
Legendary Affect: Transcultural Intimacies in The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop

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Abstract

How does it feel to make history? Taking up two of Willa Cather's best-known experiments in narrative form—the turquoise-set-in-dull-silver collage of *The Professor's House* (1925) and the unapologetically episodic *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—this paper examines intimacies produced by the cultural border zones of Cather's imagined Southwest. It builds on Melissa Homestead's carefully argued case that Cather and Edith Lewis's intimate partnership and editorial collaboration both inspired and produced these two novels, which have long been recognized as overt celebrations of male friendship and subtle evocations of homoeroticism. Still, Cather's investment in what Ben Highmore calls "the sticky entanglement of substances and feelings" has been obscured at times by her foregrounding of aesthetics in encounters between and among French, Spanish, American, Mexican, and indigenous traditions. Both novels are preoccupied by sacred objects, albeit in very different ways, as is apparent in Tom's worship of ancient pottery on the Blue Mesa and the Catholic bishop Jean Latour's devotion to building a French cathedral in a Spanish town; Cather attends more often to the colors of sunsets, mountains, stone, and sand than to finer shades of emotion. Yet throughout these novels, her fascination with the aesthetics of day-to-day experience enables her to represent, with extraordinary precision, some of the elusive and unpredictable affective dimensions of transcultural experience, such as grief, surprise, and joy, sometimes shared and sometimes not. Critics have long recognized the centrality of place in Cather's fiction, and many have argued convincingly that she was an adept chronicler (and sometime critic) of the consequences of migration and assimilation. We find, anchored in the contested processes of transcultural transmission, both over-arching and fleeting moments of intimacy, manifested in landscapes, structures and objects. Cather reveals intricate networks of links between perception, senses, and emotion, all while writing in the unaccented style of transnational legend, which, by definition, promises not historical accuracy but rather affective power.

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