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Newsletter—Literary Issue

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Edited by Bernice Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and—from Cather readers—original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588).

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With this issue of the Newsletter we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of **Death Comes for the Archbishop** (1927).

On Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop

As early as 1899 Willa Cather had commented on a novel about a clergyman. Writing about Harold Frederic's **The Damnation of Theron Ware**, she said that the first two hundred pages "are as good as anything in American fiction, much better than most of it" (**Pittsburg Leader**, June 10, 1899). Her general opinion of Frederic's novel, mentioned a number of places in her writing, was favorable. Frederic's portrayal of the Reverend Theron Ware, however, was not favorable. In fact, there is a long period of time between **The Vicar of Wakefield** and **Death Comes for the Archbishop**, during which the clergyman receives rather negative portrayals in major fiction. Anthony Trollope, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Frederic, Sinclair Lewis, and others had capitalized upon the cleric's weaknesses. Willa Cather reverted to an older tradition, as she often did in her writings, to present a true "man of God." The triumph of **Death Comes for the Archbishop** was due not to the foibles of Jean Marie Latour but to his virtues. In fact, Cather's portrayal of a Roman Catholic Archbishop was so positive that many reviewers assumed that the author must be Roman Catholic, an assumption that greatly annoyed Cather.

Religion fascinated Willa Cather from the beginning of her writing career. In her first regularly pub-



Archbishop Lamy and Cathedral, Santa Fe.

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lished column, "One Way of Putting It," in the **Nebraska State Journal**, she covered many topics. One of the most prominent of those topics was a series of articles that William Curtin (in **The World and the Parish**) has aptly entitled, "The Varieties of Religious Experience." In those early articles, Cather comments on a religious service at the State Penitentiary, a Salvation Army Revival, a Black Church service, and the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Theresa in Lincoln. She says a number of things about religion in those articles. Among them is one of my favorites. While musing about the state of the world, she says, "If the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, He is letting some of His property go to pieces most shamefully" (Nov. 5, 1893).

The element of doubt that can be detected in that statement was never to disappear entirely from Cather or her writings, but it was always combined with a certain covetous faith. In those same articles she wrote: "Almost any of us who doubt would give the

little we know or hope to know to go down upon our knees among the lowly and experience a great faith or a great conviction" (Dec. 17, 1893). That envious faith may be expressed and personified in her novel, **Death Comes for the Archbishop**. Archbishop Latour is best described as a man of faith. He is surrounded by men of "little faith,"—men who depend upon their sensual or intellectual or even their mystical faculties. Jean Marie Latour depends upon his faith, and his faith alone sustains him. Appearing in novel form, as it did, just six months after Lewis's **Elmer Gantry**, the contrast is astounding. Gantry is successful because of his fraudulence, and we love Lewis's expose. Latour is a success because of his faithfulness, and we love Cather's saint. In **Death Comes for the Archbishop**, Willa Cather has given us a modern saint, an American saint, even if fictional, that greatly resembles St. Paul. Latour, like Paul, is a missionary, sent to a people different from his own; he is shipwrecked; he has difficulty being accepted as an apostle; he has the constant oversight of all the churches. "On frequent journeys, in danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:26-28). Also, like Paul, the Archbishop is accompanied by a faithful companion, and he embodies the principle which he expresses to Father Vaillant, his Barnabas, Silas, Luke, and Timothy: "The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always" (p. 50). In **Death Comes for the Archbishop**, Willa Cather has given us such a miracle.

L. Brent Bohlke

On The Title

In her 1927 letter to the **Commonweal** ("On **Death Comes for the Archbishop**") Willa Cather inserts near the end of the article a parenthetical statement, "the title, by the way, which has caused a good deal of comment, was simply taken from Holbein's **Dance of Death**."

Thus Cather, a better student of art than many of her readers, reminds them of the presence of a literal representation of Death in traditional paintings and writings. Death, sometimes a handsome young man, sometimes a bizarre assemblage of bones (a literal skeleton), sometimes a reaper or other workman, appears in set scenes beckoning, approaching, or carrying away the mortal whose time has come.

Perhaps Willa Cather was too casual in simply citing the title's source; confusion over the title persists. It should not happen. Cather, as a mature artist, knew the value of each chosen word; her diction conveys a special meaning.

Ordinary mortals may "be killed" or "die." The semantic choice depends on circumstance. We may be killed by uncontrollable forces—disease, traffic accidents, wars—and we are, then, nameless victims to be noticed only **en masse**. Or we may die, fading away, succumbing to age and our own fated mortality,



"His silver candlesticks he had brought from France long ago. They were given to him by a beloved aunt when he was ordained."

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following the thousands, by now even the millions who have preceded us to that natural end. But what of the extraordinary mortal? No one lives forever and Death is the "great leveler," but does the unusual man just become one of the long procession of statistics?

Willa Cather writes in **My Mortal Enemy** of the narrator Nellie Birdseye's childhood impression that when the rich John Driscoll died, "Driscoll did not come to the church; the church went to him." Then, "I thought of John Driscoll as having escaped the end of all flesh; it was as if he had been translated, with no dark conclusion to the pageant, no 'night of the grave' . . . From the freshness of roses and lilies, from the glory of the high altar, he had gone straight to the greater glory through smoking censurs and candles and stars." Of course the matured Nellie and the author Cather, who always knows more than her narrator, both realize that only imagination creates Driscoll's special state. And, ironically, this man deserves nothing morally; he is merely wealthy. Yet he seems to transcend the universal end, to circumvent death itself, and, at least in the mind of Nellie Birdseye, to escape the brutal physical reality of dying.

What, then, if we were to consider the death of a morally good, although still human, man? How could his end be as special as his life? Obviously to represent the conclusion as "The Archbishop Dies" or "The Archbishop is Killed by Cardiac Arrest" is to make only a literal statement and to relegate the churchman to the group of thousands of fatalities each day.

Cather could have used "to" in the title: "Death Comes **to** the Archbishop" is the usual choice if the title is misquoted. Death is a personification, acting. But the implication here is casual. Death makes his rounds, rather like the postman making deliveries, but—in this case—making pick-ups. The Archbishop is one among several collected.

Willa Cather's choice of title is infinitely stronger. Death in personification comes **for** the Archbishop, making a trip specifically for one man. As the church seemed in Nellie's view to come to John Driscoll and take him directly to heaven, so Death comes for the Archbishop and takes him to some other realm. The churchman, like all of us, cannot avoid life's end, but he does not passively die, is not passively slain, does not wait patiently for Death to come to him in the daily round, but is given individual treatment. When his life is accomplished, he is sent for.

Cather has, then, chosen a proper title for Book 9, the last chapter of the novel. Does it work as a title for the whole? When Father Latour catches a chill and sends to his successor, the new Archbishop, asking if he may return to the house in Santa Fe to die, his companion Bernard tries to cheer him by saying that no one dies from a cold. The Archbishop answers, "I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived." This novel tells of a life that is concluded by Death's special visit. The Archbishop is not just one of many, but an exceptional, singular individual. Like the demi-gods and heroes of the classic age, he represents us all for he is a man, yet he inspires us all for he is a measure of what man can be. To such a man, Death is only a servant; Death must come for him. When we consider the inspiration of the Archbishop's life and the promise in his death, we must conclude that the title properly suggests the essence of his living and his dying.

JoAnna Lathrop

Water Imagery in Death Comes for the Archbishop

Although **Death Comes for the Archbishop** is a story of the desert, it abounds in water imagery and symbolism. For Cather water can mean life or death. In "Coming, Aphrodite!" she mentions that the serpent is the symbol of rain, but nowhere does she make the connection more evident than in the scene in **Death Comes for the Archbishop** where the Bishop and his Vicar ride in the rain to Mora. The rain drops remind Father Latour of tadpoles, and when they strike his face, they explode with a splash. The rain has a reptilian feel about it and prepares the mood for the introduction of Buck Scales, the snake-like murderer who will try to kill them.

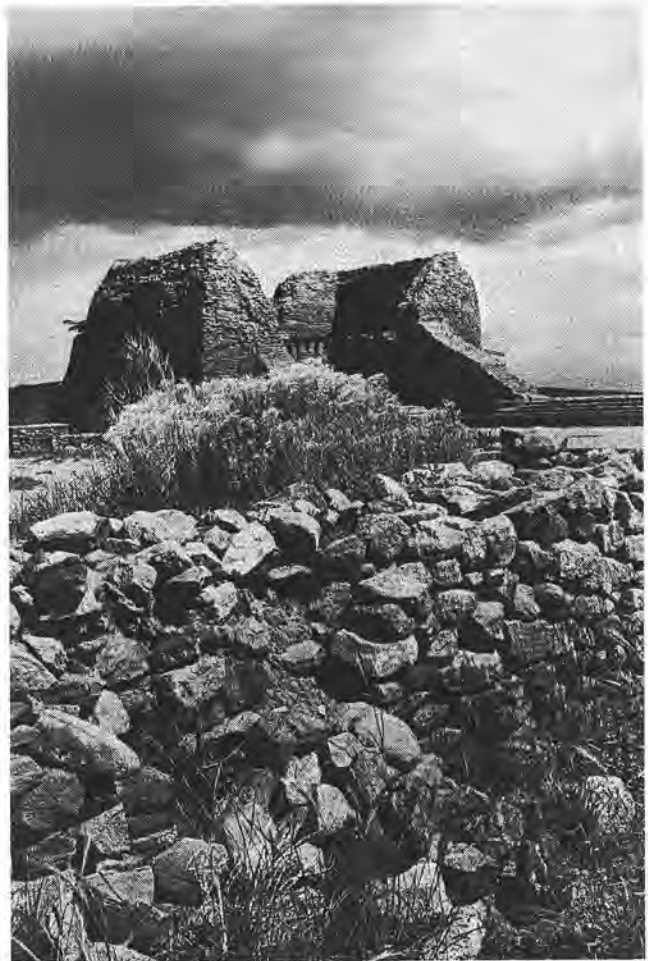
On the other hand, when rain comes down as they climb Acoma, the Bishop thinks of creation morning. The renewed plain looks to him as if it had just been created. The rain here symbolizes spring and rebirth, but when the Bishop says mass, he thinks of ministering to antediluvian creatures at the bottom of the sea.

The contrast between the two moods of rain indicates the problems of the Catholic Church in New Mexico: the church versus the long practice of paganism. The reptilian type of rain recurs at the death of Father Lucero, who has not followed the precepts of the church. Trinidad comes in a heavy rainstorm to get Father Vaillant for his dying uncle. As the old priest dies, calling for more candles to fight back the darkness, the rain beats on the windows and the wind moans down the deep arroyo.

And then at the close of the Archbishop's life, exposure to rain leads to his decline and death.

Imprisoned water can also have its light and dark aspects. In the chapter "Hidden Water" one finds no hint of water until it rises in a spring, making life possible for the whole village. Similarly, the stream at Arroyo Honda is imprisoned water leaping out to give life to the village.

But when this imprisoned water is not released into life, it has undertones of terror. When Jacinto and the Bishop enter the sacred cave for refuge from the blizzard, they hear a vibration in the cavern like bees or



Ruins of eighteenth-century church, Pecos Pueblo, New Mexico.

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drums. Jacinto opens up a crack in the floor, and Father Latour listens to the underground river. He hears the flood far below him and thinks it awe-inspiring, terrible.

When Father Latour first sees the Villa (Santa Fe) he looks at "wave-like mountains, resembling billows beaten up from a flat sea by a heavy gale . . . the town seemed to flow from it (main street) like a stream from a spring" (p. 22). Father Latour wanders in a desert of red ovens with the thought of thirst. Finally, he finds a running stream in an ocean of sand. The place reminds him of old well heads in Italy where the Romans had worshipped river goddesses. "This settlement was his Bishopric in miniature; hundreds of square miles of thirsty desert, then a spring, a village, old men trying to remember their catechism" (p. 32).

Repeatedly Cather emphasizes the desert by speaking of water. Even the blue lake at Laguna lies "in the midst of bright yellow waves of high sand dunes" (p. 89). And later, "From the flat red sea of sand rose great rock mesas. . . . The sandy soil . . . was splotted with masses of blooming rabbit brush,— that olive-coloured plant that grows in high waves like a tossing sea" (pp 94-95).

In other places Cather expresses her feeling of water surrounding peace. The hogan where Father Latour stays at Eusabio's is "like a ship's cabin on the ocean, with the murmuring of great winds about it" (p.

230). When Father Latour returns to Santa Fe to die, "He felt safe under its (Cathedral's) shadow; like a boat come back to harbour, lying under its own sea-wall" (p. 273).

Cather implies that all of the Bishop's work has been a sea voyage.

Mildred R. Bennett

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- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
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Studies of Willa Cather

The Library of Georgia State University, Atlanta, holds 18 of the 48 dissertations written since 1944 on Willa Cather and her work. The Library will honor requests for circulation of these studies through Interlibrary Loan, according to Jane Hobson, Reference Librarian. Georgia State holds the following dissertations: Philip L. Gerber, **Willa Cather: Novelist of Ideas** (State University of Iowa, 1952); Harry Finestone, **Willa Cather's Apprenticeship** (University of Chicago, 1953); James R. Bash, **Willa Cather: A Study of Primitivism** (University of Illinois, 1954); John H. Randall III, **Willa Cather's Search for Value: A Critical and Historical Study of Her Fiction** (University of Minnesota, 1957); James N. Schroeter, **Willa Cather's Literary Reputation** (University of Chicago, 1959); William M. Curtin, **The Relation of Ideas and Structure in the Novels of Willa Cather** (University of Wisconsin, 1959); Janet Ross, **Willa Cather and the Realistic Movement in American Fiction** (State University of Iowa, 1960); C. Maynard Fox, **Revelation of Character in Five Cather Novels** (University of Colorado, 1963); Richard M. Giannone, **Music in Willa Cather's Fiction** (University of Notre Dame, 1964); Sister Peter Damian Charles (University of Notre Dame, 1965); Sister Collette Toler, **Man as Creator of Art and Civilization in the Works of Willa Cather** (University of Notre Dame, 1965); John S. Zeigel, **The Romanticism of Willa Cather** (Claremont, 1967); Harry B. Eichorn, **Willa Cather: Stranger in Three Worlds** (Stanford University, 1968); Sister Patricia Kennedy, **The Pioneer Woman in Midwest Fiction** (University of Illinois, 1968); Kathleen E. Creutz, **The Genesis of The Song of the Lark** (University of California at Los Angeles, 1968); Marilyn Throne, **The Two Selves: Duality in Willa Cather's Protagonists and Themes** (Ohio State University, 1969); David A. Allen, **Willa Cather: A Critical Study** (University of Denver, 1972); and James M. Dinn, **"Only Two or Three Human Stories": Recurrent Patterns in the Major Fiction of Willa Cather** (University of Notre Dame, 1973).

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