Introduction

Willa Cather continuously pursued the ideal America in her fiction, and her ninth novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), is no exception. Therefore, regardless of its later publication year, it can be analyzed in the context of the author’s earlier works about women pioneers coming to America, such as O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), and My Ántonia (1918). In Death Comes for the Archbishop, the main characters are two French priests, regarded by Linda De Roche as “two pioneer priests” (155), successors to the pioneers in Cather’s earlier novels. Cather expresses her consistent interest in America by creating characters with foreign nationalities. Sarah Mahurin Mutter sees the diversity of nationalities in Death Comes for the Archbishop, and poses the following question about this novel: “Does it prefigure contemporary understandings of the American ‘melting pot’?” (90). In fact, the novel has Native Americans, Mexicans, Americans, and Europeans (French and Italian) as its characters, and they try to figure out a way to coexist. As these critics point out, Death Comes for the Archbishop is a novel that explores America’s frontier spirit and its diversity of ethnic groups.

The coexistence described in Death Comes for the Archbishop becomes especially complicated in the context of religion. The main story begins with the arrival of a pious French Catholic bishop named Jean Marie Latour in New Mexico as its vicar apostolic in 1851. New Mexico was at that time still a parish of pagans. As the story progresses, Bishop Latour has contact with several believers of religions different from his Catholicism, and though confused by that difference, he always
tries to understand and respect them. This natural capacity of Latour is significant because encountering others and understanding them are indispensable experiences for living in a multi-cultural America.

However, Latour’s empathy fades in the context of his sexuality. While he can successfully maintain an empathetic attitude toward the Mexicans’ and Native Americans’ faith in their indigenous religions, he becomes unsteady in the face of his sexuality. Latour has a romantic interest in Father Vaillant, a younger priest who accompanied him to New Mexico. When he is concerned about Vaillant, he unintentionally complains about the lives of indigenous people. Later in this paper, Latour’s vacillation will be examined in detail to reveal the conflict between his rational character as a priest and his inner sexual desire.

This paper also examines a point in common between Latour’s Catholicism and indigenous people’s religion, and between Latour and Vaillant. Though the French bishop’s nationality and religious customs differ from those of the inhabitants of New Mexico, they share a common faith in the Holy Mother. This prevents conflicts between them. A shared faith in the Holy Mother is also key to the relationship between the two priests. The sacred connection to the Holy Mother assures Latour that there is a tie with Vaillant unrestricted by the problem of sexuality, for the Virgin Mary exists aloof from the worldly idea of homo- or hetero- sexuality. This reassures and saves Latour during his long and lonely priesthood.

Facing the otherness and lacking stability in the context of sexuality are not the matters only for Latour. Cather also found the difference between her and the immigrants in Nebraska and considered her place as a female writer as well. This paper explores how Latour’s accepting the other, complications caused by his sexuality, and salvation through his faith, fit together in Cather’s idea of an idealized America.

**Latour’s Understanding of the Other: Catholicism and Indigenous Religions**

The novel opens with a decision made by “three Cardinals and a
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missionary Bishop from America” (3) in Rome to send a bishop to New Mexico “—a part of North America recently annexed to the United States” (4). It was decided in the year of 1841, when “[t]his new territory was vague to all of them, even to the missionary Bishop” (4). This meant that the new bishop’s priesthood would be no doubt a tough one. In the prologue, the new bishop, Jean Marie Latour, is described as “a young man, of strong constitution, full of zeal, and above all, intelligent” (7). Being “young” equals having the flexibility of mind to accept different values, and with such flexibility and “intelligence,” he understands the indigenous people whom he encounters as the story progresses. At the end of the conversation in prologue, even the bishop from America, the very person who recommends Latour as the vicar apostolic, expresses his hesitation in sending this young bishop. Enlightening the inhabitants of New Mexico was considered to be quite a difficult task even for the most excellent priest.

As expected Latour encounters plenty of problems during his priesthood in the new position, but fortunately he possesses one of the most important characteristics required for a priest of a diocese of pagans: the capacity to understand and accept others. Jacinto, “a young Indian from the Pecos pueblo” (65) who sometimes guides Latour on his travels, portrays this characteristic as follows:

In [Jacinto’s] experience, white people, when they addressed Indians, always put on a false face. There were many kinds of false faces; Father Vaillant’s, for example, was kindly but too vehement. The Bishop put on none at all. He stood straight and turned to the Governor of Laguna, and his face underwent no change. Jacinto thought this remarkable. (74-75)

Jacinto’s evaluation shows that Latour is a distinctive person who does not put on a “false face.” Latour is unique because he does not have biases when communicating with others.

Furthermore, Latour does not use a “false face” when he tries to understand the religions of indigenous people either. In New Mexico, besides the Catholics longing for the arrival of a priest, there are
Mexicans and Native Americans who have strong faiths in their own religions. For Latour as a Christian missionary, the process to understand their religions is not easy. Its difficulty is described in the episode in a kiva, the cave that Native Americans use to perform their religious rites. To avoid a storm, Latour and Jacinto take refuge in the kiva. The description of this episode, from the moment when Latour entered the kiva, repeats negative words: “Great as was his need of shelter, the Bishop, on his way down the ladder, was struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place. The air in the cave was glacial, penetrated to the very bones, and he detected at once a fetid odour, not very strong but highly disagreeable” (italics mine) (101). Even this short description has five negative expressions, emphasizing Latour’s sense of uneasiness at the peculiar atmosphere inside the kiva. Thus, in his first direct experience of Native Americans’ religious customs, the bishop honestly expresses his resistance to accepting their faith.

Through such experiences, however, Latour’s distaste changes into a sincere admiration for the Native Americans’ sense of value on nature. The change in Latour’s thought on Native Americans is most remarkable in the episode of his solo trip with Eusabio, the Navajo chief. Latour perceives that a series of this Navajo’s actions to “obliterate every trace of their temporary occupation” (185) from their natural shelters has been done the same as “exactly Jacinto’s procedure” (185), but the bishop’s reaction is the opposite of what he had felt at the kiva. He does not feel a dislike for the Native American’s habit; rather, he cites how white men approach nature and contrasts these two different ways:

Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man’s way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian’s way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through water, or birds through the air. It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. (185)
Here Latour places a higher value on the Native American’s respect for nature and their way to keep the place as it was. In the over thirty years from his arrival in New Mexico in 1851 to his death at Santa Fé in 1888, Latour was perplexed by the unique religious ideas of indigenous peoples. With his inherent intelligence, however, he finally comes to comprehend and accept those others and especially their religions. As Deborah Lindsay Williams argues the unnecessity of contrasting Catholicism with indigenous religions, Latour notices the impossibility to deny these believers’ religious faith (86).³

Latour’s Vacillation in the Context of Sexuality

As the previous part of this paper shows, in the context of religion, Bishop Latour is described as a person who can understand and accept Mexicans and Native Americans, “the other” for Latour himself. Besides that, he is an excellent priest whose piety has received a certain appreciation. However, there is a scene in which his sincerity wavers with his concern for Vaillant, who falls in sickness in a remote village in the Pecos mountains. As soon as he receives the news, Latour departs for the mountains, but his way is obstructed by bad weather. The bishop betrays his impatience as follows: “At this moment Father Joseph [Vaillant] was lying dangerously ill in the dirt and discomfort of an Indian village in winter. Why, the Bishop was asking himself, had he ever brought his friend to this life of hardship and danger?” (95) Here Latour uses some insulting words such as “dirt” or “discomfort” toward the Native Americans’ habitat, in contrast with his previous courteous attitude toward indigenous people. In addition, in his irritation at the weather that has delayed his travel, Latour rather shows his internalized view of the “white man” to control nature.⁴

Furthermore, Latour’s concern for Vaillant in this episode is excessive as a reaction to the illness of just one among numerous friends. Rather, the bishop regards Vaillant as his one and only partner, and that makes it possible to read the intimation of Bishop Latour’s homosexual relationship with Vaillant. In the discussion of the roles of religion and
sexuality in the novel, John P. Anders insists that there is “the contribution homosexuality makes to [the work’s] spiritual mood” (244-45). The scene of their first contact at the divinity school was already suggestive. On the opening day of a new term of school, young Jean Marie Latour was “looking with curiosity at the new students” (178), and his eyes were fixed on the one who seemed particularly interesting to him. The boy was Vaillant, and the new student also “seemed to feel [Latour’s] glance, and came up at once, as if he had been called” (178). This exchange of looks is the starting point of their relationship, which later deepens. Against Latour’s usual rational characteristic, the scene is recalled abruptly, not chronologically, in the novel.

It is not certain, however, whether Latour receives enough response from Vaillant to his hidden sentiments under his gaze, for though the novel features the two bishops, it contains only a limited number of scenes in which the two characters appear together. Besides, Latour is not willing to expose his thoughts to Vaillant. Even when Latour summons Vaillant, he always has a rational purpose, such as to give medical treatments to Vaillant, or to finally disclose his longtime plan to build his cathedral in Santa Fé. In other words, without such understandable reasons, Latour cannot require Vaillant to stay near him.

Even these few opportunities for the two are interrupted such as when Latour receives a letter asking him to send a priest to Colorado, where a great number of people come to strike a goldmine without any guidance from the Church. When the bishop decides to send Vaillant, he explains why he had asked him to come to Santa Fé and stay near him: “I sent for you because I felt the need of your companionship. I used my authority as a Bishop to gratify my personal wish. That was selfish, if you will, but surely natural enough” (201-02). Hearing Latour’s confession of his “personal wish,” perhaps for the first time Vaillant thinks it may be necessary to reconsider his own passionate attitude only for his priesthood and “his blindness to everything else” (202). As Vaillant tries to imagine the “[hardness] for Father Latour to let him go [and] the loneliness of his position” (202), both of their feelings finally seem to be equivalent and correctly delivered to each other.

It is ironic, however, that Vaillant leaves for Colorado the next
morning and both Latour and Vaillant know that this will be their final farewell. Here Cather develops her plot in accordance with her theory of “the paradox of success,” therefore, Latour’s “personal wish” is not fulfilled in the story. Latour, who had to abandon his wish to spend time with Vaillant, and instead sends him far away, finally needs the spiritual help of the Holy Mother.

**Latour’s Salvation: Faith in the Holy Mother and the Burial in the Cathedral**

Latour’s affection for Vaillant could have threatened his position as a priest, but he finds salvation. Coming back from a send-off for Vaillant to Colorado, the bishop thinks alone in his study of the Holy Mother. He explains how his “sense of loss [of Vaillant]” turns into “a sense of restoration [of his piety]” (204) as follows:

> 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. 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; Virgin-daughter, Virgin mother, girl of the people and Queen of Heaven: le rêve suprême de la chair [the supreme dream of the flesh]. (204)

Latour uses every expression to symbolize women in his praise for the Holy Mother. This is possible because of her “virginity,” for the Virgin Mary can be daughter and girl, as well as mother and wife of the King. The bishop also ends his praise by referring to the beauty of “the flesh” and rouses somewhat erotic images in the reader’s mind. In this reflection, Latour idealized his relationship with Vaillant through Mary’s virginity and emphasizes their Platonic love.

Latour and Vaillant’s faith in the Holy Mother is significant, for the faith is the very point that attracts these two bishops. In their divinity school days, Jean Marie Latour and Joseph Vaillant were students
from quite different backgrounds: “The Latours were an old family of scholars and professional men, while the Vaillants were people of a much humbler station in the provincial world” (178). Joseph is the son of “a baker, the best in Riom” (178). Their features are also different. While Latour has a handsome face which “in a thousand, one knew at a glance” (16), Vaillant is a man whom “the Lord had made few uglier men” than he (31). They seem to be too different to get along; however, they end up going to New Mexico together and preaching to the natives there. It is because they have their devotion in common. Latour’s excellency as a bishop has already been discussed in the conversation among the four authoritative priests in the prologue, and Latour in turn “always realized that Joseph excelled him in fervor of his faith” (179). Therefore, the strength of their faith leads these two quite different priests to be lifelong partners.

The faith in the Holy Mother is also effective in the establishment of favorable relations between Latour and the natives. For example, a young Mexican girl named Josepha, the first native whom Latour meets, greets him with “Ave María Purísima, Señor,” the words to celebrate the Virgin Mary, to show her faith. The girl invites him to take a rest in her family’s house, where he finds some wooden holy figures of the saints that are “much more to his taste” (23). Those figures are localized, such as “brightly painted” or dressed like Mexicans (23). As the narrative describes that “[t]he wooden figures of the saints, found in even the poorest Mexican houses, always interests him” (23), the bishop does not despise these figures. Thus, Latour’s first meeting with the natives becomes an amicable experience because they have a faith in the Virgin Mary in common.

Like the aforementioned instance, the importance of a shared faith is especially apparent in some episodes of female characters. When Latour comes back to Santa Fé, he is welcomed with “amity instead of enmity” (27) because Mexican women trust Father Vaillant and his strong faith in the Holy Mother. In the local culture of New Mexico, women are considered as daughters of the Virgin Mary and they should be treated and valued as such. As if to prove this, characters who treat women badly are removed from the story. Buck Scales,
the American husband of a Mexican named Magdalena, who abuses his wife, is hanged for murder. Friar Baltazar, who forced Native American women to the harsh labor of carrying water every evening to his garden on the rock, is kicked down from the rock-edge by some selected Ácoma people. The faith in the Holy Mother provides Latour common ground with Vaillant, as well as with the Mexicans and Native Americans, letting Latour understand their different culture and customs.

Latour eventually becomes Archbishop and has a blissful moment after his death when his corpse is carried into his cathedral built in the “Midi Romanesque” style (195). Latour’s dream cathedral has finally been built by a French architect just as he wished. For Latour, the cathedral had not only fulfilled his dream but also come to substitute his dear friend: “the Cathedral … had taken Father Vaillant’s place in his life after that remarkable man went away” (215). Death Comes for the Archbishop closes thus: “and the next morning the old Archbishop lay before the high altar in the church he had built” (237). Here Latour, laying in the cathedral, finally achieves “unification” with his “remarkable” friend Vaillant, with the Holy Mother witnessing the moment and giving him his salvation.

Conclusion

In Death Comes for the Archbishop, Latour’s sexuality threatens his spirituality, but finally the two blend peacefully in faith in the Holy Mother. If Latour’s empathetic attitude, which allows him to understand “the other” in both the contexts of religion and sexuality, is regarded as an “American” feature, it can be concluded as a reflection of what the author wished for the society and people of her country, America.

Furthermore, if Cather idealized Bishop Latour as a character who does not use a “false face” when communicating with people, she must have wished to spend her life as a writer without wearing the “mask” of male authors. Cather made a famous remark that “the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (Not Under Forty, “Prefatory
Note”). She gradually distanced herself from this broken world and retreated into her fiction. Latour’s cathedral is created as a kind of “utopia,” protected from the complexity of otherness and complications caused by the sexuality. By letting her main protagonist be buried in the cathedral, the author tried to seek salvation for both Jean Marie Latour and Cather herself.

Notes

1 Besides Linda De Roche’s book, Patrick K. Dooley’s “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop” also points out the connection between Death Comes for the Archbishop and Cather’s earlier novels.

2 In “Raising Eden in Death Comes for the Archbishop,” Mutter calls the place Bishop Latour has made up “Eden,” where Native Americans, Mexicans, and Europeans (such as French priests) live together in harmony (90).

3 According to Deborah Lindsay Williams’ “Losing Nothing, Comprehending Everything: Learning to Read Both the Old World and the New in Death Comes for the Archbishop,” the bishop has tried to find not contrast but connection between Catholicism and indigenous religions.

4 This episode is still in a midway point between his initial distaste and eventual acceptance of Native Americans and their religious faith. Here, Latour is still inclined to the white man’s way to control nature. After that, however, as the scene previously quoted in this paper shows his change, Latour himself reflects his attitude toward nature in comparison with the Native American’s way.

5 In this scene, Latour decides to “take this new boy [Vaillant] under his protection” quite suddenly (179), and that seems to be unlike his usual reflective manner. The impulsiveness of this decision seems to show that Latour wants the relationship with Vaillant by instinct.

6 Death Comes for the Archbishop consists of nine books, but the scenes in which the two priests appear together are very limited: Christmas at Santa Fé (1-3), The bell of Angelus (1-4), The rescue of a Mexican lady named Magdalena from her violent American husband (2-2), The trial of Mrs. Olivares for her assuming of false age (6-2), The Period for recuperation of Vaillant from malaria (7-1), and Latour’s confession of his plan to build a Cathedral and Vaillant’s departure for Colorado (8). Book 9 is set after
Vaillant’s death.

7 After the Western frontier was closed in 1890, Colorado was regarded as the new “frontier” in America. Thinking of this historical background, in the plot of Vaillant’s departure for Colorado, a feature of “pioneer stories” can be found in Death Comes for the Archbishop.

8 The phrase of “the paradox of success” is from the title of the booklet written by Leon Edel, the autobiographer of Willa Cather. He points out that the more successes Cather achieved as a writer, the more she suffered from these successes.

Works Cited

Anders, John P. “‘Something Soft and Wild and Free’: Willa Cather’s Sexual Aesthetics.” Thacker and Peterman, pp.244-63.


