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Willa Cather's Archbishop: A Western and Classical Perspective

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Merrimack College JOHN J. MURPHY Willa Cather's Archbishop: A Western and Classical Perspective The hero rather than setting or situation is the main thing in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Willa Cather admitted that for a long time she had no intention of writing the novel: "the story of the Church and the Spanish missionaries was always what most interested me; but I hadn't the most remote idea of trying to write about it."¹ What changed her mind were stories she had heard about Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe and her discovery of Howlett's biography of Bishop Machebeuf. She was intrigued by the reaction of the French priests to the people and country of New Mexico, the Western experience as filtered through the hero she would fabricate from these and other sources, a hero at once "fearless and fine and very, very well-bred. . . .

What I felt curious about was the daily life of such a man in a crude frontier society.” In this way she revealed her interest in creating a Western hero, one sharing the experiences of Leatherstocking, the Virginian, and even Huckleberry Finn, yet responding to these experiences with a more cultivated sensibility. Beyond this local or national type are similarities to the heroes of classical literature, particularly Aeneas, whose destiny was to shape a new culture in Italy by transplanting the home gods of Troy. Thus Archbishop Latour reflects Cather’s cyclical view of history, in which the American experience repeats the European, and our West the larger West. 1Willa Cather *On Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 6-7. 142 *Western American Literature I* Jean Marie Latour is introduced wearing buckskin like Natty Bumppo, although the far western setting of the novel demands an equestrian hero like the Virginian. Cather opens with “a solitary horse man, followed by a pack-mule, . . . pushing through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico.”² This horse man is atypical, however: “Under his buckskin riding coat he wore a black vest and the cravat and collar of a churchman” (p. 19). Even aside from his calling, he is unusual: “His bowed head was not that of an ordinary man, — it was built for the seat of a fine intelligence. . . . There was a singular elegance about the hands below the fringed cuffs of the buckskin jacket. Everything showed him to be a man of gentle birth — brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners . . . were distinguished.” Cather presents us with the cultivated counterpart of the naturally attractive hero described by Wister’s narrator at the beginning of *The Virginian*: “in his eye, in his face, in the whole man, there dominated a something potent to be felt. . . by man or woman.”³ Wister’s tall stranger and Cather’s young priest are knights-errant in the wilderness, rescuing those in need, righting wrongs, bringing law to lawless regions. The Virginian’s exploits range from pranks to gun duels, but there is always decency about them. The rescue of Molly Wood from the river, while a humorous situation, is of a maiden in distress, the kind of affair Natty Bumppo specialized in in the New York forests. The Virginian’s role in lynching the cattle thieves is of more serious dimension, a haunting episode leading to tears for his old friend Steve. This and the famous gun duel with Trampas jeopardize his relationship with Molly, but he is forced into them by the corrupt condition of Wyoming law. In trying to justify the hero’s actions, Judge Henry explains to Molly, “We are in a very bad way, and we are trying to make that way a little better until civilization can reach us” (p. 314). Even the Wyoming bishop cannot really condemn the Virginian’s action under the circumstances. New Mexico too is in a bad way, and Latour has to contend with similar lawlessness. “The Lonely Road to Mora” episode combines the 2Death Comes for the Archbishop (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1971), p. 17. Subsequent references are to this edition. 3Owen Wister, *The Virginian, A Horseman of the Plains* (New...

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Willa Cather's Archbishop: A Western and Classical Perspective

The hero rather than setting or situation is the main thing in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Willa Cather admitted that for a long time she had no intention of writing the novel: "the story of the Church and the Spanish missionaries was always what most interested me; but I hadn't the most remote idea of trying to write about it."¹ What changed her mind were stories she had heard about Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe and her discovery of Howlett's biography of Bishop Machebeuf. She was intrigued by the reaction of the French priests to the people and country of New Mexico, the Western experience as filtered through the hero she would fabricate from these and other sources, a hero at once "fearless and fine and very, very well-bred. . . . What I felt curious about was the daily life of such a man in a crude frontier society." In this way she revealed her interest in creating a Western hero, one sharing the experiences of Leatherstocking, the Virginian, and even Huckleberry Finn, yet responding to these experiences with a more cultivated sensibility. Beyond this local or national type are similarities to the heroes of classical literature, particularly Aeneas, whose destiny was to shape a new culture in Italy by transplanting the home gods of Troy. Thus Archbishop Latour reflects Cather's cyclical view of history, in which the American experience repeats the European, and our West the larger West.

¹Willa Cather *On Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 6-7.



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