

ANALYSIS

Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“Miss Cather softens the epic until it becomes an elegy. In recounting the lives of her characters she chooses by preference their moments of calm reflection; when she wishes to throw the long tradition of the priesthood into relief against the primitive background of the new land, she seizes upon some contrast that is deep without being violent; and she sees everything as one sees it when one broods or dreams over the past. The tumult and the fighting reach us but dimly. What we get is the sense of something far off and beautiful—the picturesqueness and the fragrance of the past more than the past itself, pictures softened by time and appearing suddenly from nowhere.

In a garden overlooking Rome, a cardinal drinks his wine and discusses the appointment of a new bishop for a vague and distant see. That bishop, come all the way from the Great Lakes, struggles with the paganism of his priests, rides miles over the desert to perform a belated marriage ceremony over the Mexicans whose children he has baptized, or dreams of the cathedral which shall some day rise in the savage land; but at night he cooks himself a soup with ‘nearly a thousand years of history’ in it and in the sense of these vanished contrasts lies the effect of the book....

Even when Miss Cather strives most consciously to give to her books a narrative movement there is likely to be something static or picture-like about her best efforts, and when she falters it is usually in the effort to carry the reader from one to the other of the moments which rise like memories before her. In the present instance she has nothing that could properly be called a plot, but she is wisely content to accept the fact and to depend upon the continuous presence of beauty rather than upon any movement to hold the interest of the reader. When things are recalled in the mood of elegy there is no suspense and they do not take place one after the other because, all things being merely past, there is no time but one. And so it is in the case of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. It is a book to be read slowly, to be savored from paragraph to paragraph, and it is quite the most nearly perfect thing which its author has done since *A Lost Lady*.”

Joseph Wood Krutch
“The Pathos of Distance”
Nation (12 October 1927)

“*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) was based upon the lives of two actual prelates: Bishop—later Archbishop—Lamy of Santa Fe, called Latour in the novel, and his vicar general Father Machebeuf, called Father Vaillant. Keeping close to history as to dates and places and the chief persons, Willa Cather rounded out the documents on which the story was based and brought it richly and beautifully to life. She did not work it into a close-knit narrative, but wrote it as a series of scenes and incidents which in historic time may have been years apart. The logic of the story is in the character of the men, deeply founded and yet generously growing in their varied circumstances. Though Kit Carson, known to many Western romances, appears, this is no roaring border chronicle. Adventure and danger, violence and death are only episodes in the resolute advance of a mild culture bringing peace to the desert.

Herself a Protestant, Willa Cather told her story with full mastery of Catholic opinion and behavior, and with full sympathy for humane, heroic deeds. Heroism comes naturally to her heroes, in their day’s work. She stresses it no more than they would have done in talking about it. There is room for fresh descriptions of landscapes and interiors, food and clothing, the looks of all the characters, reflections on conduct and manners, and many big and little happenings, all told in a quiet tone and in a silver style. The novel was received with general enthusiasm and became at once a special favorite among her books, along with *My Antonia* and *A Lost Lady*. She had made the Catholic Southwest as truly a territory of her art as the plains

had been. She had given as graceful and exact a form to the lives of holy men as to the lives of erring women.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 290-91

“Bishop Jean Latour and his vicar Father Joseph Vaillant together create pioneer missions and organize the new diocese of New Mexico. Youthful friends in France, they are lifelong comrades, united by a love of their native country, as well as by their common purpose, but their characters are sharply contrasted. Latour is an intellectual and a patrician, highly sensitive but tolerant and possessed of an indomitable resolution and courage, remaining solitary in the midst of his people’s love and his friend’s devotion. Vaillant is practical, humane, companionable, and vigorous. The two combine to triumph over the apathy of the Hopi and Navajo Indians, the opposition of corrupt Spanish priests, and adverse climatic and typographic conditions. They are assisted by Kit Carson and by such devoted Indians as the guide Jacinto. When Vaillard goes as a missionary bishop to Colorado, they are finally separated, but Latour dies soon after his friend, universally revered and respected, to lie in state in the great Santa Fe cathedral that he himself created.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 189

“*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is an historical novel; it is also a regional novel and a deliberately picturesque novel, with natural description helping to set the emotional tone.... The ritual and beliefs of the Catholic Church, the heroic activity of missionary priests, and the vivid colors of the southwestern landscape combine to produce a new kind of warmth and vitality in her art.... Yet one wonders whether this lively creation of a golden world in which all ideals are realized is not fundamentally a ‘softer’ piece of writing.... There is, it is true, a splendid sympathy in the treatment of the characters and a most genuine feeling for the period and natural setting in which the action is laid. But there is no indication here of an artist wrestling successfully with intractable material. The material is all too tractable, and the success, though it is real, seems too easy.”

David Daiches
Willa Cather
(Cornell 1951) 105

“*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is *My Antonia*’s only possible rival as Miss Cather’s most important book. A fictionalized account of the lives of Bishop Lamy and Father Macheboeuf, in New Mexico of the 1850s, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is one of the most lambent and luminous narratives in American literature.... [It] was quite as ‘natural’ for Miss Cather to write as *My Antonia*.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 329-31

“In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) she treats the material at first-hand, and the result is a historical novel—one, however, in which the main interest is centered on a psychological study of the characters. The novel is set in the early nineteenth century in the region which is to become New Mexico, and is based on actual historical documents. The key names are changed, however, the historical Bishop L’Amy of Santa Fe becomes Jean Marie Latour, and his vicar-general Father Machebeuf is converted to Father Joseph Vaillant. The central figure is the French priest Latour, patrician, sophisticated, humanistic, and intelligent, who comes to the region to take over the office of Bishop of Santa Fe. Aided by his vicar Father Vaillant, Latour converts the Indians, builds missions, and brings civilization to a far-reaching desert and mountain empire. He is opposed, however, by the selfish and opportunistic Spanish priests of the region and by the ecclesiastical authorities in Mexico. His life is spent in struggle and loneliness; he finds little intellectual companionship in the rude missionary society. But he dies satisfied with his task and certain he stands on the threshold of a supernatural reward.

This novel is Miss Cather's most romantic work, and it is also her most popular. The sources of its popularity are obvious: it is straightforward in style and optimistic in tone, and it has the exotic charm of a historical setting. The title is misleading; the novel is not concerned primarily with death, and it is only at the end that Latour is made Archbishop. The story focuses on the character of Latour, on his inner struggle with his temptations of ambition and cultivated living, and on his saintly triumph in reorganizing and revitalizing the New Mexico Church. The heroism of the bluff and vigorous Father Vaillant is of a more physical sort; at the end of the novel, feeling that his task has been accomplished in New Mexico, he journeys northward to the infidel mining camps of Colorado to carry on the Church's work. Underlying the story of these two men is a wider pattern, the history of the European (specifically Spanish) influence on the Southwest and the gradual amalgamation of Spanish, Indian, and Anglo-Saxon elements to form the modern New Mexico."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 199

"Often regarded as Miss Cather's masterpiece, this narrative is so closely based on the lives of two eminent French clerics, Bishop Jean Baptiste L'Amy (1814-1888) and his vicar-general, Father Joseph Machebeuf, that the story resembles closely the *vita* of a saint—a *vita* done with genius. In the book, the men are called Fathers Latour and Vaillant; Henry Seidel Canby calls them 'Peter and Paul of the desert.' The vineyard they work in is a strange one—'blazing sand, adobe town, red mountains, Indian ceremonials, hieratic mystery, violent colors, fire and ice,' as one critic describes it. They brave all adversities to attain their end, finally build a cathedral in the wilderness. The story is told as the archbishop waits for death; an old man, he looks back on a lifetime of hardship and accomplishment. Although the novel was highly esteemed and has retained a steady audience, some critics see in it the failing of Miss Cather's creative imagination and an increasing reliance on history as the subject matter of her stories."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 243

"Where no woman dominates the action, a novel by Willa Cather tends to fall into the hopelessness of *One of Ours* or of *The Professor's House*; or to become less a record of human conflict than a series of insubstantial reveries, such as *Death Comes for the Archbishop*."

Josephine Lurie Jessup [Feminist critic]
The Faith of Our Feminists (1965) 75

"For obvious reasons, Cather is very popular with Christian readers, and no ingenuity is required to show that Christianity is central to her work. The two 'Catholic' novels, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, would alone suffice, together with Cather's confirmation in the Episcopal church in 1922. But Cather was a Christian (Baptist) from birth, and began attending Episcopal Sunday services at least as early as 1906, six years before she ever published a novel. Not just the 'Catholic' novels but her earlier books too are filled with Christian imagery—in some case, overt Christian teaching.... But Christianity is not the sum total of Cather's idealism. It is only the most powerful symbol. (Actually, music maybe equally important.) When she is in a position to compare Christianity with other religions, she makes no greater claims for her own faith....

Each of the four novels makes the same point: to desire something is to have as much of it as you will probably ever have. The mind dreams; life mocks the dream. (Or, in the best case, the dream is fulfilled—the archbishop builds his cathedral—and then the person is left with no dreams.) The only real life is the imagination, in desire and memory. This is the same point that Proust was making, at around the same time. Cather makes it unflinchingly, and moves to the summit of her powers. Of these four novels, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is the most celebrated, and perhaps justly. It is the most perfect piece of writing Cather ever did....

In an influential 1933 essay titled 'The Case Against Willa Cather,' Granville Hicks [Marxist] acknowledged that there was considerable beauty in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but, he asked, 'what

significance...has this beauty for us?... James Woodress, in his later *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*—this is the big biography of Cather, the day-by-day one—saw *The Professor's House* and *My Mortal Enemy* as evidence of a midlife crisis, and he spoke for many when he said, with obvious relief, that after those dark books Cather turned to ‘the rich affirmations of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.’ Affirmation was the key word. That’s what Cather was—an upholder, to quote Philip Gerber (*College English*, 1958), of ‘affirmative virtues of character, fidelity, idealism, civilization, culture, religion, ethics, and order’...

[Feminist critics] have since taken us on a long crawl through the female reproductive anatomy. When Thea bathes in a pool in the aforementioned canyon, this is a womb. When Bishop Latour, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, sees an opening in a cave wall, this is a fallopian tube. Not just Antonia and Jim, but most of Cather’s main characters are shown to be ‘masked’ homosexuals... The hushed, sacramental scene between Father Latour and the servant-woman Sada in the church in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—a scene of which Cather was sufficiently proud that, despite her disapproval of spin-offs, she allowed Knopf to publish it separately as a Christmas book—is taken by Patrick Shaw as evidence of Latour’s condescending, patriarchal attitude toward women, for that is what it needs to be in order to support Shaw’s thesis that conflicts over gender were the hidden source of Cather’s creativity.”

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 21, 24-25, 34, 57, 69, 84-85

Michael Hollister (2015)