

The Professor's House Book Club Discussion Questions



1. *The Professor's House* often places two ideas in opposition to each other such as materialism vs. simplicity, social-life vs. solitude, and so on. Where are these moments most apparent?
2. What is the function of the two houses? What does the family's new estate represent and what does the old house where Godfrey St. Peter's study is located symbolize?
3. A theme throughout the novel is modernism and the ways Godfrey St. Peter believes it harms those he loves. What does this say about Cather's own understanding of the changing times she lived in?
4. In a letter to a friend, now printed in *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*, Cather writes about the structure of *The Professor's House*. Before writing the novel, she had recently viewed an "exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings" (31). These paintings inspired the structure of the text. Cather wanted to recreate the overcrowded feeling of the paintings in St. Peter's home life. However, she noticed that most of the paintings included a "square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea" (31). Through the second section, Cather attempts to recreate the feeling of those Dutch windows.

"Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa" (31-32).

Where is this structure most notable and how does this idea of recreating Dutch genre paintings influence the imagery of the novel?
5. Why does Cather frame the novel in three parts; "The Family", "Tom Outland's Story" and "The Professor", respectively? What does this say about the protagonist's state of mind or relationship to his family? What does it say about his relationship with Outland (because Outland's chapter section splits up the sections entitled "The Family" and "The Professor")?
6. How do the male characters in the novel view the female characters? Why does Godfrey St. Peter feel a deeper connection with Augusta than the other women in his life?

7. At the beginning of the novel, it seems as if Tom Outland brings the family together as seen in this excerpt from “The Family” section:

“Sitting thus in his study, long afterward, St. Peter reflected that those first years, before Outland had done anything remarkable, were really the best of all. He liked to remember the charming groups of three he was always coming upon,-in the hammock swung between the linden-trees, in the window-seat, or before the dining-room fire. Oh, there had been fine times in this old house then...” (107)

but towards the end, his image and life is the reason St. Peter detaches from his family. When does this shift occur?
8. How does the professor’s split with his family parallel the splitting of himself into two parts? For example, Cather writes: “Tom Outland had not come back again through the garden door (as he had so often done in dreams!) but another boy had: the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley-the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter” (239).
9. What does it symbolize when Tom Outland builds a cabin on the mesa? Is he “settling” this uncolonized area despite his claims that he wants to protect it?
10. When Outland, Roddy Blake and Henry Atkins find the first human remains on the mesa, they discover a badly mutilated female body and decide to name her “Mother Eve”. Later, Father Duchene theorizes that she was likely murdered for having an affair. However, the specific nation that Cather would have studied (Hopi) in relation to the cliff dwellings was matrilineal and it was uncommon for the women in the nation to have just one partner, something Cather would have known. What is the purpose of inserting these ideas from Father Duchene who seems unsure if he is right? What does this say about the three men attempting to place ideals on a nation that did not value those same ideals?

“‘I seem to smell,’ he said *slyly*, ‘a personal tragedy. *Perhaps* when the tribe went down to the summer camp, our lady was sick and would not go. *Perhaps* her husband thought it worth while to return unannounced from the farms some night and found her in improper company.’” (201, emphasis added).
11. How is religion viewed throughout the novel? How does this compare to Cather’s other texts?
12. Tom Outland says, “We didn’t want to make our discovery any more public than necessary” (183) in reference to the Cliff Palace. This is consistent with his reaction to Roddy Blake selling the artifacts. However, Outland also says, “I admitted I’d hoped we’d be paid for our work, and maybe get a bonus of some kind, for our discovery” (219). These two ideas exist in opposition of each other,

something Outland would likely have known. What does this say about his reaction to Blake and his believability as a narrator of the second section?

13. How does Outland's relationship to the mesa change after Blake leaves? How does this mirror the professor's experience?
14. Godfrey St. Peter views his daughters and wife as materialistic and corrupted by modernism and is thankful that Tom Outland escaped the domestic life he would have had with Rosamond. Is this a romanticized view of Tom, especially the Tom that chose to work with Dr. Crane and marry his eldest daughter?
15. Similarly, does the professor disappoint himself with his own expectations of his relationships because he never allows for those around him to change and grow?
16. How has Godfrey St. Peter changed from the start of the novel to the end? Is this an admirable example of character development?