

The Archetypal Hero In Death Comes For The Archbishop

by

Jeanny Ross Pontrelli

When Willa Cather traveled in France as a young woman, she looked upon the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Genevieve and expressed a desire to create "something a little like that in prose," something "in the style of legend."¹ Since she had been a student of classical literature in college,² it is not at all surprising that she would wish consciously and deliberately to write at least one novel in a classic/romance mode. Years afterward she realized this ambition in Death Comes For The Archbishop. To achieve her "style of legend," she borrows elements from both the epic and the romance. An examination of these elements invites a comparison between Father Latour with Aeneas of The Aeneid,³ and both Father Latour and Father Vaillant with knights of the romance. These juxtapositions reveal the two priests' most distinguishing qualities--the intellect of Latour and the loving heart of Vaillant--to be complementary. The union of these qualities in Latour is essential to the success of his ministry. In this union, a new archetypal hero rises from the ashes of ancient ones, a hero not only capable of achieving the goal for which he came to the Southwest of the New World but one who, though doubtful about his own capabilities until late in life, finally does truly realize that goal. Before heart and intellect unite in Latour, he works diligently to build his diocese altogether from an intellectual base, depending upon Vaillant to supply the heart. Indeed, from their first meeting Latour recognizes a warmth of spirit in Vaillant which he himself lacks. Because of this warmth, he longs to keep Vaillant near his side, but, unfortunately for Latour, their visits together come all too infrequently. Most of the time Latour must remain in Santa Fe to establish and run the Roman Catholic diocese alone. Thus he, like Aeneas, sacrifices his own personal search for fulfillment to the larger goal of founding an organized society. Also like Aeneas, he is the man of destiny, the leader of men, whose ambitious plans for the future of his people are surpassed only by his strong sense of duty and responsibility to fulfill that mission. Cather's description of Latour combines the important attributes of Aeneas and the knight:

His bowed head was not that of an ordinary man,--it was built for the seat of a fine intelligence. His brow was open, generous, reflective, his features handsome and somewhat severe. There was a singular elegance about the hands. . . 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. . .⁴

As this description connects Latour to both Aeneas and the knight in the reader's mind, so his adventures connect him with both epic and romance through a blend of allusions to The Aeneid and to the Perilous Chapel episodes of the Grail Quest.⁵ In the epic, the hero wanders for a long time, not knowing how to reach his destination. Next, he has a revelatory experience which compels him to renew his fervor. Then, after he endures hardships or wins wars,⁶ he achieves his goal either fully or partially.

When Latour leaves his home in France, he has no idea that a year will pass before he will arrive at his destination. He reaches Santa Fe only after much wandering, delayed by misadventures and confusion of direction. Once arrived, he must set out almost immediately on the three-thousand-mile trip to obtain the proper credentials to establish his authority as bishop. The account of this trip contains the first allusions to The Aeneid which reveal Latour's fine leadership qualities and founding abilities.

On his way from Santa Fe to Durango, Mexico, he loses his way in a vast desert of cone-shaped, red sand hills as monotonous to him, perhaps, as the wine-dark sea waves were to Aeneas when his ships were tossed about during the six years of his wanderings. Then out of nowhere "in that wavy ocean of sand" (p. 24) Latour sees, for the first time, his own "Italy," his own "Bishopric in miniature" (p. 32), "greener than anything . . . [he] had seen even in his own greenest corner of the world" (p. 24). The scene of the stream and the vivid greenness of the surrounding foliage resemble the description of the Italian landscape in The Aeneid when Aeneas, unaware of the identity of the land he is entering, floats up the Tiber River and gazes for the first time on the greenery that crowds its banks.⁷

That evening after ministering to the people of this green world, Latour finds the source of the stream, a spring bursting out of the "parched and thirsty sea of sand" (p. 31), and reflects that this spring is "older than history, like those well-heads in his own country where the Roman settlers had set up the image of a river goddess, and later the Christian priests had planted a cross" (p. 32). Immediately before he found the oasis, Latour had seen a juniper tree formed in the shape of a cross, the presence of which seemed prophetic of the outcome of his life's task. He would supplant paganism with Christianity.

But whereas Latour's wanderings end in hope for success in the future, his revelatory experience ends in an unaccountable feeling of horror (p. 139). In this incident, Latour and his guide, Jacinto, take refuge from a raging blizzard in a cave. Like Aeneas, who enters the underworld guided by the sybil and there feels great uneasiness, Latour enters the cave, guided by Jacinto, and is "struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place" (p. 127). He is troubled, particularly, by a deep rumbling far below them, and tells himself he is "listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth" (p. 131). It originates from a

"flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power" (p. 130). The sound was terrible to Latour (p. 130).

A review of Aeneas' trip to the underworld illuminates meaning in Latour's unpleasant cave experience. Although Aeneas feels uneasy when he first enters the outer section of the underworld, he gains self-confidence after the sybil leads him into its depths, across the river Acheron, and into Illysiun where he meets his father. From him Aeneas learns about the future of Rome. This knowledge renews his fervor for the task ahead. Latour, on the other hand, emerges from the cave with no insights about the destiny of Roman Catholicism in the New World. Ironically, this "relevatory experience" becomes a mockery, remembered only with horror.

While this adventure contains overtones of Aeneas' underworld experience, it also contains strains from the Perilous Chapel episode from the knightly romance. In some of these tales, a knight wanders through a wasteland until he finds a chapel, but in others he finds a chapel as a shelter from a violent storm. Sometimes he becomes terrified once inside because he hears a voice making "lamentation loud and dire beneath which the very building rocks"⁸ and senses he is in the presence of supernatural, and evil forces.⁹ The modern knight, Latour, takes refuge from a violent storm in a deep cave "like a Gothic Chapel" (p. 127) and listens fearfully to a persistent rumbling noise beneath the earth.

He remains uneasy throughout the night there and is eager to leave the next morning. Like the unfortunate knights of old who failed in their search for the Grail and who were frightened away by fearful sounds in chapel, Latour comes away from the cave empty-handed and with a sense of uneasiness. Latour resembles the knight of twelfth-century literature who adheres to a code of chivalry based upon a well-defined etiquette and moral behavior and Vaillant to the knight of thirteenth-century literature whose code is based on Christian love. Both Latour and Vaillant, like their knightly archetypes, search for the Grail, but they discover it in different ways. Because Vaillant possesses humility, the key to the Grail, he finds the Grail easily. But Latour, who lacks humility early in his ministry, searches for the Grail in vain until late in life when he finally discovers it through an apocalyptic experience. The cave adventure, which occurs before his apocalypse, reveals his hollow spiritual state.

If, as Jessie Weston asserts, the sources for the Grail romance lie in "a ritual which once claimed to be the accredited guardian of the deepest secrets of Life,"¹⁰ then Latour's physically terrifying and spiritually hollow experience may suggest that these secrets remain as mysterious and remote to him as the Grail had remained to most of the knights of legend. The modern knight finds no meaning to the mysteries in the chapel; the modern Aeneas receives no prophetic message from the underworld. This cave experience suggests that, in the future,

as he organizes a great diocese, he will lack spiritual strength and warmth in dealing directly with individuals of his parish. In fact, with time, Latour recognizes more and more a growing emptiness within himself, accompanied by a growing lack of assurance that his work will prosper.

Like the epic hero, Latour wandered for a long time and journeyed to the underworld. Now he experiences hardships and war. Nature deals him the hardships: these hardships he learns to enjoy. War results because of a conflict between the Navajos and the U. S. Government. These Indians live within the boundaries of Latour's diocese and, therefore, come under his spiritual jurisdiction. Eusabio, an influential Navajo among his people "with a face like a Roman general of Republican times" (p. 220), travels many miles to petition for Latour's intercession with the U. S. Government. But Latour refuses, saying that he, a Roman Catholic, would have only a negative effect on a Protestant government. Eusabio does not believe him and returns sadly to his people, who then fight for their homeland and lose it. The significance of Latour's lack of leadership is made clear by the legend of a rock important to the Navajos. In the legend, this "shiprock, a slender crag rising to a dizzy height, all alone out on a flat desert . . . bears the parents of the Navajo race" (p. 295) to their new homeland. The legend of this journey resembles the legend about the people whom Aeneas delivers to Italy. The theme of responsible leadership found in both these legends reflects Latour's total lack of this important quality with the Navajos. Symbolically, Latour's inaction represents his inability to convert the natives to Christianity, his fault being that he submits the Navajos' request for help to reason instead of to the heart. Much later, when he is old, he seems to have gained the heart that he lacked as a younger man. About the Navajos, he says, "God has been very good to let me live to see a happy issue to those old wrongs; I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (p. 297). Latour gains a sense of compassion through Vaillant, whose contribution to the creation of a new archetypal hero is vital to the achievement of the goal--the building of the diocese.

Vaillant's contribution is the heart, which balances Latour's intellect. The differences in the two priests' concepts of building the diocese is that while Latour's concern is to establish a religious institution, Vaillant's is to win individuals to God. As a result of the priests' divergent aims, the people venerate Latour, but they love Vaillant.

Vaillant, the modern model of the thirteenth-century Christian knight, whose patroness is the Virgin Mary and whose mission is the quest for souls, does not seem to measure up as a traditional knight in his physical attributes:

He was short, skinny, bow-legged from a life on horseback, and his countenance had little to recommend it but kindness and vivacity.

He looked old, though he was then about forty. His skin was hardened and seamed by exposure to weather in a bitter climate, his neck scrawny and wrinkled like an old man's. There was certainly nothing in his outer case to suggest the fierceness and the fortitude and fire of the man, yet even the thick-blooded Mexican half-breeds knew his quality at once. . . . --homely, real, persistent, with a driving power of a dozen men in his poorly-built body (pp. 37-38).

His physical demeanor belies his driving force which has its roots in an all-compelling love for his fellow man. One incident establishes not only his suitability as a knight but his resemblance to Galahad, the only knight in legend who searches for the Holy Grail, finds it, and fully restores the land to its former fertility.

Led by a Pima Indian through a wasteland of desert and sand, Vaillant is taken to a

place so wild that a man less accustomed to these things might have mistrusted and feared for his life. . . . [He] descended into a terrifying canyon of black rock, and there in the depth of a cave, [he found] a golden chalice, vestments and cruets, all the paraphernalia for celebrating mass (p. 207).

Although his cave experience reminds us of Latour's, one important difference emerges. While Latour comes away from his cave with nothing but a lingering sense of horror, Vaillant comes away with the Holy Grail, symbolized by the chalice and the vestments. The wasteland through which he passes to reach the Holy Grail represents the spiritually dry state of its people. Vaillant immediately perceives the significance of his responsibility in the Indian's entrusting of the Holy Grail to him. He says, "I was the first priest who had ever come to restore to God his own" (p. 207).

The dying Fisher-King of the Grail legend corresponds to its modern counterpart, the Roman Catholic Church, which, until Vaillant came, had grown sick and weak after the Spanish missionaries had been driven from the land. Vaillant himself sees his experience as a parable. He relates it to Latour:

"The Faith, in that wild frontier, is like a buried treasure: they guard it, but they do not know how to use it to their soul's salvation. A word, a prayer, a service, is all that is needed to set free those souls in

bondage. I desire to be the man who
restores these lost children to God"
(p. 207).

Vaillant interprets the meaning of the Grail in much the same way as Jessie Weston, who asserts that the Grail represents the "unseen Spiritual forces of Life." Arthur Edward Waite, in The Holy Grail, takes Weston's concept a step further when he says that the Grail is "the Grace of the Holy Spirit, leading to the knowledge of God, and the Life of God in the Soul, not by way of knowledge but by that of feeling--otherwise, the Way of Love."¹¹

Vaillant understands that his mission is one of love, although he acknowledges the need for Latour's intelligence in organizing that mission. When Latour tries to convince Vaillant to remain permanently with him in Santa Fe, Vaillant replies:

"But you do not need me so much as they do! . . . Any one. . . can serve you here. It is work that can be done by intelligence. But down there it is work for the heart, for a particular sympathy, and none of our new priests understand those poor natures as I do. I have become a Mexican! . . . I am their man" (p. 208).

Latour feels he has good cause to request Vaillant to remain with him permanently. The ostensible reason is practical: his work load is too great, but the most important one is emotional: he misses Vaillant's infectious warmth. Not until Latour is nearing retirement does he finally admit to other than a practical need for his friend:

Since Father Vaillant went away the Bishop's burdens had grown heavier and heavier . . . Father Latour needed his Vicar, who had so much sympathy with . . . [the Natives'] . . . shortcomings . . . And he missed Father Vaillant's companionship--why not admit it (p. 223)?

Vaillant is not aware of Latour's immense loneliness until he is ready to depart for Colorado; then he does something about it. The two priests ride together a short way out of town where they both look back at those beloved hills encircling Santa Fe. Here they pause, and Vaillant calls upon his "Gracious Patroness" (p. 255), the Spirit of Mary, the Mother of God, to remain and comfort Latour. "Auspice, Maria" (p. 255) he murmurs. They part, and when Latour returns "home to his solitude" (p. 255), . . . "he seemed to come back to reality, to the sense of a Presence awaiting him. . . that feeling of personal loneliness was gone, and a sense of loss was replaced by a sense of restoration" (p. 256). Then he reflects that "A life need not

be cold, or devoid of grace in the worldly sense, if it were filled by Her who was all the graces . . ." (P. 256). The Spirit of Mary remains to comfort him until he begins to intellectualize about Her importance in the lives of his people. Momentarily moved, he requires a deeper and more enduring comforter that will touch his heart.

He achieves that comfort--the Grail--from Vaillant some time later, during Vaillant's last visit to Santa Fe:

"Blanchet," said Latour . . . "you are a better man than I. You have been a great harvester of souls, without pride and without shame--and I am always a little cold--un pédant, as you used to say. If hereafter we have stars in our crowns, yours will be a constellation. Give me your blessing."

He knelt, and Father Vaillant, having blessed him, knelt and was blessed in turn. They embraced each other for the past--for the future (pp. 261-262).

The humility expressed in Latour's words and in his kneeling becomes the catalyst which boosts the metaphysical union between intellect and heart. Only through humility's door is Latour able at last to open himself to "the Grace of the Holy Spirit . . . the Way of Love"¹²--the Grail.

Latour will no longer need Vaillant's physical presence, as he once did, to fill a vague emptiness within himself. Now that he has found the Grail, he is never troubled again with the lonely, restless thoughts that once hounded him. He never again feels that his soul is a "barren field, his work . . . superficial, a house built upon the sand" (p. 211). In this new state, Latour can truly say about Vaillant after he dies: "I feel nearer to him than before. For many years Duty separated us, but death has brought us together" (p. 265).

Latour's ministry steadily grows prior to his spiritual awakening, but afterwards it flourishes--in the school taught by nuns brought over from France and in the training of young priests who poured into Santa Fe later to become part of Latour's legend.

Both the garden Latour cultivates and the cathedral he builds from native yellow stone symbolize his achievement. Out of his garden flows an abundance of fruit and vegetables famous for their superior quality and variety. His garden symbolizes the spiritual landscape of the Fisher-King which Latour finally restores to its former fertility after he attains the spiritual attributes of Galahad necessary to accomplish it. The cathedral symbolizes both a spiritual and functional achievement. First, the cathedral reminds him of his spiritual love for Vaillant.

In fact, it "had taken Father Vaillant's place in his life" (p. 271). Second, the cathedral seems to emit "a purpose so strong that it was like action" (p. 27). The purpose is to establish a Roman Catholic diocese which will bring meaning into the lives of the people. Ironically enough, this diocese originates from that very Rome which became the seat of government for the new nation Aeneas worked so hard to build, an accomplishment which brought meaning into the lives of his homeless people, too. Both the Aeneas of legend and the Aeneas of modern times possess the intellectual qualities and strong purpose necessary to achieve their goals where weaker men had failed. But although the legendary Aeneas succeeded, he lacked the spirit of love attained by the modern Aeneas. The metaphysical union between Latour's spiritual and intellectual attributes enables him to fulfill his mission in a way more complete than either he himself could have done without his spiritual awakening or than Vaillant could have done without Latour's intellectual abilities of administration and organization. Thus, together, the cathedral and the garden suggest a rich blending of Galahad's heart and Aeneas' intellect. A successful and enduring achievement results.

At one time Vaillant had wondered why God had chosen such a fine intelligence as Latour's to head a diocese in such a wild, untamed land. Then he thinks that "perhaps, after all, something would remain through the years to come: some ideal, or memory, or legend" (p. 254). Latour's garden and, even to a greater degree, his cathedral promise to fulfill Vaillant's wish. Today the cathedral stands solid and golden, and from it still flows a purpose, an ideal, a memory. To those who will stop and listen it whispers the legend of Latour.

Now the reader can look to another achievement--Willa Cather's. It goes beyond creating a work in "the style of legend;" it reaffirms the importance of the heart in the accomplishments of man.

Notes

¹Willa Cather, On Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 9.

²Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 29.

³The association with Aeneas has also been noted by John J. Murphy, "Willa Cather's Archbishop: A Western and Classical Perspective," Western American Literature, 12 (Summer, 1978), 141, 146-150.

⁴Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop (New York: Vintage Books), p. 19. All future references to this work appear in the text.

⁵The association with the Perilous Chapel has also been noted by Bernice Slote: Willa Cather, The Kingdom of Art, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln, 1966), p. 110; and by James M. Dinn, "A Novelist's Miracle: Structure and Myth in Death Comes for the Archbishop," Western American Literature, 7 (Spring, 1972), 42.

⁶When this step is present in the Perilous Chapel episodes of the Grail romance, the war has already devastated the land before the knight arrives.

⁷Virgil, The Aeneid, trans. Rolfe Humphries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 178.

⁸Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge: University Press, 1920), p. 165.

⁹Weston, p. 165

¹⁰Weston, p. 165

¹¹Arthur Edward Waite, The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in the Arthurian Literature (New York: University Books, 1961), p. 483.

¹²Waite, p. 483.

Bibliography

- Cather, Willa. On Writing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.
- . The Kingdom of Art. Bernice Slotz. Lincoln, Nebraska, 1966.
- Dinn, James J. "A Novelist's Miracle: Structure and Myth in Death Comes for the Archbishop." Western American Literature, 7 (Spring, 1972), 39-46.
- Humphries, Rolfe, trans. The Aeneid. By Virgil. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1951.
- Lewis, Edith. Willa Cather Living. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.
- Murphy, John J. "Willa Cather's Archbishop: A Western and Classical Perspective." Western American Literature, 12 (Spring, 1978), 141-150.
- Waite, Arthur Edward. The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in the Arthurian Literature. New York: University Books, 1961.
- Weston, Jessie L. From Ritual to Romance. Cambridge: University Press, 1920.