

Paul's Case



by Willa Cather

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Paul's Case: Introduction

Willa Cather's story "Paul's Case" was first published in 1905. It was the last of seven stories in her first collection, *The Troll Garden*, which launched Cather's literary career. When the story was printed in McClure's in May of the same year, it brought Cather to national attention. In 1920 the story was reprinted by Alfred Knopf in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*.

Like many of the stories in *The Troll Garden*, "Paul's Case" explores the dangers of art and the struggles of artists and artistically inclined youth in a commercial world. Cather once remarked that the events in the story were modeled on an actual incident that occurred while she was teaching English in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Cather's portrayal of a young man who lives for beauty and believes that money can transform his identity influenced F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose novel *The Great Gatsby* explores similar issues.

Paul's Case: Willa Cather Biography

Willa Cather was born near Winchester, Virginia, on December 7, 1873. She was the oldest of seven children. When Cather was nine years old, her family moved to Nebraska, where they lived on a farm in rural Webster County and in a nearby town, Red Cloud. The population of Webster County and Red Cloud represented a diverse array of regions and nations. Cather's neighbors included immigrants from Sweden, France, and Germany, as well as Americans who had moved to Nebraska from large cities in New England and small towns from the South, as the Cathers had.

As a teenager, Cather was a tomboy. At fifteen, she signed her name "William Cather M.D." When she entered the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in 1891, she wore her hair short and dressed in men's clothes. By 1895, when she graduated from college, she had discarded her masculine persona in favor of more conventional dress. While in college, she edited the campus literary magazine and wrote articles and reviews for the *Nebraska State Journal*. These experiences led to her first job as a writer in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

In Pittsburgh, where part of "Paul's Case" is set, Cather edited a woman's magazine called *Home Monthly* and taught high-school English and Latin. She lived and traveled with her friend Isabelle McClung. In 1905 she published her first book of short stories, *The Troll Garden*, which included "Paul's Case."

After *The Troll Garden* was published, Cather moved to New York City, where she became the managing editor of the influential magazine *McClure's*. In 1908 Cather met Sarah Orne Jewett, an author whose work she greatly admired. Jewett read Cather's fiction and advised her to abandon journalism to devote herself to writing fiction full time. "You must find your own quiet center of life," Jewett wrote to Cather: "to work in silence and with all one's heart, that is the water's lot." Influenced by Jewett's words, Cather resigned her position at *McClure's* and began writing novels. While her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, published in 1912, was not a success, she won the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *One of Ours* in 1923. Today, her best known novels are *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. These novels, as with much of her fiction, were inspired by the landscape and people of Nebraska. Cather depicted the struggles of European immigrants in the midwestern prairie states in a realistic yet subtle prose style.

Cather spent the remaining forty years of her life in New York City, where she lived with her friend Edith Lewis. When she died in 1947, she left no diaries, journals, or autobiographies and had prohibited publication or quotation of her personal letters.

Paul's Case: Summary

"Paul's Case" by Willa Cather is, as the subtitle states, "a study in temperament." The story chronicles a few months in the life of Paul, a student at Pittsburgh High School, who would rather be at the opera than in class.

Part I: Paul in Pittsburgh

The story begins with Paul's faculty hearing one week after he has been suspended from school. Paul is smiling, and his accusers find his appearance—especially the red carnation in his lapel—"not properly significant of the contrite spirit befitting a boy under the ban of suspension." The teachers, full of ill will, list disorder and impertinence as two of the charges against him, but they feel it "scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble."

Paul is described as "suave," having eyes with "a certain hysterical brilliancy," shuddering from a teacher's casual touch, and having a "contemptuous and irritating" habit of raising his eyebrows. Only his drawing master hints afterward that Paul's behavior may not be what it appears, that perhaps his teachers do not understand the boy. At this point, the teachers share a feeling of dissatisfaction with the meeting and their own

behavior, which they liken to that of petty bullies.

Cather introduces the importance of art into Paul's life when he arrives early to Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall, where he is an usher. First Paul revels in his solitude in the picture gallery. He dons his uniform "excitedly" before entering the hall to become a "gracious and smiling" model usher. Before seeing Paul in the world of art and music, the reader sees him as a twitchy, uncomfortable fellow. At Carnegie Hall Paul reveals a "vivacious and animated" persona freed by his surroundings and music.

After the concert Paul follows the German soloist, a woman with an "indefinable air of achievement," to her hotel. He imagines himself part of her world, entering "an exotic, tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease." Awakened from his daydream, he heads home to Cordelia Street, a perfectly respectable part of town that he views as ugly and common.

Because it is late, Paul decides not to enter the house and face his father's displeasure. Instead he climbs through a window into the basement, where he sits awake all night fearing rats. He imagines his father mistaking him for a burglar, imagines himself warning his father in time to avoid being shot, and wonders whether his father would ever regret that warning.

On Sunday, the last Sunday in November, Paul and his father and sisters visit on their front steps, according to neighborhood custom. Paul's father talks with a young clerk who works for one of the steel magnates and who he feels is a good model for Paul. Although the man had once needed to "curb his appetites," he has settled down to marriage and a business career; he is "a young man with a future.¹" For Paul, all that really registers is the talk of faraway lands and success stories. That evening he sneaks to the theater under the guise of meeting a friend for help in math.

Paul lives for his weekends at Carnegie Hall and the theater, where he has a young actor friend named Charley Edwards who invites him to rehearsals and generally encourages his dreams. Yet the weekends also reinforce in him the thought that school is "trivial." He has more problems at school, is sent again to the principal, and is removed from school. His father makes him give up his job at Carnegie Hall and begin working in the office of Denny & Carson.

Part II: Paul in New York

Next the story jumps to January, and Paul is on a train bound for New York City. When he arrives, he buys a new wardrobe and books a room at the Waldorf Hotel. He has planned this escape even before leaving school, Cather notes, and now he has "a curious sense of relief at being where he feels he belongs. Cather then explains the embezzling that afforded Paul his escape. He has stolen nearly one thousand dollars from a deposit he was to make for Denny & Carson.

As he begins to live the high life of his dreams, Paul shows no remorse for his theft. He sees this life as "what all the struggle was about" and wonders how any honest men exist. Paul lives richly, but inconspicuously, bearing himself with quiet dignity. It is as if he were made for the life he has chosen. He is happy watching the pageant, enjoying his flowers and his sense of power. He is released from "the necessity of petty lying, lying every day" and spends eight happy days before news of his theft appears in the Pittsburgh papers.

Paul learns that his father is coming to New York to find him. After spending a few moments vividly remembering the "gray monotony" of Cordelia Street, he gives the reader a moment of foreshadowing when he realizes that the "glare and glitter about him...had again, and for the last time, their old potency." He decides to "finish the thing splendidly." Briefly wondering whether he could have spent the time after his theft any differently, he decides that "he would do the same thing tomorrow" and that "he had lived the sort of life he was meant to live." As he looks at his revolver, it becomes plain that he plans his suicide.

Paul leaves New York on a train and takes a cab west out of Newark, dismissing the driver once they get to the countryside. He walks awhile, noticing that his lapel carnations are "drooping with the cold...their red glory all over." His own glory ends in an impact with a train as he remembers all he has not done—"the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow Algerian sands" that he has not seen.

Paul's Case: Characters

Charley Edwards

Charley is a young actor, the "leading juvenile" of a Pittsburgh stock theater company, and a friend of Paul's. He encourages Paul's interest in the theater, inviting him to the company's Sunday rehearsals and allowing him to hang around. When Paul's school situation worsens and Paul's father puts him to work, Charley "remorsefully" promises not to see Paul again. After Paul leaves home, Cather explains that Charley had helped Paul plan his trip to New York.

Paul

Paul is the protagonist, or main character, of the story. A "motherless lad," he was born in Colorado, where his mother died of illness in his infancy. He is a thin, pale, dreamy adolescent who feels a need to set himself apart from his conventional surroundings in Pittsburgh. Whereas those around him are concerned about making a living and coming "up in the world," he is attracted to the glamorous world of music, the theater, and art. He desires the beautiful things money can buy, but he disdains the monotonous, cold reality of work and everyday life. After his consistent lying, failure to do school-work, and "insolent" attitude lead to his removal from school, Paul steals from his employer and leaves for New York City. There he realizes his dreams of buying expensive clothes, staying at the Waldorf, a grand hotel, attending the opera, and becoming "exactly the kind of boy he had always wanted to be." When his crime is discovered, Paul cannot face returning to the "ugliness and commonness" of Cordelia Street and commits suicide by jumping in front of a moving train. Cather's characterization of Paul is ambivalent, and readers are left to wonder whether Paul freely chose his tragic end or not. While Paul's alienation from his environment is clear, the reader cannot tell whether Paul's is a "case" of environmental determinism or of the folly of youth, of a dreamer who died with "all his lessons unlearned."

Paul's drawing master

The most sympathetic of Paul's teachers, the drawing master observes that Paul seems somehow haunted and suggests that none of them really understands the boy. He comments on Paul's mother's early death and states that "there is something wrong about the fellow." Through his eyes the reader sees how pale Paul is, with his face "blue-veined" and "drawn and wrinkled like an old man's about the eyes."

Paul's father

Paul's father, a widower, is the major authority figure in Paul's life, representing the values of hard work and the "American Dream" Paul despises. He works for a railway company and has "a worthy ambition to come up in the world." He hopes Paul might become like one of his neighbors on Cordelia Street, a young man who works as a clerk for one of the "iron kings" of a steel corporation. He is concerned and "perplexed" about his only son: he calls the principal's office after Paul is suspended, pays Denny & Carson the thousand dollars Paul stole from them, and, after Paul runs away, goes to New York to find him. To Paul, though, his father represents oppressive authority and the dreary middle-class life of Cordelia Street. He dreads coming home late to his father, "the figure at the top of the stairs," with his "inquiries and reproaches."

Paul's Case: Themes

"Paul's Case" is a story about a young man who loves art and beautiful things so much that he steals money and goes to New York to live a life of opulence and grandeur. When his crime is discovered, Paul commits

suicide rather than return to the dreary, middle-class life he escaped in Pittsburgh. The story's major themes revolve around questions about Paul's character. Was he driven to his fate by the destructive values of America, or is he morally corrupt, responsible for his actions? Is Paul, as his teachers, father, and friends agree, a "bad case," an abnormal personality, or do the others have an overly narrow view of what is "normal"? Do the worlds of business and industry, represented by Cordelia Street, destroy appreciation of culture and aesthetics, or does Paul choose to live in a world of illusion, destroying his grip on reality?

The American Dream

The American Dream is an underlying theme of the story. Paul's father and the rest of Cordelia Street, a "perfectly respectable" middle-class neighborhood, believe in values of hard work, family and church. During their leisure time, they sit around swapping stories about their bosses, the "captains of industry" who worked themselves up from poverty to lead large corporations and live in luxury. Paul despises the monotonous lives led by Cordelia Street residents, who believe that if they work hard, they too might lead such glamorous lives. But Paul shares their same desire: to become rich and lead a life without worry. He too likes to listen to the "legends of the iron kings." Disdaining the "cash-boy stage," Paul wants the "triumphs of the cash boys who became famous."

Paul does manage to live a life of leisure and beauty, but not through hard work, and only for one week. Through lies and crime, he gains access to what he considers his real home, the New York City high life exemplified by the Waldorf Hotel. There, his "surroundings explained him." In the lap of luxury, Paul realizes that "this was what all the struggle was about" and that "money was everything." Cather prompts her readers to consider whether the American dream of wealth might have corrupted Paul, fostering in him a love of materialism which leads to his ruin.

Deception

It is through deception that Paul achieves his dream, however briefly, and Cather leaves open the possibility that his achievement is itself a form of self-deception. At home, his lies to his father cover his trips to the theater, and his tall tales at school paint the life he wants to live. In New York, although he feels at peace, freed from "the necessity of petty lying," he is living the biggest lie of his life: that he is a rich boy from Washington awaiting globe-trotting parents. He feels that "this time there would be no awakening," which is either a delusion or a foreshadowing of his suicide.

Choices and Consequences

Related to the themes of the American Dream and Paul's use of deceit to claim it is the question of free will. Is Paul a sensitive adolescent who is crushed by his environment, or is he a lying thief who refuses to take responsibility for his actions? In the last line of the story, Cather writes that Paul "dropped back into the immense design of things," suggesting that his death was destined to happen. The portrait in Paul's bedroom of theologian John Calvin, well known for his ideas on predestination, lends weight to this possibility. But Paul also seems to choose his fate: for example, he decides that, if he were to choose again, he would do the same thing. It is left to the reader to decide whether Paul had no choice but to escape Pittsburgh and life altogether, or whether his love for illusion and artificiality signals his own weaknesses.

Beauty

For Paul, beauty is life, and beauty can only be found in illusions: "the natural nearly always wore the guise of ugliness,...a certain element of artificiality seemed to him necessary in beauty." Paul feels alive and comfortable in art galleries, the theater, the symphony, the opera. Looking at paintings or listening to the opera, Paul "loses himself." His identity dissolves and he merges with his surroundings. Art is a religion for Paul; the narrator describes the theater as his "secret temple." In the story, beauty can be powerful, fascinating Paul and allowing him to feel free. It can be destructive as well, when it makes ordinary life seem "worse than jail."

Alienation

Caught up in his dreams of beauty and glamor, Paul is estranged from most of humanity. Cather shows his alienation in his discomfort around the people one might expect him to be most comfortable among—his family, neighbors, and fellow students. In the very first sequence, during his faculty hearing, Cather indicates this in the reference to how he shuddered away from his teacher's guiding hand. His own street arouses his "loathing," and when the neighbors gather for friendly chat on a Sunday afternoon, he sits alone on the bottom step, "staring into the street." In class he makes much of his friends at the theater and cannot "bear to have the other pupils think" that he takes school at all seriously. He has only "contempt" for the humdrum world, in which he is convinced he does not belong. Only among strangers, the glittering parade of the wealthy in New York, does he truly feel at home, and even then he has "no especial desire to meet or to know any of these people." Although he is among them, he is not really part of their society.

Limitations and Opportunities

Paul's alienation grows out of the limitations he perceives as binding him. His father is focused on the business world and disapproves of Paul's desires—"his only reason for allowing Paul to usher was that he thought a boy ought to be earning a little." Paul has to lie to slip away to the theater, suggesting that if his father knew his real errand, he would have kept Paul home. When he reaches the theater, he breathes "like a prisoner set free." Finally he is denied his cultural activities altogether, an event that he regards as an opportunity to escape and live the life he wants. When he learns that his father is coming to New York to bring him back to Pittsburgh, a fate "worse than jail," he decides his only escape from such boundaries now is death.

Paul's Case: Style

Irony

"Paul's Case" centers on a high school student so taken by the life of wealth and culture that he runs away to New York City on stolen money to live lavishly, if only for a while. When his old middle-class life threatens to reclaim him, Paul commits suicide. The narrator's attitude towards Paul's actions is ironic. The narrator does not endorse Paul's decision to steal in order to live grandly. Nor does the narrator affirm Paul's decision to commit suicide after he realizes that "money was everything." The authorial voice often seems to be talking to the reader, reflecting on what the characters do not realize. For instance, while Paul despises Cordelia Street, it is described as a "perfectly respectable" middle-class neighborhood. Similarly, Paul's starry-eyed response to the world of the arts is directly contrasted to cruder realities: references to a "cracked orchestra" beating out an overture or jerking at a serenade hardly sound sublime, yet Paul's senses are "deliciously, yet delicately fired" nonetheless. Cather's distanced, sparse authorial voice hints at her attitude towards the events she narrates.

Symbolism

Cather uses symbolism to great effect in this story. Flowers are a continual motif, expressing Paul's character and his views of life. The red carnation Paul wears to meet with his teachers is to them a sign of his outlandish and insolent attitude. It is described as "flippantly red" and "scandalous." Paul also wears "violets in his buttonholes and dismisses those who do not do likewise as mundane. At the Waldorf, his grand suite is not complete without flowers, and he notes with awe the artificial beauty of cut flowers in the glass cases of New York flower stands, "against the sides of which the snowflakes stuck and melted." When Paul ventures to the railroad tracks to kill himself, he takes a wilted red carnation from his lapel and buries the flower in the snow. Expensive, extravagant, colorful and ephemeral, flowers represent Paul's desire for beauty in what he sees as a gray world. They also symbolize Paul, who, like flowers in winter, is out of place. The flower-killing snow Paul sees on the train to New York and by the railroad tracks at the story's end provide a stark contrast to the bright flowers Paul surrounds himself with.

Allusion

"Paul's Case" is sprinkled with a variety of allusions, or references to cultural figures and works. Some of these deal with disguises and help point out the way Paul's life is woven with deception. A description of Paul's response to the theater, for instance, includes a reference to the opera *Martha*, by Friedrich von Flotow, in which a highborn lady disguises herself as a servant, causing unhappy consequences. At his last dinner in New York, Paul hears music from Ruggiero Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci*, which concerns clowns, masks, and the idea of appearance versus reality. Another allusion, to a genie in a bottle, evokes the *Arabian Nights* and vividly describes how trapped Paul feels in the ordinary world and his ordinary life. Cather uses still other allusions to link Paul to the decadence of imperial Rome, as when he wraps himself in a "Roman blanket" after his hot bath, which itself reminds the reader of the decadent Roman baths.

Paul's Case: Historical Context

The years from 1900 to 1910 witnessed great growth in business and industry in America. Fortunes were made producing steel and iron: Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and J. P. Morgan all made vast amounts of money during this period. They were the most famous of the "robber barons," those whose wealth was created by questionable labor practices and whose businesses were favored by the government since they were fundamental in creating the infrastructure necessary for the United States to become a world power. In "Paul's Case" such industrial leaders appear in references to the "iron kings" discussed on Cordelia Street on Sunday afternoons.

With fewer government regulations on business than there are now, industry leaders ruthlessly pursued profit. Their profits allowed them to become voracious consumers of material goods. Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe such ostentatious display of money and luxury through clothes, travel, cars, and architecture. This use of wealth is most apparent in "Paul's Case" in the section devoted to New York—the Waldorf Hotel, Paul's dress clothes and silk underwear, his champagne and opera. Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, published the same year, also deals with the era's high society, focusing on a beautiful and young upper-class woman who seeks to secure her fortunes by marriage but can bring herself to sacrifice neither love nor wealth.

Still, some of the wealthy found ways to spend their surplus in ways that benefited society as a whole. Andrew Carnegie established himself as the country's leading philanthropist by granting money to libraries, foundations, and venues for the arts, including music halls that bear his name in New York City and, as described in "Paul's Case," Pittsburgh.

Paul's Case: Critical Overview

Although "Paul's Case" did not receive much critical attention when it was first published in 1905, it has become Cather's most frequently reprinted and read short story. A Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS) television adaptation in 1980 revived critical interest in the story.

According to Loretta Wasserman, in "Is Cather's Paul a Case?," one reason the story has historically garnered little notice is because the character of Paul is so unlike Cather's other characters. Whereas most of her fiction takes place in the plains and prairies of the Midwest, "Paul's Case" takes place in smoggy Pittsburgh and glamorous New York. Critics have taken pains to see the story as a fitting end to the short story collection in which it first appeared, *The Troll Garden*. All of the stories in this book concern artists or people of artistic or sensitive temperament who cannot resist the dangerous lure of the gardens of art. James Woodress, in his introduction to *The Troll Garden*, claims that Paul consumes the "forbidden fruit" of art, leading to his tragic end. Susan Rosowski, in *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, argues that Paul loses himself to the temptations of romantic fantasy.

Unlike other characters in *The Troll Garden*, however, Paul is not an artist at all. Many critics believe he does not even have an artistic temperament. Instead, they argue that Cather is writing a psychiatric "case study." Wasserman argues that Paul is emotionally maladjusted, living in a fantasy world and lacking a firm grip on reality. In her study *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, Marilyn Arnold argues that Paul is "half-crazy" and cannot describe either reality or art reliably. John A. Weigel, in a *CEA Critic* article, describes how he applied a psychological test to Paul's character and concludes that he is a schizophrenic.

Others ascribe Paul's behavior to social, rather than psychological, causes. David A. Carpenter, in an essay in *American Literature*, sees Paul as a victim of his environment. "The uncreative, superficial and life-destroying values perpetuated in the homes of Pittsburgh" produce in Paul an unhealthy desire for wealth and luxury. In Carpenter's view, the portraits of John Calvin and George Washington that hang above Paul's bed suggest that these are American values. Paul achieves the ends of success without the means, however, and so remains responsible for his actions. He "has consumed himself morally and ethically by living a lie—one purchased through someone else's hard work," according to Carpenter.

Critics ascribing genetic or social causes for Paul's behavior agree that he is "destroyed by his own illusions," as Wasserman puts it. Sharon O'Brien, in *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, considers whether Paul's "probable homosexuality" corresponds to a similar inclination of Cather's. When Cather adopted masculine dress and the name "William Cather, Jr." as an adolescent, she, like Paul who dresses as a dandy, was rejecting the restricting conventions of her day. But Cather's ironic attitude toward Paul signals her belief that there is a difference between loving art and the beautiful places it is found and creating it oneself. Cather both identifies with and distances herself from Paul's selfish, escapist tendencies. Larry Rubin, writing in *Modern Fiction Studies*, and Claude Summers, in *Studies in Short Fiction* consider the possibility of Paul's homosexuality as well. They point to his physical appearance, temperament, and the brief description of his night out in New York with the boy from Yale. But, these critics argue, Paul's thin grasp on reality and his aestheticism, which alienates him from most people, make it impossible for him to recognize and integrate his homosexuality into his life.

Paul's Case: Essays and Criticism

Heredity or Environment?

Are we products of nature or of the way we are nurtured? Do our genes dictate who we will be, or is our environment responsible for that? Are we governed by our own free will, or does destiny mandate what will become of us? These are some of the many questions that plague humanity, the questions that give philosophers, sociologists, scientists, and writers material with which to work. Willa Cather, in her short story "Paul's Case," brings forth these questions with admirable skill but offers no clear resolution, as can be seen by the two primary types of interpretation her critics have given to the story.

According to Loretta Wasserman, in her book *Willa Cather*, the interpretations of "Paul's Case" are divided according to how each individual critic answers the questions. Many see it as a story of a "sensitive, artistically inclined youth crushed by a withering environment, the dreary rigidities of Pittsburgh Presbyterianism and the physical ugliness of Paul's home." Others see it as a study of maladjustment or a pathological state.

It is worthwhile to note here that the time in which Cather lived greatly influenced her writing and her views of life. Born in the middle of the second Industrial Revolution, Cather grew up during a time when new scientific knowledge of physics and chemistry helped build gigantic new industries. The steel industry, in particular, centered in Pittsburgh, used Henry Bessemer's new open-hearth process to create stronger, less expensive steel. His process helped to vastly increase production and profits, which necessitated larger

factories, more workers and more machinery. In 1899, Andrew Carnegie created the massive Carnegie Steel Company in Pittsburgh by consolidating many of the local steel works. Only two years later, his company was worth half a billion dollars. However, Carnegie was also involved in the cultural side of life and contributed much money to the arts. He, like Cather, saw that the rapid progress of technology could potentially drown out the more aesthetic side of people, a problem he wished to avoid.

Cather dealt with this technological and aesthetic issue in "Paul's Case," which first appeared in her collection of stories called *The Troll Garden* in 1905. The story is set in Pittsburgh, and the glamorous lives of "iron kings" like Carnegie become a focal point for Paul's aspirations. According to Gather's obituary in the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, it was based on the actual suicide of a high-school student in the Pittsburgh area where she lived. The name for the collection was borrowed from a text of Charles Kingsley, who wrote in his book *The Roman and the Teuton* that invading barbarians looked at Rome as "a fairy palace, with a fairy garden" inside which trolls dwelled. The stories in the collection deal with encounters in the art world and according to one critic are "implicitly equated with the compelling but treacherous troll garden." Marilyn Arnold, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, helps explain the relation of the troll garden to "Paul's Case." She writes in an essay in Harold Bloom's anthology

Willa Cather

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Paul is obviously the hungry forest child who is utterly helpless before the luscious appeal of the garden, represented for him in the trappings of wealth and in his adolescent perception of the artist's world For Paul there is no reasoned choice, no weighing of alternatives and consequences, no will to resist, for him there is only ugliness and the garden, and he must have the garden

Gather later reprinted a revised version of the story in 1920 in another collection called *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Again Cather focuses on a vision of youth, but to Cather, given the title of this collection, the vision must have been a horrifying one. Medusa, of Greek mythology, is one of three Gorgons, monsters with golden wings, brass claws, and hair of live snakes who turned to stone those who looked at them. One can assume, then, since Cather created the collections herself, that in her mind, "Paul's Case" dealt with the fairy garden and its treacheries as well as the aspirations of a young man involved in the world of the arts.

In the first part of the story, we meet Paul through the perceptions of his teachers, his behaviors at school, his position as an usher at Carnegie Hall, and his friendship with members of a stock theater company. We learn that at school Paul is perceived as "contemptuous and irritating" and insolent. However, his drawing teacher sees that "there is something wrong" and "sort of haunted" about Paul. His mannerisms at school, from his avoidance of being touched to his "dandy" dressing and his "scandalous red carnation," paint for us a picture of a boy who does not quite fit in to the mold that is expected. In the music hall, again we see that he is not quite the same as the others. He "teased and plagued the boys until, telling him that he was crazy, they put him down on the floor and sat on him." Even with Charley Edwards, Paul's young actor acquaintance, we see that Paul does not fit a mold. Charley allows Paul entrance to the theater in part because he recognizes a "vocation" in him, but also because he cannot afford his own dresser. So here, Paul is perceived as having the theater in his blood, but also as having some use to those who have already toiled to make real what is in their blood.

Cather gives Paul no redeeming quality in these first pages. We see his willingness to tell lies at school and to his father. We see his disdain for his neighborhood and his neighbors; we know he feels that all but him and those in his "garden" world are "stupid and ugly." Yet, with all this, we still find ourselves drawn to Paul. We understand his fervent desire to be part of the "fairy world of a Christmas pantomime" where he "felt a sudden

zest of life." We understand that he does not want to feel "destined always to shiver in the black night outside, looking up at it." In fact, we feel compassion when he spends the night in the basement. We can empathize with his fear of rats and understand his desperate loneliness when he wonders whether his father could view Paul as a burglar so as to kill him.

Cather draws us into Paul's fantasy world. When he sits on the "lowest step of his stoop" he listens to another young man speak with his father. They are talking of the young man's boss, apparently one of the "iron kings." The talk of "palaces in Venice, yachts on the Mediterranean, and high play at Monte Carlo appealed to his fancy," We share in the excitement Paul feels as the orchestra tunes up and his feeling of its "being impossible to give up this delicious excitement."

Cather contrasts Paul's two views of his world. He is drawn to "the exotic, tropical world of shiny glistening surfaces" and will, as he later demonstrates, do anything to avoid "the flavorless, colorless mass of everyday existence." Although the narrator explains that Paul lives on "highly respectable" Cordelia street, we are also given Paul's own view of his home. He has a "cold bathroom with [a] grimy zinc tub" and over his bed hang "the pictures of George Washington and John Calvin, and the framed motto, 'Feed my Lambs,' which had been worked...by his mother." Critic David Carpenter suggests that Cather puts these pictures on Paul's wall to emphasize that "the uncreative, superficial and life-destroying values perpetuated in the homes of Pittsburgh are essentially American values." When we look at this view, we might then begin to assume that Cather is siding with the environmental influences on our lives. Wasserman also explains how the embroidered hanging done by Paul's mother "symbolizes his poignant longing for love" that is as absent in his life as his mother is.

There is also a resemblance to Cather's own life in the story that makes the reader aware that such an assumption may have some validity. Edward Brown and Leon Edel write in *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* that "the dichotomy of Pittsburgh" provided what was to Cather "the breath of life": "out of its ugliness and slums, its industrial smoke and flame sprang the beautiful things." They continue to explain that Cather became enamored of the Pittsburgh stock company, where she forged a lasting relationship with one of the actresses in ways quite like Paul's and Charley's. They further illuminate the similarities when they say Cather painted the neighborhood where Paul lives with the "petty-bourgeois dreariness that Willa Cather had resented during her years of boarding-house living." Professor Dorothy Van Ghent, in an essay included in Bloom's anthology, adds further credence to the assumption that Cather may side with the concept of environmental influence. She writes that Paul is a "young, artistically or merely sensitively gifted person ... whose inchoate aspiration is offered no imago by the environment, and no direction in which to develop except a blindly accidental one."

However, David A. Carpenter points out in his *American Literature* essay that Cather made great use of irony in the story, and unless a reader is watchful for the irony, the easily drawn assumptions could be erroneous. In literature irony often comes in the form of sarcasm. For instance, in a passage describing Paul's romantic response to the theater, the narrator remarks that "the moment the cracked orchestra beat out the overture... or jerked at the serenade...all stupid and ugly things slid away from him." Dramatic irony, also evident in "Paul's Case," comes from a character saying something that will have a hidden meaning to the readers, a meaning he himself does not realize. Carpenter uses the scene where Paul sits alone in the Waldorf's dining room to explain this. Paul looks around at the splendor of the room and wonders, "Had he not always been thus, had he not sat here night after night, from as far back as he could remember, looking pensively over just such shimmering textures. He rather thought he had." Clearly, the readers know that Paul has not always lived in the Waldorf. Yet Paul is so entranced in his fairy world that he believes it is where he has always been, and that is why he feels so at peace with himself, because he need tell no more lies. What is very ironic here is that Paul is now living a lie, not just telling one.

However, even as Carpenter vacillates between whether Cather is espousing environment or heredity as deciding factors, Arnold comes down clearly on the side of psychological defect and heredity when she

writes:

Cather portrays in Paul a being who is alienated by more than environment and lack of human contact and understanding... [other Cather characters] could all have been saved by altered environmental circumstances and human caring, but not Paul. He thinks an environmental change is all he needs, but he is wrong.

She further states that Cather "makes it clear that not only is Paul not an artist, but his perception of the artist's life and the artist's glittering world is miles from the truth." In the words of the actors, his is "a bad case."

We need to remember, though, that Paul is an adolescent. Wanting a life different from the one we are born into is a large part of adolescent longing. Denying the obvious, such as that it is necessary to work to achieve one's dreams, is a denial we have all made at one time. Believing that all we need to become the real person we are is a change in environment is also a feeling many of us have encountered. So, then, perhaps "Paul's Case" really is a case study—one in which a confused and troubled young man with genes that require excitement actually benefits from a change in environment.

Source: Jennifer Hicks, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Is Cather's Paul a Case?

"Paul's Case" is Willa Cather's most popular story—deservedly so, although one of the reasons for its preeminence is that for many years it was the only one Cather would allow reprinted. It remains still the first choice of anthologists, as a glance at any half dozen current collections will show, and it has been dramatized in a popular public television series. Until recently, however, "Paul's Case" received little critical notice. One reason, doubtless, is that Paul's story seems admirably clear-cut: a sensitive adolescent, attracted to music and the theater, is pushed by a callous, commercial society into a desperate theft. Facing discovery, he takes his own life by falling under the wheels of a locomotive, symbol of the iron industrialism and grinding materialism of the age. Certainly that is how students respond to the story, attracted, naturally, by any picture of misunderstood youth and no doubt inclined to sympathize, too, with Paul's aversion to lady high-school teachers, with their shrill voices and "pitiful seriousness about prepositions that govern the dative" (*Troll Garden*).

No doubt a second reason is that "Paul's Case" resists being assimilated to Cather's other work. It seems to lack her stamp. In place of vast prairie horizons or silent cliff dwellings we have a "smoke palled city" turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh and a boy who markedly lacks the vibrancy we expect in Cather's central figures. Paul's specialness is a kind of inarticulate stubbornness: his teachers think of him as a cornered alley cat. Further, as this example suggests, the sweep of imagery and allusion that marks Cather's style elsewhere is missing here—the narrative voice feels cribbed and confined like her hero's actions and purposes. In fact, these actions and purposes are the real trouble. Could the Cather who wrote so frequently against materialism regard with sympathy one who spends stolen money on a week of high living in a New York hotel and who, confronting death, reflects that he knew now "more than ever, that money was everything"? The answer from the critics is no; in fact, the gathering consensus is that her story is bathed in irony.

Serious criticism began by confronting a task that has proved troublesome—fitting the story into the collection where it first appeared, seven stories having to do with art and artists that Cather titled *The Troll Garden*, her first book of fiction, published in 1905. The title and epigraphs suggest certain dangers in art, the work of not-quite-human trolls, fascinating to "forest children" peeking into their garden (the epigraph is from Charles Kingsley's *The Roman and the Teuton*). Cather made these dangers more puzzling and ominous by a second epigraph, from Christina Rossetti's "The Goblin Market": "We must not look at Goblin men, / We must not

buy their fruits...." Considerable critical acumen has been expended on this suggested framework. E. K. Brown, Cather's first biographer, asserts rather lamely that "Paul's Case," the last of the seven, makes a "fitting coda." James Woodress, in his Introduction to his definitive edition of *The Troll Garden*, and in his biography, speaks elliptically of a "forest child destroyed by ... the forbidden fruit," the assumption being, it would seem, that Paul transgresses a moral boundary and that theater and concert hall themselves exude a malevolency.

Other commentators are more explicit or venturesome. Susan Rosowski, in her study of Cather's romanticism, stresses the tempting dangers posed by the troll/goblin artists and the horror of the "bewitched" boy who has "lost his soul" to an "inhuman" fantasy. Marilyn Arnold finds Paul indeed a case, a psychological one, "eccentric, maybe even half-crazy," mistaken even about grimy Cordelia Street where Paul, motherless since birth, lives with his father and two shadowy sisters. Where Paul sees grey ugliness, Arnold sees a respectable neighborhood of white-collar workers, full of children and plans for the future. Paul is equally blind about the world of art, mistaking glitter for real worth. Not unexpectedly, Sharon O'Brien, in her psychobiography, also stresses psychology—Paul's "probable homosexuality" may be a thin disguise for Cather's. Cather/Paul yearns for a dissolution of self, apreoedipal union with the mother—a floating on flowers and music (the New York scenes) ending in the final dissolution of self in death. David Carpenter, in contrast, finds Paul's story a sociological case study of "an extremely bleak and seemingly irremediable type of determinism." Paul is a victim of his society, Pittsburgh Presbyterianism, symbolized by the twin pictures of George Washington and John Calvin over his bed, icons transmuted by business and industry into signifying the "uncreative, superficial and life-destroying values" that dominate American life. Paul is a debased version of these values: the New York scenes are heavily ironic, Carpenter maintains, especially Paul's sense of well-being as he luxuriates in the Waldorf. Nevertheless, Paul remains blameable because he "has consumed himself morally and ethically by living a lie—one purchased through someone else's hard work." We are back with the "half-crazy" boy who "sold his soul," however different the etiology of his pathological condition. In sum, these recent studies all point in the same direction: toward a weak-willed, morally corrupt, or corrupted youth inevitably enmeshed and destroyed by his own illusions.

That these varying analyses of Paul as a case study in psychology or sociology are plausible is proof that Cather has here succeeded in balancing the competing claims of the old arguments between the opposing determinisms of nature and nurture. Part of the fascination of Paul's story must inhere in just this tension. But is this what Cather is telling us about Paul—that he is the sum of forces impinging on him? I think not, and I think we are alerted to a less positivistic perspective through the comments of Paul's teachers, who, after the disciplinary hearing aimed at correcting his vaguely impertinent attitude, feel so baffled: "his drawing master voiced the feeling of them all when he declared there was something about the boy which none of them understood"; "each of his instructors felt that it was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble."

One aspect of the story may be agreed upon: it is certainly true, as all the recent commentators stress, that Paul is not a budding artist whose gifts are being wasted. His fascination with art, music, and theater is of a different order. He uses art as a means; the sounds of the orchestra or painted landscapes are avenues. When Paul rushes off from the high-school faculty meeting to his ushering job at Carnegie Hall, he first visits its art gallery where "he sat down before a blue Rico and lost himself." Later, after helping patrons to their seats, he falls into a similar dreamy state as the symphony begins: "he lost himself as he had before the Rico." Cather is explicit that his love of the theater is not based on hidden talent or ambition: "He had no desire to become an actor, any more than he had to become a musician." Nevertheless, Charley Edwards, the stock company juvenile, regrets it when Paul's father forbids Paul to loiter about the dressing rooms because the actor "recognized in Paul something akin to what churchmen term 'vocation'." What is meant by this strange term for Paul's obsession? And how likely is it that this easy-going stock company actor would employ it? It must be that the author is here signaling to her readers over the head of her character. Blanche Gelfant, writing on Cather's poetics, notes her technique of "self-reflexivity," of including hints about how to read her story in the story itself. Casting Paul as one who has heard a summons to spiritual duty must be such a signal. Paul is

servicing a master who calls—a master who calls him to life: in clinging to music, art, and theater, Paul is keeping alive intimations of "a world elsewhere," a world where he would not be an alien. He is fighting for his life—for the life of his soul. (Cather once wrote in the *Nebraska State Journal*: "'Soul'—it's too bad that we have no word but that to express man's innermost ego.") The life and death nature of his struggle is stressed again and again. When he ushers, he becomes "vivacious and animated," and color comes into his usually pale face, the face that one of his teachers found "drawn and wrinkled like an old man's." The first sound of the orchestra "seemed to free some hilarious spirit within him; something that struggled there like the Genius in the bottle found by the Arab fisherman. He felt a sudden zest of life." His feeling at the concert hall "was all that could be called living at all." "It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting." Conversely, he thinks of Cordelia Street, where his father in his night clothes stands at the head of the stairs demanding explanations, as threatening death, imaged as suffocation by drowning. ("The moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head.") When, in New York, he learns that his father has refunded the stolen money and has come to bring him home, he thinks, "the tepid waters of Cordelia Street were to close over him finally and forever." He can confront suicide with equanimity because, it now seems, "all the world had become Cordelia Street."

Further, Paul's crime, the theft, is treated as an act of self-preservation. When Paul's father placed him as a cash boy in a commercial house and forbade the theater and concert hall, "the whole thing was virtually determined." Paul takes the money instinctively, as a salmon swims upstream. He recalls it merely as "simple" and "astonishingly easy." In fact, he has a sense of relief at his "courage" which, before the theft, he had doubted....

From glitter and stage effects, then, Paul builds a dream world that comforts and sustains. Music and art are merely a means of entrance, a "portal of Romance." Again Cather hints at religious dedication: "Paul had his secret temple... his bit of blue-and-white Mediterranean shore." To convey the peculiarly hermetic quality of Paul's "dome in air," Cather alludes through an extended simile to a strange, even lurid, legend that shimmers forth strangely from the usual flat narrative voice: Paul's vision, we are told, "was very like the old stories that used to float about London of fabulously rich Jews, who had subterranean halls there, with palms, and fountains, and soft lamps and richly appressed women who never saw the disenchanting light of London day." This odd bit of social rumor is vaguely subversive. It hints at Paul's sense of alienation from his world, at his need for refuge, at the security money can buy, at religious apostasy, or paganism: a temple for the senses. Also—an ironic point, which lifts the story above the sentimental— it hints at Paul's limited imagination: this "pleasure dome" seems modeled after the lobby of a first-class hotel—perhaps the Pittsburgh Schenley.

The badge of Paul's fidelity to his dream, his talisman, is the red carnation he wears in the buttonhole of his shabby coat as he confronts his teachers, which they (correctly) interpret as a sign of his unrepentant attitude ("flippantly red"; "the scandalous red carnation.") Cut flowers become a motif: Paul notes that the "prosy" male teachers he despises never wear violets in their button-holes. Arriving in his suite at the Waldorf he orders violets and jonquils. Driving down wintry Fifth Avenue he notes the flower stands, "whole flower gardens blooming under glass cases, against the sides of which the snow flakes stuck and melted; violets, roses, carnations, lilies of the valley." Hot-house flowers, being both artificial (raised by human contrivance under unnatural conditions) and yet also natural (they are *real* flowers) appropriately symbolize the limits of Paul's imagination and his plight. They are expensive. Badges of color in a colorless, gray world, they nurture the inarticulate boy's dim sense of a beauty connected to substance and reality but not available to him. He buys carnations again on his last journey to the snowy hill above the railroad tracks....

With judgment closing in, and death his only out, Paul still has no regrets, and his final thoughts are put in the only terms his circumscribed life has made available. The truth he knows now, "more than ever," is that "money was everything, the wall between all he loathed and all he wanted." In a theatrical, indeed ritualistic, gesture he buries one of his carnations in the snow before launching himself before the train. As he dies, Paul

sees the "folly of his haste ... with merciless clarity": but the "folly" is not his crime, nor his suicide, nor his false moral sense; rather it is his failure to escape further, to more distant lands, to "the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands." In part Cather is here taking a sly pleasure in balking the sentimental moralists of her day who expect deathbed guilt and remorse. (In this she resembles her admired Mark Twain.) More to the point is Paul's vision of the temple of beauty that blesses his final moments. Surely this is the "epiphanous moment" of the story, confirming his vision as authentic and his fidelity to it justified. The closing line tells us that a compassionate universe receives him: "Then, because the picture making mechanism was crushed... Paul dropped back into the immense design of things." It is a moment of wonder and absolution.

But the immediate appeal of "Paul's Case" does not lie in its relation to the author's personal history or in its relation to other *Troll Garden* stories. It lies, I contend, in our fascination with Paul's transformation of himself, however short-lived, and his discovery, so ultimately wrong, and yet so plausible, so right, "that money was everything." Here is the true accomplishment of the story, the conversion of romantic longing into a devotion to the medium of exchange (of change) itself—currency, the coin of this democratic realm, the glass slipper that can change a sow's ear into a silk purse. It is a very American dream, the romance of money. It was to be given greater and more developed expression a few years after Paul's story in the transformation of James Gatz into Jay Gatsby, who also sought to invent a new self, to find new parents, to create an identity by means of drawers of shirts and opulent surroundings. In fact, there may be a direct line between Paul and Gatsby. In a 1925 letter to Cather, apologizing for what might be seen as plagiarism in the likeness of Daisy Buchanan and Cather's Marian Forrester, Fitzgerald declares himself "one of your greatest admirers" and singles out 'Paul's Case,' along with her novels, as a favorite.

Although the beauty Paul served was, like Gatsby's, "vast, vulgar and meretricious," and, like Gatsby, he served it criminally, he served it unswervingly. In her note about the Parsifal theme, Cather refers to the Blameless Fool: a nice epitaph for Paul.

Source: Loretta Wasserman, "Is Cather's Paul a Case?," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol 36, No. 1, Spring, 1990 pp. 121-29.

The Measure of the Music-Prose Rhythm in Willa Cather's Paul's Case

The elements of an individual prose style are elusive of definition. Although we can sometimes describe a writer's characteristic diction, imagery, and idiomatic preferences, most of our comments will be impressionistic and tentative rather than statistically precise. No writer is perpetually true to type, and fine prose, like every other creative manifestation, is often unpredictable in both its methods and effects. Nevertheless, in a well-established literature the rhetorical mannerisms of certain authors are usually distinguishable after long acquaintance. Habits of syntax and predilections in prosody, along with the stylistic resonances they produce, can be as distinctive as a signature in the world of letters.

One minor but useful prosodic device is prose rhythm and cadence. Although sometimes dismissed by plainstyle devotees as a superficial ornament, prose rhythm provides delightful embellishment to a well-constructed sentence by giving it a flow comparable to the measures of verse. These cadences need not follow a fixed pattern; the writer who strives for an auditory effect in prose simply highlights the natural rhythms of his native tongue through the artifice of arrangement and word choice. Certain combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables produce a pleasing, jarring, or otherwise noticeable effect in a sentence, and one which can reinforce the tone of a statement or smooth the flow of a narration....

Most writers who use prose rhythm in English do so in an instinctive rather than a calculated manner. In the case of Willa Cather, however, there are strong indications that her cadences were based on careful training in

classical prosody. We know that she received a respectable if not extensive classical education, first from the Englishman William Ducker, who tutored her in Latin and Greek when she was a schoolgirl, and later at preparatory school and the University of Nebraska, where she studied the major ancient authors. As an undergraduate she published creditable translations of Anacreon and Horace in her campus literary magazine. Further, when Cather left home to start out on her career, one of the first positions she held was that of Latin teacher in a Pittsburgh high school. Such a background, certainly more common in Cather's time than it is today, ought to alert us to the possibility of classical influences on her style. And indeed when we look at her prose, we find evidence not just of a professional writer's attention to graceful word arrangement, but also of cadences that are deliberately reminiscent of stately Ciceronian periods....

"Paul's Case" has been widely anthologized, and the story is probably familiar to most teachers of American short fiction. A young Pittsburgh student named Paul, progressively sickened by the numbing routine of his bourgeois family and dreary school-work, absconds with a thousand dollars to New York City. There he lives for a week, satisfying all the hunger for luxurious indulgence that had gone unfulfilled in his respectably ordinary existence. At the end of the week, with no money left and his father in town to find him and reclaim him, he chooses to commit suicide rather than return to the leaden monotony of his former life. The story makes extensive use of sensory allusion; colors, odors, textures, tastes, and sounds are lovingly, even morbidly dwelt upon. Paul's drab life in Pittsburgh and his stolen pleasures in New York, the homespun provincial homilies of his town and the frank urbane hedonism of the city, are vividly and effectively counterpoised. Cather's normally solicitous search for *le mot juste* is intensified in the hothouse of sensuous imagery that the development of her theme demands. The story is deliberately tinged with a fascination for the sort of artificiality associated with Nineties Decadents, towards whom the mild irony of the story is probably directed in part.

A good example of deliberate cadence can be found in the last words of a paragraph describing Paul's return to his home on Cordelia Street after a night at the Pittsburgh opera:

The moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head After each of these orgies of living he experienced all the physical depression which follows a debauch; the loathing of respectable beds, of common food, of a house penetrated by kitchen odors; a shuddering repulsion for the flavorless, colorless mass of everyday existence; a morbid desire for cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers.

The double dactyl of flavorless, colorless, with its heavy restraint, leads into a cretic and spondee clausula with a resolved variant:

mass of everyday existence.

This particular clausula pattern will be familiar to readers of Cicero. They will recall that Cather's everyday existence is metrically equivalent to *esse videatur*, as illustrated in the *First Catilinarian* 14.5. Now it is possible, of course, that this collocation of stresses in Cather is merely coincidental, but I am not inclined to think so. First of all, this same cretic and spondee pattern is repeated several other times in the story, and second, the pattern always occurs in end position. It would take the credulity of an invincible skepticism to believe that these cadences are purely fortuitous.

In any case, to return to the text, consider how Cather finishes her paragraph after the words "flavorless, colorless mass of everyday existence." The undertow of retarding stresses in these words emphasizes the barren constraint of Paul's life, the prose mirroring, as it were, the chafing repression that holds the boy's libido in check. But Cather completes her sentence with these words:

a morbid desire for cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers.

Here, the pent-up energy of the word *desire*, in itself metrically ambiguous, bursts the double dactyl opening of the phrase with a triple spondee. If the passage is read aloud, the effect is unmistakable; the rhythm compels the listener to believe in the power of Paul's desire to break out of his prison.

Another example of the cretic and spondee clausula can be found in a passage that describes Paul's reaction to the ambiance of the theater:

The moment he inhaled the gassy, painty, dusty odor behind the scenes, he breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant, poetic things The moment the cracked orchestra beat out the overture from *Martha*, or jerked at the serenade from *Rigoletto*, all stupid and ugly things slid from him, and his senses were deliciously, yet delicately fired

The ultimate proof that Willa Cather was a deliberate creator of prose rhythm lies in a seemingly minor detail of syllabication that a careless reader might easily overlook. One rule of classical poetry is that a terminal and an initial vowel placed next to each other are to be blended into a single quantity. When Vergil writes (Aen. 4.54)

his dictis *impenso animum flammavit amore*

the words *impenso animum*, although they contain six syllables, constitute only five metric positions, for the *o* and the *a* are blurred in pronunciation into one sound. Such blurring (which also takes place if the second word is aspirated) is called *elision*. If for some reason elision does not occur when it normally should, there is an awkward gap or *hiatus* between the two vowels, and this contingency is almost always avoided in classical metrics. Willa Cather's conscious use of cadence is evident from her careful avoidance of hiatus in end positions. The following paragraph demonstrates how solicitous she could be for perfection in such matters:

There were a score of cabs about the entrance of his hotel, and his driver had to wait Boys in livery were running in and out of the awning stretched across the sidewalk, up and down the red velvet carpet laid from the door to the street. Above, about, within it all was the rumble and roar, the hurry and toss of thousands of human beings as hot for pleasure as himself, and on every side of him towered the glaring affirmation of the omnipotence of wealth.

The rhythm of the last words (glaring affirmation of the omnipotence of wealth) is based on three resolved cretics and a final isolated stress on the word *wealth*. This final stress clinches the key significance of money in the world that Paul has just entered, and the triple cretics hammer the idea into the reader's consciousness. But the rhythm does not work unless the *e* and the *o* of the *omnipotence* are elided. Cather uses a similar elision in another sentence:

He had only to glance down at his attire to reassure himself that here it would be impossible for anyone to humiliate him

I anticipate the objection that one can hardly picture Willa Cather or any other great writer slavishly counting syllables and stresses in the heat of literary creation. Even if I were sure of the validity of that objection—which I am not—it would only serve to support my earlier contention that prose rhythm is judged solely by aural criteria; the cadence is there *because we hear it*, as the artist instinctively heard it in the toil of composition. It is not necessary to assume that every good author knows the minutiae of cadence, but what is certain is that fine prose has definite, stable rhythms to which its most masterly practitioners are drawn again

and again, as to recurrent patterns of harmony. As one commentator has said, "This kind of artful prose is not so much the product of conscious effort as the overflow of a sensibility thoroughly saturated in a tradition, to the extent that the esthetic unity of form and content has become second nature."

Willa Cather was certainly gifted with such a Sensibility, but I am also persuaded that she attempted to carry into her writing the graceful elegance embodied in the periodic and cadenced structure of Ciceronian Latin. The evidence of "Paul's Case" convinces me that she strove not just for excellent prose, but for a prose that registered, acoustically, the very heartbeat of her esthetic impulse. Cather once wrote that "[A great story] must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique. A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden.' There is no better description of the achievement of "Paul's Case" than these words, which remind us that language, even when silently read, evokes the memory of sound, and the resonance of imagined music.

Once we appreciate the subliminal acoustic capacities of written English as they are revealed in prose rhythm and cadence, we are liberated from the false notion—propagated by too many composition teachers—that prose is simply one more means of communication among a dozen others for getting across some abstractable message. This is a ubiquitous but degraded view of language that is in no small part responsible for the current decline in prose standards. For a master stylist such as Cather, fine prose is the complex product of many intellectual, esthetic, and emotional ingredients, all of them conspiring, as it were, to create a multifaceted mode of expression. The powerful effect of "Paul's Case" depends heavily on the hand-in-glove cooperation of sound and sense, on the conscious artistic complicity of diction, rhetoric, syntax, and rhythm. It is precisely this ideal unity of all the available resources of language that the artistry of Willa Cather aspires to attain.

Source: Joseph S. Salenu, "The Measure of the Music-Prose Rhythm in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case'," in *Classical and Modern Literature*, Vol 10, No. 4, Summer, 1990, pp. 319-26.

Paul's Case: Compare and Contrast

1900s: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is the center of steel manufacturing in the United States. Many industrialists, including Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and J. P. Morgan, made fortunes producing steel. When the residents of Cordelia Street share their "legends of the iron kings," they most likely are discussing one of these Pittsburgh industrialists.

Today: Steel still ranks among the ten largest industries in America, but by the end of the 1980s, the last of the Pittsburgh steel plants closed.

1900s: Spurred by the country's new-found wealth, grand hotels are built in U.S. cities, attracting wealthy travelers and rivaling European palaces in their glamour. In Pittsburgh, Paul is entranced by glimpses of the Schenley Hotel, and in New York, Paul chooses to stay at the Waldorf, the most luxurious of these luxury hotels.

Today: Urban luxury hotels are less popular. With the arrival of the jet age, more remote areas are now easily accessible, leading rich vacationers to prefer resort areas such as the Caribbean or the French Riviera.

1900s: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is founded with a \$10 million gift from Andrew Carnegie, the Pittsburgh steel magnate who devoted the last years of his life to philanthropy, donating large sums to establish cultural and educational institutions. Carnegie founded Pittsburgh's Carnegie Music Hall, where Paul works as an usher.

Today: More than 2,500 public libraries owe their existence to Andrew Carnegie. In a time of decreasing public money for education and culture, Carnegie's legacy has a profound effect on the health of American education.

1900s: An important artistic movement is Aestheticism, based on a belief in "art for art's sake." Aestheticists believe in the intense perception of beauty as an end in itself, and they believe art is independent of social, political, or ethical concerns.

Today: While some still hold to Aestheticism, many artists believe that art should comment upon and affect social issues. Multiculturalism, a movement which aims to include non-white, non-Western forms of expression into mainstream America, is one example.

Paul's Case: Topics for Further Study

Research the Age of Steel, particularly in Pittsburgh, How does your knowledge of Pittsburgh during the 1890s and 1900s help you understand Paul, Paul's father, and the other residents of Cordelia Street?

Investigate the values and definitions of the "American Dream," and compare your research with your analysis of Paul's values.

Do you think Paul chose his fate, or do you think environmental or natural laws determined his destiny? Research theories of free will and determinism in philosophy and social science to enhance your analysis.

Paul's Case: Media Adaptations

"Paul's Case" was adapted for television, directed by Lamont Johnson, produced by Ed Lynch, and starring Eric Roberts, Michael Higgins, and Lindsay Crouse, PBS, 1980. Released as part of the "American Short Story Series, Part 2," the 52-minute film is available from Coronet/MTI Film & Video.

The story was also released as a book-on-tape by Harper Collins in 1981.

In 1986, Caedmon Audio Cassette released *Paul's Case*.

Paul's Case: What Do I Read Next?

My Antonia, Willa Cather's 1918 novel about the lives of immigrants in the Midwest, is one of her finest and best-known novels.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, focuses on Jay Gatsby, a man who lives through romantic dreams. Gatsby defines the American character torn between idealism and materialism.

The Andrew Carnegie Reader, published in 1992 by the University of Pittsburgh Press, contains a selection of Carnegie's writings on business and philanthropy, including "The Age of Steel" and "The Gospel of Wealth According to St. Andrew."

Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1891, is a key work of the Aestheticist movement. Dorian, vain and rakish, wishes to remain eternally young and handsome. Dorian's portrait ages instead of Dorian, and is kept hidden until the novel's end.

Paul's Case: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources

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Woodress, James. Introduction to *The Troll Garden*, by Willa Cather, edited by James Woodress, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

Further Reading

Discovering Authors Modules (CD-ROM publication), Gale Research, 1996.

Contains biographical information on Cather's life and works as well as excerpts from a number of critical essays

Short Story Criticism, Vol. 2, Gale Research, 1989, pp. 88-122.

Contains excerpts from ten critical essays about Cather's works Carpenter's essay and the introduction deal with "Paul's Case" in depth.

Paul's case. A study in temperament. By willa sibert cather*. I. IT was Paul's afternoon to appear before the faculty of the Pittsburg High School to account for his various misdemeanors. He had been suspended a week ago, and his father had called at the principal's office and confessed his perplexity about his son. Paul entered the faculty room, suave and smiling. "Paul's Case" is a short story by Willa Cather. It was first published in McClure's Magazine in 1905 under the title "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament" and was later shortened. It also appeared in a collection of Cather's stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905). For many years "Paul's Case" was the only one of her stories that Cather allowed to be anthologized. Paul's Case by Willa Cather Copyright Notice ©1998-2002; ©2002 by Gale Cengage. Gale is a division of Cengage Learning. Gale and Gale Cengage are trademarks used herein under license. For complete copyright information on these eNotes please visit: <http>