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**Love and Grief in *The Professor's House*:**

**A queer journey.**

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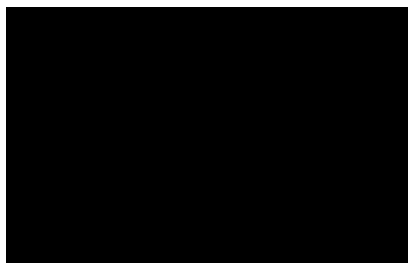


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## ENGLISH ABSTRACT

In *The Professor's House*, St. Peter undergoes a queer journey, which starts when he meets Tom Outland. Their bond manages to disrupt the heteronormative structure of the family, a space that St. Peter queer body can no longer occupy. Several years after Tom is gone, a grieving St. Peter digs up Tom's diary, which will lead him to a trip down memory lane, and, at the end of the novel, to the realisation of everything he has really lost, which he will only be able to face through the letting go of desire and love. Therefore, the aim of this project is to show that what the novel is trying to tell us is that there are other ways in which we come together, and that sometimes we need to queer the line to find our path.

**Keywords:** Willa Cather, Orientations, Love, Grief, Family.

## SPANISH ABSTRACT

En *The Professor's House*, St. Peter emprende un camino de transformación, que comienza cuando conoce a Tom Outland. Su vínculo consigue perturbar la estructura heteronormativa de la familia, un espacio que el cuerpo queer de St. Peter ya no puede ocupar. Varios años más tarde, aún en duelo tras la muerte de Tom, St. Peter desentierra el diario de Tom, el cual lo lleva a un viaje por los lugares más recónditos de su memoria, y a darse cuenta, finalmente, de todo lo que realmente ha perdido, algo que solo podrá afrontar mediante el abandono del deseo y el amor. Así pues, el objetivo de este proyecto es mostrar que lo que la novela está tratando de decirnos es que hay otras formas de unirnos y amarnos, y que a veces debemos desviarnos de las líneas rectas para encontrar nuestro camino.

**Keywords:** Willa Cather, Orientations, Amor, Duelo, Familia.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

When I finished reading *The Professor's House* I asked myself: what is the story trying to tell me? At first glance, nothing special seems to happen, it looks like your average middle class American family's story, but it's not. The novel starts *in media res*, when St. Peter, who is supposed to move in to the new family house, suddenly decides he is going to stay in the old house for a little while longer. We need to look closely to realize how many valuable lessons the novel holds, for *The Professor's House* speaks about love, loss and grief, and it also speaks about family.

This project aims to explore the professor's queer journey, the process of unfurnishing and reinhabiting of his own body that starts when he meets the second love of his life, Tom Outland. Their bond manages to disrupt the heteronormative structure of the family, because it is not desire what changes the world, but love. Several years after Tom dies, a purposeless and grieving St. Peter, anchored in the past, retreats to his old den, where he will revisit the memories of the tramp-boy that still remain. It is Tom's loss what triggers the professor to realise everything he has really lost, because he is not only grieving Tom's death, but also a failed marriage, and a falling out of place of the family. After reading Tom's diary, the professor finds himself reconnecting with the memories of the subject before discursivity, his most primitive self, the Kansas boy. At the end, St. Peter will have to relinquish all of these memories and accept his losses, and he will have to learn to live without delight to be able to face the future in the space of a family he no longer belongs to.

All in all, what the novel is trying to do is to make us realize that there are different ways in which we can come together and orient ourselves; it makes us question what a happy family really is. Sometimes we need to queer the line to find our happy place, because that place exists only outside the margins. Even if at the end, like it's the professor's case, we find no happy ending.

## 2. THE PROFESSOR'S GRIEF

The first thing that Jeanette Winterson (1992) asks in her novel, *Written on the Body* is: “Why is the measure of love loss?” (p. 9), and the only answer I came across is that we only realize how much we love someone once we lose them or are about to. Like Cain says, “We suffer the loss of something or someone in two senses: we experience this loss, then we bear and brave it, holding ourselves together.” (2016, p. 290). The moment St. Peter loses Tom, he realizes nothing is ever going to be the same. Losing someone, as I’m afraid we forget sometimes, is not something you can get over with time. The empty gap that someone leaves when they are gone will always be an open wound, the pain just gets easier to deal with, and at the end you can accept the loss, like St. Peter does, but you don’t stop missing them.

Before we begin, I think it is especially important to understand something about St. Peter. Like Wild says, “when we see St. Peter’s situation in terms of grief and the need to relinquish Tom Outland, his behavior is understandable. In a sense, he has two griefs: the loss of a friendship through death and the loss of a marriage that once had vitality” (1978, p. 271).

During the time that encompasses the novel, he fluctuates between the last three stages of grief of the Kübler-Ross model, which are: bargaining, depression and at the end, acceptance. Bargaining is defined as the stage in which we try to separate ourselves from the pain of the loss and “We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt” (Kessler, 2010), this is when the professor spends his days in his old den, away from his family, reading Tom’s diary and trying to evocate his memories of him.

Then, we have depression, defined as the stage in which our attention is in the present and we let ourselves feel the empty gap that their loss has left us, this is also when “grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined [...] We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone? Why go on at all?” (Kessler, 2010), this state is evident when we start to see the professor wondering what went wrong, what else was there for him to do with his life. In fact, nearing the end of the novel, there is a moment when he admits

that he was convinced that his life was coming to an end (Cather 1981, p. 267), and when the presence of death finally comes, he decides to let himself go, not because he actively wants to die, but because he feels he has no reason to go on anymore.

But at the end, after he is rescued by Augusta from his sure death, he finds acceptance, which is defined as the stage in which we finally let go of denial and we recognize “that this new reality is the permanent reality. We will never like this reality or make it OK, but eventually we accept it. We learn to live with it.” (Kessler, 2010), which is why the professor is able to face the future, he knows he will never feel joy again, like Wild says, “living without delight could mean many things; it certainly means living without Tom Outland” (1978, p. 273), but he still can be content, so he resigns himself to this new reality that the arrival of the Berengaria brings with it, and faces it with all the fortitude he can muster.

### **3. ORIENTATIONS AND THE NOVEL DÉMEUBLÉ**

#### **3.1. Ahmed’s Orientations: St. Peter’s body and the vacant den**

Our histories, the way we deal with them, shape us and make sense of who we are. Like Sarah Ahmed tells us, our “bodies are shaped by histories” (2006, p. 552), so what histories shape St. Peter’s body? When we meet the professor, he’s purposeless, he has accomplished everything he was supposed to, he has a new house, his daughters are married and he has finished writing his eight-volume collection about the Spanish Adventurers, so he wonders what else is there for him to do, when everything he ever wanted to do -both academically and domestically- is already done.

The histories that shape the professor’s body are those of love and loss, his histories talk about a wistful yearning for things long gone, about the desire to go back to a time before his marriage, when he and Lillian were truly happy, and even before that, to a time when he was a boy without the responsibilities of a lover. The thing is that St. Peter has checked every point on the straight culture’s to-do list, yet he finds himself feeling empty and terribly unhappy. His body has been pressed by the social



pressure to follow a certain kind of life (Ahmed, 2006, p. 555), a life that can fit into heteronormative social structures. This pressure, Ahmed tells us, accumulates in our bodies until we are pressed into lines, and these lines can be called “stress points” (2006, p. 555). The professor is aware of these stress points in his body, of the way they shaped him into the man he is today, “the secondary social man”, as we will see later. It is Tom, though, who triggers the realization and the need to escape from the pressure, to deviate from the straight line. Like Wild says “the major signal to the depth of their friendship is the extended crisis of St. Peter. The Tom Outland ‘event’ has been ‘the turquoise set in dull silver’ (p. 107) in Godfrey St. Peter’s life” (1978, p. 269).

After his loss, the only thing he has left is Tom’s memories, and they come back, or maybe it is the professor himself who comes back to Tom, to the pieces of him that still remain; like his memories of their time together, and Tom’s diary, which the professor uses as an excuse not to go on vacation with his family, even though at the end he never gets to edit it like he wanted to do. These memories, then, are something that the professor treasures, he does not want to go back to change them, he goes back to find himself in them. This trace from the past, which has an effect on the here and now, serves to propel the professor towards the future. It is thanks to these memories and the way they shape him, that he is able to face the future again at the end of the novel, because when he reaches the end of the tunnel, he knows the ground he stands on, he knows where he is, and what needs to be done, even if he knows he will find no joy in doing it, only lukewarm contentment.

Ahmed tells us that our bodies are “oriented toward certain objects, those that help us find our way”, and so “The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling.” (2006, p. 545) The professor is oriented towards the past, and he tells us about it from his old house’s study, which is mostly empty but is still full of memories. He sits at his desk, facing the past, dwelling on the old riddles, and mourning Tom’s loss. So, like Kishi says, “the central locale of the novel is a vacant den with four yellow walls, which is filled with “one passion” — the memories of St. Peter’s deceased student Tom Outland” (2013, p. 158). Tom is in the eye of the storm, but it is not the storm itself, I think the memories of their time together and Tom’s story at the mesa, is what propels the professor to this place of emptiness, it is his loss that triggers in the professor the realization that he has

also lost his marriage and his place in the family space. From here, from this place of mourning and reflection, he will go to a point deeper within himself, to meet the Kansas boy he once was.

The professor is comfortable in his old house's study; here he lays amidst the memories, which fill the emptiness of the present. In this place, away from the heteronormative space of the family, his own queer body is oriented towards a field of queer objects. But objects are not inherently queer; the same way a heterosexual space produces "a field of heterosexual objects", the spaces that queer bodies inhabit contain queer objects, since they exist in an oblique line, outside the heteronormative structures of society (Ahmed 2016, pp. 556-558). The professor's study, therefore, contains queer objects: his desk, where Tom's diary lays unedited and undecipherable, Tom's blanket, which was a gift from Roddy when Tom had pneumonia, Augusta's work and her forms, which the professor calls "his ladies" (Cather 1981, p. 21), and even the window and the sight of lake Michigan. As Ahmed says, "To be oriented is also to be oriented toward certain objects, those that help us find our way." (2006, p. 543) and "Bodies tend toward some objects more than others, given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary; they are effects of the repetition of 'tending toward'." (2006, p. 553) The professor has always tended towards his study, spending almost all the free time he could manage working on his eight-volume collection about the Spanish Adventurers. He has also tended towards his work at the university and has spent time on his most brilliant students, like he once did with Tom, one of the most brilliant minds he had ever met.

### **3.2. The Novel *Démeublé*: The thing not named**

In regards of this old dark den, it is interesting to note that Cather (1922) wished for a room with no furniture whatsoever, a clean, austere room.

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended;

leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little—for the nursery tale, no less than the tragedy, is killed by tasteless amplitude. The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls. (para. 11)

Dibattista says that there is a difference between “cheaply manufactured and crafted things”, and that “this distinction is enforced and sanctified in the extraordinary invocation of the Pentecostal chamber as an image of the novel as the place where numinous – even transcendent – reality is translated into the common tongue, that is, where things that are sacred to us speak and are spoken of idiomatically” (2010, p.80). St. Peter’s old den is as minimal as it can be, but there are objects of great value, objects that speak of histories, of the hands that crafted them and hold them, namely, the queer objects he tends and is oriented towards. In fact, in the novel there is a great emphasis in the hands that craft, the hands that choose. One of the things the professor pays more attention to is hands, like Lillian’s beautiful hands, which choose and pluck flowers to decorate the house, and also Tom’s hands, muscular and beautiful, more fascinating to him than the turquoises it once held.

Like Ahmed says, “Bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space. (...) Orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach.” (Ahmed 2006, p. 552) Therefore, there is a reason why those objects are there; they contain histories, they mean something, they shape the bodies that they come in contact with. At the same time, the things in St. Peter’s office are there because he tended towards them. Let’s take Tom’s blanket, for example, there is a moment when the professor says: “nothing could part me from that blanket” (Cather 1981, p. 130), to what Kathleen replies that “He wouldn’t have given it to anybody but you. It was like his skin” (Cather 1981, p. 130). Tom once entered the house and the family because the professor loves youth and he saw in him a brilliant mind, because he tended towards these things. We don’t know to what extent Tom was shaped by his relationship with the professor, but we know that he wouldn’t have given that blanket or his diary to him, he wouldn’t have taken the professor to a trip to the west to see the mesa, if the he hadn’t been someone important for him. They loved each other and

shaped each other with their histories. St. Peter's office, therefore, reflects the professor's desires, and it tells us a history that cannot be told with simple words. The histories these objects tell are "felt upon the page without being specifically named there (...) It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named" (Cather, 1922, para. 9). For there are things that can only be felt, and in being felt they are understood.

### **3.2.1. The Blue Mesa: A window to the outside world**

It is interesting to note, that there is a contrast between the spaces in the novel, the old house and the Blue Mesa represent the unfurnished room and the old world, meanwhile the new house and Louie and Rosamond's country house, named "Outland", represent the new world, the material world, where desire is tied to materiality. This new world is overcrowded with not only material things, but also vanity, jealousy and greed. Dibattista explains this as follows:

The opening section, entitled 'The Family,' seems written to illustrate the principles of 'The Novel D meubl .' This impression is confirmed by Cather, who, in answering a question about her aims in writing the novel, confided that she had 'tried to make Professor St Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American properties, clothes, furs, empty ambitions, quivering jealousies – until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland's face and in his behaviour' (2010, p. 974).

The Blue Mesa, then, functions as the window to the world outside, it brings light and air into these stiff, domestic spaces in the first part of the novel. We are led from the tense family situation and the increasingly depressed state of the professor at the end of the first part of the novel, to a recollection of Tom's story at the mesa in the middle of it all. Tom's Blue Mesa is a massive open space, a perfect place for reflection, just like lake Michigan, where the professor goes, or simply even looks at from his window, to think and reflect when he is tired and dull. There is, in fact, a similarity between the professor in his old den and Tom when he is alone at the mesa, after he fights with Rodney at his return from Washington. This second chapter of the novel is a

constant going and coming from the past –through the objects found in the mesa- to the now. The professor does exactly the same thing, he comes and goes from the past - through his memories and Tom’s diary- to the now, a reality that he doesn’t know how to face. After his fight with Rodney, Tom isolates himself in the empty mesa to read, to think, to reflect upon his life before he has to face reality again, just like the professor does in his old study. Cather humanizes the space of the mesa here by turning it into history, into religion and art, the same things the professor thinks offer some kind of happiness to us.

In the mesa, Tom becomes the archaeologist of an ancient place, a place from which he can only infer its history by reading the remains. These remains are simple and rudimentary, but also invaluable. Besides Mother Eve, the mesa, the objects found in it, speak to Tom about histories, they shape him, he finds himself there, he finds his queer happy family with Rodney and Henry, even if it’s not forever. It is when he goes to Washington that he comes face to face with the harshness of reality, and all of his ideas of a possible future come crashing down to the ground. It is the end of the utopian space of the mesa.

Once Rodney is gone, Tom tries to bring the mesa to an original state by erasing the trace of the German museum people. This is impossible, however; the mesa’s history can’t be tidied up. Tom wanted to have those objects in an American museum to change the concept of the Native American history, to which he feels connected, he wanted to find men that would be willing to dig up the secrets of the Cliff city to better understand its history, but it turns out to be a futile task. But the thing is that the mesa, to some extent –especially the mummy, Mother Eve-, remains undecipherable. It resists interpretation, just like Tom’s diary; these objects, albeit naked and simple, threaten the symbolic orderings of society. Mystery triggers desire, the need to possess and understand their secrets. We need to understand these objects in order to integrate them, but there is no way for them to be understood. Therefore, the mesa and Tom’s diary are things of great importance, because although they cannot be interpreted, they produce a great impact into those they come in contact with. The mesa changes Tom, and Tom’s diary, in turn, changes the professor, both things trigger a state of reflection and connection with the world of ideas. It is then the desire to uncover the mystery that these objects contain what compels both men to go deeper into themselves.

### 3.2.2. The unfurnishing of oneself

In the novel, there is a fervent wish to “unfurnish”, not only the room but oneself too. When St. Peter comes in contact with Tom’s diary, like I mentioned, he is surprised by its simplicity, “yet through this austerity one felt the kindling imagination, the ardour and excitement of the boy, like the vibration in a voice when the speaker strives to conceal his emotion by using only conversational phrases” (Cather 1981, pp. 262-263), the diary is the reflection of the unfurnished room, it is plain, yet it evokes “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it” (Cather, 1922, para. 9), it contains histories that shape the reader in the moment of contact, in this case, the professor. In the two months that the professor spends reading it, he enters a “twilight stage”, he allows himself to pause and enjoy the simplest things, and cultivates a “novel mental dissipation” (Cather 1981, p. 263). Like Wild argues, “both St. Peter and Outland possess this same quiet restraint in the display of deep feeling” (1978, pp. 264-265). They share an intellectual bond, and the kind of love that can be felt but not spelt, it is seen in between words, in small gestures.

Mother Eve and Tom are two figures that the reader tends to need to possess, to interpret and naturalise into their existences. Silent, they are unable to produce a narrative of their own. Mother Eve is given multiple interpretations, but her body does not reveal the true secrets of her existence. The professor decides to let Tom’s diary remain closed, silent and unreadable. In fact, we never really get to know Tom, we never get to hear his voice, straight from the source. The only thing we get is other characters’ recollections of him, memories of the stories he explained and the things he said. For instance, the whole second chapter is the professor’s recollection of Tom’s story at the mesa, we don’t get Tom to tell us, everything we know about him is filtered through other characters, and because of this we get not one, but two versions of Tom. We have the professor’s Tom, the one that comes from this “queer mesa”, out of there and into the secluded space of the family’s garden, and then we have Rosamond’s Tom, whose body has already been in contact with the heteronormative culture and the all-American discourse of Roosevelt, the United States president of that moment. This Tom was in his way to becoming a husband, a social man, while the professor is already going in the opposite direction, escaping from the suffocating space of the

heteronormative structure of the family, from these social structures that have turned him into the secondary social man, the lover. So they meet in the middle of those divergent paths, and the professor remembers, even though to a certain extent he fetishizes the Tom that hadn't crossed the line yet, the one that's still in the garden, facing the very thing he is running from. In dying, the professor thinks that Tom has escaped the responsibility of desire, he only handed symbols and ideas, formulas written on a paper, and when he dies in the war, he escapes the same social structures that pressed the professor into a straight line.

Unfurnishing can also be understood as an unlearning, and in the case of sexual orientation, to become queer we need to go through a path of unlearning of straight culture, like Ahmed says, "In the case of sexual orientation, it is not then simply that we have it. To become straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant." (Ahmed 2006, p. 554) The professor turns away from his family, which represents straight culture, and stays behind in his old house, surrounded by and oriented towards memories and "queer objects", which are the ones outside of heterosexual spaces. He deviates from the straight line, and once he does he's unable to go back. St. Peter longs for pure unbelonging, for escaping every label and responsibility, because he is out of energy to rebuild and reinvent himself anew, in fact, he wonders if it's worth it. He thinks that he does not have it in himself anymore to try again. It is Augusta, after he accepts Tom's loss, who helps bring him to life again. But in order to come to life again, he lets go of the past, of his "passionate griefs" (Cather 1981, p. 282), and leaves behind the true and original St. Peter -the Kansas boy-, all to be able to face the future with fortitude, but he also lets go of any sense of obligation towards his family. He finds himself thinking that he has to learn to "live without delight", to live a pleasant life but with no joy, and that no one, not even his family, could ever be more hurt by his apathy than he has already.

In the end, this unfurnishing of oneself results, as Debattista says, in a disregard of the superficial things of life in Tom, but in a cold detachment from reality in St. Peter. The professor, drowned in his mourning, loses himself in the past, he dives into it, to the deepest waters of his soul, and at some point "The professor's newfound

knowledge of elemental things is purchased at the expense of his family, but also at great expense to himself, particularly in the profound apathy that leaves him less able and in truth less willing to conjugate, as he once was so eager to do, ‘the verb “to love”.’” (Debattista 2010, p. 83) It’s his memories of Tom, his reading Tom’s diary, what triggers this trip to the past, and it is thanks to this that he finds himself, the true, original Godfrey St. Peter, but when he resurfaces, he finds that he needs to give it all up if he wants to be able to face the future.

## **4. OPPOSING FORCES: THE OLD WORLD VS. THE NEW WORLD**

### **4.1. Science vs. Humanities**

That dark den in the old house is the place where the professor goes to think, to remember, it is the place in which he can be isolated from everything and everyone but himself. Godfrey St. Peter is, if nothing else, a passionate, idealistic person, and dare I say, quite hedonistic. He considers himself “terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them. If a thing gave him delight, he got it, if he sold his shirt for it” (Cather 1981, pp. 26-27). He believes that “a man can do anything if he wishes to enough [...] Desire is creation, is the magical element in that process” (Cather 1981, p. 29).

He understands science as something that takes the mystery out of life, it is simply an utilitarian force that understands human beings as empty mechanisms. He says: “Science hasn’t given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind [...] It hasn’t given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins - not one! Indeed, it takes our old ones away” (Cather 1981, p. 68). Science, therefore, empties our existence of the complex mystery of not knowing, it takes away our sins and pleasures and, in trying to explain them, makes life overall cold and schematic. “Life was a rich thing” when souls, both those of the rich and those of the poor, were caught in the middle of God’s “gorgeous drama” (Cather 1981, p. 68); this gave meaning to our individual lives, we were important in the scheme of things until science converted us into functioning cogs in society’s great machinery.



Art and religion, on the other hand, is what he believes “have given man the only happiness he has ever had” (Cather 1981, p. 69). St. Peter is not religious, but he acknowledges the tremendous importance of it as a force that, as art, dwells on the mysteries of life, even when nothing comes out of it. That is the use of humanities, dwelling on the old riddles, giving sense to the world and its real problems. It is not productive, it does not generate material wealth or scientific progress, but it is a key point on humanity’s social and cultural evolution, because once we stop wondering about the mysteries, we lose sense of who we are.

Therefore, science relates to the material, the new world, which is linked to the tyranny of the present, to the need of tying desires to the material world. This is what the new house and his family represent: material desire. The old house, then, represents this old world full of mysteries and riddles, a queer space away from the heterosexual and normative space of the family. This is why, when they are moving from the old house to the new, that is, from the old world to the new one, he decides to stay behind, in his attic; he rejects the material world. There is a constant tension between these two worlds throughout the novel. The professor rejects the new house not only for being a representation of material desire, but because it also means he has to abandon the old world, where Tom lived, where Tom still is, in one way or another; St. Peter can visit him through his memories, through Tom’s mementos. Leaving the old house behind means more than his family could understand, it means letting go of the past, of the only remains of Tom that linger, and that is something he is still not ready to do. He has to face death, at the end of the novel, to let go of it. In a way, this isolation, this unwillingness to let go of the past, is what almost kills him, and there is no other way to move forward but by letting go of the things that hurt us, even when we love them.

#### **4.2. The rejection of material desire**

When his wife asks him if he would have rather done something else with the money he earned with his books, he answers that no money could ever buy back the fun he had while writing them (Cather 1981, p. 33). For the professor, money cannot buy happiness, although it can buy certain things, luxuries that he desires. The nature of the professor’s family preoccupations is increasingly more materialistic as the novel goes

on, which is not to say that their bonds are built upon a mere social obligation as family, they love each other, and the professor, as I said, loves his family, but he feels disconnected from them, from their ideas and desires. This is best seen when he is trying to deal with Kathleen and his jealous streak towards her sister, he finds himself unable to understand such petty grievances, and tries to tell her daughter that this jealous sentiment is only going to cause self-destruction, but she replies by telling him “Oh, father, you’re so simple!” (Cather 1981, p. 86). Later on, when talking about Crane’s inheritance share, she says “You knew that Tom had left something that was worth a lot, both of you. Why didn’t you *do* something?” (Cather 1981, p. 87) to which he responds that he “wasn’t in the mood to struggle with manufacturers, I know nothing of such things” (Cather 1981, p. 87). He does confess to Mrs. Crane that he blamed Tom for making that kind of will, but the thing is that Tom expected to return from the war and finish the project himself (Cather 1981, p. 137). Dr. Crane and the professor were not the kind of men that knew how to commercialize the patent; it took Louie’s ability to transform a formula written in paper into something real, something marketable.

On one hand, the professor deals with ideas, he is an idealistic, passionate man, and he can’t understand such materialistic preoccupations, since he thinks that they only bring misery. On the other hand, he does enjoy his luxuries, he himself says that he gets whatever he desires if it gives him pleasure. Therefore, sometimes there seems to be a difference between what he says and what he does. Let’s take chapter eight, for instance, when Louie decides to pay for their hotel room in Chicago. There is a moment, after Louie gives them the news about the new arrangements, when we are told that “The professor had forgotten his scruples about accepting lavish hospitalities” (Cather 1981, p. 92), so he is aware of this dualistic nature of his. In fact, the next day, after the birthday dinner, Lillian observes that all of the professor’s colleagues present during the event seemed to respect him more after seeing the family show such demonstrations of wealth. To this, he responds that *that* is the exact same reason why he dislikes “public magnificence”, because it highlights people’s worst features, and he adds: “I’m not finding fault with anyone but myself, understand. When I consented to occupy an apartment I couldn’t afford, I let myself in for whatever might follow” (Cather 1981, p. 96). So again, he is conscious about these contradictions, but it is also true that he does not seem to waste emotional energy on material things like the others

do, he is more carefree about them. The only thing he is insistent about is retaining the old house, especially because it has emotional value, even if it is a show of economic extravagance on his behalf.

#### **4.2.1. Tom's will vs. Tom's Legacy**

Rosamond and the professor, therefore, embody opposing forces, she is like the 'Napoleon' part of himself that he lets go; in fact, when he gets home after accompanying her to buy Spanish furniture for the house and Lillian asks him how she behaved, he says: "Wonder where a girl who grew up in that old house of ours ever got it. She was like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces" (Cather 1981, p. 154). Rosamond tells St. Peter that she feels he ought to have some of Tom's money, but the professor remains unmovable in his belief that Tom owes him as much as he owes Tom, and that his friendship with Outland is the one thing that he is not going to have translated into the "vulgar tongue" (Cather 1981, p. 62). The family's bond with Tom, at the end, is social and materialistic, he leaves Rosamond his will, which ends up being a fountain of wealth for her once Louie gets the formula and puts the money needed to commercialize the patent, but it is also the bone of contention between her and her sister and professor Crane. This means, then, that Rosamond, and Louie and Lillian by extension, get his will -his money- and the version of Tom that represented it -the husband, the scientist, the soldier-, while St. Peter -and to some extent Kathleen-, gets to keep Tom's legacy, which is not material, it is not built around the tyranny of material desire.

The will follows the straight line but Tom's legacy is an oblique line, because filiation is not straight and not necessarily blood related. His legacy is who he was, what he did, the memories, the boy that appeared in their garden one day to seek advice. And the professor longs to connect again with the only mind that shared his fascination with the old world, Tom.

#### **4.2.2. Tom's Mesa: A world above the world**

Something similar happens with Tom at the mesa, his story ends when he realizes that Rodney has sold almost everything to the Germans while he is away in

Washington, trying to find a group of experts willing to dig into the secrets the mesa withholds. Tom thinks “I have never told him just how I feel about those things we’d dug out together, it was the kind of thing one doesn’t talk about directly. [...] And yet, until that night, I had never known myself that I cared more about them than about anything else in the world” (Cather 1981, p. 239), so for Tom it was never about the money, it was about digging out the secrets of Native American history, about bringing the past into the present so they could change the future of trump-boys like him and Roddy himself, who had “no other ancestors to inherit from” (Cather 1981, p. 242). The mesa, for Tom, was never about material desire, it was his home; he says “I had the glorious feeling that I’ve never had anywhere else, the feeling of being *on the mesa*, in a world above the world” (Cather 1981, p. 240). Nevertheless, Roddy is not exactly like the professor’s family, he wanted the money to be for Tom too, so he could go to college and have a different future than his.

After he returns to the mesa again, and this time alone, he sees it with new eyes, “the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion” (Cather 1981, p. 251). Now that Roddey was gone and the possibility of changing the history of Native American people was gone too, he found himself looking at it through a different prism. In its most nakedness, the mesa became his home, and it brought him unalloyed happiness, which lasted all summer. There, with no other thing to do but study and clean the mess the Germans had made, he found himself connecting with the place, and it reminds me of the professor when he reconnects with the Kansas boy, and muses about this primitive self who knew that he ought to have been always solitary. As I said before, the summer at the mesa changes Tom the same way the professor is changed by his memories of Tom and the summer spent reading his diary, both things trigger a deep reflection about their inner selves and beliefs, and both have to let go of something to rebuild themselves at the end.

## **5. PLATO’S THEORY AND THE LADDER OF LOVE**

Many critics, like Kishi, use Freud’s works to examine St. Peter and Tom’s relationship, but we need to keep in mind that “important characteristics of religious

love and even many Freudian ideas are rooted in his theory of love” (Amir 2001, p. 6), which is why I decided it would be interesting to examine how Plato’s theories about love and desire applies to Tom’s and St. Peter’s relationship.

Plato was an idealist and an essentialist, he theorised that the essence of a thing is the ideal, perfect state of said thing, which belongs in the world of Forms. Material things are imperfect, and they are less real and good than ideas, which are transcendent, since they transcend the world of material things. To acquire knowledge of ideas, we have to use reason, which is located, in an abstract way, in the soul. The interesting thing is that we can apply his theories to explain the concepts of love and desire. “One of the most influential traditions of love in the Western world is Platonism. Originating with Plato’s writings on love (mainly the *Symposium* whose explicit subject is the nature of love and *Phaedrus*, but also the *Republic* and the *Laws*)” (Amir, 2001, p. 6). But we need to keep in mind that Platonic love is not what we think it is nowadays, in the 5th century Athens, marriage was practically a business transaction, meanwhile love and sexual love were reserved solely for homosexual relationships (Amir, 2001, p. 6).

In these writings, Plato essentially says that when we love something, we seek to permanently “possess the goodness which is in it” (Amir 2001, p. 7). Plato’s first definition of love, then, is: ‘Love is desire for the perpetual possession of the good’ (As cited in Amir, 2001, p. 7). We dedicate our lives, like the professor seems to do, to seek the things that bring us pleasure and joy, that makes us happy. These things that we desire, are always a desire for the good, “Plato always explains whatever we do, desire or strive for, as a direct or circuitous means of acquiring goodness” (Amir 2001, p. 7). Love moves the world, but men, as lovers, do not always identify the object of their love, which Plato calls the Good or absolute beauty, “that which underlies their every desire, that which will ensure ‘perpetual possession’” (Amir 2001, p. 7). Every form of existence yearns for this. We, as souls, live among the gods in the world of Forms, but in acquiring a human form in the material world, we forget this world we lived in, but there is something in us that always yearns to go back to that state of wholeness and goodness (Amir 2001, p. 8).

The body desires carnal gratification, but the soul strives to an intellectual kind of gratification, to return to the world of Forms. In the *Symposium*, Socrates says that

“to love beauty is to wish to bring forth in beauty. To possess it perpetually would be to re-create it endlessly. Consequently, love must by its very nature be the love of immortality as well as of the Beautiful” (Amir 2001, p. 8), which is why we feel the desire to procreate.

Upon meeting the lover, the soul witnesses the sight of Beauty, which it encountered in the world of Forms but forgot about it upon enclosing itself in a human form. This stage of physical attraction and awe for the lover’s beauty, then, which is a reminder of the beauty witnessed in the world of Forms, is the first step in the ladder of love. This is what happens, according to Plato, when first looking at the beloved:

At first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god; then while he gazes on him there is a sort of reaction, and the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration. (Plato, 1937, p. 225)

For Plato, this awe for the beauty of the lover, this adoration, makes “the soul grow wings” (Amir 2001, p. 8). This is the first step in the ladder of love, and it certainly rings a bell, when we think back to the first time the professor meets Tom in the garden.

The first thing the Professor noticed about the visitor was his manly, mature voice--low, calm, experienced, very different from the thin ring or the hoarse shouts of boyish voices about the campus. The next thing he observed was the strong line of contrast below the young man's sandy hair--the very fair forehead which had been protected by his hat, and the reddish brown of his face, which had evidently been exposed to a stronger sun than the spring sun of Hamilton. The boy was fine-looking, he saw—tall and presumably well built (Cather 1981, p.112)

Later on, we are told that Tom was “the hottest boy he had ever seen” (Cather 1981, p.117), so it is quite interesting to note that their relationship was a matter of

chance, and the first thing that the professor feels for Tom is physical attraction. It is precisely this appreciation of the beauty of the lover what ignites the appreciation of beauty in itself, which is the next step in the ladder of love. After this, comes the next step, which is the “realisation that beauty of the soul is more valuable than beauty of the body” (Amir 2001, p 9). The professor experiments this process, his physical attraction to Tom leads to the love of the mind; Tom becomes the second love of his life, the intellectual kind. They used to spend hours talking, like in those summer nights they were alone in the house while the family was out on vacation, the professor himself says: “Over a dish of steaming asparagus, swathed in a napkin to keep it hot, and a bottle of sparkling Asti, they talked and watched night fall in the garden. If the evening happened to be rainy or chilly, they sat inside and read Lucretius” (Cather 1981, p.176).

As Amir explains, the next steps in the ladder of love, are the appreciation of “the social and moral beauty” and the contemplation of “the beauty of institutions and noble activities”, then the “study of science and the acquisition of knowledge”, in which the individual is free “from any attachment to an individual instance of beauty” (2001, p. 9) and at last, the fifth step, in which this individual will catch ‘sight of one unique science whose object is the beauty of which I am about to speak’ (As cited in Amir 2001, p. 9). This beauty he refers to reveals the nature of the universe.

But what I take from all of this is that at some point, physical attraction creates space for love. In fact, the best kind of friendship is for Plato the one that exists between lovers. Like Neel Burton explains, “Not only does *philia* strengthen and develop *erôs*, but it also transforms it from a lust for possession into a shared desire for a higher level of understanding of the self, the other, and the universe. In short, *philia* transforms *erôs* from a lust for possession into an impulse for philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> (2012, para. 2).

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<sup>1</sup> As Burton also mentions, it is interesting to remember that Plato was especially interested in the desire and love that occurred between an older man and a younger one.

## 6. HAPPY FAMILIES AND THE KANSAS BOY

### 6.1. Desire vs. Love

Having this in mind, when discussing about the novel, most critics revolve around the idea of the professor's attraction for Tom's physicality without contemplating the idea of love. For example, Madoka Kishi says that "Tom, who 'brought him a kind of second youth,' was not so much his object of homoerotic desire as a catalyst who evokes what St. Peter perceives he has lost with his youth" (2013, p. 164), which is a statement that overlooks the love that existed between them in favor of describing what they had as "homoerotic desire". Nonetheless, I agree with Kishi's idea that Tom brought the professor the opportunity to come back in touch with his roots: the Kansas boy, and his dreams of a possible future. And I do believe that Tom is the trigger, and that all of the emotional work that comes later is only possible because of him, but I don't think that the professor is shallow enough to use his memories of Tom only as a catalyst for such a narcissistic purpose.

Kishi also says that St. Peter desire disrupts "the object-choice-based sexual binary by theorizing an autoeroticism of the closet", and by that she means that his desire certainly does not fit the heterosexual dynamic, but neither does it "easily fit into the category of suppressed homosexual desire for Tom's physicality" (2013, p. 160). Kishi describes the "professor's queer desire" as "both a physical and a metaphysical pleasure in the isolation of the closet" (2013, p. 160). I believe that, to a certain extent, this is true, because St. Peter's desire *does* disrupt the heterosexual dynamic, but this desire is not just that, I don't think that just the act of desiring someone could lead you to mourn them for such a long time. We mourn out of love for someone, not out of desire. Of course, we are not explicitly told how much time passes between Tom's death and the events narrated in the novel, but it is enough for Rosamond to mourn him and then marry and settle with Louie, so we could assume that it's been a considerable amount of time, probably years and, as I said, it is clear that St. Peter is still mourning him, in the present tense, he still has not been able to let go and heal that wound. St. Peter is a passionate man, not afraid of going after what gives him pleasure, but Tom is not something he has to work for to get, he enters his life by a matter of chance, and



decides to stay. So I think that their bond was much deeper than that, it was about love, not desire. Desire can achieve many things, and, as I said, it is the first step in their relationship, but it is love what changes the world.

## **6.2. A bond that changes the world**

The novel is not *entirely* about the professor's homosexual desire for Tom, but the homoerotic bond between them manages to disrupt the professor's heteronormative family. It is furthermore compromised by their love, Tom and the professor loved each other; whatever physical intimacy they had between each other does not matter at all. Society is ready to accept homosexual sex, but the novel does not even give any narrative relevance to this, to this older man desiring the body of a younger one. It is when we talk about love, about friendship and tenderness, when it becomes problematic. Homosexual friendship and love, as equals, that creates bonds that have the power to challenge people to question the heteronormative social structures and ideas, fed to us by the structures of power -capitalism and the patriarchy-, of what is considered normal or normative and why. It has the power to question, all in all, to make us rethink what family is, what constitutes a real family.

St. Peter's family does not break because they don't love each other, but because this usual, natural family does not offer comfort for the professor anymore, just noise and conflicts. Near the end, after receiving the news that Rosamond's pregnant and his family is coming back, which likely means that he will have to leave the old house behind, he finds himself thinking that "there must to be some way in which a man who had always tried to live up to his responsibilities could, when the hour of desperation came, avoid meeting his family" (Cather 1981, p. 274). He says he can't endure to live with them anymore, he wants to be alone with his misfortune, and then, he adds: "Surely the saddest thing in the world is falling out of love – if one has ever fallen in. Falling out, for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed" (Cather 1981, p. 275). This presents us with a St. Peter that does not have an ounce of energy left to deal with external matters, because he is depressed, he is too caught up in his grief to be able to face his family, and in these occasions isolation is one of the most common responses. He wants to cocoon

himself in the only place he feels safe, where he can be himself, and that place is his study in the old house.

This is not because he doesn't love his family anymore, at the end, you can still love something that is not good for you. So, the novel does not question whether St Peter loves his family or not, his love for Tom does not cancel his love for his family, what the novel is doing instead is questioning the heteronormative structure of the family. Sexual desire does not have the transformative power to achieve a better, more understanding world, love does; and it does not necessarily have to be expressed always in the same ways. Friendship, love, and tenderness, which are the things that the professor and Tom shared between them, manage to disrupt a family that was broken at the seams.

### **6.3. The professor's Tom**

When we talk about Tom, though, we need to keep in mind that Tom was part of two worlds, or perhaps it would be better to say that we see two versions of the same Tom. There is Rosemond's Tom, the scientist and the soldier, the boy who as soon as he stepped out of the mesa, tried to straighten the line; a part of him started making this transition into straight culture, and eventually went to fight in the WWI and died. Then, there is the professor's Tom, also Kathleen's, the boy who one day walked into the garden to seek advice and who would later on share an invaluable amount of memories and histories with them.

This Tom affects the professor obliquely, because, the professor, who exists in a heterosexual space, is confronted by a queer body and like Ahmed says, the queer body does not have the capacity to extend in a heterosexual space, which is why the queer body in a straight space might look oblique (2006, p. 560). They exist inside this heteronormative space of the family as queer bodies, they exist and interact there, but the kind of relationship they had is outside the heteronormative family, he was the second love of his life, the intellectual kind. The first Tom left his will, the second one left "a princely gift", his memories, and his *histories*. Like Barbara Wild says,

We do need to realize the existence of something which is never named but which permeates the work. Though Tom Outland is already dead at the beginning of the novel, it is a story of a great friendship between two rather unusual men. We ought not be surprised that the fine quality of such an important relationship remains unstated in any literal way. The technique of suggesting rather than defining is characteristic of Cather's fiction. (1978, p. 264)

The bond that Tom and the professor shared was something special. When St. Peter tells Lillian, "It's been a mistake, our having a family and writing histories and getting middle-aged. We should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young" and Lillian agrees, he is astonished, he can't believe that someone who is so "occupied with the future" and adapts readily to its circumstances, could dwell on the past like he does. After this, Lillian takes her chance and says "One must go on living, Godfrey. But it wasn't the children who came between us" (Cather 1981, p. 94), it was Tom. We are told by St. Peter that she was jealous and overly critical of Tom, but we don't know just how much that really hurt her until this point in the novel. We can only imagine just how strong the bond between Tom and the professor had to be to be able to come between their marriage and break it; not a rapid, clean break, but a slow kind of breaking, like the progressive rooting of a tree, or the eroding force of a water drop, silent, slow, scarring.

#### **6.4. The Kansas boy: The subject before discursivity**

At the end, this bond that the professor and Tom share is so strong that Tom not only shapes the professor, he also becomes the key that unlocks a door to a place before the normative story of the professor's life began, where he comes in contact with his deepest roots, the Kansas boy, which he had long forgotten about since he met Lillian. This Kansas boy is, therefore, his realest self, the simplest, most original version of Godfrey St. Peter, a boy that was "at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths" (Cather 1981, p. 265). The Kansas boy is a primitive being connected to nature: "Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. [...] He was earth, and would return

to earth” (Cather 1981, p. 141). This Kansas boy has a oneness with nature, a kind of communion with Earth, and the lack of separation between signifier and signified leads us to think about a time before paradise was lost; that is, when words meant what they meant, and there was no storytelling, no history line, no conjugation of verbs. St. Peter longs to go back to this state of wholeness, of primitive and complete union with nature. This primitive self belongs to the old world, to the spiritual world, something the professor is nostalgic for, the Kansas boy represents the mystery of the ordinary world, which has nothing to do with the material world the professor is trying to escape from.

Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, talks about the madness of love, and Burton explains that it “arises from seeing the beauty of the earth and being reminded of true, universal beauty. [...] the earthly soul that is able to remember true, universal beauty and so to feel true love gazes upon the face of his beloved and reverences it as an expression of the divine—of temperance, justice, and knowledge absolute” (2017, paras. 8-9). This, applied to the novel, means that this primitive self that St. Peter idolizes, symbolizes the contact of the soul with true knowledge, he belongs to the spiritual world, which is why the professor thinks of him as being his wisest version.

The Kansas boy is, among these other things, another reflection of the unfurnished room. It is the simpler, unadorned version of St. Peter, the Kansas boy is like a room with no furniture, so to speak, if we assume that furniture here means the things the professor acquired as he aged, the responsibilities that come with becoming a social man, a lover. Like Debattista says,

Cather reverts here to the elementary idiom, the bare setting, and the elemental consciousness in which she claimed that true realism was rooted and had its genuine flowering. The sentences that represent this state of mind and being could not be more stark and uncompromising in their declarations: “That is right.” “That is it”; “That is true; it is time” (2010, p. 83)

The Kansas boy is stripped bare to the utmost simplicity; he is the subject before discursivity the professor longs to reconnect with, someone who had yet to be shaped by straight culture, someone who had yet to conjugate the verb “to love”.

The professor says that his own “histories, he was convinced, had no more to do with his original ego than his daughters had; they were the result of the high pressure of young manhood” (Cather 1981, p. 265), which suggests that what he did was done because it ought to be done, because he was socially bound to follow the “well-trodden path”, which is the one that the heteronormative culture presents to us since childhood. Since the body exists inside a society, we are given, even before we are born, labels – such as those of gender and sex- that follow the binary discourse, which is culturally formed. These discourses, like Jack Halberstam (2017, CCCB) explains, have been established by institutional powers, by capitalism and the patriarchy, and they traverse our bodies, they dictate how we should behave and how we should feel and express desire, but human experience is much more complex than that. The Kansas boy, after all, was already being shaped by these discourses, he was surrounded by straight culture, but he had yet to conjugate verbs, so he was relatively free. Ahmed says that

The concept of orientations allows us to expose how life gets directed through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point. (2006, p. 554)

This is exactly what happens to St. Peter, his body is traversed by heteronormative discourses, which lead him to start conjugating the verb “to love”, narrowing the path towards particular forms of love and desire, and thereby becoming what he calls “the secondary social man, the lover”, who in turns becomes a professor, a husband and a father. All in all, he defines this secondary social man as someone who “had been shaped by all the penalties and responsibilities of being and having been a lover” (Cather 1981, p. 265). So what this secondary being does is what had to be done because he loved; his family, his career, his books, everything is a consequence of the professor being a “social man”, of his love; it is a consequence of following the straight path. But to love always takes responsibility, even if the choices he made were the product of being “the lover”, even if things came his way by chance and he took the opportunity presented to him because it was what society told him he had to do, love

takes responsibility.

St. Peter finds himself thinking that the years before he became “the lover” are the realest ones, because his choices were not depending on what society expected of him, he wasn’t bound to follow the straight line yet. The Kansas boy, that had nothing to do with St. Peter’s adult passions and intellectual activities, was free, and despite being primitive, in his simplicity, he was “terribly wise”, and he “seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father” (Cather 1981, p. 265).

I don’t think St. Peter regrets his life, he himself says so, when he says that “he wouldn’t choose to live his life over –he might not have such good luck again” (Cather 1981, 258). Nearing the end, there is a moment when he says that he did not regret it but “he was indifferent to it. It seemed like the life of another person” (Cather 1981, p. 267). After all, even meeting Tom was a matter of chance, like all the most important things in his life had been. What I think the novel is doing here is reflecting upon these chances, why they came and why he took them. The professor is led to this melancholic state because he’s mourning a great loss, and he realizes that when ideas are just that, they are simple and perfect, but in materialising, they become less so. He finds himself thinking that he was happier when things were more simple, there is wisdom in our primitive, innocent selves, because we are in contact with life, we are “at the root of all matter”, without being influenced by all the prejudices, obligations and responsibilities that come with adult life. Most people remember their childhoods with nostalgia, sometimes we all yearn for simpler times, before we had to make the kind of decisions that changed our lives, so it is no surprise that at such time of his life, St. Peter comes in contact with this Kansas boy and yearns for his primitive wisdom.

## **6.5. Happy families: Finding another path**

Therefore, we need to acknowledge the need to reflect upon the possibility of conjugating the verb “to love” in different ways. If you walk a path enough times, it will become visible. Happy families do not always follow the straight line, sometimes they require obliquity. Sometimes, you have to ride in the margins to find another path, your

own path outside normativity, in exchange for happiness. The novel presents us with a family structure that has gone wrong, that no longer bring comfort and happiness to each other, especially the professor. They have accomplished everything that there was to accomplish as a family, as a unit, and also individually. So we are presented with the concept of family as something that has a function, but once that function is gone, once they stop needing each other to accomplish these things, it fails to maintain a meaning, they can't stay together because it is obvious that their bond is somehow an obligation, in the sense that the bond is constructed upon the heteronormative family as the norm.

And then, in between the story of the family, steadily coming apart, we have mentions of real happy families, like Tom and the professor, Augusta and the professor, those are families that work, or Rodney, Tom and Henry, even Peter and Lillian before marriage. Therefore it is clear that the heterosexual family is just a social construction that not always works, because there are different ways in which we can come together; so I think the novel aims for the naturalisation of other possibilities, of other ways of conjugating verbs and other paths to walk.

In order to accomplish this, we first need to be able to reinhabit our own bodies. The moment he meets Tom, the professor's body no longer extends the heteronormative space of the family, and that produces a queer effect. This is why he feels the need to orient himself outside that space, and towards a queer one. As Ahmed says, "these differences in how one directs desire, as well as how one is faced by others, can move us and hence affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others" (2006, p. 563). When the professor comes in contact with Tom, his body is reshaped by the bond that exists between them. But orientations also point us towards the future, and "the hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer" (2006, p. 554).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

In this project we have seen St. Peter's queer journey in the novel *The Professor's House*, a story of love, grief and unfurnishings. From the beginning, we are presented with a family that does not work anymore, that does not offer any comfort to the professor, who, purposeless and grieving, goes away from this broken family and into his vacant old den filled with memories. A St. Peter that, like we have seen, fluctuates throughout the novel between the last three stages of grief of the Kübler-Ross model, which are: bargaining, depression and at the end, acceptance.

Our bodies are shaped by contact with others, with objects, and the histories we share with them. The histories that shape the professor's body are those that talk about the grieving of his loses, but also about the profound bonds he shared and how they transform us. For St. Peter, the catalyst of this transformation is Tom Outland, the moment he walks into the family's garden, everything changes. We do not get to know Tom, we don't get to hear his voice directly; we only see two versions of him filtered through the memories of the family. The professor's initial physical attraction for him grows into the kind of love that changes the world, a love of the mind and soul, a bond of friendship and tenderness strong enough to disrupt the heteronormative space of the family. A bond that can't be named, it can only be felt upon the page.

From that moment onwards, the professor's body looks slanted in the space of the family, it can no longer exist there because their bond has managed to queer the line. Orientation is a matter of how we occupy certain spaces, and these spaces are sexualized, which is why the professor orients himself towards his old den, a queer space away from the heteronormative space of his family, and towards the memories of Tom that remain once he is gone. This, though, is only the beginning of the professor's transformation, in order to find his path, he needs to unlearn straight culture, unfurnish his own body and reinhabit it.

Everything that happened before he became the secondary man, the lover, was a matter of chance, of his body being pressed by the social pressure to follow the heteronormative path, to follow the straight lines. Through the reading of Tom's diary,



several years after his death, St. Peter accesses the memories of the subject before normativity, the Kansas boy. This boy is the human representation of the unfurnished room, for he was wise and simple, unadorned, and yet to be pressured to follow a path, he had yet to conjugate the verb ‘to love’. This Kansas boy is what the professor, in his grief, years for, for the pure unbelonging that it represents. St. Peter can’t and doesn’t want to go back, and if he could, he wouldn’t change a thing, but there are things he wishes he would have known, like the fact that, sometimes, happy families can only be accessed by walking outside the well-trodden path of heteronormativity.

Another thing this project explored is how there is a constant duality in the novel, two different worlds constantly clashing with one another. On one hand we have the old world, which represents the spiritual world of humanities, the pondering over the old riddles and mysteries of humanity, but also Tom’s Blue Mesa, and the old house and its memories. On the other hand, we have the new world, which represents science and productivity, material desire tied to the tyranny of the present, and also the professor’s family and the new house.

There is also Tom Outland who, as I said, we only get to meet filtered through the memories of the characters. On one hand, we have Rosamond’s Tom, the scientist and the soldier, the man that began to follow the straight path before he died in the war. Rosamond gets Tom’s will, his money. On the other hand, we have the professor’s Tom, the boy who came from a world above the world and into the family’s garden. A boy who, in this Mesa, had once found his happy family, the only one mentioned in the whole novel, but that was broken by the same thing that breaks the professor’s family in two, material desire. The professor gets Tom’s legacy, his memories, and his histories. There is one thing that both parts agree on, though, and that is that Tom was someone who departed leaving princely gifts.

So, at the end, what this project has aimed to show is that what the novel tells us is that there are other ways in which we can come together, and that it is love, friendship and tenderness what changes the world. The professor’s queer journey was triggered by the strong bond he shared with Tom, a bond that disrupted the heteronormative structure of a family that wasn’t really happy. The coming together of the family was just a matter of chance, of following the straight lines, and although they do love each other,

after everything is done the family doesn't serve a purpose anymore, it no longer offers a habitable space for the professor's queer body. Happy families sometimes require that we are brave enough to get lost, to queer the line.

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(Ahmed, 2006; Amir, 2001; Burton, 2012; Cain, 2016; Cather, 1922; Cather, 1981; CCCB, 2017; Dibattista, 2010; Kessler, 2010; Kishi, 2013; Wild, 1978)