Beyond Gender: Catheresque Queer Harmony and Possibility

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Abstract This article discusses the meaning of queer harmony and possibility that can be found in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* published in 1927. In modern times, the term "queer" is used to describe all possibilities of various identities, dispositions, cultures, religions, places, classes, characteristics, and so on. Leaning on its elastic interpretation, this study aims to highlight the value of Cather's use of the word "queer" in relation to human beings and places by constructing a stage for her ideals of catholicity, reconciliation, healing, harmony, understanding, and acceptance. In the process of it, *Archbishop* shows Cather's primary ecstasy transforming eroticism beyond gender into spiritual freedom and value, and guarantees a model of the queer world for her other novels. In the novel, Cather's gender crossing is the energy source for her creativity, progressive spirit, and a part of her power to inspire herself and her works to be valued. For these reasons, this study explores the possibility of the sexual, racial, local, social, sensual, emotional, and ethical queer suggested by Cather within the boundary of its semantic diversity and presents some of the queer models of generosity, acceptance, and harmony that recognize the possibility of looking at existence differently.
Keywords queer; same-sex relationship; healing; reconciliation; Willa Cather; *Death Comes for the Archbishop*
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Introduction

The term "queer" began attracting increased attention in the late 1980s, and

the corresponding debate arguably settled the meaning of a previously unclear word, widely used to denote homosexuality, the deviant, the secretive, and so on. It was used prior to World War II in relation to homosexuals, who, at the time, were typically considered "ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible" (Rich 13). In the late twentieth century, however, queer theorist Annamarie Jagose described it as "a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications" (1), which supported a momentum that established the framing of the idea of queer. Jagose's concept of it is symptomatic of important shifts in identity, politics, sexuality, and the academy. Due to this, the modern definition of queer is multifaceted, and it has naturally evolved to indicate those who are alienated or marginalized.

Willa Cather (1873–1947), sometimes classified as an LGBTQ writer, characteristically used her own queer elements as "the energy source for her creativity" (Acocella 55). By saying that Cather's main characters are shown to be "masked homosexuals" (57), Joan Acocella focuses on Cather's queer disposition, noting how "she was divided between her loyalty to herself, as an artist and a lesbian" (55). Cather's expression of queer is embodied in a variety of characterizations and thematic choices through hints of love or friendship between LGBTQ characters, which emphasizes the Catheresque queer scope.

Death Comes for the Archbishop, one of Cather's outstanding novels, contains enough queer elements and religious colors and moods, as well as an intriguing title, to attract readers' interest: "When William Faulkner had the temerity to place Cather with himself as one of America's great novelists, it was *Death Comes for the Archbishop* he most likely had in mind" (Shaw 143). As Cather's gender crossing is widely known, it was part of her power to inspire herself and her art to be valued.

Father Jean Marie Latour, the protagonist and a queer figure challenging the male hegemonic culture in *Archbishop*, pursues harmony between various races, cultures, classes, religions, and differences in a barren, late nineteenth century New Mexico, where there is no moral order. In fact, in the 1920s, when Cather was writing this book, the pace of change in American society had accelerated and peaked, and the social atmosphere was so gloomy under the influence of industrial capitalism that people suffered from neurasthenia. Before long, this social change led to problems of moderation, the deviation of people's desires, and threats to their lives and happiness, which further coupled with the need for potential power that is part of being queer. Indeed, Jagose mentions that "it [queer] is potentially a transformative identity that must be avowed publicly until it is no longer a shameful secret but a legitimately recognized way of being in the world" (38). In

other words, with *Archbishop*, Cather constructs a queer stage for her ideals of reconciliation, healing, possibility, and harmony. That is, the novel not only tells a fragmentary story of two priests' arduous religious pioneering but also evokes the resilient meanings of queer in various ways. Furthermore, the detailed narrative elements that help create *Archbishop*'s immersive story are queer concepts that embrace sexual, emotional, racial, spatial, cultural, and peculiar scenic qualities. This study offers a chance to view *Archbishop* afresh, thus helping to renew all the novel's key concepts, including politics, culture, race, class, social custom, religion, and personal past in the existing and consequently powerful context. Therefore, this paper examines the meaning of the true queer possibility and harmony that Cather values by exploring the flexible meanings of queer—ranging broadly from the fragmentary interpretation of characters that develop through exchange and friendship with people of the same sex to indigenous people's friendship, passion, and valuing of nature, as well as the pursuit of cooperation and harmony. By applying this perspective, I intend to present some of the queer models of generosity and acceptance that recognize the possibility of looking at existence differently. At the same time, I aim to raise the value of Cather's literary works that seek to build and maintain relationships with readers.

Latour's Sensual Journey and Same-Sex Friendship

First, throughout *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather includes erotically charged words such as "thirst," "puzzling," "violet vest," "purple ink," "sweetness," "rapt," "water," "hole," "desire," "tenderness," "drive," "strange flowers," and "curious odors," and all these naturally create a queer atmosphere within the novel. In particular, John P. Anders highlights the sound of the Angelus's bell: "[A]s it sounds its exotic notes to Latour's discerning ears, it likewise presents to the reader the erotic undertones of Cather's text" (*Sexual Aesthetics* 121). This implies a focus on Latour's sexual inclinations embedded in the sensual, "Full, clear, with something bland and suave, each note floated through the air like a globe of silver. Before the nine strokes were done Rome faded, and behind it he sensed something Eastern, with palm trees,—Jerusalem, perhaps, though he had never been there. Keeping his eyes closed, he cherished for a moment this sudden, pervasive sense of the East" (Cather 43). In fact, Latour awakes to the ringing of the Angelus every morning, but it originates from the East. This "Eastern" sound that stimulates his ears somehow eroticizes his experience. Thus, Latour unknowingly exposes his inclinations to the sound of San Miguel's bell, which serves as a symbol of continuity between the East and the West: "Catholicism is an amalgam of different

cultures when Latour realizes he hears the angelus rung" (Reynolds, *Willa Cather* 157).

In this scene, he is influenced by Cather's Catholicism, which is "a faith of amalgamating, incorporating power, a church founded on the benevolent axioms of cultural heterogeneity and racial difference" (157). Furthermore, the bell's sound includes the meaning of intermingling narrative elements such as "earth and sky, history and fiction, sexuality and spirituality [, which] are blended together as are the gold and silver of the Spanish bell" (Anders, *Sexual Aesthetics* 121). This shows that the meaning of queer is not simply a matter of individual identity, but it is a broad force embracing disharmony as harmony: "A learned Scotch Jesuit in Montreal told me that our first bells, and the introduction of the bell in the service all over Europe, originally came from the East. He said the Templars brought the Angelus back from the Crusades, and it is really an adaptation of a Moslem custom" (Cather 45). Here, although Latour disguises his personal inclination and interest, a variety of alien cultures and sprits can coexist more harmoniously, forming a junction for queer possibility.

Moreover, the Catheresque depictions of male friendship add a queer mood to *Archbishop*: "Cather's stories of male friendship depict the intermingled emotional, spiritual, and erotic relationships of her characters" (Anders, *Something* 250). Thus, it is valuable to demonstrate the various friendships in *Archbishop*, including those between Latour and Joseph Vaillant, Latour and Jacinto, and Latour and Usabio. Latour and Vaillant's friendship is most compelling, as "[d]etails of Latour and Vaillant's friendship intensify Cather's sexual aesthetics. Physical affection and spiritual ardour are perfectly joined" (251).

Vaillant's role is similar to what would be expected of a wife in that Latour is in his care in reality and is constantly in need of his support. As part of the support provided by Vaillant, the food he cooks for Latour provides him with emotional stability and strengthens the close bond between them. In addition, his appearance with an apron on top of a clerical suit, being in the kitchen all afternoon, ladling soup, and saving French wine from a wealthy Mexican to prepare a dinner for Latour are all images of traditionally women's roles as he takes care of his beloved. Latour writes letters to his sister in France as if Vaillant is his spouse, and he tells her "he is making some sort of cooked salad" (Cather 36). In fact, since they were in Paris, they looked like a couple because they bought some clothes and wore the same capes. As such, they have good memories from their hometown. There, "[t]heir thoughts met in that tilted cobble street winding down a hill…a lonely street after nightfall, with soft street lamps shaped like lanterns at the darkest turnings"

(41). Indeed, when they emigrate from Clermont-Ferrand, France, they appear as lovers who have always taken risks together. Having left France, they willingly adopt the land, a country "still waiting to be made into a landscape," where "[e]verything was dry, prickly, sharp" (Schneider 80). In fact, in the barren country, Latour, getting along well with Vaillant, confesses to him that "I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you" (Cather 50). Concerning this, Anders says:

> Latour and Vaillant's departure from their native Auvergne has all the anguish and excitement of a romantic elopement, and their friendship is as suggestive of a marriage as is the relationship between Christ and St. John. Vaillant's signet ring, later worn by Latour, signifies their deep emotional commitment to each other and to God. (*Sexual Aesthetics* 126)

In short, these kinds of "intimacies" can be "a euphemism for sexual intercourse" (Lutes 393). Furthermore, their conversation conveys to readers the feelings shared between a traditional husband and wife. While the two quarrel over the soup, Vaillant complains, "Ah, my garden at Sandusky! And you could snatch me away from it!" (Cather 39), and he, like a spouse, tells Latour that their place is too far away and that "I have made a resolve not to go more than three days' journey from Santa Fe for one year" (40). Moreover, he discreetly advises Latour not to go any further for his safety. Notably, when Vaillant went on a missionary trip to Albuquerque and Manuel Lujon, a Mexican, welcomed him and offered his hand to help him dismount the horse, Vaillant quickly jumped to the ground, avoiding his hand. Valliant's startled reaction proves his love for Latour. Later, when Lujon presented a mule to him, Vaillant also made efforts to get one for Latour, saying that this mule needs a mate. This also conveys Vaillant's devotion to Latour.

In this way, Cather links homosexuality with the early history of the Catholic Church; indeed, "there is in fact a considerable body of evidence to suggest that homosexual relations were especially associated with the clergy" (Boswell 187). The novel consistently employs patterns of same-sex relationships. In this context, Latour's relationship with the indigenous Indians is tied to their masculine beauty. First, the old Navajo, Eusabio, handsome and attractive, is described as "extremely tall, even for a Navajo, with a face like a Roman general's of Republican times" (Cather 219). When he hears the news that Latour is moving from the Little Colorado River to Santa Fe, Eusabio is willing to accompany him. As soon as Latour arrives in town, he "merely stood holding Father Latour's very fine white

hand in his very fine dark one, and looked into his face with a message of sorrow and resignation in his deep-set, eagle eyes" (220).

Such descriptions create a complex and intense atmosphere in this relationship. Traveling with Latour to Santa Fe, Eusabio presents him with a bunch of crimson flowers called rainbow flowers. Furthermore, he is, in some instances, described using terms that are typically feminine. He dresses elegantly in velvet and buckskin rich with beading and quill embroidery, belted with silver, and his arms are covered with silver bracelets. In addition, there are very old necklaces of wampum, turquoise, and coral on his breast. In the *Forum* edition, "the description of Eusabio's hair as being 'done up' in a red *banda* has an unpleasantly female connotation. The more dignified later version has his forehead bound by a crimson band" (Crane 122). However, as Navajo leader, Eusabio "serves as a sartorial model for the intercultural processes" (Schedler 120) and contributes to Latour's emotional change as a priest. Eusabio acts as a cultural mediator and helps Latour respect Indian culture and religious consciousness. Due to him, Latour finds "his Navajo house favourable for reflection, for recalling the past and planning the future" (Cather 229), and he is unwittingly absorbed into Navajo culture.

In addition, Jacinto from the pueblo of Pecos is another partner in Latour's missionary work. He appreciates Latour's sincere attitude toward people, while Latour commends Jacinto's respect for nature and submission to its laws. This can also connect to Latour's fondness for his femininity represented by nature, and perhaps Jacinto's purple handkerchief and red blanket can be interpreted as signs of a more intimate relationship between them. In part, their special relationship is instilled in the Stone Lips, which is a covert cave significant in the pueblo. Jacinto in the Stone Lips appears as "the Romantic poet, the figure of Christ, and a Native American mystic" (Williams 87), and he takes better care of Latour within than outside by lighting a torch, filling a gap in the wall to prevent the fetid smell, and preparing warm coffee for him. This is because Latour feels somewhat disgusted and anxious in this unfamiliar place. While continuing to engage in extraordinary care of Latour, Jacinto digs into the ground with his knife to convey the vitality of nature to him and so Latour can hear the sound of water when he feels dizzy. That night, Latour closes his eyes and wonders why Jacinto protects himself without sleeping. It shows that Cather's stories of male friendship can "depict the intermingled erotic, emotional, and spiritual relationships of her characters" (Anders, *Sexual Aesthetics* 125).

Queer Possibility and Latour's Transplantable World

Archbishop also features queer characters from various backgrounds, enhancing

their own values and lessons. Buck Scales at first appears to readers as an evil-looking American "with a snake-like neck, terminating in a small, bony head" (Cather 66), and he seems to be half human at Latour's first glance. He is literally a murderer and a sexual predator who torments his wife, Magdalena Valdez. Magdalena is abused but never seems to consider running away from his sadistic control. This is regarded as a "protection racket" (Young 14), which means a man does not protect a woman to truly protect her safety but as a pretext. The portrayal illustrates his unequal relation of ownership as a domestic enforcer, and Scales sees Magdalena as a kind of booty in his violent world. Furthermore, his language is full of sadistic expressions depicting him as too aberrant to make a family: "[I]t struck them [Latour and Vaillant] both that this man had been abusing her in some way. Suddenly, he turned on her. 'Clear off them cheers fur the strangers. They won't eat ye, if they air priests'" (Cather 67). Scales, who had once threatened to harm her parents if Magdalena did not return home after he killed the first of his children, rules Magdalena through sadistic acts. In his case, such queer tendencies are a kind of social evil, and this helps diagnose the queer atmosphere of the work from an ethical point of view.

Among some priests in New Mexico, there are some who act like beasts. The tyrannical Friar Baltazar Montoya in Acoma is an unscrupulous priest who steals native crops and exploits women and young boys without any sense of guilt. In particular, he feels joy in exploiting three Indian boys, simply as a way of exerting his power of influence and authority. His extreme disposition, however, implies that he will face retribution. His dictatorial practices result in his killing of a young boy. Before his execution as a result of the incident, Baltazar, who abandons his ethics to possess the boy serving food, exhibits a queer action when he goes to check on the roast turkey still cooking in the kitchen after the priests from nearby missions leave. Ultimately, he is executed by the natives at Acoma. Cather shows the reactions to his absence: "The women, indeed, took pleasure in watching the garden pine and waste away from thirst, and ventured into the cloisters to laugh and chatter at the whitening foliage of the peach trees, and the green grapes shrivelling on the vines" (114). Such scenes remind readers of the importance of the uncertainty of immortality and human ethics.

Padre Antonio José Martinez in Taos is a lecherous dictator whose wickedness primarily manifests in his fraudulent nature, his amorous life, and his tendency to love money and wealth. He gives off a queer impression from his appearance. When he, with broad, high shoulders like a bull buffalo's, greets Latour in his diocese, he is "in buckskin breeches, high boots and silver spurs, a wide Mexican hat on

his head" (141). The clothes are apparently similar to women's clothes. One night, "after he [Latour] retired, the clatter of dish-washing and the giggling of women across the patio kept him awake a long while" (148), and then a knot of women's hair in his room made him feel uncomfortable. The reason is that it makes him reflect on himself while Latour, in fact, is confused while hiding his queer identity. According to A. Jabbur, Latour and Martinez are "more like mutual reflections of a doppelganger" (414), but to set an example as a priest, Latour pretends to keep calm.

Cather's *Archbishop* also sheds light on places that have queer elements and that create a queer atmosphere. Latour must have traveled through thirty miles of the conical red hills, winding his way in the narrow cracks between them, and he had begun to think that he would never see anything else. "They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare" (Cather 17). In fact, the forest is a place Carl Jung defines as the image of femininity, so he could be threatened by his male-based identity here.

Likewise, Latour is often placed in feminized spaces during the missionary journeys in the barren West, including the Stone Lips, which has a profound impact on his life and thought process. One day, the Stone Lips, which previously represented the queer aspects of human instinct, pleasure, and disposition, changes for him—after he enters the Stone Lips with Jacinto to escape heavy snow and wind. It evokes a woman's womb through "a peculiar formation in the rocks; two rounded ledges, one directly over the other, with a mouthlike opening between" (126). Latour feels extremely anxious about experiencing the pagan cultures. It is a magnificent place of worship where the snakes, honored by the natives, are sleeping. Latour, overwhelmed by the darkness and silence here, considers the utter darkness "a quality of paganism" (Moseley 76). He becomes nervous in the womblike space "where Latour hears an ancient voice that destabilizes the foundations of Euro-Christian patriarchy" (Jabbur 400); "[y]et, as the story progresses, Latour enacts in his lived experience the same process that Vaillant performs in his kitchen, increasingly synthesizing his Euro-Christian worldview with the pluralistic and desexualized, if not feminized, belief system of Jacinto's Pecos culture" (400).

With the protection of nature, represented by a woman, Latour puts his ears on the floor and listens to "one of the oldest voices of the earth" (Cather 130), and he receives a transfusion of the vitality of the solemn water. Since the water symbolizes the mother or vitality that Jung evinced in his collective works, the maternal characteristics of water are consistent with Mother Nature. The snake that falls asleep here can be replaced by a river, evoking the lifeline Jung refers

to in his books. This is because the winding river, shaped like a snake, represents motherhood as a lifeline. This leaves Latour in a sense of mystery, feeling the new order of the universe. Furthermore, it sets him thinking: "This submergence into the earth itself results in Father Latour's deeper understanding of the universal human nature that transcends cultural differences" (Prajznerová 139). It finally results in his success as a queer practitioner and "an organizer" (Skaggs, *Cather's Mystery* 402). Latour, emerging from the Stone Lips, which is "the site where many of the novel's apparent oppositions are conflated" (Williams 84–85), musters the courage to face a queer world with a healthy mindset through true fusion with the Navajos, perceiving a shining, pure white world covered with virgin snow.

Acoma, called a holy area, is a town on top of a rock, where Latour "felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures" (Cather 100). The odd-shaped rocks of the Acomas living in Acoma, appearing like rock-turtles, leave a deep impression on Latour: "The rock embodies the Indian's faith, devotion, and steadfastness; to Latour the rock exemplifies the 'strange literalness' of Indian life" (Reynolds, *Ideology* 24). Here, "[t]he rock, when one came to think of it, was the utmost expression of human need; even mere feeling yearned for it; it was the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship" (Cather 97). In fact, "some of the Indians substitute the rock itself for the transcendent life and security it symbolizes" (Schneider 81). In addition, the Acomas, without soil or water, appear to Latour "so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells" (Cather 100), but they honor nature and exist like fastened slow-moving animals. Acoma is a literal emblem of endurance, and the Acomas are one of the indicators of Latour's life. Latour "tries to understand the mindset of the people" (Lutes 396). Furthermore, "[a]s the smoke is part of the censer, or the foam of the wave, the composite rock and cloud mesas illustrate the inevitable blend of vitality and solidity" (Schneider 85).

In the same context, the Midi Romanesque Cathedral in Santa Fe serves as a symbol of the unity of pagan and Christian traditions; thus, its architecture is holy and it is a valuable queer place in that it "is supported by the cave wherein Jacinto's goddess-snake is enclosed" (Williams 93). Clearly, the cathedral is the symbol of intercultural harmony: "Romanesque art has been called 'the most composite of all arts', combining pagan and Christian elements in sculptures and décor" (Deschamps 1–2). Thus, it is "an art form supremely representative of an advanced people" (Kephart 78). The cathedral is also "a symbol of harmony between the Old World and the New World, between Latour and his diocese" (Clinton 91). Latour is finally laid before the altar of his symbolic legacy. Thus, as Wallace Stevens—another

Cather admirer—correctly expresses it, "[d]eath is the mother of beauty" (Quirk 93) in the novel. In other words, Cather "treats his [Latour's] life as a work of art" (Jabbur 417).

Latour's consciousness is now different from what it was in the past, when he was immersed in the dualism of good and evil and when he regarded the natives of New Mexico and the priests who had been queued as subjects of guidance. He is spiritually revivified and has proved the miracle of incarnation with indigenous Indians in New Mexico. Furthermore, Latour's queer sensibility suggests the possibility of uniting, embracing, and accepting among the groups, all of which are characteristics of queer harmony. Therefore, the Catheresque queer vision promotes amicable relationships, unifies differences harmoniously, and enhances healthy interaction among human beings by elevating human values, and it encourages them to have the strong will and courage to live their own lives according to their own convictions and beliefs.

Conclusion: Beyond Leave-Taking: A New Catheresque Future

The term "queer" provides an opportunity to perceive different identities, characteristics, dispositions, places, cultures, religions, and so on, in various ways. A flexible interpretation of its meaning allows for more possibilities of standardization and categorization of the term "queer." Cather, in keeping with this theory, tries to reflect it not only according to sexual preference, orientation, and identity but also by shaking up all the concepts of various cultures, races, classes, religions, and places, both human-constructed and natural. In this approach,

> queer theory also aims to examine hitherto unheard voices, suppressed narratives, as well as the development of counter-hegemonic queer discourses that talk about same-sex or other 'perverse' desires, practices, and subjectivities, such as, for example, coming-out stories, rape stories, or recovery tales, all of which play a significant role in the construction of sexual and political identity formation. (Vasvári 2)

For this reason, this article examines the sexual, local, sensual, emotional, and ethical queer suggested by Cather within the boundary of its semantic diversity, as it leans on the elastic interpretation of queer. This can be the true queer meaning that Cather aims for as well as the culmination of the ultimate harmony for which she strives. Moreover, "Cather's treatment of homosexuality creates meaning in her texts by suggesting important aspects of her art, especially its potential for social

commentary and its capacity for reader response" (Anders, *Sexual Aesthetics* 136). Additionally, Cather's idea of queer is not limited to gender in the novel; rather, it awakens Latour's real spiritual power and gives him true freedom.

Latour, in *Archbishop*, proves his life is ultimately built on this concept: "Where there is great love there are always miracles" (Cather 50). Similarly, the novel can work as a new code for readers today. By attempting to harmonize and conflate various races, cultures, classes, differences, and perceptions of nature and power that he has met during his clerical career in New Mexico, Latour, a native of Europe, becomes an icon of harmony and a unifying figure in the West. Performing his sacred duties, Latour, "Cather's quintessential hero" (Anders, *Sexual Aesthetics* 126), in the end shows not only an actual dangerous crossing but also a visionary conceptual crossing. In other words, erotic love and friendship between men, a style of caring, re-viewing specific locations such as the barren West and the covert cave, and spotlighting various figures are all within Cather's own queer terrain.

In *Archbishop,* Cather, who aims to break down existing ideas of queer, embrace pagan cultures, pursue a spirit of coexistence and harmony among the community, and ultimately achieve a queer sense of acceptance, returns to uncomfortable gay codes and brings them into the zone of queer possibility. As Merrill Maguire Skaggs argues, "the book is as nearly inexhaustible a treasure as literature in English can display" (*Willa Cather's Varieties* 101). Hereby, Latour and Vaillant's "moral standing" in *Archbishop* is enhanced and shows an exemplary model for developing queer possibility: "[I]n the end, it [the novel] celebrates the efforts of a man who endeavoured to bring to life a vision of peace and harmony and the beauty of his achievement" (de Roche 175). Hence, by the end of the novel, Latour's death is "extinction as ultimate reward" (Skaggs, *Cather's Mystery* 405), and he ultimately belongs to the land, which is the place that now has become a queer heaven. Thus, *Archbishop* shows Cather's primary ecstasy transforming eroticism into spiritual freedom: "Cather's central metaphor for spiritual freedom is death itself, the release from life" (Anders, *Sexual Aesthetics* 130). Consequently, Cather's contribution to the open queer field itself becomes quite queer, acknowledging multiple options and shows her own "success in creating a genuine American saint" (Bohlke 265).

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