

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Death Comes for the Archbishop

by
Willa Cather

Book Information

Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop

Quiz Number: 10027

Random House, 1927

ISBN 0-679-72889-9; LCCN

297 Pages

Book Level: 7.9

Interest Level: UG

Set in the mid-nineteenth century, this is the story of a priest who sets out to win the Southwest for Catholicism.

Topics: History, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Religion, Christianity; U.S. States/Regions, New Mexico

Main Characters

Don Antonio Olivares a rich Mexican rancher who helps with the cathedral

Dona Isabella Olivares the wife of Don Antonio, a devout Catholic, who agrees to admit to being fifty-two

Eusabio a Navajo chief and Father Latour's friend

Father Gallegos the worldly priest at Albuquerque who pretends to have gout

Father Jean Marie Latour the Bishop assigned to the new diocese in the American Southwest; the protagonist of the book

Father Jesus de Baca the priest in Isleta who keeps parrots

Father Joseph Vaillant a close friend of Father Latour's from the Seminary; he travels with Father Latour

Father Lucero a friend of Father Martinez who is greedy for money

Father Martinez the priest at Taos who is not celibate

Friar Baltazar the priest at Acoma sometime in the 1700s

Jacinto Father Latour's guide

Kit Carson a scout who becomes a friend to Father Latour

Magdalena the woman who saves Fathers Latour and Vaillant from her murderous husband

Manuel Lujon a rich Mexican who gives Father Vaillant the two white mules

Sada a Mexican slave of Americans who are hostile to her church

Trinidad Lucero supposedly Father Lucero's nephew

Vocabulary

Angelus a devotion commemorating the Incarnation, said at morning, noon, and evening, at the sound of a bell called the Angelus bell

Augean stable the stable of Augeas, king of Elis which contained an enormous number of oxen, and was uncleared for many years, but was cleaned by Hercules in a day when he diverted the Alpheus and Peneus rivers through it

ilex the holm oak

pyx the little vessel, usually watch-shaped, in which the Eucharist is carried to the sick

scurf anything like flakes or scales adhering to a surface

Synopsis

This book is episodic and does not rise to the traditional climax which resolves a conflict. As it opens, we meet Father Jean Marie Latour, the new bishop of the diocese of New Mexico. He has traveled far, with difficulty, to Santa Fe, only to be rejected by the priests there because the papers he needs were lost en route. He is lost on the way to Durango to get the papers, and happens on the village of Hidden Water, where the villagers welcome him and he performs weddings and baptisms. This is typical of what he does throughout the whole book.

With Father Latour is his friend from the Seminary, Father Joseph Vaillant. Father Vaillant is filled with missionary zeal. He acquires two wonderful white mules for himself and Father Latour. On their way to visit Mora, both priests stop at a wretched house. The woman of the house, Magdalena, signals to them that they are in danger, so they leave, with some difficulty. The next day they discover Magdalena has followed them to escape from her

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husband, who has murdered many travelers. She is taken in by Kit Carson, and later moves to Santa Fe to work in the school the priests open.

Father Latour travels through the local pueblos, and at Acoma marvels at the large church and hears a story about a prideful priest and his downfall.

He travels to Taos to meet with the local priest, Father Martinez. Father Martinez has fallen from celibacy. Father Latour appoints a new priest in his place, and even excommunicates Father Martinez. Father Martinez breaks away from the church and sets up his own church. Most of his parishioners follow him. However, he is old and the situation is resolved when he dies.

We next meet Don Antonio Olivares and his wife, Dona Isabella. They are rich, and have pledged money to help build a cathedral in Santa Fe. Don Antonio dies, and his brothers contest the will, claiming Dona Isabella is too young to have borne the daughter she claims to be his. Fathers Latour and Vaillant with difficulty convince her to admit to being fifty-two, and she inherits the money.

Father Latour sends Father Vaillant to Colorado to work in the gold rush towns. After this, although they occasionally see each other, they never again work together.

At the end, Latour, now an Archbishop, retires near Santa Fe and when he feels death approach, moves back to his old study to die, which he does, quietly and contentedly.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What augmented Father Latour's belief that "...neither the white men nor the Mexicans in Santa Fe understood anything about Indian beliefs or the workings of the Indian mind."

Jacinto and Father Latour took shelter from a snowstorm in a cave that Jacinto's people used for ceremonies. Before he would build a fire, Jacinto carefully filled a hole in the back of the cave with rocks, wedges of wood, and then mud. When Father Latour woke in the night, Jacinto had his ear to the patch as if listening to something.

Literary Analysis

What recurring flashback is important to the story?

As Father Vaillant is recovering from malarial fever in Santa Fe, and before he goes out to "hunt for lost Catholics," he describes how Father Latour encouraged him when his purpose broke as he and Latour were waiting for the "diligence" to Paris. We never learn how Father Latour saved him until the end of the book when Latour is dying and remembering his own life.

Inferential Comprehension

What does the part of the book dealing with Sada, the Mexican slave, tell us about Father Latour?

He has periods of doubt and needs someone with a more physical connection to the church to revive his faith. In the past this has probably been Father Vaillant, but in this case it is Sada. Sada helps Father Latour define his sense of purpose.

Constructing Meaning

Why does Vaillant compare lost Catholics to seeds?

He says they are full of germination but with no moisture. Contact with the church is like the moisture they need to awaken their faith and reconnect them with the church.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Father Latour decides to

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visit the Indian missions west of Santa Fe. He travels to Isleta, Laguna, and Acoma. In other parts of the book, he travels to Albuquerque, Taos, Durango, and Mora. Have the students make a map with these cities and missions. They could, in addition, trace Latour's path on his visit to the missions or trace any of his other travels.

Understanding the Author's Craft Have the students retell some portion of the book in the first person. How would Dona Isabella's story change if she were telling it? How about Father Martinez's story? Any of the stories would change even if they were told in the first person by Father Latour himself or Father Vaillant.

Comparing and Contrasting Have the students think about how the characters in the book change, if at all. Father Latour doesn't seem to; Father Vaillant begins the book begging not to be sent anywhere else, but eventually is heartened by his missions. Have the students compare the characters to each other. The book describes many priests. How are they similar? How do they differ?

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning There are many similes in this book. Have the students take note of them as they read the book, and describe what they add to the book. For example, the author says the town of Santa Fe seems to flow from the church "like a stream from a spring." What does this mean?