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Selling the Country's Secrets: Willa Cather's Eco(self)criticism in *My Antonia* and *The Professor's House*

by

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Abstract

This study considers Willa Cather's ecological consciousness as a writer of place, particularly in *My Antonia* and *The Professor's House*. In these two works, Cather's narrative distance provides her with the room to investigate the relationship between humans and their environments. Jim Burden, Godfrey St. Peter, and Tom Outland all exploit their environments to greater or lesser extents based on their way of seeing the world, which Cather draws attention to through her careful characterization and narrative distance. In each narrative, Cather forces readers to recognize the environmental consequences of egocentric vision, and the way such vision can be sustained through fictionalizations of place. Furthermore, by crafting main characters who are also writers of place, Cather call into question the role of authors in either protecting or destroying the environments about which they write, indicating Cather's own awareness of her responsibilities as a writer of the Nebraska prairie during a time of rapid industrial expansion.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In a 1916 letter, Cather told her editor, Ferris Greenslet, that she had started a new project inspired by the story of cowboy and Mesa Verde discoverer Richard Wetherwill—a story which would eventually appear in *The Professor's House* as “Tom Outland’s Story.”¹ Cather had already written “Tom Outland’s Story” (then called “The Blue Mesa”) when she wrote to Greenslet again, saying that she had set aside the Mesa story in order to begin a different novel—the novel that would become *My Antonia*.² Apparently, the story of “The Blue Mesa” struck a nerve in Cather, and inspired her to return to the Nebraska prairie of her early fiction and youth with a revised way of seeing and representing the land.

In Cather’s version of the Mesa Verde story, Tom Outland and Roddy Blake discover a Cliff City full of ancient artifacts preserved for over a century in the pristine environment of the wild Blue Mesa. Both Tom and Roddy hope that archeologists in the East will help them protect Cliff City for future generations by making it into a museum or National Park. Yet ironically, their efforts at preservation lead directly to erasure. Tom finds that no one in Washington is interested in their discovery, and as a result, Roddy sells all the artifacts—down to the last skeleton. Outraged, Tom excoriates Roddy for

¹ Letter 0365 of "WCA: Index to Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather: An Expanded, Digital Edition." *The Willa Cather Archive*. Web. 09 May 2011. <<http://cather.unl.edu/index.calendar.html>>.

² Letter 0382 of A Calendar of Letters.

having “gone and sold [his] country’s secrets.”³ Roddy reminds him, however, that they had always talked of “getting big money from the Government,” implying that Tom, too, had plans to “realize” on the canyon’s treasures.⁴ Although Tom refuses to accept responsibility, Cather indicates that both men knew on some level that uncovering the Mesa to the public eye “would come to money in the end,” as Roddy surmises.⁵ Tom’s error comes in failing to recognize that the canyon would be changed as a result of his entrepreneurial efforts—its secrets not only revealed, but lost.⁶

The anxiety found in “Tom Outland’s Story” over betraying and forfeiting one’s “country’s secrets” finds further expression in *My Antonia* and differentiates Cather’s later fiction from her early prairie novels. Works such as “Alexander’s Bridge” and *O Pioneers!* have often been criticized by ecocritics for their glorification of human progress at the expense of the natural environment.⁷ However, in “Tom Outland’s Story,” Cather seems to identify, perhaps for the first time, the obligation individuals have to the spaces they inhabit, and the dangers inherent in carelessly exposing those spaces to the rest of the world. In this way, Cather seems distinctly conscious of her own accountability for the way she asks readers to imagine the environments which play so

³ Cather, Willa, *The Professor’s House* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 242.

⁴ Cather, *The Professor*, 243

⁵ Cather, *The Professor*, 245.

⁶ Ironically, Tom calls Roddy “Dreyfus,” in reference to the Dreyfus affair in France. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely convicted of treason in 1896, and evidence of his innocence was suppressed for years in order to protect the culprit. Dreyfus was cleared of all charges in 1906, but the affair divided the nation and fostered profound mistrust for the government. This reference could on the one hand suggest that Roddy was not at fault for selling the artifacts, on the other, it implies that Tom hopes to displace his own guilt onto Roddy for the real loss of the ancient civilization. Either way, this reference further indicates Cather’s unresolved questions about what it means to be loyal to place.

⁷ See Susan J. Rosowski’s “The Comic Form of Cather’s Art: An Ecocritical Reading,” which suggests that Cather begins her career writing ego-conscious tragedies, and steadily moves towards the more bio-centric mode of comedy.

crucial a role in her fiction. Read in the context of “Tom Outland’s Story,” Cather’s later novels, particularly *My Antonia*, begin to seem permeated by a fear of exploiting what Laura Winters describes as “sacred places,” or places which have both “dynamic presence and a character” and the power to “allow people to understand their authentic selves.”⁸

In this thesis, I argue that *My Antonia* and *The Professor’s House*, famous for their unstable and shifty narration, become the testing ground for Cather’s increasing ecological consciousness, and allow her the space to question the ideological constructs to which she herself felt most prone. Cather’s complex engagement with the natural world has made her the topic of unsettled debate since the earliest sparks of the current ecocritical movement in literary studies. Indeed, in “A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism, with Excursions to Catherland,” Cheryll Glotfelty charts the trends of the Ecocritical movement through the way critics have responded Cather’s work.⁹ Because of Cather’s personal connection to the real Nebraska prairie, and because several of her works center around the region’s “settlement” in the mid to late nineteenth century, many critics have struggled to determine whether she endorses the prairie’s destruction (“selling her country’s secrets”), or whether her novels fight for the prairie’s preservation.¹⁰ In “Willa Cather: The Plow and the Pen,” Joseph Meeker argues that Cather’s pen becomes another

⁸ Laura Winters, *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993), 3.

⁹ Cheryll Glotfelty, “A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism, with Excursions to Catherland,” in *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*, edited by Susan J. Rosowski, *Cather Studies*, Vol. 5, xv-xxxvvi (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

¹⁰ I say “settlement” because, as many critics have noted, the Nebraska prairie was not a completely barren landscape as Cather describes it when the earliest Easterners arrived. Native American tribes such as the Sioux and Lakota still had some presence on the prairie when Cather’s novels take place, and when her own family arrived.

form of a plow, claiming and re-writing the landscape for the sake of civilization's progress.¹¹ In his longest example, Meeker reads Jim Burden as a double for Cather and concludes from his ability to be what Lawrence Buell describes as "both nature-loving and resource-consuming," that Cather's writing, like Jim's, uses the landscape as raw material for purely homocentric enterprises.¹² Leonard Lutwack likewise concludes, "Cather's American West, in final analysis, becomes a testing ground for the moral stamina of her characters...Cather ultimately falls back on a conception of the New World very close to that of the Pilgrims."¹³

Others disagree. Critics like Susan Rosowski, Glen Love, and Mary Ryder identify Cather as an early nature writer who recognizes the intricate connections between people and place through characters who are "responsive and sympathetic to ecological issues."¹⁴ These critics most often read Jim as a failed hero, but see other characters like Antonia, Ivar of *O Pioneers*, and Father Latour of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as models for the kind of ecological world view which, they conclude, Cather hoped to endorse. Still others claim that Cather vacillates between an ecocentric and egocentric world view, recognizing the value of the natural world in glimpses, but ultimately subordinating it to the human onlooker's gaze. Patrick K. Dooley, for example,

¹¹ Joseph Meeker, "Willa Cather: the Plow and the Pen," in *Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*, Cather Studies, Vol 5, edited by Susan J. Rosowski, 77-88 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

Meeker concludes his article, "There is no environmental ethic that emerges from her work, but rather an ethic of development that supposes that land fulfills its destiny when it is successfully farmed.... The land is raw material in the hands of Cather's Muse, and it is the setting where the plow and the pen come together" (88).

¹² Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 4.

¹³ Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994) 32.

¹⁴ Mary Ryder, "Willa Cather as Nature Writer: A Cry in the Wilderness" in *Such News from the Land: U. S. Women Nature Writers* edited by Thomas S. Edwards and Elizabeth A. De Wolfe 75-84 (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001) 79.

claims, “While [Cather’s] deepest environmental impulse, it seems to me, is in favor of a homocentric position of conservation, she also, though less often and with less fervor, sides with a biocentric position of preservation.”¹⁵

Such scholarship indicates, among other things, that the questions we continue to ask of Cather’s “divided” identity coincide closely with those we ask about the characters in her fiction. In *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*, Janis P. Stout demonstrates how characters like Jim Burden, Claude Wheeler, and Godfrey St. Peter function as biographical doubles for Cather herself.¹⁶ Interestingly, their similarities to Cather exist largely in their relationships to place. When Cather was ten, her family moved from the mountains of Virginia to the flat Nebraska prairie where they lived a few years before moving to the town of Red Cloud, where they lived until Cather left for college. While Jim and St. Peter actually chart a similar path across the country, most of Cather’s characters experience a strong attachment to a particular place which is disrupted in some way during their youth. Often their stories focus less on their initial departure as child, and more on their later attempts to reconcile their loyalties to place with their artistic, intellectual, or even economic goals, which usually require them to abandon their homes once more.¹⁷

Stout concludes from such similarities that Cather used writing as an “escape,” identifying with the characters she creates in order to imagine herself freed from the

¹⁵ Patrick K. Dooley, “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” in *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*, *Cather Studies*, Vol. 5. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski, 64-76 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) 65.

¹⁶ Stout, Janis P. *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000.

¹⁷ For more on Cather’s biographical similarities to her characters through their relationship to space, see Winter’s *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile*, and Thomas J. Lyon’s “Willa Cather, Learner.”

burdens of her daily life.¹⁸ This approach would seem to justify studies which identify Cather's world view within the ego-centricity of her narrators. Because their perspective and biographical details align them so closely with Cather herself, it's almost natural to conclude that their way of seeing reflects Cather's own. However, the parallels identified by Stout and so many others between Cather's real and fictional worlds may also suggest that Cather chose not to escape or avoid her problems, but rather to actively engage with them through the writing of her fiction. What if Cather used her pen not as plow, mirror, or escape mechanism, but rather as a magnifying glass, capable of revealing the complex relationship between humans and nature, and writer and place, in a deliberately self-conscious and sometimes self-critical way?

In *My Antonia* and *The Professor's House*, Cather's unreliable narrators and framing devices draw attention to the space between author and character which might otherwise disappear (as, for some critics, it still often does). Keith Wilhite claims that scholars who have attempted to pin down Cather's most authentic authorial perspective have ignored the deliberate irresolution of the novel's authorial voice—the fact that the author refuses to be found. Instead, “they read the novel's competing perspectives strictly in terms of a competition for authenticity or credibility.”¹⁹ In other words, when seeking to discover Cather's environmental imagination, critics traditionally assume that Cather privileges either Jim or Antonia and that whomever she prefers models the kind of ecological imagination she herself endorses. Such readings extend to other novels where

¹⁸ “Plunging into a new novel seems often to have served Cather as an escape from her personal demons,” Stout writes, and of *The Professor's House*, she suggests, “One wonders if it was a sense of having revealed too much of her own state of mind that led Cather, shortly after its publication, to refer to the book with distaste” (203, 204).

¹⁹ Keith Wilhite, “Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*,” *Studies in the Novel* 42, no. 3 (2010) 269-286. 269.

instead of Jim and Antonia, critics consider the ecological consciousnesses of characters like Alexandra Burgess and “Crazy” Ivar, Claude and Nat Wheeler, and Father Latour in hopes of discovering Cather’s own environmental imagination present in their voices.

Instead of looking for the most credible voice within Cather’s text, in this study I assume that Cather distances herself from her texts in order to give voice to a wider ecological consciousness than could be expressed by any single character’s narrow perspective. By detaching herself from her characters, Cather fosters a sense of “narrative indeterminacy and regional instability” that insistently calls the readers’ attention away from the central ego of her texts and towards the complex physical world represented in the novels themselves.²⁰ Because writing itself becomes a theme in so many of Cather’s works, her simultaneous identification and disidentification with her characters, particularly those who are also writers, allows her to explore her own anxiety over assuming authorship of the environments she describes. Cather’s reflections on the nature of authorship in her texts call into question the same destructive ideologies of imperialism, romanticism, and ethnocentrism of which she has been accused during the near century since she wrote.²¹ When her characters impose anti-environmental world views on their physical environments, nature—including human nature—suffers as a result. By drawing attention to the precarious role of the author as both protector and dispatcher of the “country’s secrets,” Cather demonstrates her awareness that “how

²⁰ Wilhite, 270.

²¹ For more on Cather’s anti-environmentalism, see Mike Fischer’s “Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism,” and Louise Wrestling’s chapter “Willa Cather’s Prairie Epics” in her book *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*.

writers write/overwrite nature reflects and encourages ways of seeing the natural world that either contribute to its demise, or implore its recognition.”²²

In the two chapters which follow, I propose that Cather’s narrative distance from the familiar subjects and material of her texts provides her with the authorial space to study the complex relationship between individual and environment in a way which anticipates the ecocritical work of scholars like Harold Fromm, Annette Kolodny, Lawrence Buell, and Glen Love. Her unique amalgamation of regional and artistic identities has made her fiction among the most frequently analyzed by ecocritics, but her own working out of that complex crossroad has yet to receive the critical attention it deserves. Here I hope to consider not only how Cather’s characters see themselves in relation to their environments, but furthermore how Cather herself articulates an ecological consciousness through the failed ecoconsciousness of the characters in her works. Their failures, patterned after Cather’s own struggles as a writer and an artist, force readers to recognize that “[h]ow we image a thing, true or false, affects our conduct toward it,” and that our imagining of the environment can therefore contribute directly to its exploitation and erasure.²³

²² Glen Love, *Practical Ecology: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003) 69.

²³ Buell, 3.

Chapter Two: *My Antonia*

Jim Burden may be the most questionable character currently admitted into the ecological literary cannon. Particularly when read alongside *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia* seems to confirm critical suspicions of the anti-environmental underpinnings of Cather's depictions of nature. For critics who question Cather's environmentalism, the myth of settlement as embodied by Jim Burden and Alexandra Burgson suggests that for Cather, making the natural world "fit human designs" matters more than preserving that world based on its intrinsic value.²⁴ For critics who champion Cather's ecological awareness, Jim's pastoral "fantasy of escaping to unblemished nature" is "contradicted" through the environmental consciousness of Antonia, who preserves the land that Jim's railroad destroys.²⁵

Reconciling Jim's narrative with Cather's unstable identity as a nature writer poses a particular problem to ecocritics because his "masculine land ethic of dominance and control" so clearly grows from the genuine love for the prairie which he experiences during his youth.²⁶ While most critics agree with Jan Goggans that Jim "us[es] [Antonia]

²⁴ Dooley, 67.

²⁵ Rosowski, *Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*, Cather Studies, Vol. 5. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski, 64-76 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) 112.

²⁶ One of Jim's early descriptions of his relationship with the environment appears on Cather's tombstone. The quote on the tombstone, which reads, "...that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great," comes from the famous scene in *My Antonia*, when Jim leans against a large pumpkin in the garden and imagines being absorbed into nature, "something complete and great." (Ryder, 79).

for his own nostalgic purposes,” his close alignment with Cather based on their similar experiences of the Nebraska prairie make severing the authorial connection between Cather as author and Jim as internal writer difficult, if not impossible.

²⁷ Nor can it be satisfactorily argued that *My Antonia* belongs to Cather’s pre-World War I canon, and that her true ecological consciousness only appears in later works like *One of Ours*, *The Professor’s House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.²⁸ Cather not only wrote *My Antonia* during World War I, but furthermore she began it after her first sojourn to the Southwest, where she would be inspired to write what many critics consider to be her most environmentally oriented work.²⁹ If we can neither sever Cather’s connection with Jim, nor cordon that connection off to an early, naïve version of Cather, recognizing the division between Cather the author and Jim the narrator becomes crucial for accurately identifying the ecoconsciousness of *My Antonia*, and placing it within the ecoconsciousness of Willa Cather herself.

Here I look to the failings of Jim’s narrative perspective as evidence of Cather’s awareness of her own responsibilities as a nature writer, particularly as they relate to the dangerous role writers play in representing the natural world through their work. Glen Love describes the traditional function of pastoral writing in *Practical Ecology*, where he

²⁷ Goggans, Jan. “Social (Re)Visioning in the Fields of *My Antonia*” in *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*. Cather Studies, Vol. 5. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski, 153-172 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) 158.

²⁸ Leonard Lutwack, for example, suggests that “In the literary career of Willa Cather, there is a turning from a pastoral to mystical relationship to the land. The idealization of farming in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* changes to deep disillusionment in *One of Ours* and subsequent works” (156 *The Role of Place in Literature*). If we remember that the war was raging as Cather penned *My Antonia*, it seems more than likely that her “idealization” of life in general had already disappeared (assuming, of course, it ever existed).

²⁹ Particularly *The Professor’s House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are regarded as environmentally conscientious, if not in fact ecocentric in their world view.

writes, “In the pastoral world, amid sylvan groves and rural characters—idealized images of country existence—the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the salutary, simple life that will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon” (66).³⁰ Jim reduces the frontier to a pastoral vision, and tries to preserve it through his narrative. These acts of false consciousness allow Jim to believe that the wild prairie still exists even as he personally contributes to the real prairie’s demise. Jim’s dual role as preserver and defiler of the prairie indicates Cather’s anxiety over the role of fiction in sanctioning environmental erasure through what Lawrence Buell describes as “environmental doublethink.” Jim, in writing his love song to the prairie, effectively establishes the kind of egocentric way of seeing which justifies his use of the prairie for personal gain while still allowing him to share in mourning its loss. Cather makes plain that Jim’s way of seeing and writing reflects a desire for ownership and self-justification over preservation, and thereby removes herself from those discourses of mastery which, as a writer of place, she must scrupulously avoid. In this way, each aspect of Jim’s conflicted relationship to the prairie serves to highlight an authorial anxiety over habits of environmental doublethink which justify environmental exploitation through artistic representation, and lead directly to ecological loss.

Read in this way, *My Antonia* calls into question the kind of environmentally hazardous thought which ecocritics have come to associate with pastoral writing. Buell explains, “Historically, artistic representations of the natural environment have served as agents both of provocation and of compartmentalization, calling on us to think ecocentrically, but also conspiring with the readerly temptation to cordon off scenery into

³⁰ It could be argued that such a paradigm not only applies to Jim’s narrative of balancing New York society against Nebraska countryside, but furthermore to the function of novels like Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, which allow city-dwellers an imaginative escapes to the country.

pretty ghettos.... Their achievements are mirrors both of cultural promise and cultural failure.”³¹ In many ways, the plot progression of *My Antonia* exactly outlines this pattern of compartmentalization and subsequent environmental erasure. After the introduction, Jim’s story begins with his first arrival on the Nebraska prairie, where, he famously reflects, “There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are mad. No, there was nothing but land.”³² Jim narrates the story of the not-country’s growth into a place fit for human habitation and in his writing populates the prairie with the people and memories of his childhood. Yet as the country grows, the “material” of the country steadily disappears. By the end of the novel, Jim’s descriptions lapse into pure pastoralism. He describes Antonia as living on a prosperous fenced-in acreage in the rural outskirts of town in perfect peace and happiness, quite literally contained within a “pretty ghetto” that is more Edenic than it is natural. His prelapsarian vision demonstrates the extent to which he has divorced the prairie of his imagination from the real prairie of his youth, and in many ways his first-person narration asks readers to perform a similar imaginative shift in their envisioning of the prairie.

Although Cather patterns much of Jim’s biographical narrative after her own, she includes an introduction that definitively situates Jim as author of the story which follows, and furthermore places the changing face of the prairie at the heart of the novel’s overarching concerns.³³ By beginning the novel on a train passing through Iowa, Cather

³¹ Buell, 4.

³² Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918) 11.

³³ As Ronald Weber writes in his chapter on Cather entitled “Home Pasture,” “Jim’s account follows, of course, Cather’s own recollection of her Nebraska past—the early days in the country shared with Antonia who lives on a nearby farm, the eventual move to the country town where Antonia also comes to work as a hired girl, the years of separation from Antonia in Lincoln and finally at Harvard as a student, the

immediately emphasizes the reduction of the landscape to a blurry backdrop next to the progress of the speeding train: “*While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car.*”³⁴ The unnamed narrator, sometimes associated with Cather herself, recognizes Jim Burden on the train and the two share in mutual reminiscences about their youth on the prairie. Importantly, the two characters seem slightly removed from the train’s progress: the “*train flashed through*” the country, while the two characters “sat in the observation car,” presumably attempting to see the details that the train’s motion effectively wipes out. At the train’s pace, everything looks “*ripe,*” “*bright,*” and “*never-ending.*” Yet paradoxically, the “*little prairie towns*” where the two travelers grew up cannot exist in the same way anymore because of the very vehicle in which they now travel. In the unnamed narrator’s list of features, “*country towns*” appear second only to wheat, implying their abundance in the formerly undeveloped countryside. The prairie’s distinctive character seems to rely on the way people who have lived there remember it: the two travelers agree, “*that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about [the land itself].*”³⁵ The travelers’ conclusion thus ironically suggests that knowledge of the prairie exists solely in the past-tense, removed from the current industrialized present.

After thus acknowledging the disappearance of the prairie, the narrative switches immediately to Jim’s personal association with the changed face of the prairie. The

concluding reunion with Antonia when both are middle age” (*The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* 134).

³⁴ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1.

³⁵ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1.

narrator explains that “[Jim] is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways and is often away from his office for weeks together.”³⁶ Even as this description identifies Jim as a sympathetic, somewhat homeless traveler, it also clearly implicates him in his former home’s destruction. Commenting on Jim’s railroad career, Joseph Meeker writes, “It’s not hard to imagine what a lawyer for the railroad might have been occupied with during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Among his tasks would have been the acquisition of as much land as possible for the rights-of-way and commercial and real estate development. Whatever his sentimental ties to the land might have been, they were surely tinged with a strong capacity for its exploitation.”³⁷ The introduction acknowledges not only that Jim’s “sentimental ties to the land” were “tinged” with his exploitative abilities, but rather that they were instrumental to that process of exploitation. As the unnamed narrator explains, “*The romantic disposition which often made [Jim] seem very funny as a boy, has been one of the strongest elements of his success. He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development.*”³⁸ According to the narrator’s description, Jim’s love and “personal passion” for the prairie leads directly and, based on the calmly rational narration, naturally to the country’s development.

While Jim’s love for the prairie might appeal to readers as a nostalgic remembrance of both American landscape and his personal home and heritage, at the same time it distances us further from the actual prairie he describes. The lush the

³⁶ Cather, *My Antonia*, 2.

³⁷ Meeker, 89.

³⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 2.

pastures, the riper the fields, the further the narrative strays into the realm of pure romanticism, and the further from the actual environment which is being erased by civilization. Jim's concrete contribution to the reduction of the prairie dramatizes the danger of his romantic attitude, as the narrator points directly to the way in which Jim's "*romantic disposition*" enables him to play "*an important part in [the prairie's] development.*"³⁹ As Buell writes, "This paradox (of both loving the land and exploiting its resources), not unique to America but an exaggeration of a modern syndrome found worldwide, is sustained by acts of compartmentalization made habitual by the way our sensibilities are disciplined."⁴⁰ Although the narrator marvels at Jim's ability to maintain his disposition in the face of so many "*disappointments,*" Jim reveals his secret when he admits that "*From time to time I've been writing down what I remember about Antonia.... On my long trips across the country, I amuse myself like that.*"⁴¹ Writing thus becomes the method of compartmentalization which prevents Jim from feeling the weight of his paradoxical relationship to the natural world. Preserving the memory of Antonia keeps the romantic pastoralist alive in Jim, which enables him to continue unconflicted in his development of the prairie. Like the "*never-ending miles of ripe wheat,*" the Antonia Jim remembers, and the prairie he remembers her on, exist indefinitely in the combination of his limited perspective and limitless imagination.

By considering the growth of a single girl out of the prairie, instead of the history of the ecological region itself, Jim attempts to comfortably participate in the preservation of his homeland in a way which overwrites his own contribution to that same region's

³⁹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 2.

⁴⁰ Buell, 4.

⁴¹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 3.

irreversible transformation. In the introduction, both travelers seem to become uncomfortable with the continued discussion of the real landscape they rush industriously past, and instead “*ke[ep] returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had both known long ago.*”⁴² In this way, the bond between travelers develops first in relation to the prairie then gets displaced onto the more comfortable object of an absent but living female figure. The narrator explains, “*More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood.*”⁴³ The need to identify a figure to “*mean...the country*” signals an inability on the part of either traveler to view the environment as its own particular place rather than as an elaborate metaphor.

Jim exhibits a further flaw in his environmental consciousness that ultimately separates him from Cather, and separates the narrative that follows from both the unnamed narrator and Cather herself.⁴⁴ Jim’s final actions in the introduction imply that he writes not as a way of grappling with his relationship to the prairie, or as a misguided attempt at preservation. Instead, he uses the narrative as a way to maintain possession over the prairie as a memory, reenacting the same form of mastery which led to the original prairie’s development. Unable to write a simple love story to the communal landscape, Jim seems unsatisfied with sharing the communal memory of Antonia with the unnamed narrator unless he himself constructs it. Jim’s overwhelming desire for possession above preservation appears in the claim he places on the narrative. The

⁴² Cather, *My Antonia*, 2.

⁴³ Cather, *My Antonia*, 2.

⁴⁴ Many critics argue these two are one and the same, however it is not essential for my reading to decide either way. If Cather is the unnamed narrator, then her relationship to the narrative which follows diverges from Jim’s at the same point as it does should she remain outside of the novel altogether.

unnamed narrator writes that before giving away the manuscript, “[Jim] went into the next room, sat down at my desk and wrote across the face of the portfolio the word ‘Antonia.’ He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it ‘My Antonia.’ That seemed to satisfy him.”⁴⁵ Before inscribing “My” onto the manuscript, Jim appears to be part of a shared experience with the unnamed narrator and with others who remember the real Nebraska prairie as it existed before the railroad. But sharing the land ultimately dissatisfies Jim, and these final lines of the introductory chapter firmly establish the impetus for the whole affair—Jim’s satisfaction.

While figuring Antonia as representative of the prairie allows Jim the freedom to indulge fully in nostalgic reminiscence, the story reveals early signs of Jim’s conflicted relationship to the environment. As a young boy, Jim appears to have an ecocentric view of the world around him: in the famous pumpkin patch scene, he reflects, “I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy.”⁴⁶ This attitude changes drastically after Jim’s encounter with the rattlesnake while investigating a prairie dog town with Antonia. The language of the scene echoes that of the introductory chapter, where Antonia is made to seem “*the whole adventure*” of the two travelers’ childhood. As Jim begins to describe the episode, he writes, “It was on one of those gravel beds that I met my adventure.”⁴⁷ This adventure changes the relationship between Antonia and Jim forever and thus

⁴⁵ Cather, *My Antonia*, 3. Commenting upon this scene, Judith Fryer writes, “Jim Burden creates “his” Antonia, just as, in the telling of the story, he creates himself. Like the pastoral shepherd, Jim Burden remembers and represents a time and place in which a great deal of human suffering occurs in an idealized landscape” (*Felicitous Space* 279).

⁴⁶ Cather, *My Antonia*, 18

⁴⁷ Cather, *My Antonia*, 45.

signals a change in Jim's relationship to the environment. As Jim crawls backwards in the dirt (clearly heedless of any danger the land might have to offer), Antonia's scream alerts him to the presence of a snake behind him. Afterwards, Antonia explains to the family, "I scream for him to run, but he just hit and hit that snake like he was crazy."⁴⁸ Antonia sees the snake first and her immediate instinct is to run, respecting the power of nature and leaving the environment unharmed. Jim, on the other hand, responds with violence, betraying his stubborn refusal to either surrender ground or allow something wild and threatening to live.

Jim reveals the fundamental conflict in his relationship to the prairie in his reaction to the snake, and the way that reaction gets translated into narrative. As he turns, he finds the snake stretched out sunning itself, "lying in long loose waves, like a letter 'W.'"⁴⁹ While this "W" can be read many ways, "W" perhaps best represents the "wildness" or "wilderness" of the undeveloped prairie, which lies both threateningly and vulnerably before Jim.⁵⁰ If we take the snake to represent the undeveloped wilderness, "left on from Indian and buffalo times," the resulting change in Jim and Antonia's relationship makes sense, as each character suddenly sees Jim as someone who controls and alters the natural world, rather than someone working within its limits.⁵¹ Jim's reflections on the event suggest this reading, as he realizes while dragging the rattler home, "The great land had never looked to me so big and free. If the red grass were full

⁴⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 49

⁴⁹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 45.

⁵⁰ In a feminist reading of this scene, Judith Butler identifies Willa Cather herself in the snake's body (the capital "W").

⁵¹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 48.

of rattlers, I was equal to them all.”⁵² Where Jim used to lie at peace under the gaze of sun, he now looks out on the prairie as a prospector might, and with the newly assumed attitude of a hunter. Yet while Jim narrates a glorious new perspective on the land, the description of the snake suggests the desire for ever wilder spaces expressed throughout the novel: Jim admits, “My big rattler was old, and had led too easy a life; there was not much fight in him...and he had forgot that the world doesn’t owe rattlers a living.”⁵³ The wilderness without “fight” becomes nearly aligned with society in Jim’s mind, as he deploys a capitalistic commonplace in critique of his kill (“the world doesn’t owe rattlers a living”). In this way, Jim begins to separate the depleted physical prairie from the mythic wilderness which he imagines will always exist, and in doing so places the prairie at further risk for continued exploitation and defeat.

This rattler must be translated back into myth in order to maintain the symbolic wilderness necessary for Jim’s narrative, and Jim gains a new perspective on his relationship to the prairie largely because of Antonia’s response. Antonia showers Jim with praise after killing the snake, as Jim reflects, “She went on in this strain until I began to think that I had longed for this opportunity, and had hailed it with joy.”⁵⁴ Since Jim treats Antonia as a representative of the prairie itself, her acceptance of his kill, and indeed her glorification of it, help Jim justify his egocentric attitude towards the prairie. Thus, Jim’s mastery over the landscape becomes justified as a response to the “ancient, eldest Evil” and fosters in him the attitude of environmental exploitation which comes to

⁵² Cather, *My Antonia*, 48.

⁵³ Cather, *My Antonia*, 49.

⁵⁴ Cather, *My Antonia*, 49.

define his industrial success.⁵⁵ In reality, the danger of the snake arises out of Jim's refusal to run and out of the language he and Antonia both use in his narrative to describe it—language that disguises the age-weakened snake as “the ancient, eldest Evil” and changes Jim, in his own words, from a young boy to a “big fellow.”⁵⁶ Jim describes this moment as the one which changed his relationship with Antonia forever, and indeed it seems like the moment where his attitude towards the landscape shifts from companionship to mastery.

Although the scene marks Jim's important shift, it also betrays the power of story telling to subsume the power and importance of nature under the central ego of personal narrative. Jim's descriptions of the snake as a “circus monstrosity,” with “loathsome, fluid motion” and a “hideous little head” aggrandize the snake into a representative of the greatest evil of the natural world and mythic world.⁵⁷ Yet a few paragraphs later, this very evil becomes a prize to Jim: “I explained to Antonia...that he must have been there when white men first came, left on from buffalo and Indian times. As I turned him over, I began to feel proud of him.”⁵⁸ Here Jim explicitly connects his own conquest to that of the earliest frontiersman and in doing so makes his snake at once evil and necessary to eliminate, but also cherished and prized. The snake, like the buffalo and Indians (two formerly eradicated inhabitants of the wilder prairie), represents for Jim something desirable both as a possession and as a masculine pastoral idea. He embraces the idea that

⁵⁵ Cather, *My Antonia*, 47.

⁵⁶ Cather, *My Antonia*, 47, 50.

⁵⁷ Cather, *My Antonia*, 45.

⁵⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 47.

the fields are full of natural challenges, but by setting those objects in opposition to his own possessive, imperialist agenda, he inevitably ensures their demise.

Interestingly, the result of this new view of the prairie directly affects Jim's friendship with Antonia, erasing the age gap which had made her bossy with him before and landing him in the role of male protector. Jim's view of the landscape reinscribes gender and racial hierarchies in service of his agenda of development and mastery. Buell explains, "As revisionary scholarship on race and gender has shown, nature has historically been not only directly exploited but also the sign under which women and nonwhites have been grouped in the process of themselves being exploited even while being relished as exotic, spontaneous, and so forth."⁵⁹ While this scene clearly marks a move for Jim from the ecocentric life of a boy to the egocentric life of a young man, the narrative depicts the way in which that move causes, or at least reinforces, a change in his relationship to women. The symbolic language used decades later by Jim to describe this childhood event reveals an early connection made in his male consciousness between his mastery of the environment and his masculine authority over women.

Although Jim rarely reads as a powerful patriarchal figure, his uncertain relationships with women, which leads him in part to write the story, appears utterly bound up in his paradoxical relationship to the environment. The scene with the snake shows how easily Jim develops his masculine combative view of the landscape, and how that relationship immediately enables him to put the environment on a sort of pedestal. He begins to imagine the fields full of rattlers and challenges to his manhood and self, when in reality the fields have one fewer rattler than before. Likewise, although he imagines that he has changed his relationship to Antonia forever for the better, this

⁵⁹ Buell, 21.

change only complicates their ensuing relationship, as Jim rises to a new level over Antonia by killing the snake, replacing friendship and natural age differences with gendered hierarchy. The need to reinstate the sort of mastery he establishes over Antonia through retelling the narrative of his youth suggests that Jim continues to prefer battles against the “ancient, eldest Evil” to conflicts in his own life. Yet by revealing in the Introduction that Jim’s marriage is unhappy and his life is spent traveling from one side of the country to the other, Cather indicates that such a re-appropriation of the natural world (and women, who, for Jim, seem to fall under its sign) into mythic registers ultimately leads to a dissatisfied carelessness towards the realities of the physical, immediate world.

Jim’s attempt to force the natural world to serve an impossible combination of ideological and practical purposes thus comments upon a general tendency in writing about nature of which Cather seems distinctly conscious. Buell explains that “The American literary renaissance of the antebellum period, influenced by romantic naturism, nurtured the image of a wild, unsettled continent as an article of cultural nationalism well into the age of industrial revolution.”⁶⁰ This need to believe in the purity of nature, particularly during an age of rapid industrial expansion, finds further expression in Jim’s evolving relationship with Antonia. After he hears that Antonia returned unmarried and pregnant from her elopement with Larry Donovan, he reacts against her loss of dignity more than her actual pain: “I tried to shut Antonia out of my mind. I was bitterly disappointed in her. I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity.”⁶¹ Jim admits

⁶⁰ Buell, 14.

⁶¹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 298.

in this statement the personal pride he takes in Antonia's public image, particularly her virginity, which is perhaps why he claims that even in his dreams he cannot imagine a sexual encounter with her. Because Jim sees Antonia, like the prairie, as a part of his own egocentric narrative, he considers her symbolic power more important to maintain than her real physical vitality. As Mary Ryder remarks, "[Jim] sees not Antonia herself, but simply a feminine territory, one which he occasionally perceives as enough of a wilderness to need taming, but which eventually becomes an idyllic, pastoral, Golden Age, the "primal warmth" of femine landscape."⁶² Jim needs to find a way to reestablish Antonia's symbolic sanctity without placing the blame of her deflowering on himself, or the patriarchal, industrial society in which he personally has flourished.

Thus the last few chapters serve the purpose of freeing Jim from blame and restoring Antonia's symbolic health, recentering the story before its close around Jim's perspective and leaving the Antonia and the environment tucked away in pastoral peace and confinement. When Jim return to "the high country" after graduating from Harvard and before entering law school, he records the changes in the environment with a decidedly split tone.⁶³ First, he elaborates on the changes to the land: "The wheat harvest was over, and here and there along the horizon I could see black puffs of smoke from the steam threshing-machines. The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing."⁶⁴ Descriptors like "over," "broken," and "disappearing," make this passage read like a lament of the industrialization of a once wild land. Yet his tone switches deliberately mid-paragraph, as

⁶² Ryder, 79.

⁶³ Cather, *My Antonia*, 306.

⁶⁴ Cather, *My Antonia*, 306.

he explains that “The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea.”⁶⁵ As with the opening chapter, this passage resituates the story of the country, which is beginning to appear to be “broken” and “disappearing,” around the growth of civilization. Since the story itself is of Jim’s growth from boy to man, this passage further illustrates his own identification with the development of the land and his commitment to making that development appear as an improvement. However, the statement lacks certainty, as Jim admits that the cultivated land “seemed” admirable to him, reminding readers that the “beautiful and harmonious changes” are based on Jim’s perspective and do not reflect empirical reality. Cather reminds readers of Jim’s personal need to preserve and possess the prairie despite his awareness of the changes, and with divided prose, she dramatizes his vacillation between lament and pastoralization.

Yet Jim’s narrative does not end with such confusion about the effects of industrial expansion, but instead shifts into pure pastoralism, rewriting Antonia and the prairie as symbolically timeless in order to assuage his guilt over their increasing marginalization in the industrial present. His reflections on the altered prairie appear in the final pages of the second to last section of the book, entitled “The Pioneer Woman’s Story,” which he writes twenty years after the fact. “The Pioneer Woman’s Story” ends with Antonia walking through a field at dusk and Jim recalling “the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women’s faces, at the very bottom of my memory.”⁶⁶ Although Jim makes sure to gender the sunburned, weathered face of Antonia even in this

⁶⁵ Cather, *My Antonia*, 306.

⁶⁶ Cather, *My Antonia*, 322.

description, he cannot end the story on a note of realism and memory. The faculty of nostalgia, like the word “Antonia,” fails to fully satisfy his “passion” for the prairie because it suggests that something belongs to the Prairie and the story of Antonia which he still desires but cannot possess. Such a structure furthermore implicates Jim in the destruction of the prairie, and thus Antonia, as both woman and landscape become identified with the irrecoverable real of the region’s past. In the final section of the novel, written, according to the introduction, after Jim’s meeting with the unnamed narrator on the train, he shifts to the present day.⁶⁷ The final chapter, written quickly and immediately after the events it narrates, allows Jim to glorify Antonia and the prairie to a place past reality and into the realm of myth, while simultaneously establishing his masculine ownership over their story.

Just as the Introduction distances Cather from Jim’s central consciousness, the final chapter calls into question not only Jim’s authorial veracity, but more importantly the limitations of his ecological vision. When Jim returns to visit Antonia, he states his fears openly, prompting the reader to question the honesty of his vision thereafter, even without the lush Edenic prose which follows. He admits, “I did not want to find [Antonia] aged and broken,” echoing his description of the “broken,” “disappearing” fields he found on his last return.⁶⁸ He goes on, “I really dreaded it. In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some

⁶⁷ It could be argued that Jim writes more than the final chapter after meeting with the unnamed narrator in the introduction, however even so, the final chapter differentiates itself from the rest of the narrative by relating recent events. Thus, Jim’s reflections on his recent encounter with Antonia can be said to most closely represent the culmination of his way of seeing her, and his way of imagining the prairie itself.

⁶⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 328, 306.

memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again.”⁶⁹ Here Jim admits that everything we’ve read so far is to him a perfect “illusion” and that he knows his memories are not “realities.” While this may suggest that Jim recognizes his limitations as a story teller, it also indicates his awareness that he wrote Antonia’s story like a novelist, not a biographer. If reality was not his top priority, something else motivated and guided his construction of the story. In the same vein, Jim’s acknowledged reluctance to return to Antonia implies that some stronger force must have urged his visit. Some part of the story he had already written must have felt unresolved, or else surely the hesitation would have won out. Thus the visit, and the section describing it, offers a necessary addition to Jim’s version of “The Pioneer Woman’s Story” where he reconciles his love and use of the prairie by overwriting the landscape into a prelapsarian paradise he personally preserves with his pen.

Jim’s journey to the Cuzak farm immediately feels like a move into a romantic writing style as it appears to be a journey back in time, going from train, to buggy, to the boys who appear distrustful of the wagon and prefer instead to walk. Children of all ages and size pour forth on the trip up the Cuzak driveway, and as Jim approaches the house he reports, “Ducks and geese ran quacking across my path. White cats were sunning themselves among yellow pumpkins.”⁷⁰ The animals lying in the sun recall to mind Jim’s early moments of happiness basking in the fields, and the strength of motion and vitality saturates the entire scene. The sense of perfection in the landscape only grows throughout the chapters following, and that perfection has the effect of distancing Jim further from the place even as his warmth of affection increases. He eventually concludes of the

⁶⁹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 328.

⁷⁰ Cather, *My Antonia*, 330.

Cuzak farm: “Everything was as it should be: the strong smell of sunflowers and ironweed in the dew, the clear blue and gold of the sky, the evening star, the purr of milk into pails, the grunts and squeals of the pigs fighting over their supper. I began to feel the loneliness of the farm-boy at evening, when the chores seem everlastingly the same, and the world so far away.” That Jim’s final trip to the prairie makes him long for his industrial home signals even further his participation in traditional pastoralism, as he attains the “critical vision of salutary, simply life that will presumably sustain” him when he returns “to the great world on the horizon.”⁷¹

Here Jim’s prairie transcends the limitations of “the world so far away,” and in the process becomes a “highly selective ideological construct” removed from the effects of industrial expansion.⁷² After his glowing depiction of the environment, Jim feels isolated and distanced from the real, imagining “the world” as distant, and the rural haven as “everlasting.”⁷³ In this way Jim effects a final division of Antonia’s world and the world of the prairie, even in the present tense, from the world of industrial society. Through the unfolding narrative, Cather suggests that Jim’s habits of compartmentalized thought, reinforced over time, directly enable him not only to justify his past actions against the prairie (as in the scene with the snake) but furthermore to allow him to continue unconflicted in his exploitation of what’s left of the American wilderness.

⁷¹ Love, *Practical Ecology* 66.

⁷² Buell, 32.

⁷³ That Jim’s final trip to the prairie makes him long for his industrial home signals even further his participation in traditional pastoralism, particularly in the novel’s final section. As Glen Love writes, “In the pastoral world, amid sylvan groves and rural characters—idealized images of country existence—the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the salutary, simple life that will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon” (66).

Cather signals the threat Jim's imagination poses to the current environment through his final walk across the Nebraska prairie. After his trip to see Antonia, Jim reflects:

I took a long walk north of the town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks. Out there I felt at home again. Overhead the sky was that indescribable blue of autumn; bright and shadowless, hard as enamel...my mind was full of pleasant things; trips I meant to take with the Cuzak boys, in the Bad Lands and up on the Stinking Water. There were Cuzaks to play with for a long while yet.⁷⁴

Not only will the rural havens of family and hard work exist everlastingly in Jim's mind, but the real wild spaces of America will live on in Jim's narrative forever. Here he stands on the undeveloped hillsides like a prospector, reclaiming those undeveloped fields as "home." In the bare country, he finds a space to imagine the boyhood adventures he might undertake with Antonia's hardy young children, yet ironically, the "trips" Jim takes all seem to require trains. Jim, living in the city on wealth earned building railroads through the West, ends his story alone on the barely visible, overgrown road slowly disappearing into the prairie of "earlier times," completing his "little circle" of "man's experience" by reimagining an experience of childhood no longer possible on the developing prairie, the same revision he enacts in writing down the story.

Cather persistently underscores the connection between Jim's pastoral preservation project and the disappearance of the unique ecological region he describes, exposing the dangers of literary "Environmental doublethink" in a way that anticipates the work of contemporary ecocritics. Cather's identification with Jim suggests that she feels powerfully struck by the need to differentiate herself and her writing from the egocentric patterns of thought which drive Jim's narration, while still exposing and

⁷⁴ Cather *My Antonia*, 350.

critiquing those patterns as real ecological threats. In this way, the story illustrates Cather's distinct awareness of the real danger of using up the "material out of which countries are made" by divorcing the real places of the American frontier from the imagined wild spaces of pastoral fiction.

Chapter Three: *The Professor's House*

In *The Professor's House*, Cather returns to the problem of privileging imagined ideals over physical actualities, only her concern extends beyond the health of the prairie to include the health of the mind. Unlike Jim, who reconstructs the natural world to fit his own imperialist agenda, many of Cather's later heroes recognize the threat to the environment inherent in industrial progress.⁷⁵ According to Mary Ryder, Cather's later fiction memorializes the plight of heroes who resent the increasing mechanization of modern society, but whose voices against it go unheard. In *The Professor's House*, Cather presents two such characters offering what Ryder calls a "cry in the wilderness" against modern industrialization, but while one comes from the open space of the wild Blue Mesa, the other comes from the intellectual confines of the Professor's house.⁷⁶ As Cather demonstrates in *My Antonia*, the "wilderness" matters as much as the "cry," and makes all the difference in whether the hero finds productive fulfillment through his real or symbolic removal from industrial society, or whether the "wilderness" to which he retreats merely echoes back his lament.

Through Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland and the spaces they inhabit, Cather presents two such versions of individuals crying out against the rampant industrialization of modern American society. Their parallel narratives allow Cather to critique those

⁷⁵ As Leonard Lutwack remarks, "Cather was disillusioned with rural life as she saw it on the great plains....[and] identified the cause in the materialism of individuals" (162-163).

⁷⁶ Interestingly, most book jackets for *The Professor's House* either feature the study, the Blue Mesa, or a view of the Blue Mesa from the Professor's study.

philosophies which attempt to escape industrial society by erecting a wall between the intellectual and the material, the ideal and the natural, the mind and the body. Through allusions to Platonic forms and her ironic characterization of Godfrey St. Peter's insistent idealism, Cather crafts a pointed revision of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, wherein the landscape resists its reduction to a blank canvas for the ideal forms of men's imaginations. St. Peter imagines his "upper world" as the unfurnished upstairs study where he grapples with intellectual ideas, and the "lower world" of the house as the place where he fulfills the obligatory role of father, husband, and teacher.⁷⁷ Cather emphasizes St. Peter's Platonic division of ideals from lived realities in order to effect an important reversal in which the bright upper world of intellectualism becomes St. Peter's darkened cave. Although St. Peter attempts to travel between the two realms, as advocated in Plato's allegory, as a result he becomes a kind of disembodied eye, increasingly distant from physical reality and trapped within the isolated world of ideals.

Scholarship surrounding *The Professor's House* enforces a similar mind/body dualism in Cather's work, isolating her ecoconsciousness from her philosophical and intellectual concerns. Here I attempt to unite the recent scholarship of critics like Lisa Hughes and Anne Mosely, who read *The Professor's House* for its engagement with Platonic idealism, with the ecocritical perspectives offered by scholars from across the expanding canon of ecoconscious Cather criticism—to study the novel for its complex

⁷⁷ Janis Stout suggests that we might read St. Peter's intellectual retreat as an expression of Cather's own anxiety over removing herself from human society: "Refusing to leave his study... is an act of clinging to his intellectualized escapism. We can read in this, perhaps, Cather's suspicion that she, too, may have demonstrated a dehumanizing commitment to her writing over the years, especially when she refused Isabelle's offer of a home and a new study on the grounds that she would not be able to write there. In 1924, when she was well into the novel, she said that she could scarcely stand company any longer but wanted only to be alone" (210).

mingling of environmental thought and intellectual philosophy.⁷⁸ I argue that by challenging St. Peter's vision of his "upper world," and contrasting it against the "upper world" of the Blue Mesa in "Tom Outland's Story," Cather critiques the very notion of a self which can exist independent of place and bodily experience.⁷⁹ Cather thus suggests that fulfillment and enlightenment are only possible in environments that reconnect individuals with the natural world. In such surroundings, the physical and intellectual experiences of knowledge coincide rather than conflict. With this revision, Cather secures the value of landscape and place in the construction of human consciousness.

Read within an ecocritical context, *The Allegory of the Cave* symbolizes not only what Socrates describes as the "upward journey of the soul" to the "world of knowledge" but furthermore the kind of egocentric idealism which Cather and other nature writers seem to disavow.⁸⁰ In Plato's Allegory, Socrates postulates that most people live as prisoners in the "lower world" of the cave. They are chained to the rock face by their necks and hands, and can only see the cave's opposite wall. The light in the "upper world," which exists on the cliffs above the cave, casts shadows of real objects up above on the rock face at which the chained people stare. The prisoners mistake the shadows that they perceive as actual truth, and Socrates claims that even if released from their shackles and turned towards the light, most people would resent the brightness above and

⁷⁸ Anne Moseley, "Spatial Structures and Forms in *The Professor's House*," *Cather Studies* 3, (1996): 197-211.

Lisa B. Hughes, "Gender, Sexuality, and Writing in Plato and Cather," *Classical and Modern Literature: A Quarterly* 22, no. 1, (Spring 2002): 49-60.

⁷⁹ Glen Love also argues that Cather insists on an embodied self by focusing primarily on Tom's experience in the natural world on the Blue Mesa. Here, I hope to build on that notion by examining more fully the cause of disembodiment in Cather's *The Professor's House*, which seems to stem as much from intellectualism as from materialism and common culture.

⁸⁰ Plato, *Plato's Republic*, Ed. and trans. A. D. Lindsay (London: Everyman's Library, 1964), 208.

try to turn back around. However, if an individual “is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he’s forced into the presence of the sun himself,” he will eventually become accustomed to the light of the “upper world,” and come to recognize the actual realities (or intellectual “forms”) casting shadows on the walls of the cave.⁸¹ Against their “natural” desire to stay near the light, souls who have journeyed to the “upper world” must be made to “descend to human affairs” once more in order to guide others to enlightenment and to become interpreters of the shadows on the rock.⁸²

Plato thus presents an enlightenment paradigm based on an ascent to knowledge and light, and a subsequent descent into “human miseries” and “mortal affairs” which Cather questions and repeats through Tom and St. Peter’s parallel narratives in *The Professor’s House*. Throughout the novel, St. Peter travels between his third-floor academic study and the “human” house and natural world below.⁸³ The novel begins after St. Peter has completed his histories, *The Spanish Adventures*, successfully enough to afford the new house into which his wife has already moved.⁸⁴ Yet as his family moves forward, St. Peter retreats further and further into his intellectual den, refusing to descend into the “worldliness” of everyday affairs.⁸⁵ Conversely, in the novel’s centerpiece, “Tom Outland’s Story,” Tom travels up and eventually down the Blue Mesa, where he and Roddy Blake discover the remnants of a lost civilization. Tom calls the mesa “a world

⁸¹ Plato, 210.

⁸² Plato, 210.

⁸³ Cather, *The Professor*, 27.

⁸⁴ St. Peter’s authorship presents an interesting parallel to Jim’s, as each writer overwrites their chosen landscape into a triumphant conqueror narrative. Importantly, where Jim writes about place based primarily on his personal experience, St. Peter writes about region based primarily on his scholarly research.

⁸⁵ Cather, *The Professor*, 160.

above the world,” and like St. Peter and the enlightened souls of Plato’s allegory, feels a natural desire to stay in that upper world forever. When Roddy sells all the artifacts found within the Cliff City, Tom rejects him for the same vulgar materialism that motivates St. Peter’s steady retreat into intellectualism, and that Cather herself often complained of when discussing modern culture.⁸⁶ Yet after Roddy departs, Tom discovers an “upper world” within the canyon that escapes the standardization of industrial society through a reconnection with natural rhythms and forces on the Blue Mesa. Unlike the impotent intellectualism into which St. Peter retreats, Tom’s experience of the natural “upper world” on the Blue Mesa enables him make a successful descent into the “lower world” of everyday existence.

Cather alerts the reader to her critique of intellectual idealism by signifying recognizably on Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in her furnishing of St. Peter’s upstairs room. St. Peter shares his study with two dress “forms”—mannequins used by Augusta the housemaid to make clothes for St. Peter’s wife and daughters. Like the forms in Plato’s allegory, these outlines inform St. Peter’s conception of femininity to such an extent that the real women in his life suffer by comparison.⁸⁷ Although St. Peter revels in the absence of his wife, Lillian, and daughters, Kitty and Rosamond, when they move away from the old house, he staunchly refuses to part with the “forms” in his study. He

⁸⁶ In “On The Professor’s House,” Cather claims that she deliberately filled the first half of the novel with “American properties, clothes, furs, and petty ambitions...until one got rather stifled,” giving vent to her frustrations with standardization and materialism in post WWI culture.

⁸⁷ Interestingly, St. Peter seems most often to criticize his daughter’s silhouettes. Rosamond is too tall, too wide in the hips and shoulders, and reminds St. Peter of his “old slab-sided Kanuck grandfather” (27). Kathleen in profile looked to St. Peter, “just like an interrogation point,” and her only redeeming qualities are the shadows cast by her cheek-bones, which erase her features rather than bring them out (27). However comic St. Peter’s critiques, they indicate that St. Peter’s predilection for ideal forms deeply informs his evaluation of living things.

tells Augusta, “They shan’t be wheeled. They stay right there in their own place. You shan’t take away my ladies.”⁸⁸ Although St. Peter insists on the presence of the forms in his study, their actual physicality repulses his aesthetic sensibility: “Though this figure looked so ample and billowy (as if you might lay your head upon its deep-breathing softness and rest safe forever) if you touched it you suffered a severe shock, no matter how many times you had touched it before. It presented the most unsympathetic surface imaginable.”⁸⁹ Here Cather’s description illustrates not only St. Peter’s preference for ideals over actualities, but furthermore proves that his vision of idealized womanhood cannot be upheld even by the physical forms which inspire them. Thus the “forms” to which St. Peter clings exist for his eyes only, as touching them brings them out of the realm of ideals and into the tainted world of imperfections and actualities.⁹⁰ Thus like the disembodied soul in Plato’s allegory, St. Peter’s intellectual life exists in staunch opposition to the physicality of the world around him.

Not only does St. Peter’s intellectual idealism separate him from other individuals and physical realities, but it furthermore makes static the power and fluctuations of the natural environment in which he lives. St. Peter meticulously removes every blade of grass from his “walled-in garden,” which he begins in response to the birth of his first child.⁹¹ The pains he takes to organize and control his garden thus arise out of a desire to

⁸⁸ Cather, *The Professor’s House*, 21.

⁸⁹ Cather, *The Professor’s House*, 18.

⁹⁰ It is also worth noting the possessive phrase “my ladies” that St. Peter uses when discussing the “forms.” Unlike his daughters, who constantly frustrate him with their stubborn independence, the “forms” can be owned. Not only are they docile, but they are unchanging, making them all the more possessable.

⁹¹ Cather, *The Professor’s House*, 14.

have a stronger say in the processes of growth and reproduction in nature.⁹² While the garden provides an outlet for St. Peter's discomfort with nature's own processes, Lake Michigan gives St. Peter an escape from everydayness into what at first seems like a natural paradise. Cather writes that St. Peter's happiest memories occur on Lake Michigan, where "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."⁹³ This version of the lake idealizes the water past its physical point of reference just as St. Peter's imagining of Augusta's "forms" moves beyond the physical possibilities of the female figure.⁹⁴ St. Peter sees the idealized, unchanging lake as a physical and intellectual retreat, next to which the harsh land and its struggling inhabitants represent "dreariness" and ugly materialism. Thus like St. Peter's appreciation for his garden and affection for the female form, his love for Lake Michigan relies on escaping the realities of nature alongside the shortcomings of civilization in his pursuit of an idealized intellectual space.

Furthermore, in considering St. Peter's reification of the Lake, it is important to remember that Cather's understanding of water went beyond idyllic and aesthetic appreciation.⁹⁵ Mary Ryder points out that Cather's "rambles along Back Creek, Virginia,

⁹² St. Peter claims to have "got the upper hand" of his garden, and in her descriptions Cather emphasizes the stone wall, gravel walks, and unnatural variety of vegetation which St. Peter has imposed on his "plot of land" (40).

⁹³ Cather, *The Professor*, 40.

⁹⁴ This passage also mirrors an often quoted moment in *O Pioneers!*, where Cather writes that on the Nebraska prairie, "the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes" (*O Pioneers!* 10). There, the power of the land stands as the "great fact" of life, and humans struggle within its limitations for survival.

⁹⁵ See Mary Ryder for more on Cather's interest in wetland preservation, as evidenced in Cather's participation in environmental activism and focus on the fickleness of water in her early work.

undoubtedly sparked her interest in water conservation, but of equal importance was her experience on the open plains, which, in a given season, could parch and blow away.”⁹⁶ After her years living on the Nebraska prairie, Cather knew that water was anything but constant, anything but infinite, and anything but “*toujours plus naïf*,” as St. Peter describes Lake Michigan.⁹⁷ Although St. Peter sets his description of the lake in opposition to the always changing, always complex properties of civilization on land, in the process he fashions water into something static and constant. Thus even when enjoying the physical environment, St. Peter must ignore its fundamental properties of fluctuation and unpredictability in order to appreciate his experience of the natural world. In this way, he exhibits the kind of relinquishment Buell cites as the first step to developing an ecological consciousness—the disavowal of material commodities—but he fails to achieve the dissolution of ego required to recognize the particularity of place. Instead, the natural world around him becomes subsumed into his own central consciousness, and as a result, the idealized lake becomes a kind of anywhere space, lacking in concrete detail and overwhelmingly Arcadian in St. Peter’s descriptions.

The battle between physical and ideal realities in St. Peter’s world-view coincides with the struggle Plato predicts for individuals traveling between the “upper” and “lower” worlds of the Allegory. In the Allegory, Socrates claims that part of enlightenment comes from recognizing the “false realities” of the shadows in the cave and seeing reality instead in the “intellectual world.”⁹⁸ Secured in his study with the “forms” of feminine comfort and companionship, and with a view of the lake from his window, St. Peter

⁹⁶ Ryder, 78.

⁹⁷ Cather, *The Professor’s House*, 31.

⁹⁸ Plato, 208.

supplants the reality of the house and world below him with the idealized and intellectual visions of reality he sees in his “upper world.” St. Peter’s altered version of reality affects a reification of “nature” beyond its physical counterpoint which redefines “nature” itself as an ideal that exists above the world, rather than as a living presence within the world.⁹⁹ Cather illustrates that St. Peter’s intellectual “upper world” opposes not only the material “worldliness” of commonplace life, but also the “worldliness” of nature, ironically binding him away from the natural world as thoroughly as Plato’s unenlightened individuals are bound to the wall of his allegorical cave.

Even as she illustrates St. Peter’s devotion to his “upper world” of ideals, Cather overwrites St. Peter’s upstairs study and intellectual life with signs of darkness and illusion similar to those which Plato ascribes to the “lower world” of the Cave. St. Peter claims to have trained his mind to be “active at a fixed time” of night, implying not only that his mind is inactive during the brightness of day, but furthermore that his intellectual process has become dependent on hours of darkness and isolation (page number). Even in his study, St. Peter is plagued with unstable sources of light and heat. Whenever his “faithful kerosene lamp” ran empty, he “jammed an eyeshade on his forehead and worked by the glare of that tormenting pear-shaped bulb, sticking out of the wall on a short curved neck just four feet above his table.”¹⁰⁰ Not only does St. Peter’s “faithful” lamp prove fickle, but furthermore the bright light of the “pear-shaped bulb” proves brighter than St. Peter can bear. In the Allegory of the Cave, traveling between “upper” and

⁹⁹ For instance, St. Peter’s redefinition of what’s “natural” appears in the following criticism of his wife, Lillian: “That worldliness...which had developed so strongly in Lillian in the last few years, seemed to Louie [St. Peter’s son-in-law] as natural and proper as it seemed unnatural to Godfrey” (*TPH* 160).

¹⁰⁰ Cather, *The Professor*, 27.

“lower” worlds requires a slow adjustment of the eye to the brightness of the upper world and the darkness of the lower. If exposed to pure light too quickly, a prisoner’s eyes would “ache,” and his “journey would be one of pain and annoyance.”¹⁰¹ Unlike the enlightened soul of Plato’s allegory, who learns to study the sun itself directly, St. Peter shields himself from light in his intellectual study, and struggles to keep just enough spark alive to see the dark ink on the pages before him.¹⁰²

The fragility of St. Peter’s light source reflects the general instability of his vision of reality—an instability which Cather suggests results from St. Peter’s stringent separation of physical and intellectual realities. Returning to the image of a large body of water, Cather writes that to St. Peter, “The university, his new house, his old house, everything about him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a sea-sick man.”¹⁰³ Because Cather has already revealed that St. Peter is a strong swimmer and lover of waters, her simile seems to imply that escaping the confines of the boat and swimming in the water itself (which St. Peter frequently does on Lake Michigan) would be the ideal solution for a “sea-sick man.” However, in the view from his study, the lake becomes a “blue smear” on the horizon, and rather than submerging himself in the water, St. Peter seeks stability by climbing further up into his “unsupportable” house. Hiding in the metaphoric crow’s nest of the ship, St. Peter attempts to overcome his sea-sickness by moving away from the actual water and natural

¹⁰¹ Plato, 208.

¹⁰² Furthermore, it could be argued that the words on paper symbolize the shadows on the cave wall, particularly as St. Peter commits himself to writing histories, which etch events of the past onto paper to be read in the present.

¹⁰³ Cather, *The Professor*, 150.

world, and in the process further entraps himself in the isolated world of ideals.¹⁰⁴ By darkening St. Peter's "upper world," and distancing him from the realities of the natural world, Cather complicates Plato's conclusion that the "upper world" of happiness and knowledge is one of pure intellectualism. Leaving St. Peter in limbo between realities, Cather shifts the scene of the novel to the wild Blue Mesa of "Tom Outland's Story," and there crafts a revised "upper world" which reinforces rather than severs the connection between individual and environment, mind and body.

Many critics cite Cather's shift in scenery between Part I and Part II as an immediate transition from stuffy society to natural freedom: Janis Stout writes, "'Tom Outland's Story' brings the breath of fresh air and the sense of open spaces that Cather spoke of when she likened it to an open window in a Dutch painting of an interior scene."¹⁰⁵ Despite the stylistic shift, in the first half of "Tom Outland's Story" Tom demonstrates many of the same tendencies toward intellectual idealism, and resulting distaste for the imperfect natural world, which Cather critiques in the preceding section of the novel. When Tom first enters the Mesa, he does so out of frustration with a defiant set of steers: Tom explains, "I was furious to have them steal a march on me, and I swore to myself I'd follow them over and drive them back."¹⁰⁶ Tom's initial resentment for the unpredictability of nature finds further expression in the diary he keeps of his first summer on the Mesa. St. Peter later claims that the entries are so dry and matter-of-fact

¹⁰⁴ The vertigo St. Peter experiences in trying to find coherence between his ideals and actualities mirrors the kind of confusion caused upon leaving or re-entering the cave: Socrates claims, "the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye" (line number) Note how Plato emphasizes the separateness of the mind's eye from the body's eye even in identifying their similar functions.

¹⁰⁵ Stout, 211.

¹⁰⁶ Cather, *The Professor*, 198.

that they would mean nothing to readers without a sketch of Tom Outland the individual, who St. Peter finds absent within the pages. By recording the details of the excavation in such a manner, Tom exerts a form of ownership over the objects found on the mesa, filing them away in the “merchant’s ledger” which he uses for a journal.¹⁰⁷ Through the merchant’s ledger, Cather suggests that Tom performs a type of commoditization of the Mesa’s treasures by imposing an intellectual objectivity between himself and the artifacts.¹⁰⁸ More importantly, the fact that the journal contains nothing at all of Tom’s experience on the mesa suggests that Tom’s intellectualism allows him to see the Cliff City and its physical artifacts as something entirely external to himself. Thus Tom becomes a kind of disembodied eye scrutinizing the “upper world” of the mesa. Like St. Peter, he relinquishes the material culture of town, but maintains a worldview in which his own ego remains the primary subject.

For Cather, the intellectual distance between self and nature functions as a catalyst for idealizing space past its physical point of reference, and towards the kind of symbolic value allows for environmental degradation. When Tom travels to Washington to try to garner archeological interest in the artifacts he and Roddy discovered, his experience of modernized society combines with his intellectual and physical distance from the mesa to launch the mesa itself towards an abstract ideal. Tom’s idealized vision of the Cliff City comes to hold more value for Tom than either his friendship with Roddy or his own experience on the Mesa. After returning from Washington, Tom’s description of the Mesa swells into distinctly idealistic terms: “When I pulled out on the mesa, the

¹⁰⁸ When Roddy later sells the objects, he saves the journal as Tom’s “private property,” and during their final fight, Roddy accuses Tom of assuming an air of proprietorship over the entire operation.

rays of sunlight fell slantingly through the little twisted pinons,—the light was all in between them, as red as a daylight fire, and they fairly swam in it. Once again I had that glorious feeling that I’ve never had anywhere else, the feeling of being *on the mesa*, in a world above the world....it was like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky.”¹⁰⁹

Tom experiences the mesa as a bodily feeling, yet the italicized phrase “*on the mesa*” implies that his exaltation results at least in part from his privileged vantage point above the mesa itself. “[*O*n the mesa,” he enters “a world above the world,” suggesting he sees the mesa as a kind of “upper world” space in which he, like St. Peter, can escape the dreadful commonness of everyday life which he recently experienced in the city.¹¹⁰

Although Tom offers similar descriptions of the Mesa earlier in the narrative, he realizes the extent of his attachment to the place and its artifacts only after returning from Washington D. C., where he felt “a kind of low-spiritedness [he] had never known before.”¹¹¹ When he finds out about the sold artifacts, he admits that “until that night, I had never known myself that I cared more about [the artifacts] than about anything else in the world.”¹¹² Thus the distance Tom maintains between himself and his environment allows him to transform the mesa in his mind into an idealized personal paradise—an antidote to the rampant consumerism and standardization of modern industrial society.

Tom’s heightened idealism sends him on a similar climb into the intellectual “upper world,” which for Cather is simply another darkened cave. Setting his ideals in

¹⁰⁹ Cather, *The Professor*, 240

¹¹⁰ The materialistic couple who houses him and the workers filing in and out of buildings all seem to Tom like “people in slavery, who ought to be free” (*The Professor*, 234).

¹¹¹ Cather, *The Professor*, 233.

¹¹² Cather, *The Professor*, 239.

opposition to vulgar materialism, Tom returns to the mesa with a heightened appreciation for the aesthetic value of the Cliff City that exceeds the limitations of the physical space. In their final fight, Tom explains to Roddy that the Cliff City “had been preserved through the ages by a *miracle*” (italics mine).¹¹³ By attributing the continued presence of the city to a “miracle,” Tom removes agency from the canyon whose particular ecological climate actually preserved the remains of the city.¹¹⁴ Similarly, he tells Roddy that he would have “sold any living woman first” before selling the skeleton they named “Mother Eve,” implying again the primacy of idealized value over natural life.¹¹⁵ In both examples, and in the fervency with which he attacks Roddy for selling all the artifacts, Tom proves that his attachment to the Mesa stems more from his intellectual visualization of the Mesa than from the life and history of the Mesa itself. Interestingly, when Tom watches Roddy ride away, he states, “by this time, my eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and I could see Blake quite clearly...I could hear him for a long way down, and the sounds were comforting to me, though I didn’t realize it. Then the silence closed in. I went to sleep that night hoping I would never waken.”¹¹⁶ The transition from light to darkness harkens back to the Allegory of the Cave, where the soul’s eyes adjust slowly to darkness after descending from the light. However, like St. Peter, Tom experiences his darkness from the height of his intellectualism rather than from the depths of his worldliness. Isolated and enclosed in darkness, Tom finds himself

¹¹³ Cather, *The Professor*, 244.

¹¹⁴ Roddy jokes earlier that “wind and sun are good housekeepers,” indicating that they perhaps discussed the “miracle” of preservation scientifically at some point during the excavation.

¹¹⁵ Cather, *The Professor*, 244.

¹¹⁶ Cather, *The Professor*, 248.

trapped in the same cave of intellectual idealism that Cather fashions out of St. Peter's study.

By bringing Tom's intellectual journey to such a recognizable point of defeat ("I went to sleep that night hoping I would never waken"), Cather indicates that the catharsis which follows arises not out of Tom's own initiative, but instead from the Mesa itself. After riding to town to try to catch Roddy, Tom climbs back into the Mesa around sunset, and in many ways the scene mirrors his return Washington D. C.. The "upper world" he finds on this return, however, is markedly different from the ideal landscape he saw before: "The heavenly bodies look so much more remote from the bottom of a deep canyon than they do from the level. The climb of the walls helps out the eye, somehow. I lay down on a solitary rock that was like an island in the bottom of the valley, and looked up.... I remember these things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole."¹¹⁷ Instead of emphasizing his placement "*on the mesa*" "in a world above the world," here Tom lies in the bottom of the canyon and feels distant from the "heavenly bodies" above. Tom recognizes that by making the heavens seem distant, the canyon itself "helps out the eye," reminding the seer of the closeness of their immediate surroundings by making the "upper world" of the heavens seem "remote." Instead of "breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky," Tom now feels the rock beneath his body, and opens himself to experiencing life *within* the canyon, rather than above it.

In his true moment of connectivity, Tom moves beyond his initial relinquishment of industrial society and into a relinquishment of ego, which allows him to experience his

¹¹⁷ Cather, *The Professor* 250-251.

own human nature and the living nature in the material world. In order to see the mesa “as a whole,” Tom has to be reminded of his distance from the ideal forms of the heavens, and has to feel “all of [himself]” present within the natural environment. The situating of the scene around a sunset not only parallels Tom’s earlier moment “on the mesa,” but furthermore indicates the kind of blended unity Cather imagines between Plato’s sharply divided “upper world” of light and the “lower world” of darkness. Both sun and moon hang overhead as Tom achieves the clarity of vision in which he not only sees, but also understands the mesa: “It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading.”¹¹⁸ This “understanding” parallels the kind of enlightenment which should result from extended time in the “upper world” of Plato’s allegory. However for Tom, such knowledge requires recognizing his environment as a living and evolving “series of experiments,” rather than as a static object which he can simply see and then know. By casting Tom’s new understanding as that obtained through “a series of experiments,” Cather also indicates the level of personal involvement required in order to achieve such vision. While the experiments “are leading” Tom to a conclusion, Tom, as the scientist, plays an active role in the evolving process. Thus through Tom’s epiphany, Cather suggests that “happiness unalloyed” becomes attainable when an individual reconnects their mind with their immediate surroundings, and recognizes their own stake and responsibility in the ongoing natural processes of the ecological world.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Cather, *The Professor* 250

¹¹⁹ For more on the intimate connection between “nature” and “human nature,” see Glen Love’s *Practical Ecocriticism*, and his essay “Nature and Human Nature: Interdisciplinary Convergences on Cather’s Blue Mesa” in *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*.

Cather completes her ecological revision of the intellectual “upper world” through the rest of Tom’s time on the mesa, during which time he lives according to the natural rhythms of the world’s revolutions. Tom tells St. Peter:

Every morning, when the sun’s rays first hit the mesa top, while the rest of the world was in shadow, I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything. Nothing tired me. Up there alone, a close neighbour to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way. And at night, when I watched it drop down behind the edge of the plain below me, I used to feel that I couldn’t have borne another hour of that consuming light, that I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep.¹²⁰ (*TPH* 252)

Unlike the disembodied soul of Plato’s Allegory, which finds knowledge by seeing and studying the sun, Tom soaks up the “solar energy in some direct way,” and is filled “to the brim” with the power of the sun itself. Thus he moves from an intellectual evaluation with his environment to a biological experience of his body’s natural processes. Glen Love identifies such physicality throughout Tom’s experience in the Mesa: “Basic to Tom’s experience is the primacy of bodily movement, swimming the river, running, walking and scrambling over stony ground.”¹²¹ In these early experiences, Tom experiences his body by acting within the natural world—swinging, running, walking, scrambling. Yet after his relinquishment of transcendent ideals, he begins to feel his body being acted upon, experiencing the natural processes of his own body. The above description likens Tom to a plant in the canyon, absorbing sunlight and converting it through photosynthesis into productive energy. Leaving “the rest of the world in shadow,” Cather secures the world Tom enters on the mesa as a revised “upper world” of

¹²⁰ Cather, *The Professor’s House*, 252.

¹²¹ Glen Love, “Nature and Human Nature: Interdisciplinary Convergences on Cather’s Blue Mesa” in *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*, 19.

true enlightenment, where reconnecting with the ecological world facilitates a realignment of the mind and body into a cohesive whole.

Many critics note that when Cather moves readers from Tom's mesa to St. Peter's study in Book III, the style of the narrative shifts further than ever away from the clutter of human society filling the early pages: as Glen Love explains, "Tom Outland's story provides the cleansing, eradicating wind—sweeping aside the propensity to frame the world as a succession of human cultural constructs—that begins the novel's progressive diminution."¹²² Love argues that in the novel's final volume, St. Peter makes a return to "primal nature" similar to Tom's reconnection with the ecological world. However, read in the context of Plato's Allegory, St. Peter's final chapter appears to strengthen the divide between nature and humanity, to such an extent that in the climactic moment of St. Peter's possible extinction, his mind and body act independently of one another. That Tom's story sits at the center of St. Peter's transformation indicates, as others have noted, that the release of Tom's story causes some change in the Professor which leads him to his near-death in the study. If, as Love suggests, and Cather herself indicated in interviews, Tom's story functions as a "clean, eradicating wind" in an otherwise stuffy narrative, then the final shutting of the window holds symbolic power as the moment at which St. Peter loses his connection with Tom, and, by extension, his tenuous connection with the natural world.

As she isolates St. Peter in the upstairs intellectual den, Cather frequently indicates that Tom Outland once bridged the widening gap between St. Peter and the ecological world. St. Peter's respect for Tom seems to arise out of the way he blends

¹²² Love, Glen, *Practical Ecology: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003) 108.

powerful physicality with profound intellect, and his early descriptions betray his fascination with both. When Tom extends a handful of turquoises for St. Peter's daughters to see, St. Peter looks "not at the turquoises, but at the hand that held them: 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. What a hand! He could see it yet, with the blue stones lying in it."¹²³ In this description, St. Peter pays scrupulous attention to the physical details of Tom's hand, each of which suggests that Tom has lived an active life both indoors and out-of-doors. The "many-lined palm" suggests the wisdom of experience, while the "beautifully shaped thumb" separates itself from the rest of the hand, as though symbolic of the imaginative, intellectual side of Tom's nature. When Tom walks into St. Peter's garden for their first meeting, Cather's description of him implies just such a blending of intellect and physicality: Cather narrates, "a young man in a heavy winter suit and a Stetson hat, carrying a grey canvas telescope, came in at the green door."¹²⁴ While he seems to literally arrive out of the green world, fitted for the rough weather and beating sun, he also carries the telescope, a marker of philosophical interests beyond the material world.

Tom's dual nature makes him St. Peter's perfect conduit to the physical world, connecting him to the Southwestern landscape of St. Peter's *Spanish Adventurers*, and furthermore to the kind of life experience which St. Peter's intellectual study denies him. St. Peter attributes the success of his later histories almost entirely to Tom, whose stories

¹²³ Cather, *The Professor*, 121.

¹²⁴ Cather, *The Professor*, 112.

of the Southwest gave him an intimate connection to the landscape and history that he had failed to achieve on his own. His reliance on Tom as a connection to the world appears in his desire to travel with him to the Southwest and to Paris—to *see* Tom *seeing* the historical sites, rather than to experience them for himself. The descriptions of St. Peter’s actual travels to the Southwest with Tom merit only a line or two of text, and center on Tom’s knowledge of the outdoors rather than the outdoors themselves: “Tom could take a sentence from Garces’ diary and find the exact spot at which the missionary crossed the Rio Colorado...Given one pueblo, he could always find the route by which the priest had reached the next.”¹²⁵ St. Peter’s experience of the Southwest is thus mediated not only through Tom, whose acumen overwhelms St. Peter’s memory of place, but furthermore through the ancient footpaths which determine their journey. Cather illustrates the intense ethnocentricity which can result from life in an academic study by highlighting St. Peter’s need to experience nature second, or even third hand. By making Tom the matrix through which Tom sees and experiences physical life on earth, Cather establishes a dependence which, when lost, leads St. Peter to the brink of natural death.

The mediated experience of nature which Cather critiques through St. Peter moves steadily towards an idealization of the mediator, which Cather affects through the way St. Peter remembers Tom after his death in World War I. No longer the perfect blend of rugged masculinity and intellectualism, St. Peter re-imagines Tom in such a way as to glorify his young death as an escape from ordinariness: “What change would have come in his blue eye, in his fine long hand with the backspringing thumb, which had never handled things that were not the symbols of ideas? A hand like that, had he lived, must

¹²⁵ Cather, *The Professor*, 259.

have been put to other uses. . . . He had escaped all that. He had made something new in the world—and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others.”¹²⁶ Cather highlights the overstatement of St. Peter’s description by making this passage so closely parallel to St. Peter’s first vision of Tom’s hand. Gone are the deep lines of experience, and the hard won musculature; even the turquoises dug from the Blue Mesa become “symbols of ideas,” valueless in and of themselves. All that remains is the “backspringing thumb,” which earlier symbolizes Tom’s creative potential, and reappears here in St. Peter’s glorification of Tom as an image of ideal youth. In idealizing Tom, like Lake Michigan and the female form, past his physical point of reference, St. Peter completes his removal from the physical world and into the world of ideas.

If, in the Professor’s world, Tom functions as the physical “outland” to St. Peter’s intellectual in-doors, Cather suggests Tom’s symbolic presence through the open window of St. Peter’s study. When describing the novel’s structure, Cather explained that she wanted to make the first sections “overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American properties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions. . . until one got rather stifled. Then [she] wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa.”¹²⁷ The window in St. Peter’s study symbolizes just such a window. St. Peter finds his creative energy in Tom’s experience on the Blue Mesa and the “blue smear” of Lake Michigan, each of which seem to blow in like “fresh air.”

Importantly, the fresh air not only inspires St. Peter, but furthermore keeps his room from filling with fumes of his gas stove—the only source of heat in the chilly

¹²⁶ Cather, *The Professor*, 261.

¹²⁷ Willa Cather, “On The Professor’s House” in *On Writing. Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (New York: Knopf, 1968) 31-32.

upstairs study. In the novel's final climax, St. Peter lies down on his upstairs couch, exhausted by the prospect of his family's return from Europe. As a storm rages outside, he imagines that "The wind would be protection," against asphyxiation, as well as against visitors.¹²⁸ Yet by this point, St. Peter has moved Tom so far beyond the realm of personhood and into the realm of ideals that Tom no longer functions as a conduit for the "fresh air that blew off the mesa," or as St. Peter's connection to the natural world. The gas stove—his unnatural heat source and replacement for the sun—burns out when the window swings shut, closing the professor into the figurative cave with air itself becomes toxic.

The closing of the window signifies the closing of the cave. As St. Peter dozes on his couch, he watches as "the fire made a flickering pattern of light on the wall," signifying his isolation in the revised cave of intellectual retreat.¹²⁹ When the window swings shut, the professor's landscape finally reduces itself to one of pure intellectualism divorced from the external world. Thus divorced, St. Peter's body acts independently from his mind in order to save itself from extinction. The final scene signifies the yearning for the ideal "upper world" experienced by intellectuals, and satiated only by reconnecting with one's environment in body in a way which not only escapes materialistic society, but furthermore abandons the ivory tower of intellectualism which divides philosophical concerns from ecological crises. The asphyxiation which nearly results indicates that an individual consciousness cannot remove itself from the "reality" of the lower world of experience with ease, but rather that we are limited and defined by our environments, embedded in landscape. Thus, Cather critiques the disembodied

¹²⁸ Cather, *The Professor*, 275.

¹²⁹ Cather, *The Professor*, 276.

placelessness of Plato's allegorical "upper world," sets the stage for an experience of knowledge that reconnects rather than severs the connection between individuals and the natural world and thus secures the value of landscape in the construction of human consciousness.

Cather crafts Tom and St. Peter's stories as parallel searches for enlightenment according to the vertical paths to and from human society established in Plato's allegory. Tom's story ends with his decision to fight in World War I, where he makes a descent into "worldly" affairs that symbolically combines intellectual ideals with physical action. The Professor's, on the other hand, ends in his isolated study, where he dreads more than ever the return of his wife and daughters, and of the material world into his intellectual retreat. Although his retirement from society reflects the retreat from commerce made by characters like Antonia, his increasing stoicism marks an ultimate descent not into the natural world, but into his own intellect.

The division between St. Peter's mind and body becomes complete when his body acts independently of his intellectual consent, as he reflects, "when he was confronted with accidental extinction, he had felt no will to resist, but had let chance take its way, as it had done with him so often. He did not remember springing up from the couch."¹³⁰ Yet instead feeling reconnected to his body, which saves him from the apathy of his mind, upon waking St. Peter renounces all "obligations to his family," all "passions" and "joys" and "griefs."¹³¹ Ironically, St. Peter's near death experience signals his ultimate consent to stop living.

¹³⁰ Cather, *The Professor*, 282.

¹³¹ Cather, *The Professor*, 282, 283.

Although for St. Peter the divorce of his mind and body symbolizes a balance between the upper world of ideals and the lower world of experience, Cather's structuring of the novel forces readers to recognize an alternative "upper world" on the Blue Mesa. In this revised "upper world," Tom learns to value life, body, and the natural world over the intellectual idealism that leads him to the greatest error of his youth—the rejection of human companionship. Unlike the "upper world" of Platonic idealism, from which one returns disillusioned and aloof, the "upper world" of the Blue Mesa invigorates the mind and body with a productive enthusiasm for life that can cause positive change in the physical, everyday world. In this way, Cather demonstrates that an escape from material culture and the spiritual crisis caused by industrialization cannot be effected by an intellectual retreat into aesthetic and cerebral idealism, but instead must be achieved by reconnecting the mind to the natural processes of one's body and environment.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

My Antonia and *The Professor's House* demonstrate the depth of Cather's awareness of the ecological crises brought on by increasing industrialization. Not only is the environment of each novel distinctly under threat, but furthermore the happiness and stability of each character's psyche seems directly vulnerable to the sort of split consciousness required to live in an un-naturalizing world. The habits of environmental doublethink adopted by Jim Burden enable him to both reify and destroy the natural environment of his childhood. His subsequent mindset requires frequent imaginative and physical journeys to the place of his youth where he grows increasingly melancholic, longing for the space his own imagination helped destroy. Similarly, St. Peter's philosophic retreats into his "upper world" intellectualism isolate him from the realities of his everyday life. Ironically, as he retreats further from the mundane into the transcendent, he descends into darkness and despair. Thus, the connection to the natural world which Tom experiences in the heart of Cow Canyon marks the kind of aesthetic awakening Cather strives to create in her work. As Tom becomes aware of the presence and power of his environment, he simultaneously loses his desire for mastery or ownership over that environment, and instead begins to balance his intellectual desires with his biological needs and limitations.

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