CHAPTER VI

FULFILLMENT IN RELIGION
Death comes for the Archbishop, is Willa Cather's best known novel. It is a serene book and while writing it she experienced "the most unalloyed pleasure of her life,"¹ as she told Ida Tarbell. Edith Lewis has said that, "Willa Cather never got so much happiness from the writing of any book as from the Archbishop."² The reason for her serene mood while writing it was that she had "laid aside all the frustrations which had engendered the despair reflected in the books of her middle period."³ according to Leon Edel. It was a return to her early memories of the Southwest, which had served as background in "The Enchanted Bluff", "My Antonia", and "Tom Outland's story" in The Professor's House. In Death comes for the Archbishop the Southwest is the core of the novel. E. K. Brown has argued that she felt that "it was eminently a subject for a Catholic to realize"⁴ and had shied away from it in her earlier novels. When she joined the Episcopal church in 1922 it was not the result of a religious experience but "a hope for faith,"⁵ according to James Woodress who has compared her with T.S. Eliot, writing Ash Wednesday as both "responded to the wasteland of the twenties by finding support in Christianity."⁶ Death comes for the Archbishop is an evidence of Willa Cather's "gift for imaginative historical reconstruction,"⁷ and in it she dealt with the revival of the Catholic faith in the nineteenth century New Mexico. In her next novel Shadows on the Rock her subject was the endurance of the French culture on the rock of Quebec transplanted by self-exiled Frenchmen.
during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. David Daiches has said that Willa Cather's frustration with the present made her turn to the past in a search for the fulfilment of her ideals of "beauty, order and heroic action." In Death Comes for the Archbishop only the framework is provided by the mid-nineteenth century but Latour and Vaillant, the two French priests, made fragmentary acquaintance with a far older past when the Spanish Franciscans had first reached there and the later time when their successors twisted and corrupted the faith. "It is in the tale of this older past, picked up by the French priests in their wanderings, that Miss Cather's narrative art is most remarkable," according to E.K. Brown. Death Comes for the Archbishop is considered the best novel of Willa Cather and a unique one in American literature. Shroeter has pointed out that Willa Cather experimented with a new way of writing: "There is no other novel like it in American literature. The author throws out all the ordinary sources of appeal - plot and story, surprise, characterization in the usual sense of the term, social criticism and the play of ideas, wit, a striking diction or manner, a "new" subject. Instead of these, the author takes what may be the slightest resource at the writer's command - simply what might be called "scene", the power of evoking with words the feel of a place - and elevates this to the unifying principle of the book. In a sense this completes the technique of The Professor's House by expanding the "intrusion" and omitting the narrative frame altogether," Willa Cather had used the Sonata form in The Professor's House. In Death Comes for the Archbishop she was doing something in the way of a legend, as is evident from her Commonweal letter.
"I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of the dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose, something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition. In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance. The essence of such writing is not to hold the note, not to use an incident for all there is in it - but to touch and passon."

The life of St. Genevieve painted by the 19th Century painter Puvis de Chavannes in murals on the walls of the Pantheon in Paris is in two groups of four panels each depicting the French Saint at different stages in her life, conveying a strong feeling of order and tranquility. These are characterized by a simplicity of line and delicate harmony of color. Though the scenes are static, they are charged with a sense of quiet momentousness, and an impression of movement is created by the eye as it moves from panel to panel. Clinton Keeler has pointed out that just as Puvis de Chavannes went back "to the period of the Florentine Renaissance for the clarity of individual figures.... their flatness and their lack of accent, at a time when the impressionists were directing the point of view of art further inward--to the eye itself, the breaking up of light in the act of seeing, similarly Willa Cather turned to an earlier period--to historical subjects and a classical style at a time when Joyce
and others had led fiction within the mind. Puvis de Chavannes painted from memory rather than from nature and Willa Cather wrote about things that teased her memory. According to Patrick J. Sullivan Willa Cather’s "shift" in 'style' than "is part of a larger artistic need - to sustain a commitment to the "kingdom of art", to restore a sense of possibilities in her craft but not "hold the note" produced by Professor St. Peter's "situation". In *Shadows on the Rock* her method was musical "more like an old song, incomplete but uncorrupted, than like a legend.... I took the incomplete air and tried to give it what would correspond to a sympathetic musical setting; tried to develop it into a prose composition not too conclusive, not too definite; a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past, lacking in robustness and full of pious resignation." The experiment in style reduced the element of dramatic conflict and the choice of the historical past as material for her fiction led to an impression that she was an escapist. For example, Granville Hicks wrote:

"Miss Cather, we see, has simply projected her own desires into the past; her longing for heroism, her admiration for natural beauty, her desire - intensified by pre-occupation with doubt and despair - for the security of an unquestioned faith. Similarly in *Shadows on the Rock* she "created her ideal frontier and peopled it with figments of her imagination." He concluded that Willa Cather "abandoned her efforts and surrendered to the longing for the safe and the romantic past."
Randell argued in a similar vein:

"It is hard to escape the impression that her use of historical material self-indulgently escapist, and the world of the past becomes no more for her than just another kind of sanctuary. This is a serious charge, but one which I believe to be justified."

These critics ignored that these historical novels are about pioneering times older than the subject of her Nebraska novels and requiring greater courage and endurance.

Leon Edel has emphasized that Willa Cather could relive that past "in the history books, in anecdote, in memories other than her own, and then retell them... She could still and in deed better than ever - do what she had always done." The emphasis is not on the death of the Archbishop but on his pioneer qualities - courage, steadfastness, gentleness and worldly wisdom. Lionel Trilling has pointed out that the nineteenth century romanticism laid emphasis on the struggle rather than the reward. Willa Cather found in Catholicism a philosophy where the goal is more than the search. "The Catholicism to which she turns is a Catholicism of culture not of doctrine.... The Catholic tradition selects what it can make immediate and tangible in symbol, and Miss Cather turns to the way of life that "makes the most of things", to the old settled cultures. She attaches a mystical significance to the ritual of the ordered life," Religious ideal implies success for the pioneer priests because of the worth of their goal.
Edward A. Bloom and Lillian Bloom have emphasized:

"When she writes about prehistoric aborigines, seventeenth century Canadians, or nineteenth century priests, Mexicans, and Indians, she does not look for the surprising eddies of custom and event which distinguish particular areas but for the profundities of faith which unite all men of all time. Each frontier becomes a stronghold of private need, but it is a need which widely disparate men have experienced and satisfied." According to this view time and space are irrelevant to the pioneer impulse and Willa Cather merely extended her focus in her historical novels. Like her other novels of the frontier Death Comes for the Archbishop "allegorizes the individual's withdrawal from cold reality toward sanctified purpose." Willa Cather was inspired to write Death Comes for the Archbishop after reading William Howlett's The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Macheboeuf. She had also talked to Father Haltermann, a Belgian priest at Santa Cruz, who served as the original of Father Duchene in "Tom Outland's Story" in The Professor's House. The statue of Father Lamy at Santa Fe had also inspired her. Macheboeuf had been vicar to Archbishop Lamy of New Mexico. Father Lamy died earlier than Father Macheboeuf but in the novel she reversed the order of their deaths.

The title of the novel came from Holbein's Woodcut "Dance of Death" in which death as a skeleton comes for an archbishop. It is part of a series in which Holbein's gay skeleton summons a host of mortals to their rewards. The bishop allows himself to be led away.
with an air of tranquility and resignation. Besides, there are literary analogues. The Divine Comedy has thirty-three cantos and Death Comes for the Archbishop has nine books divided into thirty-three parts and a Prologue. The first seven parts deal with seven deadly sins and seven virtues. Book VIII is concerned with fulfilment in building of the Cathedral, and the last book takes the Archbishop to his just reward. The Prologue, not to be found in Howlett's book, provides a frame for the story and prepares Latour for his journey through life and temptation to final salvation. This journey may be compared with Christian's journey in The Pilgrim's Progress.

The Prologue is in 1841 and the book ends in 1889. The plot is concerned with the organization of the vast diocese after decades of neglect, the parishes scattered over hundreds of miles of mountains and deserts, by the French Priests, Latour and Vaillant. It is emphasized that the French priests are "the great organizers..... have a clear sense of proportion and rational adjustment. They are always trying to discover the logical relation of things. It is a passion with them." This praise of the French priests expresses Willa Cather's admiration of the French culture in particular and European civilization in general. It is prophesied in the Prologue that the Bishop in the New World will "direct the beginning of momentous things." The theme is the cheerful acceptance of physical hardships, commitment to an ideal, free from the desire for possession, whether human or worldly. Latour and Vaillant face resistance from nature,
Indian tribes and Mexicans but remain committed to art, to religion, to idealism, involving sacrifice of life of ease. Ultimately they succeed in conferring order. Since they are idealists even their worldliness is not of the grabbing kind. Randall has called Vaillant crafty when he extorts the mules as gift. He ignores that after all the mules helped the Christian mission. Some of the weaknesses of the priests only make them look more human. The emphasis is on renunciation, and being "an unconscious agent in the hands of providence." Order is necessary to Latour and the Cathedral which he builds is symbolic of the order conferred on the wilderness. In the course of the long quest there are moments of doubt, sense of inadequacy in the face of indifferent nature and nostalgia for the culture of Europe. Yet there are enduring symbols of spiritual reality like "The Cruciform Tree" and "Hidden Spring" which remind Latour of his mission and keep him dedicated. Ultimately Latour and Vaillant have a feeling of fulfillment having realized the dreams of their youth. Latour succeeds in linking the past and the present which Professor St. Peter in The Professor's House could not. There is a past on the frontier with roots in cultures older than the European and the Navajo Tribe treats the shiprock more sacred than the churches. The Rock Mesa is linked with the theme of the quest and is described as resembling vast Cathedrals. It is the hope of all suffering and tormented creatures, offering them safety and sanctuary. There is a reference to the Exodus - the Israelites took the rock as an idea of God, the only thing their conquerors could not take from them. Cather defines rock as the "utmost expression of human need; even mere feeling yearned for it; it was the highest comparison of
of loyalty in love and friendship. Christ and himself had used that comparison for the disciple (St. Peter) to whom He gave the keys of the church."26

Latour accommodates with the land and responds to its meaning. He helps the exiled Navajos regain their land. The land also responds to his dreams. This is symbolized by the Cathedral built out of the native yellow rock. The Southwest, according to D. Patrick J. Sullivan, becomes the eighth sacrament embodying the truth, "that the deeper necessity of man is not to lose himself but to find himself."27 The Cathedral is built for posterity and is a continuation of Latour and his purpose. At sunset the Cathedral flushed the colour of "the dried blood of Saints and martyrs preserved in Old Churches in Rome, which liquifies upon occasion."28 The Cathedral is also a symbol of the acceptance of the natural landscape of America by the cultured European immigrants who ultimately overcome their nostalgia for home and having conferred order on the natural landscape, feel in harmony with it, and give up the idea of returning back after retirement.

It was expected that he would return to France, after retirement and occupy a chair in his old college in Clermont. He had thought about it seriously when he was in Auvergne, last time, just before his retirement. But in the old world he found himself homesick for the New. In Mexico he always awake a young man:

*Beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, the charm of noble women, the graces of art, could not make up to him
for the loss of those light-hearted mornings of the desert, for that wind that made one a boy again.”

The Europe-American theme is thus resolved. Cather began by looking towards Europe for ideals and ended by recognizing the mingling of cultures.

Latour’s sense of loss at the thought that at the age of forty-seven, he would have been surrounded by little children at home, is replaced by a sense of restoration, “It was just this solitariness of love in which a priest’s life could be like his Master’s. It was not a solitude of atrophy, of negation, but of perpetual flowering.” Like Prof. St. Peter in his study, Latour finds repose in the hope of being buried in his Cathedral, “like a boat come back to harbour, lying under its own sea-wall.”

Professor St. Peter had pointed out in *The Professor’s House* that Art and Religion are one. The Cathedral in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a symbol of how the identity of an individual is subsumed in the medium of art, devoted to religion.

The Cathedral endures through time in order to continually re-sanctify the world. When Latour dies there is a suggestion of a beginning rather than an end and this sense of ongoingness is further emphasized through the metaphor of the journey. As McFarland puts it “The death that comes for the Archbishop is not a grim and grinning skeleton, as depicted in *The Holbein Woodcut* from which the novel takes its name, but a de diligence — a carriage.” Shadows
on the Rock (1931) also deals with the Catholic milieu and covers the
period between October 1697 and November 1698, evoking the feel
for secular and religious life on the rock of Quebec where nothing
changes and the transplanted French culture endures. There are
narratives of life refracted through chronicles and legends and
Willa Cather has expressed her reverence for tradition, especially
religious tradition.

The title is an echo of Plato's cave implying all human
life to be a shadow. Earlier in A Lost Lady Willa Cather had
expressed the idea through Old Captain Forrester watching the
shadows creeping on his sun-dial.

In her letter to Wilbur Cross Willa Cather compared her
art to music. However, Edward Wagenknecht has pointed out that
here, "and not in Death Comes for the Archbishop, is the real suggestion
of Puvis de Chavannes."33

Willa Cather had seen in the Louvre a diary of an apothecary
who served in Quebec under Count Frontenac, one of the great figures
of French Colonial history, and was inspired to write this novel
about his last days. He had been "a soldier who fought for no
gain but renown, merciful to the conquered, charitable to the poor,
haughty to the rich and overbearing."34 He represents the pioneer
virtues of the self-exiled French immigrants and suffers because
of his forthright nature. Louis XIV refuses him even the permission
to return to France to die.
His ecclesiastical opponent Bishop Laval shares his pioneer virtues. Auclair, the French Apothecary belongs to the next generation and like Judge Pommeroy in A Lost Lady has no wish to live any longer because the old order has gone with the Count.

The Count and others like him had found a sanctuary from the materialism and politics of France on the rock of Quebec and through the household of Auclair, the widowed apothecary and his adolescent daughter Cecile, who go on trying to live decently in Quebec, preserving the French culture, its warmth and hospitality, Willa Cather emphasizes affirmation, ideals, order and steadfastness which help in creating a climate within climate, through domestic rituals. The rock in Willa Cather's fiction has water, symbolic of life and vitality. For example the children in "The Enchanted Bluff" dream beside a river, Thse in The Song of the Lark bathes in a stream at Panther Canyon; Tom Outland in The Professor's House fords a river to reach the mesa; Latour in Death Comes for the Archbishop sees Indians at Acoma drawing water from deep wells and cisterns. Quebec in Shadows on the Rock is surrounded by St. Lawrence river. Pierre Charbon stands for the frontier virtues and like Count Frontenac stands for protection to Auclair and his daughter Cecile. When she marries him she feels safe, and her children are "the true Canadians of the future." This the process of blending of cultures is completed. This along with the emphasis on water as symbol of vitality belies Randall's interpretation.
that Willa Cather emphasized domestic happiness because she was convinced that heroism was not possible anymore and she was afraid of the modern environment. Whatever nostalgia is there is concerned with Euclide Auclair who is content because of the Count. When both depart, the next generation completes the process of blending. The emphasis on the comely life does not constitute a contempt for the low, as pointed out by Randall. It is not condescension when Cecile is sympathetic to the poor. She is being what she is. No one can divorce himself completely from his background. The author points out that women by instinct have devotion in them, only the opportunity is required. Given the opportunity, she could be a philanthropist but certainly not a nun.

Beginning with *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, a quiet hearth remained the ideal and the centre of happiness with Willa Cather. Home is linked with order. It is the same in *The Song of the Lark*; *One of Ours* - the French countryside home or the Wheeler household; Mr. Forrester’s home in *A Lost Lady*, the Professor’s old house in *The Professor’s House*; the hospitable Hemphawes in *My Mortal Enemy*; the garden of Latour in *Death comes for the Archbishop*, or Colbert’s house in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* where hospitality was very natural. Therefore, the emphasis on the hearth does not indicate a narrowing down of Cather’s interest. It is in fact, a fruition and a mellowing of a long story of quest. Commenting on Willa Cather’s emphasis on Salad dressing in the civilizing of a country, in her letter to Wilbur Cross, McFarland has said that it is “a valid metaphor of the sacramentalization of the act of
Thus providing an interrelationship between the material and the spiritual worlds. Also she paid greater attention to the domestic ritual than to the religious ritual which she mentions but does not describe much in her Catholic novels. She describes the carving of lamb, the preparation of salad oil and the making of soup.

Although Quebec is lashed by winds and billows of snow drive over it, the bell-ringing by Bishop Laval begins "an orderly procession of activities," and it has a Catholic milieu.

"There is no other place in the world where the people are so devoted to the Holy Family as here in our own Canada. It is something very special to us." The bell of the church rung by Bishop Laval has a meaning of spiritual security for Cecile, as if there must be powerful protection for Kebec in such steadfastness.

The Ursuline sisters do not feel any homesickness here, "for they were quite as near the realities of their lives in Quebec as in Dieppe or Tours. They were still in their accustomed place in the world of mind (which for each of us is the only world) and they had the same well-ordered universe about them; this all important earth, created, created by God for a great purpose," Like Aeneas they "had brought to Canada the Holy Family, the saints and martyrs, the glorious company of the Apostles, the heavenly host." The first three books emphasize the religious foundations on which the colony of Quebec has been built and there are narratives of important religious personages in the history of Quebec. Father Hector tells Auclair about the necessity of "that last Sacrifice, the giving of oneself altogether and finally to one's
Calling. The story of Jeanne Le Ber, the Recluse of Montreal, once the richest heiress, who took a vow and lived in seclusion all life in a cell behind the high altar of a nunery chapel causes a protest against the ascetic ideal, voiced by Pierre Charron who calls it a waste. It also implies a regret at the rejection of human ties involved in giving one's all to one's calling leading to an acute sense of isolation and loneliness.

Bishop Noel Chabanel, the missionary priest to the Hurons, suffered because in spite of being a great scholar of classical and European languages he could not learn the language of the Indians. Also he could not like them and their ways. Above all he suffered from a sense of the withdrawal of God. Ultimately he took a vow of perpetual stability and decided not to go back to France but live among the Hurons he hated. He perished in the great Iroquois raid of 1649, two years after his vow. Auclair felt the sacrifice by such missionaries, including Father Hector, was a waste. It was like the box of precious ointment which was acceptable to the Saviour, and he is like the disciples who thought it might have been better used in another way. This is similar to Pierre Charron's response to Jeanne Le Ber's fate but for Cecile and others like her the Recluse of Montreal is a source of inspiration and great joy. David Daiches has pointed out that this "religious anecdotalism" looked appropriate enough in Death comes for the Archbishop where two central characters are priests but in Shadows on the Rock it is overdone and is aesthetically inappropriate, although there is historical accuracy.
The emphasis in these anecdotes is on qualities like loyalty, steadfastness, compassion and faith symbolized by the enduring rock of Quebec across whose surface the shadows of succeeding generations play. Thus there is constancy and change. The individual lives are transitory and subject to growth, change and death and history moves on while the ideals remain unchanged and provide the bedrock on which the human community is built. Willa Cather turned to the historical past and Catholicism not out of weariness of the present and helplessness but because she had faith in the endurance of ideals which are timeless. Religion formed the world of permanent essences which are always the same, in contrast to the fleeting secular world subject to decay and death.

Her novel on Avignon, if completed, would have taken her even farther into the past, the past of the Avignon of the Popes.