

Elisabeth Bayley
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

***Can the ‘Art’ of Peace become a Work of Violence? Explorations
of Religious ‘Works of Peace’ in Willa Cather’s ‘Death
Comes for the Archbishop’***

Introduction:

Gil Ballie points out that literature has developed into neither straight myth nor truth but that it is the place where these two concepts “struggle for the upper hand.”¹ The ability of literature to stand at the crossroads between concealment and revelation allows the novel to portray fundamental qualities within societies that often go missed. Because neither the acceptance of legends nor the breakdown of legends or myths are easily disclosed, literature therefore, serves an important role in assisting in both disclosing the cornerstones of our security in legends as well as the shifting truths behind the legendary function. The ability for literature to stand at these crossroads is what I am going to focus on in this paper. In particular, I am going to look at Willa Cather’s book *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and will use different constructs of René Girard’s notion of the mythical to point out the ways in which different aspects of myths or legends are depicted and deconstructed through her work. Throughout this exploration, I am going to look specifically at the involvement of Bishop Latour, the central protagonist, whose very presence in the New Mexican region along with the ways in which his involvement likewise caused great reflection for the native population serves to illuminate and develop the liminal space between peace and violence.

Cather’s historical novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is based on the life of Bishop John B. Ramy, the first Bishop (and later archbishop) appointed to the region of New Mexico in 1853, just after that region was acquired by the United States. Cather herself states the purpose of her 1927 work by saying: “I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment.”² However, her work has been considered controversial, because it is based on real individuals though it has a fictional approach, with the changed names of only certain

¹ Gil Ballie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (Ann Arbor, MI: Crossroad, 1995), 34.

² Willa Cather, *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 9.

characters. This approach of certain name changing ends up with the potential of maligning or glorifying individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. But reading her work as only a negative portrayal of historical facts does not do justice to Cather's novel. Guy Reynolds points out that Cather has included not only real characters from history but also concepts of mystery and miracles.³ This union of the 'real' with the 'mysterious' is what creates the legendary qualities within Cather's novel but which likewise highlights the mythological aspects of acceptance of a subtle violence within her work. It is only through reading her text as a whole that the reader is given the opportunity to see what Raymund Schwager points out as the 'truth' of fiction. Essentially, he notes that Girard's use and analysis of fiction is only done through the whole story so that no one is understood as the absolute of either good or evil.⁴ And Cather's novel indeed demonstrates the importance of not reading any one character as either 'good' or 'evil.' The story she tells is one of the convergence of cultures and belief systems. However, doing so through a legendary lens means that she not only creates a mythical or legendary story based on an historical character, but she likewise breaks down this legendary figure through the use of another culture's mythical belief systems

Breakdown of the Myth: Establishing Power to Obtain Desires

Cather's story begins by showing how Jean Marie Latour is appointed by a group of three cardinals and one missionary bishop who make their decision during a beautifully situated meal in Rome. During their conversation, the understanding for the need of 'order' and 'salvation' for the lost people of New Mexico is discussed. Thus, already setting the premise for which the main character is to become: the legendary priest who is chosen to go into a region, not his own, to create a sense of 'order' and give salvation to its people. This understanding of purpose already creates a certain mythical understanding of the ability of the Church to, first of all, decide what is best for others and, secondly, to determine that they have the 'gifts' to give salvation. As Jacques Lacan notes, "The domain of the good is the birth of power"⁵ and this is in fact exactly where the priests found their notion of power, by believing that they held the domain of the

³ Guy Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 152.

⁴ Raymund Schwager, *Must There be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 7.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1969: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter. (Chatham, Kent: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1992), 229.

good. The four men in the meeting describe the people of New Mexico as “Untaught and unshepherded” and because of this the priest who is sent to that region will “...have to deal with savagery and ignorance, with dissolute priests and political intrigue. He must be a man to whom order is necessary—as dear as life.”⁶ After this brief disclosing prologue of the story’s premise, the book then delves immediately into Latour’s time in New Mexico. And although Cather depicts him as a gentle person from the start, Latour nonetheless goes to live among the people of this territory with an understood purpose of creating ‘order’ within it.

After the prologue, the first chapter shows Latour lost in the desert. He happens upon a tree that looks like a cross, kneels down before it and prays. Cather describes him as “Everything showed him to be a man of gentle birth—brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners, even when he was alone in the desert were distinguished. He had a kind of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing.”⁷ Latour is already portrayed in this description as someone who is ‘other worldly’ in a sense. In the middle of being dehydrated and lost in a desert, he takes time to pray for 30 minutes, in front of a tree and when he arises he “looks refreshed.”⁸

The story then continues with Latour stumbling across a small village situated in the middle of a desert, with an immense greenness and numerous people waiting and praying for a priest. As he is being welcomed into an Eden-like atmosphere, the small girl who finds him says “‘A priest?’ she cried, ‘that is not possible! Yet I look at you, and it is true. Such a thing has never happened to us before; it must be in answer to my father’s prayers.’”⁹ Latour is thus welcomed into a beautiful community that has been waiting for his (a priest’s) arrival for many years. Demaree C. Peck writes that “This first scene is paradigmatic of the course of Latour’s travels in the novel as a whole; for him, as for the early Franciscan missionaries...”¹⁰ that, as Cather writes in this story, was a “way

⁶ Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Demaree C. Peck, *The Imaginative Claims of the Artist in Willa Cather’s Fiction* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 226.

through the wilderness blossomed with little miracles.”¹¹ Peck is onto something by pointing out the way in which this book creates an almost ideological travel log of the Bishop, but I believe this is done with Cather’s intention, once again, to create a legend and at the same time, disclose the legend’s inner-workings through the deliberate description of only certain aspects of good and almost other-worldly characteristics. Here we see the first step in the mythical process: the creation of the legend through the power held over others and through the ownership of an other’s desires (in this sense spiritual).

Breakdown of the Sacrificial:

Once the first step of the legend, the idea of power over another, is established through the beginning of her story, Cather continues to depict the next step of legend through Latour’s experience within an old Indian cave. This depicted legend tells the story of part of an Indian religious practice (or legend to the white man) to which Latour is deeply affected. Latour and his guide, Jacinto, get stuck in a huge snow storm, one so large that Jacinto takes Latour to a secret cave used only by the Indians. Once inside, Latour was “struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place.” Jacinto then spends time examining the cave and searching about him. He relates his insecurity in bringing Latour there and says, “ ‘Padre...I do not know if it was right to bring you here. This place is used by my people for ceremonies and is known only to us. When you go out from here, you must forget.’ ”¹² And Latour willingly agrees to forget the place.

This cave is described by white men in the story but never by Indians which creates a sort of wonderment concerning the place for the white men in the story. A few pages later, Latour has a discussion with Kit Carson concerning the cave and various Indian beliefs. Latour asks if it is true that the Indians keep a snake somewhere. Carson responds by saying, “ ‘They do keep some sort of varmint out in the mountain, that they bring in for their religious ceremonies,’ the trader said. ‘But I don’t know if it’s a snake or not. No white man knows anything about Indian religion, Padre.’ ”¹³

In this context, there is an expression of the sacrificial legend through an explanation by Carson that “ ‘One night a Pecos girl, with her baby in her arms, ran into

¹¹ Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 279.

¹² Ibid., 128.

¹³ Ibid., 134.

the kitchen here and begged my mother to hide her until after the festival, for she'd seen signs between the *caciques*, and was sure they were going to feed her baby to the snake. Whether it was true or not, she certainly believed it, poor thing, and Mother let her stay.”¹⁴ This story which Carson tells and the experience that Latour has in the cave combine to deconstruct the sacrificial myth of not only feeding an infant to a snake but likewise the inability of the white men (in particular Carson, who is depicted as the epitome of the white or American man focused on expansionism) to figure out the Indian belief system, and because of their lack of understanding, their total dismissal of the Indian sacrificial tradition.

Latour's experience in the cave, however, proved to bother him whenever he thought about the coldness and dread he felt within the cave. “...the cave, which had probably saved his life, he remembered with horror. Not tales of wonder, he told himself, would ever tempt him into a cavern hereafter.”¹⁵ In other words, Latour came into physical contact with the Indian legend of the snake and it gave him a feeling of horror. What was it that horrified him? Could it be that he was hit with the reality of the power of the legend itself? The coldness and dread he felt within the cave could be a feeling of helplessness to the workings of a legend in the Indian people's lives and although he was never able to bring this reality to a conscious level, he felt the desperation of it and it left him horrified. This experience for Latour can be seen as an uncovering of the mimetic power of the Indian's sacred tradition and for the “Americans” to have a belief or legend to dismiss. This, therefore, is an example of how Cather depicts another phase which founds the myth, which is the mimetic violence, done not only in the sacred tradition of the Indians but likewise in the identification of a group of people, by the white men, to dismiss and ostracize.

Breakdown of the Scapegoat:

The violent act of mimesis with its final act of scapegoating is told through the legend of Friar Baltazar. In the middle of the novel, the story of Baltazar is told to Latour by a priest at Isleta. It is the story of a gluttonous Friar living in Acoma which is a city that set upon a mesa or a large, bare, flat rock. Friar Baltazar forced the people to serve

¹⁴ Ibid., 135.

¹⁵ Ibid., 132-133.

him with their best foods, crops and services. He was very disrespected by the people among whom he lived. One night he gave an immense dinner party for some priests with food sent from far and wide and had many servants helping to serve. One of the servants, a young boy, accidentally spilled gravy on one of the priests sitting at the table. This made Baltazar so angry that he threw an empty pewter mug at the “clumsy lad”¹⁶ and killed him instantly. The priests at the table fled but Baltazar did not flee; instead, he went into the kitchen and “took the turkey from the spit, not because he felt any inclination for food, but from an instinct of compassion, quite as if the bird could suffer from being burned to a crisp.”¹⁷ All the while, the people in the town gathered together, came into Baltazar’s house, carried him out and threw him over the mesa’s edge, to his death. This story shows not only the violence of the priest, but it also shows the violence of a group of people by their throwing the priest over the side. Thus illustrating the potential for power (as with the Friar) to go awry but also the power of the group when violence erupts. So here we see again the ability of Cather to deconstruct the last phase of mimetic violence or the legend by showing the group behavior of violence.

It is through these three mythical depictions in her story that Cather locates the different steps within the mythological process of mimesis or wanting to obtain the desires of an other through false notions of power, violence, through the sacrificial acts of the Indians and the snake, and scapegoating, here through the story of Friar Baltazar. At the end of the novel, Cather goes on to tell of the final stage of the mythological process of memorialization. It is not that this concept has not yet been explored throughout her story but it is most obvious in the temptation and desire of Latour.

Self Memorialization:

Latour, being selected to take the position of Bishop, and then Archbishop, is therefore asked to take part in a legendary position of power over others through the belief of holding onto a notion of ‘order’ and ‘truth.’ This calling by his superiors is something which Latour is pictured as struggling with at times and something which made his perspectives of those around him as something empty, like his own faith. But even in the midst of his doubting or being confronted with other legends or belief

¹⁶ Ibid., 110.

¹⁷ Ibid., 111.

systems, Latour comes to have the vision of building a Cathedral in the French style.¹⁸ Not only does he have this Cathedral built in an unusual architecture compared to the native inhabitant's traditional buildings, he does so in hopes that it deliberately become a legendary structure. As he says to Vaillant, "... perhaps, after all, something would remain through the years to come; some ideal, or memory, or legend."¹⁹ And here is the final stage of the legend: memorialization. Latour desires to have something remain after he is dead. The discomfort which his co-priest and best friend Vaillant expresses at Latour's desire to construct a Cathedral actually serves to uncover the oddness that self-memorializing creates. The reality that it is not right is clear to Vaillant but he is unable to question Latour's desire because Latour is his superior and because the act of constructing one's history is often a sensitive subject.

Peaceful Reflections:

As noted above, it is important to Girard that a novel be read in its entirety so that no one is completely villianized or sacralized. Reading Cather's work with this in mind allows her story to take on its fullness in both the legendary constructs and likewise in the 'mystical' or unexplainable aspects. Susan J. Rosowski writes that "...she wrote of a 'twofold loveliness,' beauty coupled with ugliness, joy with pain; and she proposed that salvation resides in the power of love to reconcile the two. These ideas [were to] reach their fullest development in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*."²⁰ There are a number of areas where Cather shows the 'mystical' nature of the culmination of cultures and perspectives and even solitary ones, where individuals are able to reflect upon goodness in the world. In particular, she shows how Latour, although his intentions for peace might have gone astray at points through temptations of self-memorialization or incorrect judgments of others, is still very reflective and often times attempts to be a peaceful non-intrusive individual. This is depicted through his reflections during many parts of the novel, such as when he reflects on a bell²¹ and the historical reality of many religious

¹⁸ Demaree C. Peck, *The imaginative claims of the artist in Willa Cather's fiction* Susquehanna University Press (September 1996), 231

¹⁹ Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 252.

²⁰ Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press: 1986), 212.

²¹ "A learned Scotch Jesuit in Montreal told me that our first bells, and the introduction of the bell in the service all over Europe, originally came from the East. He said the Templars brought the Angelus back from the Crusades, and it is really an adaptation of a Moslem custom." Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 45.

aspects interwoven in its tradition. Or when he was very aware of Jacinto's difference and respects it. Jonathon Goldberg points out that "...the companionship of Latour and Jacinto is not one in which the Westerner seeks to impose himself on the alterity valued in the native. It is only at the level of unspoken, unspeakable emotion that union is possible, a union deferred to a futurity, or realized only through the Navajo, in the way they are said to take possession by dispossession."²²

But even more specifically, there is a moment which Cather reveals as a vague but hopeful answer to the convergent legendary realities during Latour's times. Latour, while speaking to the Vaillant, states:

"One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always." pg 50

After deconstructing the layers of legend through converging cultures and myths, Cather does not neglect the reflective side of Latour and uses his thoughts and words to show the flip side to the legendary melting pot: that among desired fixed legends there is still a hope for the healing of perceptions and false religious intentions through the concept and corrective aspects of love.

Conclusion:

What Cather's novel uncovers is that when multi-faceted traditions and legends come into contact with one another, there is, in a way, a kind of natural deconstruction of each others' legends through their exposure to each others' legendary belief systems. The depiction of Latour's desire to bring something he perceived as a good to the people in the New Mexico region, ended up, in this story, opening up the reality of the myth. And this deconstruction of legend is most clearly portrayed by Latour himself and his desire, in the end, to partake in a legendary story. By placing his desire of building a legend at the end of the book, Cather shows the great temptation that occurs in wanting to be a legend. In the end, Cather's look at the multi-faceted myths in a multi-cultural environment displays not only the notions of violence held within myths but could also

²² Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 178.

be seen as a ‘violent’ act because it both serves to conceal but likewise uncover the false motives within the narrative of legend. As Janice P. Stout notes, “...*Death Comes for the Archbishop* becomes, despite its seeming tranquility and its location above the dust of the arena, a very political novel.”²³

However, Cather also depicts how in the middle of the legendary breakdown of mimesis, sacrificing, scapegoating and memorialization, there is a reflective aspect which shows the other side to the violent cycle: a side in which a certain self-awareness occurs through the corrective vision founded by love. Even though Cather does not delve into the specifics of this concept of love or how it works, she none-the-less offers this alternative side to Latour and his experiences in order to offer the balanced perspective of violence mixed with human love.

Cather shows the ways in which a desire for peace by the bishops in Rome, and even in Latour himself, create havoc in other people’s lives, by introducing and assuming a legendary status and, in a way, by assuming a violent attitude towards their ‘peaceful’ intentions through taking hold of a power over others. At the same time, she portrays the ways in which the peaceful acts of the bishop are possible through self-reflection and a singular hope in love. Thus, Cather’s novel portrays the battle between identifying what could be seen as moments of ‘peace’ and acts of ‘violence’ through conflicting notions of legend and through moments of self-revelation. With this reflection in mind, Cather’s novel could be seen as she had hoped, “legendary” not only in its depiction of Latour but likewise in the uncovering of the legend itself. Her work is therefore truly fictional in that it maintains the ability to both conceal and expose the legendary function.

²³ Janis P. Stout, “Touching the Note and Passing On: Violence in Cather’s Picture of the West” in *Violence, the Arts and Willa Cather*, eds. Joseph R. Urgo and Merrill Maguire Skaggs (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 97.