

Loss, Desire, and Wisdom in Nostalgia Narrative of Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*

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Article History: **Abstract.** Scholarship fields, especially in history and memory studies, have broadly utilized the notion of nostalgia. It has also become an essential part of understanding the narrative in literature. Some studies have used nostalgia and memory to analyze novels. From a qualitative approach, this study analyzes two intrinsic elements (settings and characters) in *The Professor's House*, written by Willa Cather. It applies the nostalgia concept as the main framework. Here, it provides a narrative discussion about people and nostalgia that symbolize loss, desire, materialism, and wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia and memory have been incorporated into human lives that can shape and define our perspectives on some matters. As a human being, nostalgia has become an essential part of remembering, reflecting, and longing for something that happened in the past. Nostalgia derived from the Latin word, "the word home (nostos) and longing (algia) mean longing for a home that is no longer exists" (Legg 2004, p. 100). Nostalgia is also commonly defined as "the painful longing for a lost home, a yearning to return" (Bradbury, 2012, p. 3) or "understood as a hazy perception of the past that glorifies what was and is no more while downplaying all the shortcomings of the past" (Palmberger, 2008, p. 358). Academic fields, for instance, history, memory, and literary studies, apply the notion of nostalgia. In historical context, the study of nostalgia has been famous in connection with colonialization study (Sugg, 2002) and the history of post-war (Palmberger, 2008). Although there is a connection between nostalgia and trauma derived from the discussion of memory and nation, for instance, the nostalgia of

remembrance of a *used-to-be-existed but not anymore* country like Yugoslavia, it functions as a reflection and becomes part of its nation's cultural memory (Lindstorm, 2005 and Volčič, 2007). In a sense, nostalgia can be distinguished from its difference from trauma, although there is a chance for both to intertwine.

Moreover, Sandberg (2018) indicates the relationship between literature and nostalgia. Sandberg states, "Literature is an inherently nostalgic art form, frequently if not exclusively retrospective frequently if not always imbued with the particular emotional intensity of nostalgia" (p. 116). Wagner (2004) states nostalgia had become the framework of British novels in the 18th to 19th centuries to show retrospection and individuality; it also functions to change the characters. Wagner maintains, "*Nostalgia has shaped the novel genre and how its literary history not only reflects but forms, an important part in the formation of Western modernity*" (p.13). Baldwin et al. (2014) also add that nostalgia has become a common theme in modern classic novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* by Defoe and *Remembrance of Things Past* by Proust. Unlike male writers, contemporary classic female writers offered different nuances in portraying the nostalgic moment, as in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, written by Rebecca West; their readers were lured and "confronted with a series of nostalgic rhetorical moves that work to construct West's argument about nationalism and imperialism, and that constitutes her demand for fixed gender roles" (Stec, 1997, p. 140). Yukman (1988) states that Cather applied subjectivity implicitly, referring to *longing* for mother and child relationship and detachment in *My Antonia*. Nealon (1997) maintains that Willa Cather appeared to use *nostalgia as a vehicle* in *The Song of Lark* (p. 18). It questions how far nostalgia supports the literary world, especially well-known American classic writers like Willa Cather. Kress (2009) also gives special attention to the work of Willa Cather, as she considered her one of the iconic American writers and compared to Hemingway, whom both had produced much meaningful nuance and aesthetic narrative in their works.

Willa Cather was a prominent example of an American female writer who received her canonical status in the 1920s (O'Brien, 1988). Her novels are mostly embellished with historical contexts, plot lines of memories, religious allegories, gentle but complex characters, and the selection of plot settings meticulously illustrated both in America and Europe (Yukman, 1988; Kirkland, 2010; Shively, 2017). Some of the prolific works from Cather are *My Antonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), *The Professor's House* (1925), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and some short stories collections like *The Troll Garden* (1905). Moreover, as a phenomenal American writer, her novels have been analyzed and debunked in many theoretical frameworks. Many scholars studied her protuberant works and analyzed them from gender and queer perspectives; for instance, the analysis of *Paul's Case* shows that redefining the function of masculinity was the answer to Oscar Wilde's refusal to become the victim of homophobic society (Summers, 1990 as cited in Nardin, 2008). Furthermore, one of the ultimate works from Cather is a novel titled *The Professor's House* (1925); it portrays the life of Godfrey St. Peter, a fifty-two years old man who works as a Professor of Spanish History at a university in a small town of Hamilton. The story also depicts the privileged life of Godfrey St. Peter, being a successful professor in his middle-aged year and comfortable living with a beautiful wife and two daughters. It consists of three chapters: The Family,

Tom Outland's Story, and The Professor, which makes it more fascinating for Tom Outland himself to narrate the chapter of Tom Outland's Story from the first point of view.

Furthermore, *The Professor's House* is fascinating to discuss and study from different frameworks, for instance, the history of the First World War and the rise of bourgeoisie life in American society in the 1920s (Wilson, 2005; Dyck, 2015). Previous scholars have studied the novel from many frameworks; the analysis concerns gender and sexuality (Bell, 1994; Nagy, 2007; Badenhop, 2015). A study from Nagy (2007) analyzes the maternity and homosexuality relationship between the main characters: The Professor (Godfrey St. Peter) and his protégé Tom Outland, which he describes as a failure in settling down the *mother-son* connection and queer romance. Reynolds (2003) compared the iconic duo between Outland and St. Peter to Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is also a sheer reminder of how peculiar and bizarre relation between these two men, of how obsessed Nick Carraway described Gatsby showed a latent homoeroticism (Fruscione, 2010). In addition, DeBiase (2013) analyzes the liminality of St. Peter and Outland as transcended concerning the world, which contains the memories of places like Blue Mesa, the Lake, and even France. Badenhop (2015) focuses on the female characters in *The Professor's House*. She emphasizes that previous studies only focused on the Professor and Tom Outland; female characters here are pivotal as they play dominant roles in influencing the development of the portrayal of the Professor himself.

This current study analyzes settings, main characters, and supporting characters. The analysis focuses on how nostalgia operates and the symbols of nostalgia in the story. Although the previous studies have discussed *The Professor's House*, this current study intends to provide a further discussion by examining the plot, which contains many flashbacks and ruminations from the past. This study emphasizes implementing the concept of nostalgia as the main framework to analyze the narrative through intrinsic elements: the settings and characters. In addition, the significance of this paper is to discuss the relationship between nostalgia and places, desire and eroticism, materialism, and life wisdom.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper uses a qualitative approach. The object of this study is the novel *The Professor's House* by Willa Cather, using the novel as the primary data source and nostalgia as the framework. This study applies the concept of nostalgia to understand a narrative discussion in literary work since literature can represent and narrate the life situation and conditions in a certain period. Reading literature as an object of remembrance connects and understands through generations (Erl and Rigney, 2006). Moreover, by doing library research, this study looks into secondary sources such as the internet, books, and articles to support the analysis. The aim is to describe and analyze first how settings symbolize nostalgia, the relations between nostalgia and desire in the characters, and the materialism and life wisdom in the nostalgia of Tom Outland in the story. It also explains the protagonist and analyzes the depiction of nostalgia by paying close attention to the various characters and settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Settings as the Epitome of Nostalgia of Sentimental Memories and Loss

Many fields and literary genres have utilized nostalgia concepts to develop the characterization. Wagner states, "*Nostalgia for an ideal space increasingly gave rise to fantasies of particularly eccentric homes, as many of Dickens' fictional home show*" (2004, p. 13). Since settings as an intrinsic element refer to places and time-space, reminiscing the past time and place is also an act of nostalgia with or without the people. For example, Nagy (2007) mentioned that the attic room, the lake, and the garden of St. Peter are described in a womb-like form that implied the longing for a mother figure, a repressed desire for the past. Furthermore, the title, *The Professor's House*, represents the house as the central place where the center of the events and the characters develop. All the characters in the story have spent time in the Professor's house temporarily or permanently. It shows the space for creating and sharing happy and sad memories. The strength of this story relies on picturesque nostalgia, poetic, slow-pace plot, and flashback stories which make the readers feel an unfathomable connection through dialogues between characters and detailed descriptions of time and place.

The time-setting also appeared when St. Peter remembered the flashback of his time in France with its detailed description of memories in Paris. Cather writes, "*He was thinking of certain holidays he had spent alone in Paris*" (p.39). It had become the epitome of his sentimental memories as it might be seen as a youthful and freedom era before St. Peter decided to confine his marriage and needed to share his life with someone else, a part of nostalgia St. Peter wished to retrieve. He also regretted why he did not take Outland to Paris to commemorate his best years and now could only imagine it in a nostalgic frame of imagination (Cather, pp. 99-100). It illustrates the significant connection between place and person that refers to the best things that matter in the nostalgic moments of St. Peter. Time flies, and he already reached his old years.

A garden symbolizes the next level of the life of St. Peter. First, when St. Peter spent his *golden period* in France, it seemed pretty sentimental when he spent time in Luxembourg Garden (Cather, p.39). Also, a garden is one of the main places mentioned in the novel. St. Peter worked in the garden when he first saw Tom Outland (Cather, p.42). Also, St. Peter has a sentimental nostalgia for Kathleen (Kitty). When Kathleen was a kid, she was to play in the garden every morning; his youngest daughter he developed a special kind of affection for (Cather, p.33). In addition, even Tom Outland himself mentioned in his nostalgia narrative when he referred to the garden as a brand new door of life, "*In the spring, just a year after I quarreled with Roddy (Outland's best friend), I landed here and walked into your garden, and the rest you know*" (Cather, p.97), illustrated the starting and a breakthrough of a new kind of life.

When St. Peter entered his elderly age, his life splendor faded away; he had become discouraged due to his loss of Tom Outland, the new attitude of his family, and the arrival of Louie Marsellus to the family. After the demise of Tom Outland, he was disgusted by the hypocrites and haughty personalities of the member of his family they became. Cather thoroughly describes St. Peter's house and location,

symbolizing the traits and persona of his character. St. Peter's house represents the naivety and the years of a happy childhood. From the window of his house, he could see Lake Michigan; this reminded St. Peter of his childhood years (Cather, p.10). The story describes Godfrey St. Peter as the protagonist; he had a seemingly ideal and happy existence until he had to deal with the loss of his favorite student Tom Outland and the behavior changes of his family. His family turned out to be different after receiving Outland's inheritance. When Marsellus, the son-in-law who annoyed St. Peter the most, named the new place of his and Rosamond, St. Peter's oldest daughter, with "Outland" to pay tribute to Tom Outland who invented the Outland engine and gave the patent to Rosamond when they were still together (Cather, p.14). Marsellus disrupted short remembrances and deep connection with Outland when he chose the name "Outland" for his new place. It shows a separation of St. Peter's deep sentimental connection with Outland. It symbolizes the self-loss of St. Peter; it is the loss of his sentimental memories.

Nostalgia and Desire

The Professor's House represents the detailed appearance description of each character. The novel is more than just showing off their identity and class. Cather was very subtle in conveying desire and eroticism of the characters. Cather's distinctive writing creates a story enriched with exquisite phrases and metaphors to forming a sentimental nuance. Her ability to use intricate tensions to thrilling effect is one of her excellent accomplishments as a writer that not only made the readers deeply connected with the characters and the plot but also could feel the hidden allusion and sensuality within the narrative (Wasserman, 1982; Rosowski, 1982; Murphy, 2014). Several Cather's works present the repressed sexual desire to pose a notion of nostalgic-romantic discourse; it also shows her distinction compared to the rest conventional female writers at that time (Yukman, 1988). By showing off the physical features of the character, the meticulous details of St. Peter refers to the portrayal of a handsome and charismatic man whom subtlety brings out the notion of eroticism, "The Professor in pajamas was not an unpleasant sight; for looks, the fewer clothes he had on, the better" (Cather, p.4).

Moreover, the characterization of St. Peter and Outland describes the vagueness of sexual desire; they are both involved in close relationships between man and woman. Outland was in a close relationship with his best friend, Rodney Blake, before he met the Professor; he needed to let go and become a mere memory after Outland ended his engagement with the professor's daughter. On the other hand, From St. Peter's remembrance of Tom Outland, it seems that he always connects it with his deep desire, which is very elusive described. The confusion of desire and affection are mingled in his pensive nostalgia, "[...] the Professor would hear them in the garden: the laughter and exclamations of the little girls, and that singularity individual voice of Tom's—mature, confident, seldom varying in pitch, but full of slight, very moving modulations" (Cather, p.48). Meanwhile, the Professor also consciously admitted his wife's appearance, "he was conscious of pretty little girls in fresh dresses. [...] of his wife's good looks and good taste" (Cather, p.38), but at the same time, the first explanation of the novel hides the other desire. It gives some clue that nostalgia and desire combined into one about his beloved student, "Desire is creation, is the magical element in that

process. If there were an instrument by which to measure desire, one could foretell achievement. He had been able to measure it roughly, just once, in his student Tom Outland, and he had foretold" (Cather, pp. 9-10). Thus, by bringing up the nostalgia of two people that he loves, it seems to offer the context of affection and desire that were once reciprocated but seems to disappear in the elderly years of the Professor: the changing attitude of Lillian and the decease of Outland.

Likewise, an earlier study also identifies Tom Outland as the *surrogate love and male homosexual lover* of St. Peter as he reminded The Professor of his young life (Nagy, 2007, p.4). Nagy (2007) also added that the central spaces in St. Peter's house, like the garden, lake, and attics, also might illustrate the metaphors of same-sex paramours, "While evoking maternal origins, they also suggest homosexuality through erotic symbols, homoerotic fantasies, and subtexts of male-male romance" (p.7). It resonates with The Professor's wife herself is full of jealousy towards his protégé, "St. Peter had no friend in Hamilton of whom Lillian could be possibly jealous until Tom Outland came along" (Cather, p.18). Additionally, Tom Outland was not only described in the nostalgia of the Professor about his masculine features of a manly, mature voice, sandy-haired, and fine-looking boy (Cather, p.43) but also how vividly he remembers about him, "[...] and the Professor thought this was the hottest boy he had ever seen" (Cather, p.45).

Not only had the nostalgia involving Tom Outland but also his past with the Thieraults in Paris been an essential nostalgia for St. Peter. The Thierault boys were very close to St. Peter, "They (Thiereault brothers) were much closer to him (St. Peter) than his brothers" (Cather, p. 40). St. Peter had managed years to live with two lives, both of them very intense" (Cather, p.9); it shows that the Professor had divided his life between his private life and university work. It may also give a clue about the secret identity of St. Peter for having a closeted affection and kept his desire towards other men. Nostalgia hides desire and eroticism; father-and-son connection portrays man-to-man relationship. For Outland he lost a father figure as he kept searching and finally found a mentor and guardian from St. Peter's persona. On the other hand, the Professor has been missing the favorite child he desired but no longer had when he realized that both daughters had disappointed him and had become *distant children* and different from his nostalgia when they were young.

The Nostalgia of Tom Outland: A Memento of Materialism and Wisdom

As nostalgia has been expanded into a more abstractive and broad context to encompass *loss* of, including the longing for a *lost childhood*, for *irretrievable youth*, for a vanished *world of yesterday* (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2002, p. 258), nostalgia can also reflect the memento of searching for the things (material) and value of life wisdom. Characters are the intrinsic elements that influence the plot. Monfared and Sadeghzadegan (2022) explore the interpretation of childhood trauma and self-expression of the main character in Cather's *Paul's Case*. Lawton (2015) affirms that *The Professor's House* is about the solastalgia of longing for the culturally and physically destructed land. In this novel, Tom Outland is the second main chapter, narrating his story from his point of view from his early age, telling about his ups and downs journey with his best friend, Blake, in between the dispute over prehistoric Indian remains discovery and excavation surrounds Blue

Mesa and the moment when he came to St. Peter's house. The point of view was told in a flashback, as the character was still *alive*, and his nostalgic perspective of searching for materials ended up in gaining and acknowledging life wisdom, "For me, the Mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion" (Cather, p. 96). St. Peter's life friction started from his denial of the loss of the pivotal figure in his life and his growing awareness that the affection of his family is ebbing away to be replaced by material wealth.

The name of Outland means the *outsider land*, referred to the boy who came from *the outside world* of St. Peter's life and influence in his elderly time. Years after Outland's demise, his surname still used to imply a *space to inhabit* and changed its concept into the materialistic world, "At home, Dearest, with me, at our own dinner-table at Outland!" Marcellus said to his new place (Cather, p.25). Although, it seems that using his name as a metaphor for nostalgic materialism might have two meanings of commemoration and mockery to different characters. Agreeing with the explanation from Hilgart (1998, p.397), "He (St. Peter) used Tom as a resource of energy, then retrospectively drained him to emptiness, unwittingly cooperating with the others in their reductive translations." Moreover, Tom Outland was always associated with his discovery, a legacy that made Rosamund and Louie inherit money. However, when Rosamund offers the 'compensation' to her father, St. Peter refuses it, "I couldn't possibly take any of Outland's money," and explains to her that the material clause is not the basis of his bond with Tom Outland (pp. 22-23). Tom Outland is also *utilized* as a material for mirroring reflection because he saw the genius boy who reminded him of himself (Laoera, 2012). Therefore, Outland has also become a token material of self and wealth in the timeline of nostalgia.

From all disputes the wealth inheritance, St. Peter believed that money and wealth were not determinants of happiness. The longing for *pure love* from his family, the nature splendor, and integrity had become the sources of his greatest joy. Even though St. Peter had a perfect life and a great mind, he found joy in the simplest things and wanted peace and happiness. His name tells the audience about the character that would preach wisdom. Johnson states, "When God-free, a reference to the Professor's secular humanism, is paired with St. Peter, the father of the Christian church, we find the first hint of the role St. Peter will play as a secular priest of art within the text" (2010, p. 115). The leaving of Outland from his place of youth in Mesa implied how much he developed and learned about the happiness, even though it sounds so obscure, "Happiness is something one can't explain. You must take my word for it. Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high, and blue, a life in itself" (Cather, p. 97). Moreover, St. Peter shows that the meaning of happiness seems to be similarly vague as Outland's view, which in the end showed that only relying on wisdom (of art and religion) can bring happiness to people.

"[...] and that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. It makes us happy to surround our creature needs and bodily instincts with as much pomp and circumstances as possible. Art and religion

(they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had" (Cather, p.25)

In addition, Cain (2016) explains the connection between life and suffering in *The Professor's House* when St. Peter fell into depression and decided to 'end his life' by staying in a room full of gas (Cather, p.105), however, I presume, it also gives some wisdom about materials, money, and possession which in the end will not define someone's life and characters.

CONCLUSION

Nostalgia is the central concept to understanding the meanings of the novel by looking through the lenses of intrinsic elements: settings and characters. *The Professor's House* offers a narrative about loss, desire, and wisdom through nostalgic places and memories. St. Peter yearns for a functioning family, love, and wisdom; he yearns for the essential worth of life in a world full of longing for material things. *The Professor's House* emphasizes the lost characters and lack of affection and desire; it portrays a living by embracing or rejecting nostalgia. Cather's novels are classics and prolific works. *The Professor's House* is worthy of further analysis from many perspectives.

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