual obligations. Goldberg also examines the Professor's younger self, arguing that it represents his queer self that had "(hetero)sex" grafted upon it after he married Lillian (Goldberg 328). Goldberg's analysis of the novel confirms that while enclosed domestic spaces represent repression, natural and unfenced spaces evoke queer freedom.

Most scholars agree that in *The Professor's House,* Cather explores the incompatibility between the social world and queerness, ultimately declaring that the restraints of a capitalistic and heteronormative society cannot sustain a happy life. However, these critics fail to fully analyze how the Professor adopts capitalistic and appropriative social practices into his own dealings with others, which limits his potential for future happiness. I argue that in St. Peter's pursuit of the queer opportunities found in arenas associated with nature, he ultimately appropriates and embodies the lives of others—Tom, Native Americans, and even his fictional Spanish Adventurers— leading him to re-enact the same power structures that physically confine him in the domestic and social world.

SECTION 1: THE PHYSICAL CONFINEMENT OF DOMESTICITY

The Professor feels confined by both the role of domestic father and the physical houses that he lives in. He says his old house "was almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be: square, three stories in height, painted the colour of ashes— the front porch just too narrow for comfort, with a slanting floor and sagging steps" (*PH* 3). The Professor will also not stop

complaining about the "needless inconveniences" of his old house: "the stairs that were too steep, the halls that were too cramped, the awkward oak mantles with thick round posts crowned by bumptious wooden balls, over green-tiled fire-places" (*PH* 3). The repetition of "too" portrays an excessive amount of irritation, and it seems odd that St. Peter would be willing to put up with so much discomfort. Furthermore, the Professor recalls his study, which is in the sewing room, as "the most inconvenient study a man could possibly have." However, "it was the one place in the house where he could get isolation, insulation from the engaging drama of domestic life" (*PH* 10). One can conclude that while the Professor hates his study and his old house, he retreats to it because it is the one place that he can get away from the obligations associated with married life.

Even though his new home has eliminated all of the "needless inconveniences" of the old place, he remains in his old house because of its relation to the past. Moving to the new house is an admission that the Professor could make himself at home in a heteronormative life—something he refuses to do. The house is filled with the perpetual unease that is involved with heteronormative marriage: sharing one's space, fixing domestic appliances, and helping out one's wife and children. The Professor decides to put up with these miserable aspects of domesticity because he does not want to let go of his old life and move into the new house. This refusal to adopt a new way of life is also coupled with a refusal to repair the old one, however. When St. Peter talks about the various inconveniences of his old house, he remarks that "He had a deft hand with tools, he could easily have fixed them," and yet St. Peter never makes time to fix up his house (*PH* 3). In this passage, St. Peter's hand appears as a metonym for his agency as a whole, and just as he does not feel like he has enough time to fix his house, he believes that it is too late to fix his life, his marriage, and his happiness. St. Peter has all the literal and

metaphorical tools of change at his disposal, but he literally and figuratively does not lift his hand to enact this change.

The Professor's disassociation from his own life and his embodiment of other people's lives is best demonstrated through the motif of hands in the novel. When describing the female busts in his study, he notes how uncomfortable they are to touch: "Its hardness was not that of wood, which responds to concussion with living vibration and is stimulating to the hand, nor that of felt, which drinks something from the fingers" (*PH* 6). Many scholars have already interpreted the busts as a metonym for women and the Professor's disdain for heterosexuality (Goldberg 334-335). However, even though he might dislike the busts and the "cruel biological necessities they imply," he prohibits Augusta from removing them from his office (*PH* 8). The Professor engages in an unenjoyable yet compulsive act of touch with the busts, which mimics the way that he unhappily but not unwillingly engages in heteronormativity. In this passage, the Professor finds himself in a predicament similar to that of his dismantled house: he is unsatisfied with the way things are in the social world, yet he feels powerless to change them.

The kinds of touches that the Professor does enjoy are those of Tom. The first time that St. Peter meets Tom, he examines the young boy's hand: "the muscular, many-lined palm, the long, strong fingers with soft ends, the straight little finger, the flexible, beautifully shaped thumb that curved back from the rest of the hand as if it were its own master" (*PH* 55-56). Haralson examines how the "soft ends" of Tom's fingers "can only be a memory born of *tactile* experience, something the Professor could not know without having enjoyed Tom's touch" (Haralson 167). These soft touches contrast greatly from the stiffness of the busts and the cruelness of Lillian's hands. In one scene toward the end of the novel, St. Peter states that the

best representation of his wife's character "would be a hand (a beautiful hand) holding flaming arrows— the shafts of her violent loves and hates, her clear-cut ambitions" (*PH* 129). Thus, Lillian's hands represent something far more lethal than Tom's touch. St. Peter does not simply admire Tom's hands for their muscularity or their "soft ends," but also for their agency. By describing the thumb "as if it were its own master," the Professor confesses that Tom has a great deal of freedom and independence in his life. St. Peter also expresses gratitude that Tom's hand never becomes "the instrument of a woman who would grow always more exacting" (*PH* 122). Clearly, the Professor associates Tom's hands with freedom, and his wife's hands with restriction, which once again shows the uneasiness St. Peter has in regards to married life.

SECTION 2: THE SOCIAL VERSUS NATURAL WORLD

One aspect of the social realm, the Professor's family, brings immense stress because the Professor feels constrained by the heteronormative expectations of domesticity. The marriage between the Professor and Lillian is strained and sexless, as demonstrated by their frequent quarrels and the fact that the Professor has his own room in the new family home. To make matters worse, he prefers to work on his writing alone in his old study rather than spend time with his family. Furthermore, the Professor does not entirely enjoy being a father. When Rosamond, his daughter, asks him to come on a shopping trip, she runs her father ragged by forcing him to act as her courier and making him pay for all the expenses despite her own wealth. The Professor reflects upon that trip as a time he learned "how painful the paternal relation could be" (*PH* 132). The shopping trip also causes the Professor to wonder if Euripides decided to live alone in a cave at sea— something the Professor calls "queer" — because "he had observed women so closely all his life" (*PH* 73). Evidently, the Professor has lost the initial joy

of having a wife and daughters, so he contemplates abandoning domesticity in favor of Euripides' "queer" living situation. The Professor sadly reflects that by chance, and not by choice, he was led down the path of "this secondary social man, the lover" (*PH* 123). He associates married life with unwanted "penalties and responsibilities," noting that "because there was Lillian, there must be marriage and a salary. Because there was marriage, there were children" (*PH* 123). Although the Professor may have been in love with Lillian originally, the pressures of heteronormativity— marrying a woman, having a job to support that marriage, and having children—bring more stress than happiness since they were not his desires to begin with. The pressures of the social world— heteronormativity and capitalism— ultimately debase the Professor's relationship with his wife and family. He even equates falling out of love with "falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed" (*PH* 129). In the social world, a lack of heterosexual love places one as an outsider to the accepted social realm. As a result, the regulations of the social world cause the Professor to feel unhappy with his marriage and his life.

Capitalism plays a huge role in the heteronormative social world by reducing relationships to their profitability. In the social world, new houses, fancy clothes, and imported furniture are meant to bring one happiness. However, money and materialism instead bring about conflicts between the sisters, sons-in-law, and spouses in the book. The Professor is notably unhappy about the role money plays in his life. When Lillian notices "an ironical turn in some remark" her husband makes about their new house, she asks him if he would have rather spent the money on something else (*PH* 13). The Professor states that the only thing he wants is the happiness from writing his books back, noting, "The great pleasures don't come so cheap" (*PH*

14). Of course, writing books is the pastime the Professor prefers over spending time with his family, perhaps because the books are associated with Tom. The Professor notes that Tom was the main inspiration for the last four volumes of his series due to the young man's first-hand experience living in the South-west country. Indeed, the Professor's time spent with Tom while listening to his stories or traveling to the Blue Mesa make up some of his most fond memories. As a result, one can deduce that "the great pleasures" from writing the book series mainly came from his time spent with Tom. Although the social world values money over relationships, the Professor's bond with Tom brings him far more happiness than his wealth ever could.

Even though the Professor's queer relationship with Tom brings him happiness, their love is not formally recognized by the social world. When Rosamond frets that her father, and not her, deserved Tom's inheritance, he replies, "You had no choice. For you it was settled by his own hand. Your bond with him was social, and it follows the laws of society, and they are based on property. Mine wasn't, and there was no material clause in it" (*PH* 28). Tom's hand once again appears as an abstracted, separate part of himself that is forced to make monetary and property exchanges that the Professor so despises. One might think that St. Peter is upset that the social world compensates heterosexual relationships with dowries and inheritances, but not queer ones. Even so, the Professor states that he does not want to receive any of Tom's inheritance from Rosamond because he does not want his friendship with Tom "translated into the vulgar tongue" of money (*PH* 27). The Professor has first-hand experience with the way that money debases relationships, and he does not want his friendship with Tom reduced into a business venture. Sadly, the social world utilizes capitalism along with heteronormativity to ensure that relationships focus more on profit than happiness.

The social world acts as a harbinger of unhappiness because social rules prevent the Professor from engaging in queer desires that bring him joy. One might be curious about what exactly drove the Professor and his wife apart. While the marriage of their children causes stress in the household, Lillian declares, "It wasn't the children who came between us" (*PH* 42). Instead, his homosocial relationship with Tom appears to cause the most marital strife in the book. The Professor describes Lillian as "fiercely jealous of Tom Outland," even though she used to enjoy his company (*PH* 21). Unfortunately, after the professor "began to make a companion" of Tom, Lillian "withdrew her favor," demonstrating that Lillian's dislike of Tom stems from more than just personal bias (*PH* 81). As a result, the Professor begins to meet with Tom secretly, at the university or when his family goes on vacation, as to not upset Lillian. One might want to call Lillian a hypocrite for her jealousy considering that she similarly engages in "coquetry with her sons-in-law" (*PH* 34). Indeed, the Professor feels replaced by Louie and Scott, and describes how Lillian "lived in their careers as she had once done in his" (*PH* 35). However, the Professor simply concludes that sons-in-law were meant "to take the husband's place when husbands ceased to be lovers" (*PH* 75). In a heterosexual world, when one no longer feels love towards one's spouse, the only other option for happiness is to find an opposite sex partner to replace the spouse. Heteronormativity allows Lillian to regain her happiness and express her heterosexual desires through interactions with her sons-in-law. In contrast, the Professor is prohibited from likewise expressing his desires through a relationship with Tom since those desires are queer. Lillian even states clearly that she would rather see the Professor cheat on her with some woman while she travels to Paris than to see him "becoming lonely and inhuman" while writing his book (*PH* 76). In other words, Lillian desperately wants to see her

husband engage in heterosexuality, even if that means cheating on her with another woman. In the social world, adultery is only an issue if the relationship is queer, so Lillian views the Professor's romance of the mind with Tom as more problematic than an affair with a woman. The hypocrisy of the social world rewards heterosexual desires, even when those desires are based in adultery, while demonizing all forms of queer desires.

When the Professor reminisces about his childhood, his memories emphasize his distance from heterosexuality while highlighting his closeness to nature and authenticity. The Professor's best childhood memories feature the lake near his home. The lake always brings the Professor happiness, and he states that "You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free" (*PH* 12). Unfortunately, the elements of the social world fail to bring the Professor nearly as much joy. Later in the novel, when the Professor becomes depressed, he remembers his childhood by the lake with fondness. St. Peter associates nature with his younger "primitive" self, the version of him that is "only interested in earth and woods and water" (*PH* 124). He yearns for his youth, and notes that his "original self and his nature" had been "modified by sex rubbed on together" (*PH* 124). Jonathan Goldberg notes, "'Sex' in this formulation is almost unnatural, a social grafting; but sex is also explicitly heterosex" since the primitive boy disappeared after he married Lillian (Goldberg 328). Furthermore, the Professor remembers this "original self" by stating, "He was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father" (*PH* 124). Thus, the Professor associates his marriage as something unnatural that was forced upon him. His heterosexual marriage to Lillian ultimately represents an unnatural turn away from his true self.

While the Professor's marriage to Lillian represents a turning away from this natural self, his queer relationships with other men occur during his returns to nature. Whenever the Professor returns to nature in the novel, he is either escaping his family or meeting up with another man. One notable place the Professor enjoys immensely is his garden. He recalls that he created the garden "soon after the birth of his first daughter, when his wife began to be unreasonable about his spending so much time at the lake and on the tennis court" (*PH* 4). Thus, the garden has a queer origin story associated with the abandonment of heterosexual duties. The garden serves as the meeting spot for Tom and the Professor while his family vacations in Colorado, and the garden also acts as the location for Tom to tell his queer Mesa story. Additionally, the Professor has other fond memories of meeting with Tom in nature, whether in Spain, Old Mexico, or the Mesa. The one regret of the Professor's life was not the missed chances to spend time with his family, but the fact that he never was able to bring Tom to Paris to see the Luxembourg Gardens, another spot of nature. The association of nature to queerness does not stop with Tom. Cather characterizes the Professor as a man that would prefer to spend a summer alone in his office rather than go to Paris with his family. Hence, one might think that the Professor spending a day at the lake alone with "a good-looking fellow" like Scott is a bit queer (*PH* 32). Indeed, after they finish swimming, the Professor spends a good deal of time inwardly praising Scott for his "splendid teeth," "attractive eyes," and "small, prettily cut mouth" (*PH* 32). One must note that this instance of queerness coincides with a trip to the lake, which is one of the Professor's favorite places to visit. Additionally, the Blue Mesa, the lake, the turquoise Mesa stones, and Tom's eyes share three common connections: the color blue, youth, and queerness, further connecting nature with the Professor's inner self. The association of nature with queerness is so

strong that the Professor cannot even imagine his wife as part of his dream to abandon the social world and become shipwrecked somewhere. Instead, his fantasy features the all-male company of the sailors from his books. In the novel, nature is associated with both the Professor's childhood and his queerness, suggesting that a return to nature is a return to one's authentic self.

The Blue Mesa serves as the novel's main example of a natural world free from the burdens of heteronormativity and repression. In the Mesa, Tom, Rodney, and Henry can live a natural life unburdened by society's rules. Henry becomes the housewife of their "happy family" by doing all the cooking, cleaning and decorating (*PH* 93). In the social world, Henry might have been denounced as effeminate, but out on the Mesa, the men do as they please. Furthermore, the Mesa allows the men to explore their sexualities away from the judgmental social world. When Tom first arrives at the "tantalizing" Mesa, one of the first things he notices is the phallic tower, which bears a flesh-like red hue (Goldberg 330). He finds the tower "beautifully proportioned" and notices its "swelling out to a larger girth a little above the base" (*PH* 94). Tom's queer fascination with the tower's phallic beauty cements the idea of the Mesa as a safe space for homoerotic desire. Jonathan Goldberg confirms this theory by proposing that the Mesa has a "symbolic function as the site of unspeakable desire," a desire that is so taboo that only a few can be trusted with its secret (Goldberg 331). By using this homoerotic lens, one can further see why Tom becomes so upset when Rodney exposes the Mesa. Tom sees the Mesa as safe space for homosexuality, while Rodney only seems to care about the monetary rewards of the relationship. Rodney's betrayal of Tom directly parallels the way that the Professor feels betrayed when Tom's life is translated into "the vulgar tongue" of money (Goldberg 327). Tom might also feel betrayed because Rodney did not see their relationship as romantic. Tom notes, "I never told him

just how I felt about those things we'd dug out together, it was the kind of thing one doesn't talk about directly. But he must have known, he couldn't have lived with me all summer and fall without knowing" (*PH* 112). The "thing one doesn't talk about directly," similar to Cather's "the thing not named," represents repressed homoerotic desire. The true value of the Mesa lies in its distance from the rules of the social world. However, Rodney tries to profit off of their queer experience by placing a monetary value on their found artifacts, thereby socializing the Mesa. Sadly, the debasement of Rodney and Tom's relationship through social norms undermines the Mesa's role as a safe space for queer people. The Blue Mesa serves as a natural site where individuals can freely express themselves, so Tom is understandably upset when Rodney tries to bring the restrictions of the social world upon their queer paradise.

SECTION 3. THE LIMITATIONS OF QUEER, NATURAL UTOPIAS

Unfortunately, these queer natural utopias are contaminated with the same kinds of artifices and restrictions of the social world. Tom's homosocial utopia becomes ruined when Rodney sells the Native American possessions they found. However, Tom does not consider that the place was tainted with capitalistic properties the second they came there. Tom criticizes Rodney Blake for selling the Native American artifacts they found out on the Mesa, saying, "But I never thought of selling them, because they weren't mine to sell— nor yours! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from. You've gone and sold them to a country that's got plenty of relics of its own. You've gone and sold your country's secrets, like Dreyfus" (*PH* 113). He also argues that they could have kept the Native American artifacts, saying "I'm not so poor that I have to sell the pots and pans that belonged to my poor grandmothers a thousand years ago" (*PH*

114). Tom claims Mother Eve as his own grandmother, possessing both her body and her memory as his own. He does not acknowledge, though, that these artifacts do not belong to either of them, but to the Native Americans themselves. The entire Mesa experience is haunted by the disembodied presence of the Native Americans, who are mysteriously absent from the New Mexican landscape. The men marvel over the fact that most of the bodies of the past inhabitants of the Mesa have mysteriously disappeared. They only find four bodies: the corpse of Mother Eve, who they proceed to claim as their own ancestor, and three other bodies prepared for burial earlier. The question of where the others went— the unknown tragedy that wiped out all remaining survivors of the tribe— hangs over their heads. Father Duchene theorizes, "They were probably wiped out, utterly exterminated, by some roving Indian tribe without culture or domestic virtues, some horde that fell upon them in their summer camp and destroyed them for their hides and clothing and weapons, or from mere love of slaughter" (*PH* 103). The fact that he sounds so sure it was another Native American tribe demonstrates either willful ignorance or naïveté. For example, the Navajo, a tribe that lived near the Mesa, were a relatively peaceful tribe that disliked going to war.[4] The one explanation that seems the most likely goes unspoken: that white settlers exterminated the tribe by abducting, plundering, or both. Tom cannot acknowledge this possibility, however, because that might render his own explorations of the Mesa a similar act of appropriation and exploitation. Rather than acknowledge any of his potential complicity in the colonial project, Tom prefers to imagine himself as the ancestor of this great Native American tribe who originally lived on the Mesa. Tom's appropriation of the

[4] One of the main doctrines of the Navajo tribe is Hózhó: peace, harmony, and balance (Austin 53). For more information, see *Navajo Courts and Navajo Common Law: A Tradition of Tribal Self-Governance* by Raymond Darrel Austin.

disembodied presence of the Natives brings into question whether Rodney really betrayed Tom, or if he was merely illuminating the evil behind their actions.

The presence (or lack thereof) of Native Americans also brings into question what is considered natural versus unnatural. Father Duchene believes that the civilizing instinct of the Mesa Native Americans is not normal, as he states, "I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people. Perhaps they were not so when they first came upon this Mesa, but in an orderly and secure life they developed considerably the arts of peace … Their life, compared to that of our roving Navajos, must have been quite complex" (*PH* 102). Father Duchene seems to imply that it's unnatural that the Native American tribe lived such an organized, advanced life. He states, "Your people were cut off here without the influence of example or emulation, with no incentive but some natural yearning for order and security. They built themselves into this Mesa and humanized it" (*PH* 104). Father Duchene implies that Europeans, the people of "example or emulation," were not present for the Native Americans to copy. This sentiment is quite common among Christian missionaries, who travel to third-world countries to "civilize" the indigenous populations. Father Duchene thinks that Western notions of domesticity are natural, which goes against what the Professor feels about his own life as a father. Father Duchene also laments the death of the tribe, and asks Tom to go to the Smithsonian's director: "He will revive this civilization in a scholarly work" (*PH* 104). Tom must go revive the lost tribe into a Smithsonian report, thus enacting re-embodiment of the Natives through the written word. Ultimately, Native Americans in the novel are not granted a bodily presence unless it is through the influence of white people like Tom and Rodney, who idealize and imitate indigenous cultures.

Tom regards actual living Native Americans with contempt because they are living according to capitalistic principles. He states, “In New Mexico the Indian boys sometime went to trader’s with their wives and bought shawls and calico, and we thought it rather contemptible” (*PH* 109). Rodney also shares a similar view, and says if he had not sold the Native American artifacts to the German man, they would have “had to pack it around at Harvey Houses, selling it a dollar a bowl, like poor Indians do” (*PH* 113). Tom and Rodney express disgust for these “poor Indians,” who have to abide by the rules of capitalism in order to stay alive. They regard the hypothetical dead Native Americans who lived on the Mesa with much more respect and admiration. While Tom and Rodney enjoy appropriating the indigeneity of Native Americans, they do not admire the lives of actual and alive Indians. When Tom talks about the happiness associated with living by himself on the Mesa, or the Professor talks about the fond memories he has exploring the Mesa, they are ignoring the fact that the very things they went there to avoid are the very things that made it possible for them to inhabit that place: capitalism, domesticity, and the exacting hand of some demanding person.

SECTION 4: QUEER APPROPRIATIONS OF LOST OBJECTS

St. Peter imitates Tom’s disapproval of capitalism while also ignoring the ways in which he is complicit in it. For example, St. Peter calls his garden “the comfort of his life” that he constructed “soon after the birth of his first daughter” (*PH* 14-15). It is interesting that the “comfort of his life” is not a person, like his wife, but instead a place. Furthermore, the garden began right after the birth of his firstborn, which implies that the garden is a replacement child. When the responsibilities of heterosexual marriage arrive, he avoids them by turning to a very procreative act: gardening. Gardening also serves as a substitute for the lake and the tennis court.

The Professor needs to escape the indoor world, one filled with responsibilities, to somewhere he can be free to create his own world. The garden is also important because "it was there he and Tom Outland used to sit and talk half through the warm, soft nights" (*PH* 5). This further associates the garden with St. Peter's homosocial relationship with Tom. However, the entirety of the garden is built upon a façade. It is not truly something of the exterior natural world. For instance, the Professor notes, "There was not a blade of grass; it was a tidy half-acre of glistening gravel and glistening shrubs and bright flowers." So, the Professor's garden is not truly a natural place—it is still a cultivated product of civilization, and is not bound to last as a queer utopia. Furthermore, there are instances within Cather's novel where the Professor admires acts of capitalistic appropriations of nature, which adds to his hypocrisy. While admiring the interior design of his new house, "It struck him that the seasons sometimes gain by being brought into the house, just as they gain by being brought into painting, and into poetry. The hand, fastidious and bold, which selected and placed—it was that which made the difference. In Nature there is no selection" (*PH* 33). Here, a disembodied hand acts as a colonizing and civilizing presence that domesticizes nature, and thereby improves it. St. Peter's inability to acknowledge these imbalances parallels the way that Tom cannot realize how he helps the Mesa succumb to the pressures of capitalism.

Just as Tom Outland appropriates the disembodied life of the Native American tribe, the Professor appropriates the disembodied life of Tom Outland. The Professor's main mode of escape from the social world is by visiting the natural world— when he cannot physically travel there, he mentally embodies the space by writing his "Spanish Adventurers" novels. By the end of the novel, he is not motivated to do anything besides annotate Tom's journals as an

accompaniment for the novels. However, the memories that he utilizes to do his life's work are not even his own. The large majority of the novel's inspiration came directly from Tom Outland and his experiences out in the Southwest. As Haralson phrases it, Tom serves "as the secret author of the Professor's texts (both his writing and his life)" (Haralson 163-164). Furthermore, the large majority of the pleasure from that experience came from conjecturing about the lives of the Native Americans that used to live out on the Mesa. Hence, the Professor enacts a double appropriation of two disembodied presences: one of his dead pupil, and one of dead Native Americans. This embodiment runs so deep that the Professor even claims that people tell him he looks like a Spaniard, even though he is "Canadian French on one side, and American farmers on the other" (*PH* 4). St. Peter's metaphysical embodiment of both the Native Americans and Tom makes him feel unattached to his own life.

The Professor's dissociation from himself causes him to think that he has no control over his life; as a result, he turns to vicarious living in order to live out his innermost desires. The Professor appears to have an external locus of control, meaning that he attributes his success in life to chance. He states that "all the most important things in his life … had been determined by chance," and calls the happiest moments of his life, such as his early years of marriage, an "accident" (*PH* 120). People with external loci of control do not believe that their actions have any consequences on their futures, and thus often feel hopeless in times of hardship, leading to depression. The reason why the Professor feels like he has no control over his life is twofold. On the one hand, the heteronormative regulations of the social world restricts the Professor's choices. All of his life, the Professor has had to follow a predetermined path. In fact, the Professor attributes most of the events of his life to the expectations required of a "social" man:

> One thing led to another and one development brought on another, and the design of his life had been the work of this secondary social man, the lover. It had been shaped by all the penalties and responsibilities of being and having been a lover. Because there was Lillian, there must be marriage and a salary. Because there was marriage, there were children. (*PH* 123)

The social world is one of heteronormative and capitalistic standards that require the Professor to marry a woman, have children, and work a steady job. However, he did not actually want any of those things in the first place, and just felt obligated to do them. If the Professor does not feel like he can follow his desires and must live his life according to a preset code, then it only makes sense that he developed feelings of hopelessness, a loss of control, and depression.

On the other hand, part of the reason that the Professor feels so directionless is because chance is just a stand-in word for Tom. Tom is heavily associated with chance and the Professor calls him "a stroke of chance he couldn't possibly have imagined" (*PH* 120). When the Professor says his life was determined by chance, one could argue that it was largely influenced by Tom and his adventurers out on the Mesa. The Professor's dissociation with his own life and embodiment of Tom's life leaves him feeling quite depressed about himself. For instance, he states, "He did not regret his life, but he was indifferent to it. It seemed to him like the life of another person" (*PH* 125). The reason St. Peter feels this way is because the life he leads is directly inspired by Tom's life. Indeed, the young boy influenced the later editions of "The Spanish Adventurers," a time during which St. Peter "could feel his hand growing easier with his material" (*PH* 13). Whether the Professor wants to admit it or not, it seems Tom's own hand, a "many-lined text," directly influences what the Professor's own hand can produce. After Tom's

death, the Professor finds himself unable to continue his work, claiming that it was "one of those little things at which the hand becomes self-conscious, feels itself stiff and clumsy" (*PH* 80). At this point, the Professor no longer has Tom as his guide to keep writing "The Spanish Adventurers" novels. He will have to literally close the chapter on that part of his life, which means moving on from his queer relationship with his dead student. This change is something the Professor refuses to enact, however. The reason why he has the uncanny feeling that he is nearing his death is because he already completed as much of Tom's life as he could have— now the only thing left to replicate is Tom's death. It makes sense that the Professor turns to an indirect suicide, because one could argue that is precisely the way Tom died. Before Tom went to war in France, he created a will for his fiancée, Rosamond. Tom was not drafted, but simply desires to go to war. Is it a coincidence that he goes before marrying Rosamond? It is very well possible that he did not really want to marry Rosamond, but he knew that was the only way to fulfill the duties of heterosexuality. He plans to die to escape this heterosexual fate, as he created a will before he left. Vicariously living through Tom allowed the Professor to complete his life's work. However, once the novels are finished, the Professor is rendered completely directionless and unmotivated, as the only remaining path Tom left for him was death.

Unfortunately, this external locus of control makes the Professor unwilling to keep on living. Even though the Professor claims that he is not suicidal, it is very clear that he has no desire to keep on going on with his life. He shows clear signs of some kind of depressive disorder: he sleeps all the time, drinks large amounts of sherry, has low energy, and enjoys doing nothing (*PH* 125). The Professor feels so unmotivated to live that he almost allows himself to die. The text states, "He had no more thought of suicide than he had thought of embezzling. He

had always regarded it as a grave social misdemeanour" (*PH* 132). Later on, however, when the Professor has to face "the long-anticipated coincidence" of his window shutting and keeping the gas from his stove inside, he experiences a great reluctance to save himself. He specifically debates the morality of not saving himself, asking, "How would such a case be decided under English law? He hadn't lifted his hand against himself—was he required to lift it for himself?" (*PH* 130). St. Peter assigns the blame to his hand— the same "dark hand" that "[lay] clenched on his writing-table," dreading the return of his family (*PH* 128). St. Peter does not even acknowledge his agency to end his own life in a time of sorrow, and instead leaves his fate up to "chance." The Professor clearly wants his death to appear as an accident and not a suicide. However, all signs still point to the fact that the Professor was so unsatisfied with his life and so out of control that he saw the window closing as a confirmation of his previous intuitions that he was supposed to die soon. This melancholic attitude makes perfect sense considering the fact that his novels are finished, his lover is dead, and he is stuck in a loveless marriage with ungrateful children. While death used to terrify him, "now he thought of eternal solitude with gratefulness; as a release from every obligation, from every form of effort" (*PH* 128). In other words, the Professor's suicidality is a direct result of him wanting to escape the obligations of his familial and social life that he feels he has no control over.

The Professor's separation from nature also plays a role in his suicidality. His study represents an escape from the social world that allows him to peer into nature; however, the small sublimations of desire present there are not a permanent substitution for freedom. The study combines elements of the social and natural world while not existing fully as either, as people can come to visit the Professor while he works and he can see the outside world through

his window. The little square window has a view of a "long, blue, hazy smear— Lake Michigan, the inland sea of his childhood," which serves to inspire the Professor while he writes (*PH* 12). The window serves a greater purpose to link the Professor to nature, to his childhood, and to Tom. The view of the lake arguably gives the Professor his main incentive to live. The last time the Professor was separated from the lake, he "nearly died of it" (*PH* 12). Therefore, when the window swings shut one night, the Professor not only loses his remaining connection to the outside world, but also his desire to live in a world without that connection. The gas stove, a man-made item from the social world, nearly suffocates the Professor to death. Similarly, the man-made regulations of the social world constrict the Professor and hinder his will to live.

Luckily, the Professor does not die because he is pulled out of his study by another queer figure— Augusta the spinster. Even more, Augusta is the figure who finally convinces St. Peter to keep on living, and he later reflects, "If he had thought of Augusta sooner, he would have got up from the couch sooner. Her image would have at once suggested the proper action" (*PH* 131). Unlike Tom, who leads St. Peter towards passivity, Augusta's image urges the Professor to take action. Furthermore, it seems to fix his focus. He tells himself life is still worth living because "[t]here was still Augusta, however; a world full of Augsutas, with whom one was outward bound" (*PH* 132). After his run-in with Augusta, the Professor seems more oriented towards the outside world, instead of the interior realm of fantasy. One must also note the association of spinsters with queerness, as Augusta appears more dedicated to her craft than to heteronormativity (Kishi 170). Augusta thus represents a way in which someone can live outside of the heteronormative framework and still be happy and successful. While St. Peter is still not ecstatic about his family coming home, he now knows that the world is not hopeless— that there

is still a way to keep living outside the bounds of heteronormativity that are not solely dependent or imitative of Tom.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

The Professor's House displays a society riddled with rules and repression. In general, St. Peter regards the domestic social world as a site of heteronormativity, capitalism, and debasement, while the natural world represents an avenue of freedom. However, he fails to acknowledge the ways in which the natural world is not fully separated from the social world, as individuals bring vulgar qualities of the social world into spaces of nature. The inability to escape the social world causes the Professor to metaphysically embody the lives of others in order to vicariously live through them. However, imitating the lives of his Spanish Adventurers, namely Tom, leads him to give up on his own life, and his appropriation of these people merely reproduces instead of dismantles the structures that he tries to escape. In a word, the Professor feels trapped and desires the kind of independence that Tom embodied throughout his life. Even the structure of the novel reflects this fact. When the novel is narrated from the Professor's point of view, it is in third person, emphasizing how dissociated he is from his own life. In contrast, Tom's section of the book is told in first person, emphasizing the direct control and action he has over his own life. For all the complaining that St. Peter does about people appropriating Tom Outland's name and memory— whether it is through houses or patents— he fails to see how he himself appropriates this young boy's memory in his entire livelihood. Rather than living his life according to a designated plan— whether that is the plan of heteronormativity, or a plan of imitative and vicarious living— the Professor needs to discover his own embodied sense of agency. Only then will he be able to transition from the Professor, an epithet given to him as part

of his initiation into the social world, to simply “the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter”: a Kansas boy who loves the lake (*PH* 123).

Conclusion: Chance and Control in Times of Crisis

Although at times I have critiqued Cather's nostalgia and idealization of the past, I do not wish to condemn her writing as obscure and unproductive to read. Past critics have called Cather "a romantic, nostalgic writer who could not cope with the present" who used her writing to escape from a disappointing reality (O'Brien 115). Considering the state of the world— especially the global pandemic that is occurring at the time of this thesis' publication— I do not intend to criticize fictional or real people for their lack of foresight or their inability to cope with what life brings their way. Instead, I will analyze how readers of Cather's works can learn from the shortcomings of her characters while also admiring their appeal.

As I have read more of Cather's work, I have found this singular commonality: many of the characters have to come to terms with the fact that their real lives have not quite lived up to their grandiose expectations. In a word, Cather's characters always fail. While part of the reason they fail is their own selfishness, one must also consider the immense systematic barriers to their happiness. For Niel, classism and sexism hinder his happiness; for St. Peter, heteronormativity and the demands of marriage prevent him from realizing his deepest desires. These cultural barriers cause these men to enact a double appropriation and embodiment of both Native American cultures and the lives of their love interests in order to return to a more idealized, natural past.

While both characters struggle with feelings of powerlessness, and thus turn to appropriation to deal with this loss, one must note a key difference in the way their problems arise. Niel attempts to turn Mrs. Forrester into an idol, and then becomes angry when he cannot control the hand of his lost lady. St. Peter desires to emulate the agency of Tom Outland, but

believes that his own hand does not have as much power as Tom's muscular hand. In the former instance, a man feels upset that a woman exercises her own agency. In the latter situation, a man recognizes his object of affection as an equal whose memory should not be appropriated into the realm of money. Even so, the Professor still appropriates Tom's memory for his own vicarious living. Niel does not recognize the precariousness of appropriation while St. Peter does, but they ultimately both try to possess the past.

These characters must come to realize that while they cannot control other people's happiness, they also cannot leave their own happiness up to other people or fate. While one's hand may feel like a separate part of one's body, every person has control over their own hand—and by extension, their own life. The second a person shifts their focus from their own agency onto someone else's, they lose part of themselves. To avoid the unhappy fates of Cather's characters, one must shift one's focus from the idealized past to the embodied present. By seizing one's own authority, one can learn to take the future, and whatever challenges it presents, by the hand.

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