8-1-1962

Roman Catholicism in selected novels of Willa Cather

Irma Aloysius Sister Derck
Indiana State University

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN SELECTED NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies

Indiana State College

Terre Haute, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree

---

by

Sister Irma Aloysius Derck, S.P.

August, 1962

THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis of Sister Irma Aloysius Derck, S.P., contribution of the School of Graduate Studies, Indiana State College, Series I, Number 825, under the title, "Roman Catholicism in Selected Novels of Willa Cather," is approved as counting toward the completion of the Master of Arts Degree in the amount of six semester hours of graduate credit.

APPROVAL OF THESIS COMMITTEE:

George E. Snook
(Signature of Committee Member)

Mark A. Neville
(Signature of Committee Member)

Joseph L. Reid
(Signature of Committee Chairman) August 1, 1962
(Date)

APPROVAL FOR SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

Elmer J. Clark August 7, 1962
(Date)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to analyze Willa Cather's use of Roman Catholicism in six of her novels: O Pioneers!, (1913), My Antonia (1918), The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1926), Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), Shadows on the Rock (1931). These novels were chosen because they are most concerned with the dogma, doctrine, and practices of Roman Catholicism. The study is arranged chronologically in order to observe the author's continuing interest in the subject, and her preoccupation with it.

Although Miss Cather makes much use of Roman Catholicism's liturgy and ritual and some of her characters are ardent members of the Roman Catholic Church, she herself was not of that faith. Her interest in the subject seems originally to have been fostered by her early years in Nebraska, where she went at the age of eight. Here she grew among the Bohemians, Scandinavians, Germans, and French-Canadians of a pioneer environment. Most of these immigrants were Catholics, and Willa learned to know them intimately in their joys and sorrows, in their solutions to life's problems. She had a good friend in Father Fitzgerald of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Her first use of the subject in O Pioneers! is in reference to the Kourdnas family. She was to continue to use it in

many succeeding works, especially in the other five novels considered here.

On the whole, as we shall see, her knowledge of Roman Catholicism as exemplified in her novels was correct. Certain aspects of Catholicism seem to have appealed to her more than others; some aspects of the subject she rejected or ignored. The characters in her novels who belonged to the Church vary widely in their faith: some were backsliders and in a sense ignored the Church; others were ardent followers of Catholic doctrine and lived their faith.

After a discussion of Miss Cather's literary artistry and spiritual insight, we shall analyze the use of Roman Catholicism in O Pioneers!, her first novel to treat of the subject extensively.

CHAPTER I

WILLA CATHER'S INSIGHT

Miss Willa Cather writes sincerely and knowingly of life and of people; therefore, she must necessarily deal with religion, which is man's eternal search for God. She presents many facets of religion in her novels but this paper will deal exclusively with Roman Catholicism as shown in six selected works.

Willa Cather's entire life was a search for the Truth, which means, that like all other human beings, she was seeking for security, serenity, and happiness. She reflects this search in her writings, for she wrote of life truly and entirely; therefore, she had to be concerned with religion, the "steady continuance of man's immemorial wistfulness, the reaching out for God, if haply he may find Him. . . . the recognition of spiritual forces, and the picture of the emptiness, the insignificance of life without faith, without God."[1] In her own poetry, she characterizes her prose:

> The thoughts of men which are eternal,
> In which, eternal, men remain.[2]

---

[1] H. E. Luccock, Contemporary American Literature and Religion (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1934), p. 34.

[2] A. H. Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, Inc., 1936), p. 697.

In general, Miss Cather stresses "two great values for religion and morals: 1. truthful representation of the struggle with nature and environment; 2. real success of character, triumphant over frustration."[1] True of her is Thomas Carlyle's, "A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge,"[2] but even more so, is what Arnold Bennett called a novelist's greatest need--" an all-embracing Christlike sympathy."[3]

These qualities are exemplified as she presents many facets of religion in her novels: Alexander's Bridge (1912), New England or Puritan antecedents; O Pioneers! (1913), Evangelism, Bohemian and French Catholics; Song of the Lark (1915), Methodism; My Antonia (1918), Baptists and Slavic Catholics; One of Ours (1922), Methodism and Evangelism; A Lost Lady (1923), a high ideal of naturalism; The Professor's House (1925), German Catholic, a French priest, and Materialism; My Mortal Enemy (1926), Irish Catholics and Freethinkers; Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), French and Spanish Catholics, Indian superstitions; Shadows on the Rock (1931), French Catholics; Lucy Gayheart (1935), Lutherans, Italian Catholic; Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), Christian principles and morality.

---

[1]Luccock, op. cit., p. 84.

[2]Ibid., p. 40.

[3]Ibid., p. 84.

However, this paper is concerned with Roman Catholicism in the following six novels: O Pioneers!, My Antonia, The Professor's House, My Mortal Enemy, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock. We shall consider Catholicity[1] in reference to the organization and the priesthood, but especially the sound doctrine in the truths of Faith as taught by the Church: prayer; devotion to Mary and to the other Saints; Sacraments, especially Baptism, Confirmation, and Matrimony; the Mass; traditions, and the attitude toward death, suicide, and burial. We shall treat of these as they are presented in the work of Willa Cather.

What artistry and authority did she bring to the treatment of the subject? All her life she sought for values, truth, and a peace demanded by her unsatisfied spiritual needs. She searched, as do all men, for the eternal verities of life.

Even as a child she became serious about life's problems and their solutions. From the age of eight, on the Nebraska prairies, she came into intimate contact with the neighbors, many of whom were Catholic. At home in the saddle, she galloped her pony over the plains, "mingling with the children of the other ranchers, mostly foreignborn or second

---

[1]The word "Catholicity" is found "for the first time in a letter of St. Ignatius to the Smyrneans, written about the year 110. . . . The technical use seems to have been clearly established by the beginning of the third century. In this sense of the word, it implies sound doctrine . . . and unity of organization."

generation Americans, and learning at firsthand the lives of the people about whom she was to write in later years."[1] Delivering mail to the immigrants, she learned their household ways, heard their news of the old country, of their ambitions in this, of their hardships and disappointments, and of their faith. To many of them, especially the Catholics, their religion was most important in their lives for it gave the answer to their problems of daily living. Luccock in Contemporary American Literature quotes Miss Cather, "I used to ride home in the most unreasonable states of excitement. I always felt that they the immigrants told me so much more than they said, as if I had actually got inside another person's skin."[2] Early she learned a "keen realization of the sufferings of life coupled with a thoughtful regard for them."[3] She learned from these Catholic immigrants how their faith strengthened them in these trials.

She knew, then, of the faith in her neighbors' lives, as well as in the lives of her friends, and since she was a realist she accurately portrays Catholicity in her novels. Many biographical essays about Willa Cather state that a number of her earliest acquaintances were Catholic; from childhood she had a friend in Father Dennis Fitzgerald

---

[1]Kuntz and Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1942), p. 258.

[2]Luccock, op. cit., p. 84.

[3]L. V. Jacks, "Vision of Willa Cather," Books on Trial, IX-X (May, 1950 - June, 1952), 286.

of Red Cloud. Father Halterman at Santa Cruz told her much of the early history of New Mexico and Arizona; an ex-theological student, Ewan MacPherson, was a fine scholar with a thorough knowledge of Catholic tradition who explained many points to Miss Cather; she worked for accuracy by reading Catholic books and by consultations; thus she developed an interest which she manifested her entire life.[1]

Another reason why the author is unerring is her sincerity and consummate artistry in that her conception of her art was the same as her vision of life, filled with gaiety and grace, ideality and beauty. Thus she "reflected life with truthfulness in the value of the human soul and the great dignity of man."[2] In doing so,

> . . . she reduces life to its nobler elements. . . . For Miss Cather is not interested in men and women because of their wrongs or economic status, but because of what they are and what, inwardly speaking, they make of themselves. . . . She renews a tradition which needs to be renewed--the tradition that the human personality is something given . . . and not something to be laboriously assembled by the novelist.[3]

She gives us a sense of the dignity of life which contemporary fiction has mainly lost. Lewis wrote that for thirty-five years she created beauty as she quietly and alone

---

[1]Noted in general bibliography.

[2]T. J. Fitzmorris, "Formula for the Great American Catholic Novel," America, LIII (August 10, 1953), 425.

[3]H. M. Jones, "Novels of Willa Cather," Saturday Review of Literature, XVIII (August 6, 1938), 3-4.

pictured the great life.[1] This she did with the "joie de vivre" in the qualities that Carlyle attributed to Shakespeare," Valor, candor, tolerance, and truthfulness."[2]

Especially the last quality, truthfulness, is typical of Miss Cather. It illuminates everything she wrote; and by its application to the lesser things, it increases our confidence that it will be true of the greater, also. Let us consider for a moment then, her truthfulness, her sincerity as an artist. Dorothy Van Doren states, "No American writer writes more beautifully than Miss Cather, with more care for the just word, for the pure phrase, for the noble and elevated idea."[3] Stephen Tennant in his Preface to Willa Cather on Writing tells us, "She loved faithfulness. . . . She gave the impression of one who has gazed deep and long in the crystal of human fidelity."[4] In Willa Cather Living by Edith Lewis we read, "All her impulses were simple, direct, unswerving as if they came from some changeless center of integrity."[5] Sydney Greenbie said, "The transforming

---

[1]Sinclair Lewis, "The Greatest American Novelist," Newsweek, XI (January 3, 1938), 29.

[2]Rena Rapin, Willa Cather (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1930), p. 97.

[3]Dorothy Van Doren, Review of Shadows on the Rock, by W. S. Cather, Nation, CXXXIII (August 12, 1931), 160.

[4]Stephen Tennant in Willa Cather on Writing, by W. S. Cather (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1927), Preface.

[5]Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953), p. 165.

power of her pen touches the base and the noble, and turns them both into something more human, more Godlike."[1] Latrobe Carroll in the Bookman wrote, "She is one who tells of life with beauty and entire earnestness. . . . Her best work is satisfying because it is sincere; she strives to tell the truth--the truth stripped of sentimentality."[2] Her friend, Miss Lewis, assures us we can depend on what we read because "Miss Cather was always very painstaking about her facts--she intensely disliked being careless or inaccurate, and went to much trouble to verify them."[3] Rene Rapin wrote, "Her work is a classical work. Classical, because its innate romanticism is checked by realism, and both are made subservient to an ardent love of life and a respect for truth."[4] Her style came "as the result of clear vision and genuine emotion truthfully rendered."[5] And so with the author's accuracy, sincerity, and truth as her chief qualities, we shall study her novels to ascertain her interpretation of Roman Catholicism in the lives of her characters.

---

[1]Sydney Greenbie, "Review of Death Comes for the Archbishop, by W. S. Cather," Springfield Republic, November 13, 1927, p. 7.

[2]Lathrobe Carroll, "Portrait of Willa S. Cather," Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 213.

[3]Lewis, op. cit., p. 157.

[4]Rapin, loc. cit.

[5]Ibid., p. 25.

CHAPTER II

O PIONEERS!

(1913)

In O Pioneers! Miss Cather looks at Roman Catholicism through the admiring eyes of interested non-Catholics, the Bergsons, who seem to feel merely the emotional appeal of the timeless ritual, ceremony, and music. Alexandra, the heroine, is almost an earth goddess, and is a much stronger character than Marie, the Catholic, who is unhappily married to Frank Shabata, but is really in love with Emil Bergson.

Alexandra often goes with Marie to the "French Church," that is the parish of St. Agnes, where many French immigrants have settled. Marie went every Sunday "whatever the weather."[1] As a Catholic, Marie is obliged to attend Mass every Sunday in order to obey the first precept of the Church and the third commandment, "Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath."

Carl and Emil also have Catholic friends, and so ride up into the "French country to attend a Catholic fair."[2] That is a festival or carnival held by the Catholic parish

---

[1] O Pioneers!, p. 201. [2] Ibid., p. 159.

but which would differ in no way from one held by any denomination. Here Amedee, a friend, who has been recently married, indicates one of the main purposes of marriage when he says, "I bring many good Catholics into this world, I hope, and that's a way I help the Church."[1] But his dreams were short-lived, as Miss Cather soon reveals.

She admirably depicts the living, pulsing Catholic life as the little French village of St. Agnes prepares for the Bishop to administer Confirmation to one hundred boys and girls. When the welcoming cavalcade for forty boys met the Bishop's carriage five miles east of St. Agnes, he gave them the episcopal blessing as he raised his right hand, traced the sign of the Cross three times in the air, and prayed, "May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost descend upon you, and remain forever with you." The choir sang a Mass by Rossini, an early nineteenth century composer of church music. The "Gloria" is a hymn of praise in the early part of the Mass; it recalls the words of the angels on the first Christmas night, "Glory to God in the highest." At the Offertory, Raoul sang the "Ave Maria" by Gounod, an exquisite melody for the "Hail Mary" composed by Charles Francois Gounod (1818-1893), a French composer.

But with all this celebration, the Church was mindful of its dead. Amedee was one of the young parishioners

---

[1] Ibid., p. 161.

who had been happily married for a year, but had been stricken with acute appendicitis, and died suddenly on Saturday. The parishioners who volunteered their services were preparing the funeral black for the burial on Monday.

> They kept repeating that Amedee had always been a good boy, glancing toward the red brick church which had played so large a part in Amedee's life, had been the scene of his most serious moments and of his happiest hours. He had played and wrestled and sung and courted under its shadow. Only three weeks ago he had proudly carried his baby there to be christened. They could not doubt that that invisible arm was still about Amedee; that through the church on earth he had passed to the church triumphant, the goal of the hopes and faith of so many hundred years.[1]

This is an accurate and succinct picture, which Miss Cather gives, of the Church playing an important part in her children's daily living, and in their hopes after death.

However, Emil is not a Catholic; he assists at the services, but does not participate; his is an emotional reaction only. The author takes time to tell us, "Emil, overtaxed by excitement and sorrow as he was, the rapture of the service took hold upon his body and his mind." This seems to indicate that if Emil had not been overtaxed, if he had been normally rested and happy, the services would not have brought such an emotional reaction as Miss Cather describes.

> He seemed to emerge from the conflicting emotions which had been whirling him about and sucking him under.

---

[1] *O Pioneers!*, p. 252.

> He felt as if a clear light broke upon his mind, and with it a conviction that good was, after all, stronger than evil, and that good was possible to men. He seemed to discover that there was a kind of a rapture in which he could love forever without faltering and without sin. . . . The spirit he had met in music was his own. . . . "Sancta Maria" wailed Raoul from the organ loft; "Ora pro nobis!" And it did not occur to Emil that anyone had ever reasoned thus before, that music had ever before given a man this equivocal revelation.[1]

But it is exactly because Mary is holy and close to God that she can pray for us sinners. "Behold thy Mother,!" Christ said on the Cross.

When Emil left Sainte-Agnes, ". . . he rode past the graveyard, looked at the brown hole in the earth where Amedee was to lie, and felt no horror. That, too, was beautiful, that simple doorway into forgetfulness."[2] The grave is hardly that to a Catholic, for he has already faced the one most important moment of remembrance in the particular judgment, and eternity has begun. Neither is he forgotten by his dear ones here, nor by the Church, who prays daily for the dead.

Once when Emil is cutting grass in the little country cemetery, Marie drives by and stops to talk.

> The Kourdnas were Bohemians. Why aren't they up in the Catholic graveyard?
> Freethinkers, said Marie.
> Lots of the boys at the U. are. Why did you ever burn John Huss for, anyway? It's made an awful row. They still jaw about it in history class.
> We'd do it right over again, most of us, said Marie hotly. Don't they ever teach you in your history

---

[1] O Pioneers!, pp. 255-56. [2] Ibid., p. 257.

> classes that you'd all be heathen Turks if it hadn't been for the Bohemians?[1]

Since the Kourdnas had become Freethinkers, "who reject Christian Revelation and base belief or opinion solely on the findings of reason,"[2] and were no longer of the Catholic faith, they could not be buried in consecrated ground. Mr. Trease explains why reverence is shown the dead. In reference to John Huss, whom Emil asked about, he was a Bohemian reformer who taught the doctrines of Wycliffe, refused to go to Rome when summoned, sent a representative to explain his errors, and so was excommunicated from the Catholic Church; the secular arm burned him at the stake.[3]

---

[1] Ibid., p. 80.

[2] L. J. Trese, The Faith Explained (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers Association, 1959), p. 183.

Because the Body of a person in whom grace has dwelt has been truly a temple of God, the Church has always insisted upon great reverence being shown the bodies of the faithful departed. They are committed with loving prayers and ceremonies to the graves which have been especially blessed to receive them.

[3] C. B. Palfu (ed.) et al., New Catholic Dictionary (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1929), p. 382.

New efforts to obtain a retraction proved fruitless, and so John Huss was brought for final sentence before the Council of Constance (July 6), at which the emperor assisted. He was condemned as a heretic, deposed, degraded, and handed over to the secular arm, which in turn condemned him to perish at the stake, at that time the usual legal punishment of convicted heretics. His principles were incompatible with either the ecclesiastical or civil order of the time, and would, at any period, have bred both religious and civil anarchy.

It was not only the dead that interested Marie and Emil, however, for another time they talked of the early tree-worshipers.

> I'm a good Catholic, but I think I could get along with caring for trees, if I hadn't anything else.
> That's a poor saying, said Emil, stooping over to wipe his hands in the wet grass.
> Why is it? If I feel that way, I feel that way.[1]

However, Marie is accurate in her appreciation of faith and prayer, when she says to Emil, "I wish you were a Catholic. The Church helps people, indeed it does. I pray for you, but that's not the same as if you prayed for yourself."[2]

As Marie says, the "Church does help people"[3] with special graces for good daily living, and so it is pathetic that the two principal Catholic characters, Marie Tovesky and Frank Shabata, are burdened with the greatest evil: Marie is unfaithful in love, and Frank commits murder. We can understand them better if we consider their temperaments.

Marie Tovesky was a beautiful, vivacious, laughing woman of eighteen when she ran away from the convent school, and married Frank Shabata, a gay, young immigrant, who became a rash and violent man. He was bitterly jealous, although there was no one in particular on whom to fasten it. He grudged Marie her friends, her liveliness, and her acceptance of life; therefore, he tried to break her, but she

---

[1] *O Pioneers!*, p. 153. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 157. [3] *Ibid.*

only drew away until the distance between them had hardened and widened. He knew he had lost his wife, but wondered what she hid in her heart "for she was not a woman who could live without loving."[1] However, Marie

> . . . was a sincerely devout girl. She prayed for herself and for Frank, and for Emil, among the temptations of that gay, corrupt old city. She found more comfort in the Church that winter than ever before. It seemed to come closer to her, and to fill an emptiness that ached in her heart. She tried to be patient with her husband.[2]

She tried not to let him know how much he hurt her, but accepted him as the one she had chosen. She was therefore, quite alarmed when Emil asked her to go away with him. "Emil, how wickedly you talk! I am not that kind of a girl, and you know it. But what am I going to do if you keep tormenting me like this!"[3] Marie was struggling against her love for Emil, and her implied self-condemnation is most severe, as it should be, "when a girl had loved one man and then loved another while that man was still alive everybody knew what to think of her."[4] Thus she refers to the unlawful love of and for Emil, which leads to their tragic death in the orchard, as they are shot by Marie's husband, Frank Shabata.

He had returned home after the Confirmation services and an exciting day, but he had been drinking too much and

---

[1] Ibid., p. 222 [2] Ibid., pp. 201-02.

[3] Ibid., p. 231. [4] Ibid., p. 249.

was in a bad temper. He found Emil's mare in the stable, took his murderous 405 Winchester from the closet (although he hadn't the faintest purpose of doing anything with it), and walked outside the orchard hedge to the wheatfield corner, where he heard a low murmur and peered through the leaves of the hedge at the dark figures on the grass, in the shadow of the mulberry tree. He heard the murmur more distinctly.

> . . . his blood was quicker than his brain. He began to act, just as a man who falls into a fire begins to act. The gun sprang to his shoulder, he sighted mechanically and fired three times without stopping, stopped without knowing why. Either he shut his eyes or he had vertigo. He did not see anything while he was firing. . . . Suddenly the woman stirred and uttered a cry, then another, and another. She was living! . . . Holy Mother of God, not to suffer! She was a good girl--not to suffer![1]

Marie was a good girl, and Frank could not honestly believe that she had been unfaithful. He knew that he was doing her wrong, and that he was to blame. Therefore, he gave himself up "to the police in Omaha and pleaded guilty of killing without malice and without premeditation."[2]

This was not, then, a premeditated and deliberate act of murder, nor was Emil's meeting of Marie pre-arranged in the orchard when he came to say his final goodbye. Sufficient reflection and consideration are requisites in ascribing the heinousness of a crime to anyone. Marie and Frank were trying to live good Catholic lives, and their

---

[1] O Pioneers!, p. 263. [2] Ibid., p. 283.

failures were due more to circumstances and their fiery Bohemian temperaments, probably, than to any other cause.

Here in O Pioneers! Miss Cather gave us a story which showed ". . . a belief in human values which are at the heart of a theistic and Christian outlook."[1] She told us that she tried to write as simply as if she were telling the story by word of mouth. "From the first chapter I decided not to 'write' at all--simply to give myself to the pleasure of recapturing in memory, people and places I had believed forgotten."[2] And again, "O Pioneers! interested me tremendously because it . . . was about old neighbors, ones very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the excitement of growing up."[3] She portrays these characters with the more positive qualities of vitality, kindness, honesty, high courage, and creative force. They are

> . . . portrayed in a friendly spirit of comradeship which emphasizes their essential unity instead of nationalities. . . . Enduring human satisfactions are neither on the supernatural plane of mysticism, nor on the naturalistic plane of uncontrolled instinct and passion, but rather in the peculiarly human world of everyday labor, friendship, love, fulfillment, and suffering.[4]

---

[1]H. E. Luccock, Contemporary American Literature and Religion (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1934), p. 214.

[2]Lathrobe Carroll, "Portrait of Willa S. Cather," Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 214.

[3]Edward Weeks, "Method in Their Madness," Bookman, LXXV-LXXVI (April, 1932 - March, 1933), 154.

[4]W. F. Taylor, History of American Letters (New York: American Book Co., 1947), pp. 363, 332.

This true and sympathetic interpretation reveals a deep understanding of the pioneer woman, for woman's sufferings as well as man's endurance made the epic conquest of the continent. Parrington pointed out that Miss Cather had a psychological interest in her characters.

> The emotional side, the final ledger of human values, we have too little considered--the men and women broken by the frontier--the cost of it all in human happines--the loneliness, the disappointments, the renunciations, the severing of old ties and quitting of familiar places; these unponderables too often have been left out of the reckoning in our traditional romantic interpretation. . . . Because it penetrates to the secret inner life of men and women who undertook the heavy work of subduing the wilderness, it is--apart from all artistic values--a great historical document.[1]

In this novel, Miss Cather's conception of spiritual desire and yearning is for the most part associated with the frontier, but she shows that "everywhere man is a free moral agent consciously choosing among the fine gradations of good and evil."[2] However, she presents the violation of the moral law as sin, not as glamorous, but as a fact of life, which it is, as truly as virtue is a fact of life. "She assumes it as an integral part of the story that she is relating, or as an incident or a habit in the life she is depicting."[3] She presents life, just as it is, and people, just as they

---

[1]L. V. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1930), p. 387.

[2]Taylor, op. cit., p. 332.

[3]F. Talbot, S.J., "Rock of Willa Cather," America, XLV (August 22, 1931), 477.

are; she rewards good and punishes evil. Her firmest belief regarding the immigrant is that often:

> . . . Americanization was a process of deterioration, a substitution of artificialities for the more worthwhile traditional values frequently brought over from the old country. Certain spiritual commodities might be imported from abroad, as well as nitrates and cheap labor.[1]

Thus Miss Cather was concerned with the spiritual problems of her characters. In O Pioneers! they seem to be symbolized by the French Church, properly the Church of Sainte-Agnes, which dominated the scene as it stood upon a hill, and could be seen for miles across the wheatfields. Geismar writes:

> One notices the increasing references to Catholicism and to that little French Church in the wilderness, "powerful and triumphant there on its eminence," with its music and pageantry and hallowed rituals of suffering, with the gold cross flaming on its steeple, and offering that kind of rapture in which one can love forever "without faltering and without sin."[2]

The rapture of Divine love offered by the Church is far removed from the unlawful love portrayed in the novel, and thus understandable when Ivar found the two murdered in the garden, he went crying to Alexandra, "Mistress, mistress, it has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy on us!"[3]

---

[1]P. D. Westbrook, Acres of Flint (Washington, D.C.: Scarecrow Press, 1951), p. 175.

[2]M. Geismar, The Last of the Provincials (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1943), p. 163.

[3]O Pioneers!, p. 271.

Whereas, in O Pioneers! Miss Cather stresses the deep strong faith of the French and Bohemian immigrant as Roman Catholics, and the emotional appeal of the timeless ritual, ceremony, and music to the non-Catholic, in My Antonia she portrays the faith of the Shimerda family in their respect and reverence for the priesthood, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and the power of prayer.

CHAPTER III

MY ANTONIA

(1918)

In My Antonia Miss Cather presents the Shimerda family, Catholic Bohemian immigrants, and stresses principally their deep strong faith as reflected in their reverence for the priesthood, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and the power of prayer. The author indicates increased interest in the Catholic theme. McNamara writes:

> In My Antonia she first becomes deeply interested in the Roman Catholic Church. We have seen in her characters a natural faith and goodness in spite of religious indifference or even good-willed bigotry. But now in the Shimerdas, Bohemian Catholics, she discovered something new, something more than a natural religion, a strange peace which exists, not in spite of religious indifference, but even in opposition to it; which is based on religious tradition that is old and changeless, whose legends and tales of miracles betray a sameness of simple faith and spirituality through generations innumerable.[1]

Often, then, throughout this story, Miss Cather treats of Catholic themes. At Christmas, the Burdens have a creche beneath the tree, and Mr. Shimerda visits them.

> When the candle ends sent up their conical yellow flames, all the colored figures from Austria stood out clear and full of meaning against the green boughs. Mr. Shimerda crossed himself, and quietly knelt down

---

[1] R. McNamara, "Phases of American Religion," Catholic World, CXXV (September, 1932), 642.

> before the tree, his head sunk forward. . . . There had been nothing strange about the tree before, but now, with someone kneeling before it,--images, candles, . . . Grandfather merely put his fingertips to his brow and bowed his venerable head, thus Protestanizing the atmosphere. . . . He made the sign of the cross over me, put on his cap and went off into the dark. . . . Grandfather looked at me searchingly. "The prayers of all good people are good," he said quietly.[1]

And so Mr. Shimerda returned to his sod home, but he was old and frail, and knew nothing of how to farm. He was ill and sad, and "his face looked like ashes--all the warmth and light had died out."[2] Overcome by difficulties and hardships, he committed suicide; at least, it seemed to be suicide, although Krajiek's axe under the manger just fitted the gash in the front of the old man's face.

> When Krajiek, who had been sneakin' round, pale and quiet saw me examin' the axe, he began whimperin', My God, man, don't do that!
> I reckon I'm a-goin' to look into this, says I.
> Then he began to squeal like a rat and run about wringin' his hands. They'll hand me! says he. My God, they'll hang me sure![3]

But Grandma Burden discourages any attempt to prove murder, instead of suicide, as she groans, "Poor soul, poor soul! I'd like to think he never done it. He was always considerate and un-wishful to give trouble. How could he forget himself and bring this on us!"[4]

---

[1] My Antonia, p. 99.

Early in the 13th century St. Francis introduced the placing of the Crib of the Christ Child at Christmas in a conspicuous place. This is to bring more vividly to our minds how much Christ loves us.

[2] My Antonia, p. 24. [3] Ibid., p. 97. [4] Ibid., p. 96.

The body could not be touched until the coroner came from Black Hawk. Fuchs was going to make the long ride, which would take several days in that weather, to fetch the priest and coroner; Jim was left alone with Ambrosch.

> He was deeply, even slavishly devout. He did not say a word all morning, but sat with his rosary in his hands, praying, now silently, now aloud. He never looked away from his beads, nor lifted his hands except to cross himself. Several times the poor boy fell asleep where he sat, wakened with a start, and began to pray again.[1]

Poor Ambrosch is entirely overcome by his paroxysm of grief, and can find relief only in praying the rosary.[2] He was chiefly concerned about getting a priest, and about his father's soul, which he believed was in a place of torment and would remain there until his family and the priest had prayed a great deal for him.

> As I understand it, Jake concluded, it will be a matter of years to pray his soul out of Purgatory, and right now he is in torment. I don't believe it, I said stoutly, I almost know it isn't true. . . . Nevertheless, after I went to bed, this idea of punishment and Purgatory came back on me crushingly. I remembered the account of Dives in torment, and shuddered. But Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish; he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer.[3]

---

[1] Ibid., p. 113.

[2] The Rosary is the form of prayer given by the Mother of God to St. Dominic in the early thirteenth century. It consists of fifteen decades, each of which contains a Pater Noster, ten Ave Marias, and a Gloria Patri. During the recitation, one meditates on the principal mysteries in the lives of Christ and His Mother. The power of this Prayer is known through history, where many victories are indicated.

[3] My Antonia, p. 103.

He was so unhappy that he had committed suicide, and cast his family into dreadful sorrow. They had no spiritual consolation from their pastor; because of the storm the trains were not running; and the priest was a hundred miles away at the other end of the parish.

> Will they be much disappointed because we cannot get a priest? grandfather asked.
> Yes, sir, that is very bad for them. Their father has done a great sin; Our Lord has said that.
> We believe that Mr. Shimerda's soul will come to its Creator as well off without a priest. We believe Christ is our only intercessor.
> I know how you think. My teacher at the school has explained. But I have seen too much. I believe in prayer for the dead.[1]

Yes, Ambrosch believed that priests are truly intercessors between God and man, for St. Paul said that every high priest is ordained ". . . that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sin."[2] Truly, to the good Catholics, the Shimerdas, it was most distressing to be without a priest in this great sorrow. "By his office, a priest is only concerned with heavenly things; he stands between God and man; he lays our petition before the Most High and conveys divine graces to us."[3]

Anton had said that their father had done a great sin, and truly he had by suicide.

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 105-06.

[2] Paul, Epistle to the Hebrews, 5:46.

[3] Spirago-Clarke, The Catechism Explained (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1927), p. 644.

> It is only by God that human life is given; it is only by God that human life may be taken away. Every human soul is individually and personally created by God. God alone has the right to decide when that soul's time on earth is finished. . . . Since the person who takes his own life dies in the very act of committing a mortal sin, he cannot be given a Christian burial. In practice, however, it is very seldom that a Catholic person in his right mind will take his own life. Christian burial is never denied when suicide seems to be the result of mental derangement, even temporary.[1]

Anton then tells a story of how he and the priest were protected from cholera because "we carry that body and that blood of Christ, and it preserves us." He also says that "I go with him to carry the vessels with the Holy Sacrament." Cholera had broken out in the camp, and the soldiers were dying like flies. The exact meaning is not clear, but no child could carry the Body and Blood of Christ, nor the sacred vessels which contained them; they are touched only by the consecrated hands of the priest, and moreover, Holy Communion was not distributed under two forms then. He must have meant that the priest carried the Sacred Host, and he held the small golden plate, the paten, under each communicant's chin.

> All the marching soldiers and officers on horses, when they see what we carry, pull up their horses and kneel down on the ground in the road until we pass. So I feel very bad for my kawntree-man to die without the Sacrament, and to die in a bad way for his soul, and I feel sad for his family.[2]

---

[1] L. J. Trese, The Faith Explained (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers Association, 1959), p. 254.

[2] My Antonia, p. 121.

It was impossible not to admire this frank and manly faith. Grandfather Burden concluded, "I am always glad to meet a young man who thinks seriously of these things, and I would never be the one to say you were not in God's care when you were among the soldiers."

Anton's faith expresses correctly the sorrow and grief caused by Mr. Shimerda's suicide. Because of the stormy weather, the coffin could not be taken to the Catholic cemetery, and the Norwegian cemetery would not admit it, so poor Mr. Shimerda had to be buried on his own property with a short eulogy by a Baptist minister and a hymn, "Jesus, Lover of my Soul." Every incident of the death and burial made it especially hard for the family.

The Shimerdas are presented as very unattractive characters, except Antonia. Mrs. Shimerda was envious, complaining, conceited, boastful, and proud. Rudely she asked for an iron pot from Grandmother Burden, "You got many, Shimerdas no got." Later, the donor remarked to Jake, "Where's a body to begin, with these people? They're wanting in everything, and most of all in horse sense. Nobody can give them that, I guess."[1]

When asked if Ambrosch had any real push in him, Jake replied, "He's a worker, all right, ma'am, and he's got some ketch-on about him; but he's a mean one. Folks can be

---

[1]My Antonia, p. 78.

mean enough to get on in this world; and then, ag'in, they can be too mean."[1] Perhaps his meanness is indicated in Antonia's words to Mr. Burden, "If I lose that horse, Mr. Burden, I never stay here till Ambrosch come home! I go drown myself in the pond before morning."[2]

But Antonia is one of the most delightful characters in American literature. She symbolizes the soul and the spirit of the Middle West; she is the ". . . apotheosis of a pioneer working woman, glorified on the frontier, a rich flood of life, suffused at the end in a sunset gleam against the background of field and furrow."[3] The plow silhouetted and magnified in the disk of the setting sun symbolizes Antonia's self-abnegation, dedication, and vocation. Antonia represented the good life--"laughter, generosity, enthusiasm, wholehearted labor. Tragedy clustered around her: her father's suicide, Wick Cutler's foulness, her seduction by Larry Donovan, . . . but she incarnated kindness."[4]

She was engaged, spent much time packing her trunks with beautiful linens and heirlooms from the old country, went to marry Larry Donovan, but was seduced and abandoned.

---

[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 133.

[3] P. H. Boynton, The Rediscovery of the Frontier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), p. 117.

[4] F. X. Connolly, "Willa Cather: Memory as Muse," Fifty Years of the American Novel, ed. H. G. Gardiner (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 75.

Mrs. Steavens speaks to Jim:

> Jimmy, I was just heartbroke; . . . I felt bowed with despair. My Antonia, that had so much good in her, had come home disgraced. And that Lena Lingard, that always was a bad one, . . . had turned out so well. . . . There is a great difference in the principles of those two girls. And here it was the good one who had come to grief. She was quiet and steady . . . so crushed and quiet that nobody seemed to want to humble her.[1]

That speech, in itself, is a testimony to Antonia's character, her principles, and her goodness. Her greatest fault of character, which was probably responsible for the situation, is given by herself later. "The trouble with me, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved."[2]

Antonia deeply loved her father, and often visited his grave.

> Look at my Papa here; he's been dead all these years, and yet he is more real to me than almost anybody else. He never goes out of my life. I talk to him and consult him all the time. The older I grow, the better I know him and the more I understand him.[3]

Mr. Shimerda was a good, kind, gentle father. Antonia, as the eldest girl, was especially loved by her father, for she worked as a man with him on the farm. If our beloved dead were interested in us on earth, they are more so now that they are with God. In the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, we assist them with our prayers, and they help us. Antonia feels very close to her father who,

---

[1] My Antonia, pp. 354-55.

[2] Ibid., p. 387.

[3] Ibid., p. 362.

she believes, is at Home with God. Certainly, for such a good man to commit suicide, he must have been momentarily insane.

Antonia married a farmer, had eleven children, and was visited by Jim, who commented, "As I watched her I was thinking how little appearances mattered. I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow had faded. Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life."[1] Perhaps, because she had a zest for living, as she explains, "Father Kelly says that everybody's put into this world for something, and I know what I've got to do."[2] She was never down-hearted; Anton was a good man; she loved her children and always believed they would turn out well; and she belonged on a farm. For Antonia, motherhood is her fulfillment, and Bishop Fulton Sheen writes of its power and dignity:

> A mother is a double benefactor to humanity; its physical preserver and its moral provider. Through life, and through the high personal qualities of her children, she is the universal, constant challenge to death, the messenger of cosmic plenitude, and the bearer of eternal realities.3

Antonia, the mother of eleven children, is untouched by the longing for escape and social advancement. Her self-reliant and serene spirit seeks for happiness--"to be dis-

---

[1] Ibid., p. 379. [2] Ibid., p. 363.

[3] F. Sheen, God Love You (New York: Garden City, 1955), p. 116.

solved into something complete and great."[1] She finds it by bringing new life into the world, and by sharing in the faith of Roman Catholicism.

In My Antonia Miss Cather stresses the spiritual values in the lives of the Shimerdas, Bohemian Catholic immigrants, with their reverence for the priest, the Mass, and prayer. In The Professor's House, however, Augusta, the German Catholic seamstress, is the one stabilizing force with her down-to-earth answers for the problems of life and of death.

---

[1] My Antonia, p. 20.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE

(1925)

In The Professor's House Miss Cather searched with Professor St. Pierre for a satisfactory solution to the problems of life and of death. He found them answered simply and surely in the bedrock faith of Augusta, the German Roman Catholic seamstress, and in the education and discipline given by Father Duchesne to Tom Outland. This novel has a sturdy and sane realism which deals with the inner core of being, the spiritual and psychological problems of middle age adjustment to a modern materialistic world. A literary critic, Miss Margaret, adroitly explains the professor's problem:

> The need of the human spirit to impose a pattern upon all things is basic, and it is akin to that which is closest to God. All his life the individual struggles to force a satisfactory, a perfect pattern upon his own life, and he succeeds only in death. Hence, if a generation is in revolt against the patterns of art, we had better examine into its philosophy to see if it lives in intellectual and spiritual chaos.[1]

The Professor is an idealist who cannot readjust himself to the success of the world; wealth alienates his

---

[1]H. Margaret, "Religion and Literary Technique," Catholic World, CLVII (July, 1943), 392.

family and causes discord among them. He leads two highly dissimilar lives in two dissimilar houses; the "one is up-to-date with cheap devices, and shallow as the professor's stupid wife and silly daughters; the other, old-fashioned and convenient, rich in memory of good living."[1] He has to choose between them, but he is helped by the thought of death, for the sagging springs of his old couch remind him of the sham upholstery in coffins. He learned much from Augusta regarding life and death; now he thought ". . . of eternal solitude with gratefulness, as a release from every obligation."[2]

Like all men and women, the professor is attempting to find some security and peace in life. "Youth's eager conquest of life, maturity's calm dominion over it, age's dispassionate acceptance of nature's ways and of the inevitable end,"[3] are all felt by one man, as he considers the emptiness of success, and ". . . abandons scientific materialism for it fails to add to the enrichment of life. Cultivated living comes from obeying peculiarly human impulses toward order, design, and beauty."[4] He embodies this thought

---

[1]H. Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1935), p. 68.

[2]W. C. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 244.

[3]Rena Rapin, Willa Cather (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1930), p. 75.

[4]W. F. Taylor, History of American Letters (New York: American Book Co., 1947), p. 329.

in his art-religion lectures.

Some critics term The Professor's House a religious novel,

> . . . not by any answers it proposes but by the problems it elaborates, and by the atmosphere in which they are enveloped. There is a depth of self-scrutiny and anxiety about alternatives. . . . So with the novel as a whole, one passes from a record of happenings to the achievement of startling and satisfying form, and then to the suggestion of essential feeling about final issues.[1]

However, it is not religious in stressing feelings as the solution to the problems it proposes, nor in its disgust for life. Professor St. Pierre wanted the security of religion. Once he said to Augusta, the sewing woman, a reliable methodical spinster, and a very devout German Catholic, "You'll never convert me back to the religion of my fathers now, if you're going to sew in the new house and I'm going to work on here. Who's ever to remind me when it's All Soul's day, or Ember day, or Maundy Thursday, or anything?"[2]

---

[1]Brown, op. cit., pp. 246-47.

[2]The Professor's House, pp. 24-25.

All Souls' day is November 2, the day after all Saints' day. As the latter is to honor the faithful who have gained heaven, so the former is to honor the faithful departed in Purgatory. Each priest may offer the Holy Sacrifice three times that day for our departed ones.

The Ember days are the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday at the beginning of each quarter (quatuor tempora) and are usual seasons for the ordination to the priesthood. They occur after the third Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of Lent, after Pentecost, and after September 14, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The penance required by the prescribed fast and abstinence is offered to implore Almighty God to send us good priests, to thank Him

Another time the Professor said:

That reminds me: I've been wanting to ask you a question. That passage in the service about the Mystical Rose, Lily of Zion, Tower of Ivory--is that the Magnificat?

Why, Professor! Did you receive no religious instruction at all?

How could I, Augusta? My mother was a Methodist, there was no Catholic Church in our town in Kansas, and I guess my Father forgot his religion.

That happens in mixed marriages.

Ah, yes, I suppose so. But tell me, what is the Magnificat, then?

The Magnificat begins, "My soul doth magnify the Lord."

---

for past benefits, to beg his blessing on the future, and to beseech Him to bless the harvest.

Maundy Thursday is the English name for the Thursday of the Lord's Supper, that is the Thursday of Holy Week. It is, therefore, the eve of Good Friday. On that solemn evening, Christ had His disciples prepare the Paschal Lamb and Supper. Then He changed the bread and wine into His Body and Blood at the first Mass, and ordained the Apostles as His first priests. "Do this for a commemoration of Me."

The three titles which the professor names refer to the Litany of Loreto, but the middle one is not included in present use; these titles may be found in the writings of the Fathers of the first six centuries. It was formally approved for use in the Universal Church in 1587.

It consists principally of 47 invocations of Our Lady, with the prayer "pray for us"; the first 19 are addressed to her as Mother and Virgin, each with a separate epithet, . . .; the next 13 are remarkable terms, symbolic of her office, power, or virtues, . . .; then follow four common titles, and eleven addressed to her as Queen.

The queen of all flowers is the rose, so the Queen of all Saints if the Mystical Rose; a tower is high, and ivory is highly prized, so Mary as Tower of Ivory towers above all angels and saints, and reflects the beauty of the Godhead.

But I thought the Magnificat was about the Virgin.

> Oh, no, Professor! The Blessed Virgin composed the Magnificat. . . . Just as soon as the angel had announced to her that she would be the mother of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin composed the Magnificat.[1]

Augusta correctly tells the professor that the titles are not a part of the Magnificat, the hymn first uttered by our Blessed Mother; she is incorrect, however, in telling when it was first said. The angel Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was with child, and Mary went to help her. Elizabeth saluted her: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"[2] And Mary answered with the Magnificat:

> My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. Because he that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is his name.[3]

This was the beginning of the Magnificat, but the professor knew none of these things Augusta explained because he had no religious instruction. He was the son of a ". . . practical, strong-willed Methodist mother, and a gentle, weaned-away Catholic father."[4] Augusta remarks, "That happens in mixed marriages." She means that when a

---

[1] The Professor's House, pp. 99-100.

[2] Luke 1:42-43 (Douay Version).

[3] Luke 1:45-51. [4] The Professor's House, p. 30.

Catholic marries one of another faith, he often becomes careless about his religious obligations, and the children are deprived of the greatest gift God could give them--the true faith. The Church has always opposed mixed marriages, required a dispensation for the same, and a promise that the children be reared in the Catholic faith. This is merely for the greater good and happiness of the family. Since marriage is a "total sharing of life," man and wife can understand and love each other better, can agree so much more readily, when they think alike and feel the same responsibility in the deeply spiritual and moral problems of life.

In the professor's history lectures, he depreciated the Church and science. In one lecture, he said:

> Science hasn't given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight-of-hand. It hasn't given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins--not one! Indeed, it takes our old ones away. It's the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world. You'll agree there is not much thrill about a physiological sin. We were better off when even the prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin. I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance--you impoverish them.
>
> As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing. The king and the beggar had the same chance at miracles and great temptations and revelations. And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives.[1]

---

[1] The Professor's House, p. 68.

Professor St. Pierre is thus saying that science, with all of its effort, development of gadgets and improvements, increased pressure for material things, making a necessity of what we could well do without, has given us nothing new--neither pleasure nor sin. Of course, science cannot take away sin, and the professor is blasphemous when he gives that power to the laboratory. Science merely denies sin, or calls it by some other name. Sin is, according to Webster, "1. To violate human rights, law or propriety, 2. To violate the divine law by actual transgression or neglect."[1] St. Augustine tells us that it is any thought, word, or deed against the law of God.

> Sin is essentially a deliberate rebellion against the authority of God; by it man prefers to choose some self-gratification in opposition to and in defiance of the law of God. Hence serious sin deprives man of God's friendship, and the sinner will receive due punishment here on earth or in the future life.[2]

The professor was wrong, therefore, when he said, "We were better off when even the prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin." No sin is magnificent, for it is an offense against God, our neighbor, or ourself. The prosaic matter of taking nourishment is no sin; God gave us ability to taste so that through food and drink we could nourish our bodies. It is only when

---

[1] N. Webster, Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam Co., 1939), p. 928.

[2] C. B. Palfu (ed.), The New Catholic Dictionary (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1929), p. 490.

either is taken to excess through gluttony or intemperance that sin occurs; then we harm, instead of nourishing, the body.

Professor St. Pierre is admirably correct when he says that we impoverish people by making their conduct of no importance instead of great importance. Continuing his lecture, the professor added:

> Art and religion (they are the same thing in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had. . . . With the theologians came the cathederal-builders; the sculptors, and glass-workers and painters. They might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven. How can it be done anywhere else as it is done in heaven?[1]

According to the Catholic Dictionary, "Art is a deliberate skill employed in the making of things, and requires a rational mind and a practical intelligence. The Fine Arts require a thing of beauty, as well as of utility."[2] religion, however, is defined as "a knowledge of God and a life corresponding to the will of God. Religion is not a matter of feeling; it is a matter of the will and of action, and consists in following out the principles that God has laid down."[3]

Art, therefore, is merely the handmaid of religion, and through beauty, often helps people to draw nearer God.

---

[1]The Professor's House, p. 69.

[2]Palfu (ed.), op. cit., p. 67.

[3]Spirago-Clarke, The Catechism Explained (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1927), p. 75.

Christ gave us the Lord's Prayer with "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The professor questions how that can be. Actually and literally, it can't; probably Our Lord meant that we should aspire to do God's will as it is manifested in our daily lives. There is an acceptable truth in "Hitch your wagon to a star," or in "A man's reach should exceed his grasp,"or "What's a heaven for?" Parallel with Christ's petition are His other words, "Be ye, therefore perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect."[1] He wants merely our effort, for the infinite perfection of God can never be fully reached by any finite creature; the perfection attainable in this life is only relative and progressive. "Whan a man loves God with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and his neighbor as himself for God's sake, then he is perfect."[2]

As the professor gets older, he finds himself thinking more and more of death. He knew that Augusta understood it because she often sat up with people who were ill, if she happened to be sewing in the house at the time.

> He didn't mind hearing Augusta announce these deaths which seemed to happen so frequently along her way, because her manner of speaking about it made death seem less uncomfortable. She hadn't any of the sentimentality that comes from a fear of dying. She talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy March, or any of the sadnesses of nature. . . . Seasoned and sound

---

[1] Matthew 5:48.

[2] R. McNamara, "Phases of American Religion," Catholic World, CXXXV (September, 1932), 642.

> and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter-of-factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal.[1]

Augusta faces death calmly because it is inevitable, and her whole life is but a preparation for the moment. "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death,"--the only two moments on earth we are sure of! Each time she said the rosary, she said that petition fifty-three times. "Death is the echo of life," and so long as one loves God and his neighbor, and tries to do God's will in all things, death is merely the last minute of life. Thomas Merton once said, "Death does not exist for a single moment for any one of us; there are only two lives." The Church gives us many helps at death: confession, if we wish; Extreme Unction, or the last anointing, whereby the priest begs God to forgive us all our sins of the five senses; and finally Christ Himself as our last Holy Communion or Viaticum. He is the only friend who can go with us through the gates of death; He is with us on our last journey or way. Then we have a Requiem Mass, are buried in consecrated ground, and await the glorious Resurrection. Moreover, in every Holy Mass until the end of time, the Church prays especially for the faithful departed in the Memento for the Dead. No wonder that Augusta can calmly face death! It is but the required prelude to joy, peace, and happiness eternally. However, the professor:

---

[1] The Professor's House, pp. 280-81.

> . . . always marveled at the quiet way in which she spoke of death, not as a cataclysmal antithesis to life but as something co-natural with life, and working in perfect agreement with it. Now he knew, partly at least, why she is thus. It is because of her evenness of life. But even beyond that there seems something more for which he will envy her, but which he is probably too old to learn.[1]

Augusta's peace and serenity come from the deep and simple faith with which she accepts Christ's teachings in the Catholic Church. Miss Cather has been working toward ". . . an analysis and understanding of this timeless spiritual quality which pervades the soul of those balanced existences, . . . especially of those who are truly Catholic in spirit."[2]

Thus Augusta, with her common sense, gives support and consolation to the professor, but Tom Outland also has a stimulating influence. This novel shows the effect of Tom's ardent spirit on the professor's family as individuals and as a group; something more tangible than this spiritual effect is shown by the contrast with Marcellus, a perfect Philistine. He and Tom represent the somewhat opposed forces in American life today. Tom must have been an unusual soul to have been so great an influence. What forces helped to make him what he was? Principally, it was Father Duchesne who is pictured as kind, sympathetic, helpful as a teacher, and as a friend in the long search for Rodney.

---

[1]R. McNamara, Phases of American Religion," Catholic World, CXXXV (September, 1932), 647.

[2]Ibid.

Mr. Gavigan writes thus of him:

> In the intervals when he was not comforting men and women of the mesa towns in sickness and death, or making tiresome rounds of seventeen Indian pueblos included in his parish, it was Father Duchesne who found time to teach the lad Caesar and required that he learn a hundred lines a day. He it was who taught the boy the value of discipline; who encouraged the youth in his projects and ambitions; and according to Tom's own testimony, it was Father Duchesne, savior in a time of great distress, and "got his mind off his trouble."
>
> One doesn't learn much of this remarkable man from The Professor's House but we are told that he served as priest among the Indians for nearly twenty years; that he spoke several Indian dialects, and that he was a great archaeologist into the bargain. It is clear to me, at least, that this humble priest "who had friends all along the Santa Fe" and who hastened to Belgium as soon as the Great War came "to serve in any capacity he might," moved throughout the novel as one of the great moral influences of Tom Outland's life.[1]

In that case, this self-sacrificing missionary seems to have become "a person essential to the warp and woof of the great story."[2] Through his powerful influence on Tom's soul, he indirectly plays an important part in the lives of those who are so influenced by Tom.

Miss Cather has presented two admirable Catholic characters in this novel, Augusta and Father Duchesne. The first gave to the disillusioned, troubled professor the Catholic attitude toward life with its power and blessings of religion and conservatism. When everything else seemed to fail, she wakened new hope by enkindling in the soul of

---

[1] W. V. Gavigan, "Priests in Fiction," Catholic World, CXXV (April, 1927), 61.

[2] Ibid.

the discouraged professor a few faint sparks of her own unquenchable faith. The second character, Father Duchesne, was the great stabilizing and inspiring influence on Tom, and through him to others. Augusta stands "for the hope and comfort that has, for ages, been associated with the Catholic Church"; and Father Duchesne, pictured as the very best kind of priest, is a "symbol of the saving grace of the Roman Catholic Church."

But in My Mortal Enemy Miss Cather gives us a picture of an Irish Catholic, who is untrue to her faith, and in her extreme selfishness makes miserable all who come into contact with her.

CHAPTER V

MY MORTAL ENEMY

(1926)

My Mortal Enemy pictures Myra Driscoll, an Irish Roman Catholic, who sacrificed her religion by her marriage before a civil authority to Oswald Henshawe, a German Free-thinker. Automatically she cut herself off from communication with the Church.

> Moreover, while the ostensible theme of My Mortal Enemy is that of Myra Henshawe's religious conversion, and the latter half of the story is heavily weighted with the ecclesiastical symbolism of the conversion, the real achievement of the novel is the account of an intense and destructive human relationship.[1]

Myra revealed her detestable selfishness--a selfishness that poisoned her own life, and the lives of her husband and her friends. She became embittered at the loss of wealth and made all others miserable. In anger, her uncle, John Driscoll, disinherited her and left all of his money to the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions. The exaggerated description of his funeral is most untrue in Catholic practice, although there is a choice of a Requiem High Mass said

---

[1] M. Geismar, The Last of the Provincials (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1943), p. 190.

by one priest at which the choir sings, or a Requiem Solemn High Mass at which a priest, deacon, and subdeacon officiate. The latter was offered for John Driscoll. For each of these Masses there are but six candles lighted on the altar; however, if the corpse is present, three candles are lighted on each side of the bier. Miss Cather thus describes John Driscoll's funeral:

> The high altar blazed with hundreds of candles, and the choir was entirely filled by the masses of flowers. The bishop was there, and a flock of priests in gorgeous vestments. When the pall-bearers arrived, Driscoll did not come to the church; the church went to him. The bishop and clergy went down the nave and met that great black coffin at the door, preceded by the cross and boys swinging cloudy censers, followed by the choir chanting to the organ. They surrounded, they received, they seemed to assimilate into the body of the church, the body of old John Driscoll. They bore it up to the high altar on a river of colour and incense and organ-tone; they claimed it and enclosed it.
>
> In after years, when I went to other funerals, stark and grim enough, 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" about which our Protestant preachers talked. From the freshness of roses and lilies, from the glory of the high altar, he had gone straight to the greater glory, through smoking censers and candles and stars.[1]

According to Webster, a "choir" is a gallery or that part of a church appropriated to the singers."[2] If the singers occupied the choir, there is not much probability that there was room for masses of flowers; moreover, one can

---

[1] My Mortal Enemy, pp. 26-27.

[2] N. Webster, Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam Co., 1939), p. 177.

not imagine the undertakers carrying all of the flowers in and out of the church in the usual time it takes for the offering of the Solemn High Requiem Mass, the blessing of the body, and the accompanying of it again to the vestibule of the church.

"The church went to him." Always the corpse is met at the church entrance by the officiating priest or priests, vested in black cope, attended by acolytes carrying lighted candles and incense, and preceded by the cross, which denotes that our prayers are offered in the name of the crucified Redeemer. Mr. Palfu, in the New Catholic Dictionary, describes the normal Catholic funeral rites:

> After entering the church the responsory "Subvenite" is sung with its verse, and if the Office of the Dead and Requiem Mass are to be said or sung, they immediately follow. After Mass is said the prayer Non Intres, "Enter not into judgement with thy servant, O Lord," and the responsory Libera me," Deliver me, O Lord, from everlasting death," with its versicles, Kyrie Eleison and the Lord's Prayer, while the priest sprinkles the corpse with holy water and incenses it, thrice on each side; he then says a prayer for the deceased, that he may have everlasting joys. While the corpse is being carried to the grave In Paradisum is sung; if necessary, the grave is blessed, it and the corpse being again sprinkled and incensed; otherwise, the corpse is at once laid therein while the Benedictus is said with the antiphon "I am the Resurrection and the Life," followed by the Kyrie Eleison, the Lord's Prayer, and a prayer for the fellowship of the deceased with the choirs of angels.[1]

The beautiful funeral service and prayers are a part of the Catholic liturgical worship offered to God for the

---

[1] C. B. Palfu (ed.) et al., New Catholic Dictionary (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1929), p. 215.

soul of the departed person, imploring His mercy for "forgiveness of sins, an early deliverance from expiations due to past infidelities, and a more generous share in the happiness of heaven insofar as our intercession can secure these things for him according to our fellowship in the Communion of Saints."[1] Each ceremony is fraught with meaning:

> The lighted tapers express the desire that the departed may be admitted into the realms of perpetual light; the holy water sprinkled on the coffin expresses the desire that his soul may be cleansed from sin; the incense that is burned expresses the desire that our prayers on his behalf may ascend to the throne of the Most High, even as the clouds of smoke roll upward.[2]

Since the ritual prescribes the order of the funeral service, it is always done accordingly. John Driscoll received nothing more nor less than every good Catholic receives at his death. Because of his wealth, importance, and influence in the community and the church, his may have been a spectacular and pompous funeral; the Church only prays for him as for all her children. "May he rest in peace." John Randall swings wide of the mark, as he often does in interpreting Miss Cather. In writing of John Driscoll's funeral, he comments:

> This passage abounds with the tinsel vulgarity of the Gilded Age. It is a fantasy about extreme wealth corrupting the church itself and envisages a projection of a moneyed aristocracy into eternity. Compare with

---

[1]Fathers L. Rumble and C. Carty, Radio Replies, II (St. Paul: Radio Replies Press, 1940), 262.

[2]Spirago-Clarke, The Catechism Explained (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1927), pp. 700-01.

> this picture of the old Irishman buying his way into heaven, Myra's death with a crucifix in her hand. It seems clear the book has religious overtones, but it is a brute glorification of the power of money.[1]

With no authority or proof, Mr. Randall's erroneous opinion stands; reasons have been given previously.

In My Mortal Enemy, the second paragraph about the funeral contrasts it with other funerals, some by Protestant preachers. The narrator seems to think that "from the glory of the high altar, he had gone straight to the greater glory." That could be, for "Charity covers a multitude of sins,"[2] and"whosoever shall give you to drink a cup of water in my name, because you belong to Christ: amen I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."[3] "He hath distributed, he hath given to the poor, his justice remaineth for ever and ever."[4] The Catholic funeral service gives the consolation of a spiritual joy and triumphant peace that another one of her faithful children has entered eternal life.

Myra makes many references to Catholic belief and ritual: candles, Mass, the stipend and value of the Mass, Religion itself, the Sacraments of Extreme Unction and the Holy Eucharist as Viaticum, Penance, and Matrimony. Candles represent Christ, the Light of the World; the faithful hold the lighted blessed candle in their hand at Baptism, and at

---

[1] J. H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. 237.

[2] I Peter 4:8. [3] Mark 9:40. [4] Ps. 3:9.

their death, as a symbol of the great gift of faith. Holy Simeon called Christ the "light for the revelation of the Gentiles."[1] Spirage-Clarke clearly explains how candles represent Christ.

> The wax tapers are emblematic of Christ, the Light of the world. The wax betokens His manhood, the flame His Godhead; as the light shines forth from the taper, so the divinity of Christ shines forth from His sacred humanity by His teaching and His miracles; and as the taper is consumed, while illuminating all around, so the human nature of Our Lord was sacrificed for the sake of enlightening mankind. Christ is in very truth the Light of the world, since by His teaching He dispels the darkness of ignorance and error.[2]

Myra sends an offering for a Mass for the repose of the soul of Helen Modjeska, Countess Bozenta-Chlapowska, on the anniversary of her death. Once she said, "But that is money I keep for unearthly purposes; the needs of this world won't touch it,"[3] and she directed Nellie to have Masses said for her after her death. In My Antonia, Ambrosh sent an offering for Masses for his father's soul. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the supreme act of worship in which Christ offers Himself to His Heavenly Father under the appearances of bread and wine to atone for the sins of the world. It is the renewal of Calvary in an unbloody manner, and is offered in adoration, reparation, thanksgiving, and supplication.

---

[1] Luke 2:32

[2] Spirago-Clarke, op. cit., p. 698.

[3] My Mortal Enemy, p. 102.

> In the Mass a true and proper sacrifice instituted by Christ is offered to God. According to the prophet Malachias, the Lord of Hosts speaks, saying: "I have no pleasure in you (the Jews), and I will not receive an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name shall be great among the Gentiles, and in every place an incense offering shall be presented unto My name and a pure offering (Heb., minchah); for My name shall be great among the Gentiles." (Mal. 1, 10f.). This prophecy referring to the Messianic future could only have been fulfilled by either of two sacrifices, the Sacrifice of the Cross or the Sacrifice of the Mass. But the Sacrifice of the Cross took place on Golgotha . . . whereas the Sacrifice of the Mass . . . literally fulfills the prophecy as a sacrifice offered "from the rising of the sun even to its setting," and "in every place."[1]

Myra talks to Father Fay, a priest of the parish in San Francisco, about religion. "She says, "In religion seeking is finding. . . . Desire was fulfillment, it was the seeking itself that was rewarded."[2] Myra seems to be saying that if one sincerely desires the truth, and seeks to find it, she will have her efforts rewarded. Myra returns to the Catholic faith of her childhood although she had rejected it during all of her married life. Now she accepts all that has happened, and unites it with the sufferings of Christ. There is a ". . . marvelous fruitfulness of suffering when supernaturally endured in union with the Savior. The apostolate of suffering fructifies far more than we imagine the apostolate of preaching, teaching, and exterior works."[3]

---

[1]Steinmueller and Sullivan, Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia (New York: J. F. Wagner, Inc., 1950), p. 422.

[2]My Mortal Enemy, p. 111.

[3]R. Garrigou-Lagrange, Our Savior and His Love for Us (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1951), p. 285.

Myra is incurably ill, and when she knows death is near, she "asked to be given the Sacrament. After she had taken it she seemed easier in mind and body."[1] Since she was in danger of death, she received the sacrament of Extreme Unction, whereby the priest anoints the sick with consecrated oil in the form of a cross on her five senses represented by the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands, and feet. At every unction, he prays: "Through this holy unction and through His most tender mercy, may the Lord pardon thee whatever sins thou hast committed by seeing, hearing, smelling, taste, and touch."[2] This is for the healing of the soul, and often of the body, for it confers grace to bear suffering more easily and increases in us sanctifying grace and divine charity. When Holy Communion is given after the anointing, it is called Holy Viaticum because Christ goes with the soul on its journey to heaven.

After this anointing, Myra had greater peace of mind and body. She "kept beside her now an ebony crucifix with an ivory Christ. . . . 'Give it to me. It means nothing to people who haven't suffered.'"[3] But it meant much to her now for she united her sufferings to Christ's. That afternoon when Oswald opened the door to her room, he shouted despairingly, "She's gone!" On the desk was a note scribbled

---

[1] My Mortal Enemy, p. 114.

[2] Spirago-Clarke, op. cit., p. 640.

[3] My Mortal Enemy, p. 109.

in pencil: "Dear Oswald: My hour has come. Don't follow me. I wish to be alone. Nellie knows where there is money for masses."[1] How truly this last message shows her utter selfishness and coldness to her husband who had given her kindness all her life!

All night, with police aid, he searched for Myra, and when they found her on a cliff facing the sea, "Her head had fallen forward; the ebony crucifix was in her hands."[2] The crucifix carries with it the salvific power of the Crucifixion, the doctrine of Christ's redemptive death," For the word of the cross, to them indeed that perish, is foolishness; but to them that are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God."[3] With the crucifix in her hand, then, Myra Henshawe died.

There are many surprises in this story; Myra, baptized a Catholic, married out of the Church, but in her illness returned ardently to the faith of her childhood. She believed in "holy words and holy rites"; however, they are merely to influence one to lead a holy life. Myra doesn't live one. Mr. Adams writes, "The basic problems of life are repetitive and eternal; they are the individual's relation to himself, to his fellows, and to God."[4] That is why we are

---

[1] Ibid., p. 115. [2] Ibid., p. 118.

[3] Paul, I Corinthians 1:18.

[4] J. D. Adams, The Shape of Books to Come (New York: The Viking Press, 1944), p. 122.

so amazed at Father Fay's words, "I wonder whether some of the saints of the early Church weren't a good deal like her."[1] Brown comments:

> His remark amazes me because Myra has none of the kindness, charity or humility that we conventionally associate with a religious spirit; but it also illuminates--for it becomes clear to us that this worldly woman has passed out of worldliness into preoccupation with primary realities.[2]

We no longer have a picture of a grasping, worldly woman who was never satisfied, one who

> . . . hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its absurdities. I Nellie recalled her angry laugh, and how she had always greeted shock or sorrow with that dry, exultant chuckle which seemed to say: "Ah-ha, I have one more piece of evidence, one more, against the hideous injustice God permits in this world.[3]

Now she has mellowed, and knows that since man is a free moral agent he chooses good and evil with the resulting justice and injustice. In speaking of her uncle, she remarks that they were very proud of each other, and that if he were alive she would ask his pardon because she knows what it is to be old, lonely, and disappointed. Moreover, as we grow older we

> . . . become more and more the stuff our forbears put into us. I can feel his savagery strengthen in me. We think we are so individual and so misunderstood when we are young; but the nature our strain of blood carries is inside there, waiting, like our skeleton.[4]

---

[1] My Mortal Enemy, p. 110.

[2] W. C. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 250.

[3] My Mortal Enemy, p. 80.

[4] Ibid., pp. 98-99.

Truly, we are much of our ancestors, but, on the other hand, each man lives his own life. Myra's life under the title of My Mortal Enemy is provocative. Who is the mortal enemy? Did she really mean her husband--kind, generous, indulgent, still deeply in love, but made miserable by her ". . . dissatisfactions grown to desperate rebellion and her native violence out of control."[1] She once remarked, "Our marriage has been the ruin of us both. We've destroyed each other. . . . We've thrown our lives away."[2] More probably, perhaps, she meant herself. Nellie tells us that as she watched with Myra during a night of suffering she seemed to hear a soul speak. "I could bear to suffer. . . . So many have suffered. But why must it be like this? . . . Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?"[3] It seems she did mean herself. We often destroy what we love, and too often each human being is his own worst enemy.

> For all of us, whether we will or no, the hour strikes when we find ourselves alone, in spirit even more utterly than in body. There are recesses of the soul where none may follow and not even where Love's self may find the way.[4]

The inescapable loneliness of life is stressed in the common end of all mankind--death. "It deals with that

---

[1] C. Van Doren, Borzoi Reader (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1935), p. 2.

[2] My Mortal Enemy, p. 91. [3] Ibid., p. 113.

[4] J. J. Reilly, Of Books and Men (New York: Julian Messmer, Inc., 1942), p. 42.

ultimate mystery lying close and cold at the heart of every man and woman. . . . It is a complaint common to humanity. For we are, all of us, to die one day like that, alone with our mortal enemies."[1] And yet, though that was Myra's complaint, and although she had not lived a Catholic life, she had less loneliness than millions of others: hers was the absolution of Penance, the anointing of Extreme Unction, and Christ Himself as Viaticum; "Through the gates of death I'll take Him."

Myra Henshawe seems to be her own mortal enemy, and she leaves in the reader's mind the distortion and destruction her reprehensible selfishness caused in the lives of those who loved her. Even in dying, her last message shows her self-centeredness and selfishness. She left her relition to marry out of the Church, lived a life of worldliness, but ardently returned to her childhood faith. She did not live a Catholic life, but in the acceptance of her sufferings and death she grew greatly in spiritual stature. Her deep faith is shown principally in her value of the Mass.

In contrast to the character of Myra, Miss Cather's next book, Death Comes for the Archbishop, presents the lives of two priests of heroic sanctity.

---

[1] L. W. Dodd, "Alone with Ourselves," A Review of My Mortal Enemy by W. Cather, Saturday Review of Literature, October 23, 1926, p. 234.

CHAPTER VI

DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

(1927)

Death Comes for the Archbishop is the story of two heroic missionaries in the early American Southwest of New Mexico and Arizona. It is described as a picture "of life set in a sanctuary and viewed through a stained-glass window."[1] Actually it is set in the wild frontier of the New Mexican desert but viewed and interpreted in the light of Catholicism. Various biographers tell us that Miss Cather often visited the Southwest, drank in the beauty of the country, camped and traveled in the open, so she knew the pioneer country intimately, and learned of the early missionaries.[2] In a letter she tells us how she happened to write this magnificent story.

> The longer I stayed in the Southwest, the more I felt that the story of the Catholic Church in that country was the most important of all stories. The old mission churches, even abandoned and in ruins, had a moving reality about them; hand-carved beams and joints; the utterly unconventional frescoes; the countless fanciful figures of the saints, no two of them alike, seemed a direct expression of some very real and lively feeling. During the twelve years that followed my first

---

[1] M. A. Bessey and J. H. Wilson, Living Writers, I (New York: American Education Press, Inc., 1933), 11.

[2] In the general bibliography.

> visit, I went back as often as I could. The story of the Church and the missionaries was always what interested me most, but I had not the remotest idea of trying to write about it. Any story of the Church in the Southwest was the business of some Catholic writer and not mine at all. Meanwhile, the first Bishop of New Mexico had become a sort of a personal friend from the many interesting stories from very old Mexican traders, who still remembered him. I never passed his statue without wishing to learn more of a pioneer churchman--so fearless, fine, and very, very well-bred and distinguished. What I felt curious about was the daily life of such a man in a crude frontier society.[1]

She did not have to soak herself in Catholic lore, as someone expressed it, but "she drew on a large accumulated store of thought and knowledge."[2] She read extensively in the summer of 1925 in New Mexico, and nightly brought to the hotel armloads of books from the libraries of Santa Fe. She heard stories from priests who had known Bishop Lamy and Father Machebeuf; from taxi drivers, trainmen, Indian traders, from Tony Luhan, a Taos Indian; from Father Haltermann of Santa Cruz; from Father Dennis Fitzgerald of Red Cloud, Nebraska, who had been a friend since her childhood; and from an ex-theological student, Ewan Macpherson, who was a fine scholar with a thorough knowledge of Catholic tradition.[3] Some significant references were in Father W. J. Howlett's Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf, the Reverend

---

[1]Willa Cather, "How I Happened to Write Death Comes for the Archbishop," Commonweal, VIII (November 23, 1927), 713.

[2]Idem.

[3]General Bibliography.

Joseph Vaillant of the book. "The record of his life, and especially the long intimate letters to his sister and brother in Auvergne"[1] gave all the details of his missionary life in New Mexico. Miss Cather was then satisfied, as she tells us.

> I found out what I wanted to know--how the country and the people seemed to those first missionary priests from France. Without the letters and the book of Father Howlett as guide, I would never have dared to attempt a Catholic story. Many of the incidents were my own experience, but in these letters I learned similar experiences had affected Father Machebeuf and Father Lamy.[2]

She wrote that she always wanted the "writing" to count for less and less and the people for more and more. With an abundance of authoritative material, Miss Cather was ready to give us the truth; and in speaking of Catholic teachings of Eternal Truth, she consulted authority before she spoke. She writes with charming simplicity, "Some things I had to ask about." Her friend, Miss Lewis states, "Miss Cather was always very painstaking about her facts--she intensely disliked being careless or inaccurate, and went to much trouble to verify them."[3]

Death Comes for the Archbishop is one of the most inspiring books in American literature. In its beauty and

---

[1]W. C. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Knopf Co., 1953), p. 252.

[2]Willa Cather, "Letter from Willa Cather," Commonweal, VIII (November 23, 1927), 714.

[3]E. Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Knopf Co., 1953), p. 157.

lightness of style, it captures the pure, transparent sunlight and vari-colored shadows of the desert; in its lyricism, it sings its way into the heart by its melody. Charles Phillip says of it:

> The one novel that is conspicuous, that stands out as a work of art, as a thing of permanent and abiding beauty--it is too beautiful to be likened thus--it is Willa Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop. It is too important a work of American fiction, too real and addition to American literature to be passed over in any discussion of current novels.[1]

Michael Williams continues the laudation by stating that in order to write this book, she:

> . . . studied, observed, lived among and with the people, and she has thought very deeply and very long about all those things and about life itself. She has been affected by movements of her soul, by intuition and inspiration coming from beyond the frontiers of thought, and so she tells of the love that moves the universe and all its stars, the love of God for man and man for God.[2]

This book is considered by many as Miss Cather's masterpiece. It is compared to a bell ringing between heaven and earth, with its deep reverberations going on and on and on into space. When Susan Magoffin first saw the cathedral in Santa Fe in 1846, she wrote, "I can vouch for its being well-supplied with bells, which are chiming, it seems to me, all the time--both night and day.[3]

---

[1]Charles Phillip, "The Big Show," Catholic World, CXXV (September, 1927), 753-54.

[2]Michael Williams, "Willa Cather's Masterpiece," Commonweal, VI (September 28, 1927), 490-92.

[3]S. S. Magoffin, Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico, 1846 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), p. 103.

Regarding this absorbing story, we shall consider Catholicity in the organization of the Church, the priesthood with its awesome powers of Sacrifice and Sacraments, and the daily living of adherents in simple devotion to the saints, and especially their Queen, Mary, the Mother of God.

Why do we have the prologue of extreme refinement at the beginning of a book full of the rough stuff of frontier life in a new era? Mr. Van Dyke tells us, ". . . in order that we may understand the antiquity, the intellect, the many-sided culture, the material and mental richness of that vast organization which sends out and supports missionaries in the rude parts of the world."[1] Mr. Shea states:

> It was when the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ceded to the United States the ancient kingdom of New Mexico that, at the instance of the American Bishops, the Pope erected it into a Vicariate Apostolic in 1850 and placed it under the care of "an able and laborious priest of the diocese of Cincinnati."[2]

The Official Catholic Directory of Anno Domini 1961 lists "Archdiocesis Sanctae Fidei" or the Archdiocese of Santa Fe under the former Archbishops, the Most Reverend J. B. Lamy, consecrated November 24, 1850; created first Archbishop, 1875; resigned July 18, 1885; d. Feb. 13, 1888. It tells that the Most Reverend Joseph Prospectus Machebeuf was consecrated Titular Bishop of Epiphania and Vicar

---

[1] H. Van Dyke, The Man Behind the Book (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 350.

[2] J. G. Shea, The Church in the United States, 1844-1866, VI (New York: John G. Shea, 1892), 293.

Apostolic of Colorado and Utah, August 16, 1868; first bishop of Denver in 1887; d. July 10, 1889.[1] Here we have officially, the two heroes of Miss Cather's heroic tale, Bishop Lamy as Latour and Father Joseph Machebeuf as Father Vaillant.

Bishop Lamy shows both humor and modesty when he asks Father Machebeuf to go with him. "They wish that I should be a Vicar Apostolic, and I wish you to be my Vicar General, and from these two vicars we shall try to make one good pastor."[2] What bound Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant together? "It was the resolve to do what they could to promote in New Mexico that Kingdom of Heaven which is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost."[3] A quest for souls of men!

Mr. Van Dyke states that the book is of religious adventure and then defines the term:

> . . . vital theme of Willa Cather's book embodies the spirit of devout adventure in two men and sends them out on their Quest along pictorial and perilous trails, among all sorts and conditions of men, through all kinds of hardships and trials, never dull, never complaining, never despairing, but gladly carrying on, until at last, death![4]

As soon as Bishop Lamy was consecrated, he set out for his vicariate by way of New Orleans and Texas. No one

---

[1] Official Catholic Directory of Anno Domini 1961 (New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1961), pp. 248, 63.

[2] Paul Horgan, Centuries of Santa Fe)New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1956), p. 240.

[3] Van Dyke, op. cit., p. 357 [4] Ibid., p. 335.

could tell him how to go because no one had ever been there. After almost a year of traveling, during which he suffered a shipwreck which destroyed all but his books, he made a tedious overland journey to his diocese.

> On his arrival, he found the clergy indisposed to recognize his authority. The diocese of Durango had not been canonically divided, nor had New Mexico been formally detached from it, so they still recognized the Bishop of Durango as Superior. To adjust and to remove all ground of objection to his authority, Bishop Lamy set out on horseback for Durango. There the devoted Dr. Zuribia received him in holy friendship.[1]

Completing his three thousand mile trip on horseback, he rode back with his credentials to Santa Fe and began his life work among the deserts and the mountains, among the half-breeds and degenerates. He was to cultivate a ". . . vast raw, rough, primitive, unlettered land, where the seeds of authority and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, as brought by Spanish explorers, had largely gone wild or blown away in the wind."[2]

Bishop Lamy visited the churches and found great abuses existing. The Bishop and his missionary companion were men of God, men of prayer and sacrifice, who became "all things to all men that they might gain all," as St. Paul wrote. But the few priests they found were without guidance and discipline, some of them were lax in religious

---

[1]Shea, op. cit., pp. 308-09.

[2]E. S. Sergeant, Willa Cather Memoir (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1953), p. 198.

observance and lived in open concubinage. That was deplorable as celibacy is required of the Catholic priest. Celibacy means ". . . the renouncement of marriage made for the more perfect observance of chastity. Thus the priest may give himself more completely to the service of God and his people, by eliminating family worries and the added financial burdens."[1]

The Catholic reader may dislike Padre Gallegos, gambler, sportsman, dancer, drinker, who contradicts in word and fact the Catholic practice of clerical celibaby and so had to be formally suspended; or even Padre Martinez, who had ridden over especially to drive the new vicar away, but whose scandalous life caused him to be excommunicated; or his friend, the miserly Padre Lucero, also excommunicated but who came back to God at death; or the legend of the worldly and irate gourmet, Fray Baltazar, and his death. But these incidents have as much historical foundation, as the more edifying ones of Fra Junipero Serra, who was sheltered in the desert by the Holy Family; or of Padre Jesus, who with childlike faith and devotion told of his pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico; or of Fathers Latour or Vaillant. We might have preferred Miss Cather to forego these old legends and tales. But her concern is not with the scandals which actually existed, rather

---

[1] Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: Gilmary Society 1908), III, 481.

with how they contrast and show the nobility of the two priest-heroes.

Archbishop Salpointe, who succeeded Archbishop Lamy, writes, "His life in New Mexico was that of an apostle."[1] A historian declares, "He was easily the outstanding figure of the nineteenth century in New Mexico, without regard to creed or profession."[2] Bishop Machebeuf was the soul of kindness. "I have often noticed his very kind eyes--eyes full of sympathy which show at a glance his thought is for others."[3] Together these dedicated men subdue the wilderness for God and country, and the story of their lives truly represents a historical novel. For the author

> . . . has clung so closely to fact, and has described actual persons so truthfully, that her novel may rightly be called history of biography. . . . Thus, most of the people mentioned actually lived, and are described really as they lived. In the same way, the events may be verified almost wholly in the history of the founding and the development of the Santa Fe archdiocese.[4]

Catholicism came to New Mexico with a Franciscan missionary, Fray Marcos de Niza, in 1539, and ". . . the first Franciscan martyrs under Indian torture in 1544.

---

[1]G. Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels (New York: Dodd, Meade and Co., 1937), p. 94.

[2]R. E. Twitchell, Old Santa Fe (New York: n.p., n.d.), p. 365.

[3]Blandina Segale, Sr., At the End of the Santa Fe Trail (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948), p. 211.

[4]F. X. Talbot, S.J., "Willa Cather Eulogizes the Archbishop," America, XXXVII (September 24, 1927), 572-73.

Henry VIII was still reigning in England; Martin Luther was preaching in Germany."[1] When the United States annexed the territory in 1846, it was Spanish-speaking and largely Catholic.

The people present a society in transition; barbarism and civilization mingle--Mexicans, Indians, half-breeds, Spanish rancheros, adventurers like Kit Carson, and the Spanish and French missionaries. Father Vaillant said that his job was ". . . to hunt for lost Catholics. It is of the Mexicans I think Our Lord spoke when He said, 'Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven'."[2] He knew that to save the Indians' souls, they must make it clear that they wanted no profit for themselves. So often had the Indians been cheated and exploited by the white man that they had lost trust in him.

However, Jacinto and some other Indians were perfect guides for the missionaries on many of the journeys. When Eusabio, one of the most influential men among the Navajoes, was converted, he brought his son all the way to Santa Fe to be baptized. On the death of that well-beloved son, he sent word to the good man who with no delay started on the journey of several days to the south.

> The Navajo looked into his face with a message of sorrow and resignation in his deep-set, eagle eyes. A

---

[1] Wm. E. Barrett, "Crisis and Comeback in New Mexico," Catholic Digest, July, 1961, p. 92.

[2] Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 113.

> wave of feeling passed over his bronze features as he said slowly: "My friend has come." That was all, but it was everything: welcome, confidence, and appreciation.[1]

Here was perfect understanding between white man and red man. Later, after the Navajoes were expelled from their own lands, and a price was put on the head of Manuelito, Eusabio asked the bishop to meet him at Zuni. As a priest, he knew it was indiscreet to meet this outlawed chief; but he was a man, too, and a lover of justice. It was Manuelito's hope that the bishop would go to Washington to plead for the Indian; they asked nothing of the government but their religion and their own land--their country was a part of their religion. It was very difficult for the bishop to convince Manuelito that in a Protestant country one thing a Catholic priest could not do was to interfere.

The missionaries found on their journeys that those who had accepted Catholicity had a strong, simple faith. In many cases it had been kept alive for decades without a priest. The grandfather had remembered his prayers and catechism to teach the grandchildren; for instance, the first child that Bishop Latour met on his way to Mexico greeted him with, "Ave Maria Purissima, Senor." When he said he was a priest, she remarked that this had never happened to them before so she led him to the family. They thought the

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 216-17.

Blessed Virgin had led him there to baptize the children and to sanctify the marriages. Tomorrow he would do just that after Mass and confessions; the next morning every soul in the village, except Salvatore's sick wife, attended Mass.

The bishop found wooden figures of saints in even the poorest Mexican homes, and he had never seen two alike. There seemed something quite personal and distinctive about them. They were of their patron saints--Santiago, patron of horses--"he blesses the mares and makes them fruitful." The natives' faith and love for their patron saints, those whose names they bear, was surpassed only by their love for their Mother Mary.

Yes, devotion to Mary, God's Mother and ours, is deep in every Catholic heart. Perhaps that accounts somewhat for Father Joseph's deep, personal, and childlike love for Mary--the fact that he had lost his own mother so early in life. "Auspice Maria" was engraved on his ring and Willa Cather used the same motto on the title page of her masterpiece. It reads, "Auspice Maria!" and below, "Father Vaillant's signet-ring." Father dreamed of the day when he could return to France and ". . . end his days in devotion to the Holy Mother. For the time being it is my destiny to serve her in action."[1] And this he did with wholehearted generosity. Once a Pima Indian near Tucson showed Father a

---

[1] Ibid., p. 39.

golden chalice, vestments, and cruets, hidden generations ago when the Apaches sacked a mission. "I was the first priest who had come to restore God to His own."[1] In The Story of American Catholicism we read, "Thousands of Indians held to the Faith. In hidden caverns they preserved the vessels that had been used for Mass and before them they kept candles burning day and night. It was all they could do."[2]

Father served these Indians faithfully through all types of hardship and danger. But he was known as "Trompe-da-Mort" because he had often cheated death when he had black measles, malaria, or broken bones in accidents. However, when the message of his death was flashed into Santa Fe, Bishop Latour at once took the new railroad to Denver. He recalled Father Vaillant's last words to him, "Whenever God calls, I am ready." The Bishop mused, "Blanchet, you are a better man than I. You have been a great harvester of souls, without pride and without shame. . . . I am always a little cold. . . . If hereafter we have stars in our crowns, yours will be a constellation."[3]

Bishop Vaillant's body could not be buried from his cathedral because of the vast crowd which cam to pay respect.

> The funeral was held under canvas, in the open air; there was not a building in Denver--in the whole Far West,

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 201-02.

[2] T. Maynard, The Story of American Catholicism (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 41.

[3] Death Comes for the Archbishop, pp. 257-58.

> for that matter--big enough for his Blanchet's funeral. For two days before, the populations of villages and mining camps had been streaming down the mountains; they slept in wagons and tents and barns; they made a throng like a National Convention in the convent square.[1]

Such was the love and devotion for one who had "laid down his life for his friends." Bishop Latour felt his loss most keenly, but he returned to his duties at Santa Fe. In the autumn of 1888, he was caught in a violent rainstorm as he went to visit an ill priest at Santa Cruz. He said, "I will simply die of having lived," but he wished to be near his cathedral which would also be his tomb.

> When the Cathedral bell tolled just after dark, the Mexican population of Santa Fe fell upon their knees, and all American Catholics as well. Many who did not kneel prayed in their hearts. Eusabio and the Tesque boys went quietly away to tell their people; and the next morning the Archbishop lay before the high altar in the church he had built.[2]

In this magnificent novel of Catholicism, Miss Cather does falter in her description of Catholic doctrine or belief. Curiously the mistakes are to be found on only two pages in which she speaks of "the Blessed Sacrament of the Mass," of the Blessed Virgin as "divine," and of old Sada as "adoring" the little silver medal. Otherwise, the writer speaks as accurately of our mysteries as would a Catholic author.

The first reference is an error because the Blessed Sacrament and the Mass are different. The Mass is the

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 285-86. [2] Ibid., p. 299.

unbloody sacrifice of Calvary in which the water and wine are consecrated and thus changed into the precious Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, as they were at the Last Supper when Christ did the same and said, "This is My Body; this is My Blood. Do this for a commemoration of Me."[1] On the other hand, the Blessed Sacrament, the glory of the Catholic Church, is the real and abiding presence of Jesus Christ in the Tabernacle. From there He speaks, "Come to Me all you who labor and are burdened and I will refresh you."[2]

The second and third references regard Mary, who we know is in no way divine, as she was the daughter of Joachim and Ann. She was chosen by God, through the message of the Archangel Gabriel, to become the Mother of His Son. This she did by accepting God's will in her regard. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to Thy word."[3] Adoration belongs to God alone; Catholics in honoring Mary do merely what God did. Neither do we "adore" but show only reverence for a medal of our Mother, just as all people show respect for pictures of their loved ones or for medals struck to honor some hero or to commemorate some important event.

Miss Cather was not a Catholic, and yet no Catholic American has written pages ". . . so steeped in spiritual

---

[1]Luke 22:13 (Douay Version).

[2]Matthew, 11:28. [3]Luke 1:38.

knowledge and understanding of Catholic motives, and so sympathetically illustrative of the wonder and beauty of Catholic mysteries as she has done in this book."[1] She understands a great deal of the heroism required of these spiritual pioneers.

> This is the story of a passionate, flaming consuming love. . . . of the devastating love of these two men for men, women, and children, of the all-embracing love of God for these two men and other men, and of their love for him. . . . To prove their love they rode mules across windswept deserts and mountain passes, rode unceasingly through rain, snow, and scorching sands, slept under trees and ate in native huts; and their souls were desolate more than once as they shouldered their heavy crosses. But they spent their lives for God and they did not count the beads of tears and sweat. . . . These were men of steel. Together they picked up with naked hands the embers of a dying Faith and fanned with a heaving breath to a consuming fire.[2]

And yet the deep spiritual heroism of the protagonists carries with it an ethereal serenity and peace. "There is a quality in the book of the deep and simple tone of the Bishop's Angelus, the bell that set his France, his Europe, wise and wonderful, reverberating over cactus, and adobe, and red canyon walls."[3] The beauty of it echoes in the souls of his converts.

> With the sure hand of genius, Willa Cather marks a difference in death by one word of her title. It is not

---

[1]Michael Williams, "Willa Cather's Masterpiece," Commonweal, VI (September 28, 1927), 490-92.

[2]F. X. Talbot, S.J., "Willa Cather Eulogizes the Archbishop," America, XXXVII (September 24, 1927), 573.

[3]L. P. Hartley, Review of Death Comes for the Archbishop, by W. S. Cather, Outlook, CXLVI (October 26, 1927), 251.

> "Death Comes to the Archbishop" but "Death Comes for the Archbishop." It is as if a messenger were sent to recall and reward a faithful soldier of the King! What gives significance and value to death is the life that goes before.![1]

It is the certainty of immortality that gives dignity and grandeur to the death of the Archbishop. In this novel Miss Cather shows a great respect for Catholic priests and their calling, and the timeless faith of Roman Catholicism with its answers for daily living and for death. Here she follows ". . . two good priests through arduous years, and at the ending of their days finds them to be not men, but saints. Here, then, is purification and sanctification."[2]

The central ". . . theological image of Death Comes for the Archbishop is of the Virgin Mother . . ., while the central psychological image (sic.) the Rock."[3] The Rock here could symbolize the Catholic Church, for Christ said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock I will build My Church."[4] However, the Rock to Willa Cather was the "utmost expression of human need." She felt that man could be as hard and steadfast as rock. In her next book, Shadows on the Rock, she deals with Catholicism in the lives of the French Canadians who inhabit the "Rock of old Kebec."

---

[1] Van Dyke, op. cit., p. 337.

[2] Talbot, op. cit., p. 572.

[3] Brown, op. cit., p. 252.

[4] Matthew 26:18.

CHAPTER VII

SHADOWS ON THE ROCK

(1931)

In this novel of seventeenth century Canada, the spiritual seeking of the French is the motive for their self-determined exile. The principal civilizing influence on the Rock of Quebec is the Catholic Church, old in tradition and wise in human nature. Miss Cather wrote this because in her visit to France in 1902 she had felt

> . . . the spell of a France that was older than any of her literary or artistic cults, the France from which the "ancien regime" in Canada derived. She wished to express what Avignon, the Avignon of the popes, had meant to her over a period of forty years.[1]

To accomplish this with accuracy she did a considerable amount of reading and historical research in the Jesuit Relations, Lahontan's Voyages, and The Memoirs of Saint-Simon. For ". . . two months she followed the trail of Count Frontenac in Paris, visited the Church of St. Paul, and St. Nicholas-des-Champs where Frontenac's heart was buried, and the Musee Carnavelet where she looked up things she wanted to know."[2] Then she went to Quebec where she stayed for

---

[1] W. C. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 269.

[2] E. Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Knopf Co., 1953), p. 158.

some time, visited the Hospital General, and saw the two small rooms where Bishop de Saint Vallier humbly ended his life. She learned much from Juchereau's History of the Hotel Dieu at Quebec, and from letters of Mother Marie de l'Incarnation which gave her a multitude of references.

Miss Cather's interpretation of things Catholic is accepted because she knew whereof she spoke. Although she read the chronicles of Parkman, she was ". . . uninfluenced by his rationalism, anti-clericalism, or his approval of Frontenac's dispute with the Jesuits. . . . Her attitude towards friars, nuns, and Jesuits, miracles, and ceremonies is in agreement with Jesuit Relations."[1]

In his critical biography of Miss Cather, Mr. Brown tells us that she also rejected Parkman's extreme and severe conception of Bishop Laval because of conversations with Abbe Hanri Scott, elderly vicar of St. Foy, a village near Quebec. "Sensitive and kindly, reserved and discreet," a late chief archivist of Canada described him, surrounded by old editions of the classics and a multitude of the best studies on modern thought and art; she felt she could trust his judgment in his special subject, the ecclesiastical history of French Canada.[2] In November of 1928, after Willa Cather had begun writing Shadows on the Rock, she returned to

---

[1] Brown, op. cit., p. 271.

[2] Ibid., pp. 271-72.

Quebec for two weeks." "On this visit she ransacked bookstores and libraries, talked with historians, antiquaries, and other men learned in the past of French Canada."[1]

In a letter she tells us that she stated the moods and viewpoint in the title Shadows on the Rock. "To me the Rock of Quebec represents the endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite. There another age persists--a kind of feeling about life and human fate, I could not accept wholly, but admired like an old song."[2] She could not accept it wholly because it seemed a kind of thinking inherited from the past, lacking in robustness, and full of "pious resignation."

> A person who accepts life, who faces it boldly, cannot adopt an attitude which involves retreating from life without serious consequence to his peace of mind. Pious resignation suggests that one has given into fate and merely endures it; on the other hand, a person who accepts life is likely to treat fate high-handedly, as an opponent to be mastered.[3]

"Pious resignation" actually means an earnest effort to accept whatever life offers because all is willed or permitted by an all-loving Heavenly Father. Such a resignation to God's will often requires heroism, but it does not prevent one from using the common sense means of lightening the

---

[1] Ibid., p. 276.

[2] W. Cather, "A Letter by Willa Cather," Saturday Review of Literature, VIII (October 17, 1931), 216.

[3] R. H. Footman, "The Genius of Willa Cather," American Literature, X (March, 1938 - January, 1939), 135.

burden or treating "fate high-handedly." There is a prayer that expresses this thought. "Lord, grant me to change what I can, to accept what I cannot, and the grace to know the difference."

This story is wholly delightful, and thoroughly Catholic in every point. Father Talbot states, "It is the calm and the real recital of the outer and the inner life of a people who loved God, and loved their neighbors as themselves."[1] Here on the rock of old Kebec is a true democracy--life lived in a Christian spirit--Cecile, Auchlair, Bishop Laval in his acceptance of Bishop Saint-Vallier, Jacques, The Count, the Ursuline Sisters, and the homemakers.

> They lived up to themselves, to their ideals, and accepted one another as creatures possessing the dignity of human beings; they lived their lives gladly, generously, willingly, never saving themselves, but doing all things well from small to large.[2]

Cecile's, the Count's, and Monsignor Laval's kindness to little Jacques; Auchlair's constant service to his fellowmen by healing their bodies and giving advice for their hearts; Bishop Saint-Vallier's humility and poverty of his later years; the Ursuline's training of the importance of order and neatness in each detail, so their charges would become good and careful homemakers;--all of this is typical of the Cather

---

[1] F. X. Talbot, "Shadows on the Rock," America, XLV (November, 1931), 160.

[2] K. D. Byles, Review of Shadows on the Rock, by W. Cather, Truth, XXXV (November, 1931), 26.

spirit. In addition, Miss Cather points out Cecile's mother giving her

> . . . something so precious, so intangible--a feeling about life that had come down through the centuries. It was actually made up of very fine moral qualities in two women: the mother's unswerving fidelity to certain traditions, and the daughter's loyalty to her mother's wish. Faith taught them that a house was not of wood, cloth, and glass . . . but a home created by a capable woman as a work of art--a living art, more real than masterpieces of literature, great paintings, or imperishable sculptures. This spirit, an ideal of matrimony, would lead to peace and happiness on earth and be a sure road to heaven. Life is after all, a matter of detail.[1]

The simple French faith is evident throughout the story; it is a part of daily living.

> When an adventurer carries his gods with him to his new country, the colony is bound to have rich graces and blessings and a bright life "where the great matters are often as worthless as astronomical distances, and the trifles dear as the heart's blood!"[2]

The feasts of the Church are very close to those on the Rock of Quebec, as they participate in the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. The Church is composed of three parts: the Church militant on earth; the Church suffering in Purgatory for whom we pray on all Soul's Day, in every Mass, and especially in the Requiem Mass; and the Church triumphant in Heaven, whom we commemorate on each one's special feast, but especially on All Saint's Day.

The angels, too, were close, as we see when Cecile remarks to old Blinker ". . . that the angels are just as

---

[1] Ibid., p. 27.

[2] Shadows on the Rock, p. 153.

near to us here as they are in France," and he replies, "Ma'm'selle, I think they are nearer."[1] How close Heaven seems when, after having sought shelter from the rain, Jacques remarks after a long silence in the Church, "Cecile, all the saints in this Church like children, don't they?" Cecile kindly replied, "Oh, yes! And Our Lord loves children, because He was a child Himself, you know."[2] What simple faith!

In this congenial universe, created by God for a great purpose, the drama of man went on. There was sin, of course, and "there was punishment after death, but there was always hope. . . . The usual parting, 'I hope we shall meet in Heaven,' meant nothing doleful--it meant a happy appointment, for tomorrow, perhaps!"[3] The French colonists' deep faith, love, and trust in their Heavenly Father made them conscious of real life through death.

This Quebec that Willa Cather has immortalized in Shadows on the Rock gives us "Catholic history, and reveals her devotion to the French culture."[4] She shows that "grace guides the simple to moderate lives, lives without accent save one universal accent, and then it adds above this the profound, quiet appreciation of beauty and love."[5] Each day

---

[1] Ibid., p. 129. [2] Ibid., p. 67. [3] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

[4] E. S. Sergeant, Willa Cather Memoir (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1953), p. 241.

[5] R. McNamara, "Phases of American Religion," Catholic World, CXXXV (September, 1932), 648.

was ushered in the same way. "The punctual bell and the stern old Bishop who rang it began an orderly procession of activities and held life together on the rock, though the winds lashed it and the billows of snow drove over it."[1] One critic says that "the book itself is a bell, a pure, thin tinkle in a sanctuary: beautiful, but not great."[2] However, Father F. X. Talbot disagrees and gives the book lavish praise. He calls it

> . . . one of the most superb pieces of artistic writing that has been published this year, and it is as wholly and sincerely Catholic in detail and in tone as a well-educated Catholic could make it. Let it be accepted wholeheartedly and ungrudgingly, and let it be placed among the best Catholic books of our times.[3]

It has been accepted as such for it is a novel of grace and love. Miss Cather shows Quebec as a center of French Catholicism. The Church influences the daily lives of the people on the Rock, but stronger than its strength, the spirit of French Catholic civilization preserves its life of faith in the clergy, the Sisters, Jeanne Le Bar, the recluse, in liturgical feasts, in devotion to the angels and the saints, especially Mary, and in daily dignified happy living with the usual parting--"I hope we shall meet in Heaven." Thus Miss Cather shows the tremendous power

---

[1] Shadows on the Rock, p. 105.

[2] L. P. Hartley, Review of Death Comes for the Archbishop, by Willa Cather, Outlook, CXLVII (October 26, 1927), 251.

[3] F. X. Talbot, S. J., Review of Shadows on the Rock, by W. Cather, America, XLV (August 22, 1931), 476.

of a profound faith in this, the last of her novels which deals principally with Roman Catholicism.

CHAPTER VIII

WILLA CATHER AND CATHOLICISM

(1931)

Willa Cather's entire life was a search for the Truth; like all other human beings, she was seeking for security and happiness. She was not in harmony with the world around her, and so she gave deep consideration to the role of religion in relation to art, to the mind, and to civilization. Brought up as a Baptist, in 1922 she was confirmed with her parents in the Episcopal Church. Mr. Brown wrote, "In her entrance to the Episcopal Church, she was seeking a solution, and the repose a solution would bring, but it is doubtful if she really expected this step to bring repose."[1] That is rather a queer statement coming from such an astute interpreter, but he tells us that she took this step in order to share with her kin and townspeople. Religion is really, however, a wholly personal relationship between one's own soul and God.

Yet this act proves that she was truly searching; consequently, she maintained her interest in things Catholic. Perhaps her interest was due mainly to her conservative

---

[1] W. C. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. xvi.

nature. She admired the agelessness, the colorful ritual and liturgy, the ceremonies, the traditions, the values in the lives of her adherents, and the influence of the Church which is distinguished by four characteristics: one, holy, catholic or universal, and apostolic.

From childhood Willa Cather had been interested in Roman Catholicism because of friends among the clergy, the immigrant neighbors in Nebraska, and her playmates. In her tour of Europe in 1902, "France had the deepest influence and in her reactions and conclusions one can see the trend which was to lead years later to Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock."[1] Strange as it may seem,

> The Roman atmosphere wherever it was found in England was that which excited Willa most. . . . She went to see the Italians celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Here were undoubtedly the beginnings of Willa's deep interest in Catholicism.[2]

She was particularly interested in its translation from Rome to new unfriendly surroundings. It was in France, however, ". . . that she found a sort of internal peace which she recaptured and gave the world in her two distinctive French-Catholic books."[3]

Her interest in the Catholic faith, however, was not principally because she hoped to embrace it, although she seemed to be sincerely seeking truth; hers was rather an

---

[1] M. R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1951), p. 123.

[2] Ibid., p. 124. [3] Ibid., p. 131.

artistic and aesthetic appreciation of ". . . the impact on a problem in America of a great humane and disciplinary force."[1] Half of her novels, the six which we have considered, are saturated with Roman Catholicism, and yet she showed

> . . . resistance to Romanism on one side and inclination toward it on the other. All that can be inferred from inspection of dates is that throughout her literary life Willa Cather showed interest in the Church of Rome. It may even appear that this interest characterized her best books.[2]

Mr. Jacks states that some critics feel that Miss Cather had a genuinely Catholic spirit.

> They are quite wrong: she had a genuinely artistic spirit, an altogether different thing. It enabled her to appreciate many aspects of Catholicism in the Southwest as well as in Quebec. Her appreciation was the true kind based upon close careful study. To appreciate, one must understand. To understand, one must study. Study is work. There is no short cut, and Sallust is still right. Her feelings about Catholicism is rather a very fine feeling for the fitness of things, a delicate perception of what is right and proper, not a feeling prompted by any desire to unite with the observed phenomenon.[3]

However, Robert McNamara says that Willa Cather speaks for the Catholic American tradition; then adds in optimistic tones:

---

[1] W. F. Taylor, History of American Letters (New York: American Book Co., 1947), p. 329.

[2] J. L. Jessup, Faith of Our Feminists (New York: R. R. Smith Publishers, Inc., 1950), p. 112.

[3] L. V. Jacks, "The Vision of Willa Cather," Books on Trial, IX-X (May, 1950 - June, 1952), 285-86.

> She may produce something which will even exceed Dante in the perception and praise of beauty. Such an accomplishment will reform or really establish an American literature. It will restore America to its religion. But even more, it will make forever evident the bond between all art and all religion, between art, the seeking, and religion, both the seeking--the sought, the finding, and the having. "To whom shall we go but to Thee, O Eternal fountain of Truth? Thou has the words of eternal life."[1]

So truly did she write of Catholicism that many people thought she had become a Catholic; Mr. Loggin's book carried that untrue statement, so the publisher had to send erratum slips to all libraries stating the contrary. She was a communicant and active member of the Episcopalian Church, probably because her parents were. She writes,

> I need scarcely tell you of my great admiration for the Roman Church, since I have written two books which assure you of that feeling which is deep and sincere. I have a number of old friends in the Catholic clergy, and their prayers and good will are a great source of comfort to me.[2]

To Miss Cather, the life of the spirit is more important than the life of the body, and that "no matter how obscure the earthly destinies may be, they are of eternal importance."[3] This makes her a truly Christian artist, for "she was always aware of the grandeur of life even in its

---

[1]R. McNamara, "Phases of American Religion," Catholic World, CXXV (September, 1932), 649.

[2]Vernon Loggins, I Hear America (New York: T. Y. Crowell Co., 1937), Crowell Company erratum slip.

[3]"Recommended Books," Catholic Book Survey September, 1932, p. 9.

struggle for existence."[1] Her love for men and women was shown in her Christlike sympathy, love, and understanding; it is revealed so tellingly in the six novels considered.

O Pioneers! and My Antonia are stories of the conquest of the soil and acceptance of life; The Professor's House and My Mortal Enemy present a psychological search for a solution to the loneliness of life, and the problems of a pressurized materialistic civilization which offers nothing for the problem of death; Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock reflect the past with serene beauty and show the stabilizing influence of the Church in the problems of daily living and in death. These reveal Miss Cather's advance from the symbolic level of bodily conquest of the soil to the level of the intellect, and, finally, to level of the soul,--from pioneers of the land, to modern intellectual pioneers, to pioneers of the spirit.

In these six novels Miss Cather deals with many points of Catholic doctrine: the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Sacraments, the priesthood, the prayer, the Communion of Saints, the devotion to the saints and Mary, the Mother of God, and many attitudes of daily living, death and funerals. Amazingly, she rarely errs in her presentation and interpretation.[2]

---

[1] J. K. Piercy, Modern Writers at Work (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 979.

[2] Brown, op. cit., p. 289.

The doctrines are well-handled, but what about the characters? It is Marie, not Alexandra, who with her fiery, passionate Bohemian nature loves Emil unlawfully; it is Antonia, not the bad Lena Lingard, who is disgraced; it is kind Mr. Shimerda, not the Presbyterian grandfather, who commits suicide. In My Mortal Enemy, it is Myra, not the gentle and kind Oswald, who creates misery. While we do not agree, of her may be said what Mr. Boynton said of another, "Immorality lies not so much in the infraction of laws and precepts as in the fact that such a life as hers is inherently self-defeating."[1] There is a great deal of truth in that; immorality, however, does lie in the violation of law.

After the presentation of those Catholics who do not live their religion, perhaps the author feels that she should make some sort of "restitution." So she gives us Augusta, the German seamstress, who with her simplicity and down-to-earthiness, gives and lives the ultimate answers; and Father Duchesne, the "very best kind of priest," who as teacher and friend made Tom Outland the great influence he was in the Professor's family and life. Perhaps the Professor wistfully voices Willa Cather's own ideas when he says that there were still things for which he would envy her but which he is probably too old to learn.[2]

---

[1]P. H. Boynton, "Willa Cather," English Journal, XIII (June, 1924), 379.

[2]McNamara, op. cit., p. 643.

Then come her two predominantly Catholic stories: Death Comes for the Archbishop, considered by many as her "masterpiece" and a classic, and Shadows on the Rock dealing with faith in simple lives, and with "gods of the household." And yet, J. L. Jessup says of them, "However excellent as aesthetic commentary, neither Death nor Shadows possesses value as a testament of faith."[1] In the previous chapters, we have stated the contrary. Lamy and Vaillant, the two priests of the first novel stand for a ". . . fusion of action and contemplation, of doing and being, of enterprise and art, which was latent in Antonia and emergent in the Professor."[2]

> From the first of her novels the Church had occupied a special and gracious place in Willa Cather's mind. She now thinks with increasing eloquence of its permanence and certainty and of the universal human yearning for something permanent, enduring, without shadow of change. The Rock becomes her oft-repeated symbol: the rock, when one comes to think of it, was the utmost expression of human need. For the Church seems to offer the possibility of satisfying that appealing definition of human happiness which Miss Cather had made as far back as My Antonia--to be dissolved in something complete and great.[3]

It was toward this dissolvement that Miss Cather was ever tending. She reached the end of her self-expression in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock

---

[1]Jessup, op. cit., p. 115.

[2]H. C. Gardiner, Fifty Years of the American Novel, 1900-1950 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 95.

[3]Malcolm Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 59.

reveals a closed world. Robert McNamara wrote after Obscure Destinies: "It does not much disturb Miss Cather's position at the crucial point of her religious-philosophical development. However, it is my belief that here we have indication that she neither will nor can go farther in that development."[1] Her lack of continuous growth may be accounted for by two possibilities: she sees her spiritual impulse as a mistake and returns to her realistic path, or she never properly understood the Christian spirituality of Death and Shadows.

> Her "idea" of Christianity was perhaps too aesthetic, too historical, too French, an admiration of Christian art and manners, its order and decency, its culture and its codes. . . . Throughout the book it is the wholly admirable virtue of proportion and rational adjustment and courtesy that is stressed. Miss Cather admires Father Vaillant's civilized common sense rather than the communicated power and wisdom and love of his calling. She had an imperfect sense of what the struggle for spiritual perfection actually meant. . . . She had gone as far as she could go. Had she been able to understand that these two visions of reality were incomplete, that there were still higher levels of spiritual values and greater depths of spiritual suffering . . . she might have been the greatest novelist of her time.[2]

She was, however, a truly Christian writer, for she was interested, primarily in what "men and women can inwardly make of themselves." Would that we could say as true of the author what Myra Henshawe said in My Mortal Enemy, "In religion the seeking is the finding. . . ." We cannot, and yet she profited by,

---

[1]McNamara, op. cit., p. 649.

[2]Gardiner, op. cit., pp. 85-87.

> . . . the intense religious experience in her search for truth, as all sincere writers, all who seek genuine beauty must necessarily do; for does not every profound search for truth or goodness or beauty begin by inspiration from God, and end, somehow in the realization of Him.[1]

In her sincere quest, Miss Cather had gone as far as she could in her search for God. She had studied, observed, consulted, and portrayed sympathetically and accurately Catholic doctrines, and the place of the Church in daily living--but hers was not the gift of faith. Mr. Burnett tells us that "she admitted that even her Catholic books were written out of admiration for a faith she could not quite accept. . . . Miss Cather found it difficult to believe."[2] Sincerely and honestly, "she concludes, 'Faith is a gift.'"[3]

---

[1] McNamara, op. cit., p. 643.

[2] Burnett, in Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 137.

[3] Idem.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, J. D. The Shape of Books to Come. New York: The Viking Press, 1944.

Barrett, Wm. E. "Crisis and Comeback in New Mexico," Catholic Digest, July, 1961, p. 92.

Bennett, M. R. The World of Willa Cather. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1951.

Bessey, M. A., and Wilson, J. H. Living Writers. Vol. I. New York: American Education Press, Inc., 1933.

Boynton, P. H. The Rediscovery of the Frontier. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931.

_____. "Willa Cather," English Journal, XIII (June, 1924), 379.

Brown, W. C. Willa Cather: A Critical Biography. New York: Knopf, 1953.

Byles, K. D. Review of Shadows on the Rock, by W. Cather, Truth, XXXV (November, 1931), 26-28.

Carroll, Latrobe. "Portrait of Willa S. Cather," Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 212-16.

Cather, Willa. "A Letter by Willa Cather," Saturday Review of Literature, VIII (October 17, 1921), 216.

_____. Death Comes for the Archbishop. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927.

_____. "How I Happened to Write Death Comes for the Archbishop," Commonweal, VIII (November 23, 1927), 713.

_____. "Letter from Willa Cather," Commonweal, VII (November 23, 1927), 713-14.

_____. My Antonia. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918.

_____. My Mortal Enemy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.

_____. Not Under Forty. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936.

_____. On Writing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

_____. O Pioneers! New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913.

_____. Shadows on the Rock. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931.

_____. The Professor's House. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925.

Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Gilmary Society, 1908, III, 481.

Connolly, F. X. "Willa Cather: Memory as Muse," Fifty Years of the American Novel, ed. H. G. Gardiner. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951.

Cowley, Malcolm. After the Genteel Tradition. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959.

Dodd, L. W. "Alone with Ourselves," A Review of My Mortal Enemy, by W. Cather, Saturday Review of Literature, October 23, 1926, p. 234.

Fitzmorris, T. J. "Formula for the Great American Catholic Novel," America, LIII (August 10, 1953), 425.

Footman, R. H. "The Genius of Willa Cather," American Literature (March, 1938 - January, 1939), 123-41.

Gardiner, H. C. Fifty Years of the American Novel, 1900-1950. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.

Garrigou-Lagrange, R. Our Savior and His Love for Us. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1951.

Gavigan, W. V. "Priests in Fiction," Catholic World, CXXV (April, 1927), 61.

Geismar, M. The Last of the Provincials. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1943.

Greenbie, Sydney. Review of Death Comes for the Archbishop, by W. S. Cather, Springfield Republic, November 13, 1927, p. 7.

Hartley, L. P. Review of Death Comes for the Archbishop, by Willa Cather, Outlook, CXLVII (October 26, 1927), 261.

Hatcher, H. Creating the Modern American Novel. New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1935.

Horgan, Paul. Centuries of Santa Fe. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1956.

Jacks, L. L. "Vision of Willa Cather," Books on Trial, IX-X (May, 1950 - June 1952), 286.

Jessup, J. L. Faith of Our Feminists. New York: R. R. Smith Publishers, Inc., 1950.

Jones, H. M. "Novels of Willa Cather," Saturday Review of Literature, XVIII (August 6, 1938), 3-4.

Kuntz and Haycraft. Twentieth Century Authors. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1942.

Lewis, Edith. Willa Cather Living. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953.

Lewis, Sinclair. "The Greatest American Novelist," Newsweek, XI (January 3, 1938), 29.

Loggins, Vernon. I Hear America. New York: T. Y. Crowell Co., 1937.

Luccock, H. E. Contemporary American Literature and Religion. Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1934.

McNamara, R. "Phases of American Religion," Catholic World, CXXV (September, 1932), 642-49.

Magoffin, S. S. Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico, 1846. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926.

Margaret, H. "Religion and Literary Technique," Catholic World, CLVII (July, 1943), 392.

Maynard, T. The Story of American Catholicism. New York: Macmillan Co., 1941.

Official Catholic Directory of Anno Domini 1961. New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1961.

Overton, G. The Women Who Make Our Novels. New York: Dodd, Meade and Co., 1937.

Palfu, C. B. (ed.) et al. New Catholic Dictionary. New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1929.

Parrington, L. V. Main Currents in American Thought. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1930.

Phillip, Charles. "The Big Show," Catholic World, CXXV (September, 1927), 753-54.

Piercy, J. K. Modern Writers at Work. New York: Macmillan, 1930.

Quinn, A. H. American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey. New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, Inc., 1936.

Randall, J. H., III. The Landscape and the Looking Glass. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960.

Rapin, Rena. Willa Cather. New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1930.

"Recommended Books," Catholic Book Survey. September, 1932.

Reilly, J. J. Of Books and Men. New York: Julian Messmer, Inc., 1942.

Rumble, L., and Carty, C., Fathers. Radio Replies, II. St. Paul: Radio Replies Press, 1940.

Segale, Blandina, Sr. At the End of the Santa Fe Trail. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948.

Sergeant, E. S. Willa Cather Memoir. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1953.

Shea, J. G. The Church in the United States, 1844-1866, Vol. VI. New York: John G. Shea, 1892.

Sheen,F. God Love You. New York: Garden City, 1955.

Spirago-Clarke. The Catechism Explained. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1927.

Steinmueller, J. E., and Sullivan, J. Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia. New York: J. F. Wagner, Inc., 1950.

Talbot, T. S.J.Review of Shadows on the Rock, by W. Cather, America, XLV (August 22, 1931), 476.

_____. "Shadows on the Rock," America, XLV (November, 1931), 160.

_____. "Willa Cather Eulogizes the Archbishop," America, XXXVII (September 24, 1927), 572-73.

Taylor, W. F. History of American Letters. New York: American Book Co., 1947.

Tennant, Stephen. On Writing. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1927.

Trese, L. J. The Faith Explained. Notre Dame: Fides Publishers Association, 1959.

Twitchell, R. E. Old Santa Fe. New York: n.p., n.d.

Van Doren, C. Borzoi Reader. New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1935.

Van Doren, Dorothy. Review of Shadows on the Rock, by W. S. Cather," Nation, CXXXIII (August 12, 1931), 160.

Van Dyke, H. The Man Behind the Book. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.

Wagenknecht, E. Cavalcade of the American Novel. New York: Holt and Co., 1952.

Webster, N. Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield: Merriam Co., 1939.

Weeks, Edward. "Method in Their Madness," Bookman, LXXV-LXXVI (April, 1932 - March, 1933), 150-55.

Williams, Michael. "Willa Cather's Masterpiece," Commonweal, VI (September 28, 1927), 490-92.