

A Study on Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

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According to James Woodress, Willa Cather believed *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to be her "best novel."¹ Actually this work, published in 1927, gained the largest number of readers among her novels. The chief reasons are found in its serene, exquisite literary flavor, or in its style and structure that is, as the author willingly admits, "hard to classify,"² but the greatest reason is that its material, namely, the Catholic missionary of the Southwest in the age of its annexation to the U.S., is so unique and intriguing.

It should be kept in mind, however, that this work is by no means a religious novel in which Catholicism is the centralized theme. The Catholicism in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is, to put in Lionell Trilling's words, "a Catholicism of culture, not of doctrine."³ Indeed Jean Marie Latour, the protagonist, and his partner Joseph Vaillant are the priests coming to the New World to revive the Catholic faith which the Franciscans propagated in the 16th century. They are so often on a missionary journey among Indians and Mexicans in the indescribable natural features of the Southwest. But there is scarcely a passage where the priests preach a sermon or give a speech about some doctrine of Christianity even at the scenes of the Mass. What she depicted is how the first missionary with the European background lived and felt in "a crude frontier society" of the Southwest of America which is "larger than Central and Western Europe, barring Russia."

The aim of this paper is discussing what is more or less common to all major works by Willa Cather. That is, as David Daiches says, "a combination of Old and New World values"⁴ presented in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. We will survey some notable features and examine the author's notion concerning this theme not only in point of spatial scale but also in point of time between the past and the present and the future. She aims at the integration both in point of space and in point of time.

Almost all the episodes with regard to the Old World values are depicted with a certain range of cultural and historical backgrounds. The author foreshadows this motif already in the Prologue. When Jean Marie Latour is named in Rome among cardinals discussing who they should dispatch as a missionary priest in the Southwest of the U.S., one cardinal unexpectedly asks if this man has any "intelligence in matters of art." He says that if the

missionary priest has a discerning eye he might keep in mind an El Greco picture, which was taken away from his home to the New World in the age of his "great-grandfather's". This El Greco is never referred to again throughout the novel, and readers even do not know whether this story was conveyed to Latour who was to assume new position in New Mexico. But the fact that Willa Cather inserts in the Prologue this episode, which has apparently no relation to the main plot, shows how she intended the artistic graft of the Old World values onto the New. Indeed Jean Marie Latour has "intelligence in matters of art" and learning.

One notable example of the unity of both of the world is seen in the episode about a nun in the convent in France where Joseph Vaillant's sister is the Mother Superior. Vaillant often writes to this sister about their experiences and the features in the Southwest, which are, to those living in the Old World, totally beyond the bounds of imagination. The following remarks by the nun is significant and symbolical:

"...after the Mother has read us one of those letters from her brother, I...look up our little street with its one lamp, and just beyond the turn there, is New Mexico; all that he has written us of those red deserts and blue mountains, the great plains and the herds of bison, and the canyons more profound than our deepest mountain gorges. I can feel that I am there, ... my heart beats faster, and it seems but a moment until the retiring bell cuts short my dreams." (211)⁵

In these passages we see a typical example of what the author intended. There is no spatial distance that sets apart the two worlds, which are, geographically, separated by the thousands miles' stretch of the ocean. They are completely joined in her consciousness. The New World, which is located "just beyond the turn there," is the object of her dream and aspiration. This aspiration of the nun is, as a matter of course, what led Latour and Vaillant to the New World.

In other novels by Willa Cather, the Old World and the New were basically Europe and America, respectively. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, however, she enlarges the range of space to more global scale. Moreover, it is obvious that she makes great efforts in expanding the scale not only in space but also in time, transcending both of them. In describing the incidents and experiences concerning the two priests with the Old World background, Willa Cather inspires us to be conscious of the integration of the past and the present, namely, the synthesis of the current of time. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is indeed the integrated work of geographical, cultural, historical, religious, and artistic backgrounds of the Old World and the New. This characteristic is manifested even in such a smaller, seemingly trivial, episode as the taste of onion soup, which is referred to with a thousand years' history

and thousands of miles of geographical range. But the most impressive symbolization appears in Book I.

After returning from the 3000 miles' journey to Durango in Old Mexico he sleeps late in the morning, when he hears the ringing of the Angelus which could not have been in Santa Fè. Still dreamy, he is deluded to be in Rome, and then he senses something Eastern, and, still keeping his eyes closed, cherishes a vision of Jerusalem, to which he has never been.

...now this silvery bell had carried him farther and faster than sound could travel.
(50)

In this way his half-conscious imagination makes spatial expansion from Europe to the Orient. At the breakfast table, Vaillant says he found the Angelus in the basement of an old church in Santa Fè, and that it has an inscription showing it was made in Spain in the 14th century when a city was besieged by the Moors. Latour, who is no less a scholar and artist than an ecclesiastic, is pleased to know about the history, saying:

"...our first bells...originally came from the East. ...the Templars brought the Angelus back from the Crusades... I am glad to think there is Moorish silver in your (Vaillant's) bell..." (51-52)

Latour then alludes to the role Spaniards played in handing on their skill of working silver to Mexicans and then on to the Navajo. Willa Cather's notion is clear in this scene. By referring to Templars and Crusades and then to the Moors, Mexicans and the Navajo she extends the time scale of the novel by tracing back to the remote past with global geographical scale, thus transcending time and space.

Now we should turn our eyes to the discussion of the integration of the current of time. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is the work Willa Cather made public in her fifties, the age when people begin to aware that they are growing old. This work very strongly reflects her state of mind at this stage. The following passage is a part of the letter she wrote to her cousin. Although this was written ten years after the publishing of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, it gives a clue either in comprehending Latour's mentality at his closing years or in grasping Willa Cather's viewpoint as to the theme of the integration of the past and the present.

It is strange how, at the end of the road, everything is foreshortened, and we seem to possess all the stages of our life at the same time.⁶

This impression is manifested in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, especially in the depiction of the protagonist's later days, so strongly that we can consider it to be her greatest motive in undertaking this work. The author's

concept of the synthesis of the past and the present is based on this feeling of possessing "all the stages of our life at the same time," which any man feels at a certain period.

In his last days, Latour remembers the things that happened in his boyhood "as clearly" as he remembers the building of the Cathedral that happened recently in Santa Fé. He observes that there is "no longer any perspective in his memories". The subsequent passages are the same observation as the letter above.

He was soon to have done with Calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness, none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand and all comprehensible. (336-337)

In his memories the things of the Old World and the things of the New World are merged. The expression of this frame of mind is the message of the writer to the readers. She had been criticized by some critics as an escapist who turns her eyes away from the actuality to be indulged in the nostalgic past. She was always keeping this criticism in mind. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* she showed that one's past and the present are fused and that "all the stages of our life" are on the same plane. This is surely the answer she presented to those critics.

Incidentally death is a crucial factor in this work as is illustrated in the fact that the word is used in the title itself. Death is not the end of a person. It only means the termination of a body, or to say the least, the end of a physical existence. In the context of the eternal current of time from the past to the future, one's death does not mean his total extinction. This is exemplified in Latour's feeling after Vaillant's death. When he attends Vaillant's funeral, he cannot possibly believe that Joseph Vaillant is there in the coffin even though he is watching Vaillant's body so clearly before his eyes. For Latour, Joseph Vaillant is not "the shrivelled little old man...scarcely larger than a monkey" but a young man as when they came to New Mexico for the first time, getting over hardships, harboring resolution and aspiration to the frontier. In front of Vaillant's body Latour's memory cannot produce any other picture of him than that energetic young man. For Latour, a human life does not mean a physical, biological life that exists at present, but a life in the current of time that covers all his past, present and future, including his death. This is the reason for the fact that after Vaillant's death Latour can "feel nearer to him than before" because "it has brought [them] together."

More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself. (336)

Synthesis of the current of time thus not only means the extinction of the border of the past and the present but also it gives continuity between life and death. Even if one leaves "the calendared time," it does not mean the termination of his whole existence.

This view accounts for Latour's "intellectual curiosity about dying." In his last days in bed when people think his mind is failing, it is in fact "extraordinary active in some other part of the great picture of his life—some part of which they knew nothing."(337) What happened to him in the remote past and what is happening at present have the same weight, and are all located in the same distance from the center of his consciousness. This is especially so at the stage when his body is failing and forced to stay in bed.

There are variety of things and occurrences that symbolize the unity of the Old World and the New, including that magnificent lotus blossoms in the pond of the bishop house, whose bulbs Latour brought from Rome. As a matter of course, however, the central symbol is the Cathedral Latour builds in Santa Fé. This Cathedral integrates all the values of the two worlds, geological, cultural, religious, artistic.

The reason for his desire of building a cathedral on the frontier land is found in the character of Jean Marie Latour himself, who is rather an artist and scholar while Vaillant is no other than a missionary priest. Latour makes the following remark to Vaillant who is leaving for his final post of duty:

"You are a better man than I. You have been a great harvester of souls." (303)

If we limit our discussion of the two priests' activities in the purely religious sphere, that is, the mission of "hunting for souls" or "harvesting souls" or "saving souls" for which they are sent to the frontier from Rome, no doubt Vaillant gains the greater results. Vaillant totally assimilates himself to the frontier in the New World, as is symbolized in the scene where the Pope calls out to him during his visit to Rome:

"*Coraggio, Americano!*" (267)

The Pope would not have called out to Latour in this way. Vaillant becomes a man who belong to the New World. Latour, on the other hand, knows that he is "*pedant*" and cannot become an American either culturally or mentally, and therefore it is easily imaginable that he feels a certain kind of envy and debts to Vaillant. In short, the Cathedral is, for Latour, his own salvation. This view accounts for Latour's rapture for delight in encountering the golden rock as the material for the Cathedral. Latour's joy is understandable because he feels God has given him priority of constructing the Cathedral as a work of art, while Vaillant, although he knows the importance of building

it, does not realize the urgent necessity when "everything about [them] is so poor," which is never without reason. For Jean Marie Latour who lags behind Vaillant as a missionary priest, the construction of the Cathedral is the way of leaving on the New World the footmarks of his achievements that are based on his own gift and nature.

...he came to feel that such a building might be a continuation of himself and his purpose, a physical body full of his aspirations after he had passed the scene.

(203)

The Cathedral must be the architecture that grafts the European artistic tradition onto the New World. Further, it must embody the author's own idea that art and religion stem from the same root, that is, it must fulfill the religious purpose and also must be a finished art object. He decides as an artist that Midi Romanesque is "the right style for this country" and to build "the first Romanesque church in the New World" becomes Latour's dearest ambition.

The artistic tradition of Europe is thus grafted on to the New World. What should be remembered is, Latour's work is done for the future. Willa Cather so repeatedly uses the phrase "for the future", partly because she was so conscious of the criticism of being an escapist. Latour and Vaillant grow plants in the church, build the Cathedral in Santa Fé, or even embrace each other "for the future."

Latour says Vaillant is a better man than he. Actually Vaillant has totally devoted himself to the missionary work of "hunting for lost Catholics," and has been "blind to everything." Then how does he think of Latour, his superior and friend? When we consider that Willa Cather's main interest was, as she wrote in *On Writing*, how a well-bred, distinguished person embodied in Latour felt and lived in "a crude frontier society," the following passages are crucially important:

...a priest with Father Latour's exceptional qualities would have been better placed in some part of the world where scholarship, a handsome person, and delicate perceptions all have their effect... Perhaps it pleased Him to grade the beginning of a new era and vast diocese by a fine personality. (294)

Thus, he "devoutly" realizes that "God had his reasons." For the first time he understands both Latour's person and his ideas as to the unity of the cultures of the Old World and the New. Latour is satisfied when he finds the rock as the material for the Cathedral because he felt it to be the proof of God's permission to his will, while Vaillant realizes that the presence of Latour's person on this continent is, in itself, God's will. However, there is no difference here in the sense that both the Cathedral and the person of Jean

Marie Latour owe the role of the integration of the two worlds. After the passages quoted above, the pivotal passages resume:

And perhaps, after all, something would remain through the years to come, some ideal, or memory, or legend. (294)

This conclusion by Vaillant is also the author's. Jean Marie Latour is the person who leaves "some ideal, or memory, or legend" for the future. The Santa Fe Cathedral is the embodiment of this admirable person's aspiration and achievement in the New World, and also it is the proof of his fulfillment of his own life. Moreover, the Cathedral is, for Willa Cather herself, the very symbolization of her own arts.

We have seen mostly the Old World values implanted onto the New World. Then what is the greatest value the New World has in itself? In fact the New World is the place which provides a man with the infinite space where he can make a challenge and fulfill himself, which, in Willa Cather's value judgment, the most important way of life. At the very last we must discuss *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with regard to "the paradox of success," which had always been either the source of conflict or the source of creativity for the author. "Success is never so interesting as struggle—even to the successful,"⁷ Willa Cather said. This had been her issue since she saw pioneers morally deteriorated by gaining material success. Even the Professor St. Peter, a scholar, falls into dejection when he accomplishes his life work. But the case is different with the pioneer priests. Vaillant says:

"To fulfill the dreams of one's youth: that is the best that can happen to a man. No worldly success can take the place of that." (303)

The priests, Joseph Vaillant in particular, devote themselves to "hunting for lost Catholics" or "hunting for souls." Jean Marie Latour, who is rather a scholar and artist than a priest, seeks his *raison d'être* in grafting the Old World culture onto the New World frontier. In short, their "dreams" are to open up a purely spiritual sphere on the New World, and therefore there is no room at all for the paradox to cut in even when their dreams come true.

Latour determines to make New Mexico his last home. Having cleaned "the Augean stable" of the frontier, completed Santa Fe Cathedral, and retired from his duties as Archbishop, he nevertheless does not return home to spend his closing years as all his relatives and friends expect. This plot is vitally important in this connection. In *The Professor's House* we saw a typical example of a person who falls into the trap of paradox of success after accomplishing a great work, or "fulfilling his dream." But as for Jean

Marie Latour, even after he "accomplished a historic period," he is complacent to the end. For this "pioneer churchman"⁸ who comes with the historical background of the Old World, New Mexico is the sphere where he can always face the future.

...in the Old World he found himself homesick for the New. It was a feeling he could not explain, a feeling that old age did not weigh so heavily upon a man in New Mexico as in the Puy-de-Dôme. (317)

He "always awoke a young man" in New Mexico, which is full of the breath of the frontier. Here he is entirely outside the range in which the Professor St. Peter felt his dejection. The priest can be "a young man" as ever as he used to be in the days when they landed the New World with dreams and aspirations. It is understandable that Willa Cather felt *Death Comes for the Archbishop* the most satisfactory for her, seeing that she could get the idea of this plot in creating this work of art.

Notes

1. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 390.
2. Willa Cather, *On Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949), p. 12.
3. James Schroeter (ed.), *Willa Cather and Her Critics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 81.
4. David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1971), p. 113.
5. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1973). The page references throughout are to this edition.
6. Demaree Catherine Peck, *Possession Granted by a Different Lease* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: U.M.I., 1990), p. 331.
7. James Schroeter (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 263.
8. Willa Cather, *On Writing*, p. 7.