

Biblical Allusions to the Passion of Christ in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case"

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In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour reflects on the Passion of Christ as he suffers from thirst: "Of all our Lord's physical sufferings, only one, 'I thirst,' rose to His lips. Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord. The Passion of Jesus became for him the only reality; the need of his own body was but a part of that conception" (19). In view of this, could there perhaps be echoes of the Passion of Christ in Cather's other works such as her short story "Paul's Case"? After being suspended from school, Paul appears "before the faculty of the Pittsburgh High School to account for his various misdemeanours" (102). Interestingly, the narrator describes this meeting as an "inquisition."

During the meeting, Paul's "teachers were asked to state their respective charges against him, which they did with such a rancor and aggrievedness as evinced that this was not a usual case" (102). The narrator mentions the following charges: "Disorder and impertinence were among the offenses named, yet each of his instructors felt that it was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble" (102). His teachers "fell upon him without mercy, his English teacher leading the pack" (103). Afterwards, some of the teachers "remembered having seen a miserable street cat set at bay by a ring of tormentors" (104). When Paul visits a theater in

New York City, the narrator underscores the color purple: “He felt now that his surroundings explained him. Nobody questioned the *purple*; he had only to wear it *passively*. He had only to glance down at his attire to reassure himself that here it would be impossible for anyone to humiliate him” (my emphasis, 117).

Paul’s “inquisition” and the reference to the color purple may recall the trial and Passion of Christ. Paul is charged with causing disorder; Jesus is accused of civil unrest during the Sanhedrin trial, which can be viewed more as an inquisition than a trial. Paul’s teachers “felt that it was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble” (102); false witnesses give conflicting testimony against Jesus. Perplexed, the Roman governor of Judea Pontius Pilate does not understand the real cause of the accusation against Jesus as he asks, “what evil had he done?” (Mark 15.14). Without mercy the instructors fall upon Paul; Jesus suffers verbal and physical abuse at the hands of Roman tormentors as they, without mercy, mock and humiliate him by putting a crown of thorns on his head and dressing him in purple robe: “And they clothed him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head” (Mark 15. 17-18).

Significantly, above Paul’s bed there is a “framed motto, ‘Feed my Lambs,’ which had been worked in red worsted by his mother” (107). This biblical verse comes from the last chapter of the Gospel of John, which details a post-crucifixion encounter with Peter. Jesus restores Peter to fellowship despite the fact that he had denied him three times soon after Jesus’ arrest. When Jesus says to Peter “Feed my lambs” (John 21. 15), he is encouraging him to take care of the believers with deep love and affection for one another. Furthermore, Jesus gives the aforementioned command to Peter (“Feed my lambs”) as he foretells the manner of the disciple’s death, namely crucifixion: “when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee wither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by

what death he should glorify God” (John 21. 18-19). Sadly, Paul’s Pittsburg Presbyterianism does not offer him such comfort. As David A. Carpenter writes, “on the bedroom wall above his bed, Cather placed two pictures, one of George Washington and the other of John Calvin; by so doing she seems to suggest that the uncreative superficial and life-destroying values perpetuated in the homes of Pittsburgh are essentially American values, though stripped of any Calvinistic notion of divine grace in a society where business has become a religion” (608). By quoting “Feed my lambs,” Cather highlights the virtues of love and compassion.

Works Cited

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