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**CATHER'S**

# **DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP**



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# DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

## NOTES

*including*

*Life of Willa Cather*

*Introduction*

*Summaries and Commentaries*

*Critical Analysis*

*Character Sketches*

*Review Questions*

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## THE LIFE OF WILLA CATHER

Willa Cather, born near Winchester, Virginia, December 7, 1873, moved to Webster County, Nebraska in 1883. In 1890 she entered the preparatory school at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and graduated in 1895. During her student days she wrote stories, poems, plays and drama and music criticism. She continued both journalistic work and fiction writing, taking in 1896 the position of managing editor of the *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1897 she changed to newspaper work on the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*, and in 1901 began teaching English in one of the Pittsburgh high schools.

In 1903 her first book of poems, *April Twilights*, was published; in 1905 her first book of short stories, *The Troll Garden*. She joined the staff at *McClure's Magazine* in 1906, remaining with them until 1912, the year her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, was published. In 1913 *O Pioneers!* placed her in the first rank of novelists. Published in 1927, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, her ninth novel, has won much praise.

Willa Cather died April 24, 1947, author of twelve novels, many short stories and essays; winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the Prix Femina Américain; a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, recipient of the gold medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Her work, much prized abroad, has been translated into more than fifteen languages, is used as a text here and abroad.

## INTRODUCTION

After the publication of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, many people wrote Willa Cather and inquired how she happened to write the book. She was in Red Cloud that winter of 1927 and when the mail became overwhelming, she wrote an open letter to the editor of *The Commonweal*, telling him of how when she first went to the Southwest, she had to travel by wagon and camp out. She met a

Belgian priest, Father Haltermann, who raised poultry, sheep, vegetables, and flowers. He knew many stories of the country, the traditions, the Indians.

More and more impressed that the story of the Southwest was the story of the Catholic Church in that country, Cather believed the account should be written by a Catholic. Time passed. As she returned to the Southwest, she came to feel that Archbishop Lamy was a personal friend, she wanted to learn more about him. She appreciated the beauty and originality of the small churches, decorated with native art.

One day she found the book *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf*, by William Joseph Howlett. From that account she determined the daily reactions and the spirit of the two French missionary priests. Intermingling history with her own experiences, she wrote the book, consulting her Red Cloud friend, Father Fitzgerald, for detail.

She wrote in the style of the Golden Legend, wherein the mood, not the situation, counts. The title of the book came from Holbein's *Dance of Death*.

For the most part Cather sticks to actual history, but when art can be served better, she changes time factors. For example, the village of Pecos was dead before the time of the story, and in fact Father Lamy died before Father Machebeuf.

Willa Cather first visited the Southwest in 1912 when she went to stay with her brother, Douglas, who was working for the railroad in Winslow, Arizona. In a sense the country was already part of her dreams. In 1909 she had written "The Enchanted Bluff," a story of a mesa in New Mexico where the inhabitants had starved on top their tableland. She used the Southwest in *The Song of the Lark* and in *The Professor's House*, with appreciation for the cliff dwellers and the ancient ways. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* the ancient and the new mingle within the Catholic tradition which itself holds both the ancient and the modern.

When Cather speaks of the Golden Legend, she gives the clue to this book. An historic tapestry, the background—no matter what color—is suffused with gold, yellow, copper or bronze. In actual color, this is a Golden Legend.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

### PROLOGUE

#### *Summary*

A Spanish-English Cardinal, two other Cardinals one French and one Italian and a French Missionary Bishop from America dine in a hidden garden on the side of a mountain. The Missionary Bishop wants a Bishop appointed for the New Mexico Vicarate, in territory newly annexed by the United States. He names Jean Marie Latour, now serving in Canada.

The missionary priest tries to explain the problems of the New Mexico vicarate. The church has survived three hundred years of neglect. The Bishop of Durango who supposedly guides affairs lives fifteen hundred miles away, over rough, difficult terrain. The new man must be young, intelligent, vigorous, and ready for martyrdom.

The Spanish Cardinal asks if the new man is artistic and tells how an American missionary, a beggar as they all are, had persuaded his grandfather to give him an El Greco for his mission. The Spanish Cardinal wants to find it again, but his efforts so far have failed. The American Bishop does not share concern for the painting. Having lived too long in the New World, he has even lost his taste for wine and for the fine Old World manners. For their part, the other priests are bored by the Bishop's insistence on his problems.

#### *Commentary*

The nationalities represented in the priests will also be found in the New World, with Rome standing for Italy. The scene of the priests dining in an airy bird-like place watching the night come on will be repeated in varied form throughout the book. The reader



should contrast the leisure and detachment of the Europeans with the haste and earnest impatience of the Missionary Bishop. The Europeans think of art, music, food and comfort; the American priest (though of European origin) eats rapidly without even savoring the wine.

Prophetic of what will happen to those who go to missions in the New World is the suggestion that the country will drink up their youth like rain.

The predominant color of this book is some form of yellow: gold, copper, blonde, bronze and other tints of yellow. In this opening scene, although the men are in Rome, the colors are: bluish grey with a flash of copper light. The light has motion, action, climax. Even the foliage turns to gold in the afternoon light, though there may be blue, violet, russet, and rose.

## BOOK 1—THE VICAR APOSTOLIC

### *Book 1—Summary*

#### CHAPTER 1. THE CRUCIFORM TREE

Having lost his way Bishop Latour travels through red sand-hills, topped with yellow-green junipers. He and his animals have no water and suffer from great thirst. He closes his eyes and when he opens them, he sees a juniper in the form of a cross. He stops, makes his devotions, rises refreshed. The reader sees him as "brave, sensitive, courteous." In his great need for water he identifies with Christ's cry on the cross, "I thirst." He thinks perhaps this is the end of his life and blames himself for the suffering of his animals. He has been preoccupied with how to gain back his vicarate. Three years have elapsed since the meeting of the four men in Rome, and the Bishop has not yet taken over his vicarate.

His worldly possessions, except his books, were lost in a ship wreck in Galveston harbor. On the trip west, he injured his leg in a wagon accident and was delayed three months.

A year after leaving Mississippi, Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant rode in a wagon train into Santa Fé but the people would

not accept the new Bishop without confirmation from the Bishop of Durango. Father Latour is now returning from the nearly three thousand mile round trip to Mexico and is lost on the trail.

Suddenly the attitude of the animals changes. They smell water. Soon they come upon a stream between the red hills, a small Catholic settlement that cannot believe a priest has really come.

## CHAPTER 2. HIDDEN WATER

At Hidden Water, Father Latour finds friendly people who want the solace of the church. They are afraid the new American government will take away their religion. As they are simple folk and cannot grasp new ideas, Father Latour can not reassure them. The priest likes the wooden saints, carved and dressed in Mexican style. A young boy tells the priest that Santiago is the saint of horses, a New World fact that the European does not know.

Father Latour, content in his feather bed, thinks how Father Joseph would call his finding this settlement a miracle. The priest concedes that it is a miracle, but with nature, not against it as Father Joseph would contend.

Next day Father Latour performs the marriages and christenings and other religious rites and attends the following feast. He then goes for a walk, watches and muses over the antics of the tame goats, finds the water head which has been a refuge for humanity longer than history. From the hidden waters he finds strength. He sees Hidden Water as a miniature of his vicarate, and feels confident to tackle the trouble at Santa Fé and the rebellion of Father Martínez at Taos.

## CHAPTER 3. THE BISHOP CHEZ LUI

When Father Latour returns, he finds that Father Joseph has won the confidence of the people, has persuaded the incumbent Mexican priest to go to Mexico, has moved into the priest's house and has begun to create order. Nine days after his return, on Christmas Day, Father Latour, from his study in the old adobe house, writes home. The room, hand plastered, whitewashed, has cedar ceiling beams and an earth floor covered by Indian blankets. Two

old and precious blankets hang on the wall like tapestries. The heavy furniture is hand hewn as there are no saw mills in that area. Father Latour's desk, a walnut one, has been sent by an American officer. His silver candlesticks add the European note. The Bishop writes his brother of how he must be a business man all day, how he will help the Mexicans become good American citizens—it is for their own good—and how Joseph is cooking dinner. The two men will be happy, though exiles from France.

Father Joseph announces dinner. At this point Cather tells how ugly he is, and how loveable. Through him Santa Fé has become reconciled to the new priests. Father Joseph has made onion soup with a thousand years of history in it. He talks of planting gardens so he may have fresh vegetables. He remembers his garden in Ohio and remarks that this is far enough to wander, and asks Father Latour to promise not to make him go farther.

Father Latour wonders how far this is—he hasn't any notion of how great the diocese, and neither do the soldiers at the Fort. He will ask Kit Carson. As they are talking over memories in French (they usually speak English or Spanish for practice) they hear rifle shots—drunk Indians.

#### CHAPTER 4. A BELL AND A MIRACLE

A flashback tells of the first morning after his trip to Durango when the Bishop awakens to the ringing of the Angelus, making him first dream of Rome, then of the East. He can scarcely believe his ears. Father Joseph says the bell, of Spanish origin, dates from 1356. Legend says it was pledged to St. Joseph in the Moorish wars and that it contains silver, gold and some baser metals. Father Latour thinks the Moorish element accounts for the feeling of the East he has heard in the tones. Father Joseph, practical, does not like Father Latour to bring in the Moors. He changes the subject and asks Father Latour to listen to a Mexican priest who has just been to the Shrine of Guadalupe.

In 1531 a poor Mexican, Juan Diego, was hurrying into Mexico City to attend mass when he met in his path, the Virgin in blue and gold. She asked him to find the Bishop and tell him to build Her a

church on that spot. She would await Juan's return. When Juan told the Bishop, he met with disbelief. Discouraged, Juan went to his sick uncle and cared for him. After a few days, Juan had to go back to his monastery to get medicine, but he went another way, not the way where the Virgin had said She would wait. But the Virgin appeared again and asked him why he avoided Her. He told his story and She said that his uncle would be well, and that he should go again with Her request to the Bishop. Juan wanted a sign and She told him to go up on the rock and gather roses. Although it was December and no roses should bloom, he found wonderful flowers. The Virgin arranged them in his tilma (mantle) and told him to open the mantle before the Bishop. When he did, the roses fell out, the Bishop and his Vicar fell on their knees; in the mantle was a painting of the Blessed Virgin in blue and rose and gold. Forthwith the church was built.

The native priest praises the picture, saying it is still rich and delicate and colorful.

After the priest has gone Father Joseph talks about what a blessing such a miracle is for the poor. Such a miracle can be held and loved. Father Latour says that love produces miracles: that our affection makes us able to see things and hear things that are always present, but that without love we do not recognize them.

### *Book I – Commentary*

Cather has much feeling for and interest in antiquity. In this section, Father Latour's thoughts about Angora goats go back to the Bible and the Lamb, and the paganism that goats have always represented. At the hidden spring, he thinks back before known history and compares this water refuge with those where ancients put up images of the river goddess in Italy. The two priests eat an onion soup with 1000 years of history behind it. The Spanish bell dates from 1356 and the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe from 1531. Bell ringing came from the Moslems. The people at Hidden Spring beat out grain like the children of Israel.

Father Latour is Bishop of an historic See. When he "was consecrated Vicar Apostolic of New Mexico and Bishop of

Agathonica in partibus..." he received the authority of a Bishop to fulfill the duties that would come with the New Mexico Mission, which was not yet organized. Agathon or Agathonica may have been on the Black Sea. As Bishop of a See no longer in existence, Father Latour has no responsibility toward Agathon, but full power to act in New Mexico.

The two priests complement each other: Joseph, ugly, practical, loveable, intuitive, believes in miracles. Latour, handsome, reserved, sensitive, scholarly believes in the laws of nature. Father Joseph wants miracles that go contrary to nature; he is moved to strong emotions. Father Latour thinks miracles are the result of natural law; his reactions are reserved.

Father Joseph worries about order at home, in the house, in Santa Fe. He figures out a way to make a good meal in spite of having little; he takes care of the practical problems like the drunken natives who have desecrated the church. Father Latour dreams about the extent of the diocese. He ponders the broad problems: the country itself, the simplicity and ignorance of the people, the corruption and disintegration of the clergy.

Both agree that the work of the church includes gardens, vineyards and good citizenship as well as instruction in spiritual affairs.

In the prologue, the reader sees the difference between the vigor and drive of the missionary priest and the sophistication and boredom of the Old World. In the two men these attitudes are transformed and modified into Father Latour's scholarly appraisal and Father Joseph's vehement "Rest in action." This modification and reorientation of motif will be used throughout the book to bring a unity of mood and an emphasis of idea.

Some figures of speech are: Father Latour wanders in a "geometrical nightmare...a desert of ovens." Father Martinez has "shoulders like a buffalo." The pinon logs make an odor of incense—the fragrance of daily work. The goats "leaped the stream like arrows speeding from the bow..." The sand is a thirsty sea; the

note these motifs developing without giving the significance to each one individually.) 1) Willy asserts that he is "vital in New England." This is said partly because he knows that he cannot get a position in New York so he covers up by asserting that he is vital to New England. 2) The second motif is that concerning debts and things being all used up by the time they are paid for. This idea will rise to a comic height and then will be transformed to tragic pathos as Willy makes the last payment on his house and then commits suicide so that as the house is paid for, he is all used up. 3) The third motif that is suggested here is the idea of Biff's "personal attractiveness." This will develop into the single most important image throughout the play. It is the guiding principle of Willy's life and being. If a man is well-liked, if he has personal attractiveness, Willy thinks that the entire world will open up for him. It is by this idea that Willy both lives and dies. As the play progresses we will examine this idea in further detail. 4) The motif of being "boxed-in" or of "nothing will grow here." As life begins to close in on Willy, this idea is symbolically portrayed in Willy's inability to get anything to grow in his back yard. And even the buildings seem to close in on Willy. And the more things close in on him, the more desperate become his efforts to get something to grow.

4. There is one short contradiction in this first scene which could seem confusing, but in actuality it is a key to Willy's character. Within the span of seven short speeches, Willy says of Biff: "The trouble is he's lazy." "Biff is a lazy bum!" and "There's one thing about Biff—he's not lazy." This apparent contradiction is a part of Willy's character. When he is mad at Biff he accuses Biff of being lazy or spiteful. But if someone else, in this case Linda, tends to criticize Biff, Willy immediately comes to his defense. But this technique characterizes Willy. In a fleeting moment (second) of reality he offers a critique of Biff, but this reality can last only for a second. Then he returns to his dreams of "personal attractiveness" and in these dreams, there can be nothing wrong with Biff.

## BOOK 2—MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

### *Book 2—Summary*

#### CHAPTER 1. THE WHITE MULES

Father Vaillant, returning from Albuquerque, thinks of the suspicion of the people at Santo Domingo, who will come to hear him but will not allow their children to be baptized. The Spanish have mistreated them long ago and they do not forget. Father Joseph thinks of his wind-broken horse, sold him by a Yankee trader. He comes to the Lujon Ranch, like a beautiful little town. He commands Lujon to bring the men from the fields so that they can be married. The children can be baptized next day. Lujon sees no need of hurry, but does as the priest asks. The old women servants gossip about how ugly the priest is, how bad the times are.

Father Joseph insists on cooking his own leg of lamb. The Mexicans are horrified by his eating rare meat. At the table they discuss Father Joseph's useless horse. The priest says he won't trade at Santo Domingo because they are suspicious of him. Father Gallegos in Albuquerque is a rich gambler and Father Joseph has told him he does not think the priests should make a profit off the people. Manuel Lujon laughs at the father's frankness. He has hoped that Father Joseph played cards, but settles for dominoes and grape brandy.

The next morning Father Joseph sees Lujon's pair of white mules, who look at him like Christians. The men talk of Father Joseph's poor horse. Finally Lujon gives the priest Contento, one of the cream colored mules. Father Joseph cries out in delight, but the next morning he is sad because he can't take the gift. His Vicar rides a horse as bad as Father Joseph's and the lesser priest can't appear with a better mount than his superior. In the end Lujon gives both mules, and although he feels he has been tricked into it, he isn't sorry.

#### CHAPTER 2. THE LONELY ROAD TO MORA

Father Joseph and Father Latour are on the third day out toward Mora. Rain and cold make the journey difficult, and they

hope to find shelter for the night before going on to Mora, where they will plan for refugees from an Indian massacre.

They find a poor house and ask to spend the night. The man, American, appears repulsive and evil but says they may stay. His Mexican wife seems half-witted, but before she follows her husband to the stable, she pantomimes that they will be murdered if they stay. The priests have to demand their mules at gun point, but they travel on. They reach Mora after midnight.

Next morning a boy reports that a crazy woman in the stable wants to see the two priests with the white mules. It is Magdalena, the wife of Buck Scales and she has run away. She begins to tell her story to Father Latour, but he stops her and sends for a notary. Meanwhile he asks the women to help Magdalena. Cleaned and refreshed she tells that she married Scales six years before. He has murdered four travelers and the three children she has born him. After he killed the first child she ran home to her parents but he threatened harm to them and she returned, too afraid to leave him. She wants only to save her soul and die. A friend of the notary confirms that she is Magdalena Valdez.

The authorities find Buck Scales on his way to Taos to get his wife, and jail him at Mora. Magdalena fears to stay near him, and Father Latour shares that fear. He and the notary stand armed guard over her all night. Kit Carson comes and offers her refuge. Father Latour is surprised to find Carson a slight man, but likes him immediately. They become lifelong friends.

On the way back to Taos, Carson tells Father Latour how he feels about becoming a Catholic. When he was sick in California, the priests took care of him and although the native priests in New Mexico are disreputable, Carson sees there is something in the religion after all. At that time Carson cannot read or write, but he knows more geography of the west than anyone. He takes Magdalena home. Investigators find the bodies of the murdered people and Buck Scales is hanged.

When the Bishop comes back from a trip to St. Louis, he



brings five Sisters of Loretto to found a girls' school. Magdalena works for them, regains her beauty and serenity.

### ***Book 2 – Commentary***

This section points out the problems that the priests have to meet. The ancient prejudice among the Indians of Santo Domingo stems from Spanish injustice. Father Joseph's purchase of a feeble horse results from Yankee greed. Indians have massacred near Mora; Buck Scales represents the degenerate criminal. Carson's faith has suffered because of uncelibate and miserly priests. Even the weather turns unfavorable and the food does not tempt the palate of the Frenchmen.

To balance this picture Manuel Lujon gives his white mules (reluctantly), and Magdalena risks her life to save the priests. Kit Carson befriends the girl. Father Joseph can enjoy dominoes and Lujon's grape brandy.

Father Latour, although pictured as reserved and contemplative, does not fail to appreciate Magdalena's terror. He sees that she is cleaned, fed and clothed, and then watched over until safe at Kit Carson's home. Father Vaillant exhibits his technique of obtaining gifts for the cause by his refusing to accept only one mule, thereby getting both.

In the prologue the Cardinal Maria de Allande sees Indians through the eyes of James Fenimore Cooper. Father Joseph's sister sees him and the Bishop through the pictures of Xavier. This is the European way of understanding Americans.

An example of Cather's art in setting a mood can be found in the priests approach to the home of Buck Scales. The raindrops are in the shape of tadpoles, thinks Father Latour, and they are hollow and full of air. The ridges of the mountains are horny backbones. The white mules have turned to a slaty color and the faces of the priests are purple. The rain turns to sleet; they hear the "rattle of icy flakes." All these figures pointing to something reptilian prepare the reader for Buck Scales with his "repellent head...thick ridges" of his skull and his "rudimentary ears." He has a "malignant look." "His head played from side to side exactly like a snake's."