

# Cather's connection to "paul's case"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To understand art, one must first understand the artist who created it and their motivation in doing so. In Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperance" the protagonist, Paul, is a unique and complex character, which gives insight into the complexity of his creator.

Understanding Cather's personality and her purpose in the creation of Paul is paramount in the analysis of Paul as a character. The story of "Paul's Case" was not wistfully imagined with the inclination to tell a pleasant story of light-hearted entertainment; the immaculate conception of the character Paul and his corresponding case is one of forced emotional expression under the pressures of a society that renounces those who with homosexual tendencies and the isolation that accompanies the concealing of such a secret. As scholar Marilee Lindemann states, "Cather's fiction is clearly and deeply marked by medical and juridical discourse that pathologies nonprocreative sexualities; often, instead of being subverted or critiqued, those discourses are brutally enforced, even by those who are most oppressed by them". It wasn't that Cather was elated to share the story of a young dainty boy who "was tall for his age and very thin, with high, cramped shoulders and a narrow chest... and a red carnation in his buttonhole" (Cather) but rather she was using writing as an escape from her own emotional struggles, with "Paul's Case" being the accumulation of those thoughts and feelings when channeled as written word. Paul is not only the protagonist but the manifestation of Cather's own homosexuality. Paul is the opposite of the archetypal man. He isn't interested in sports or chasing women, his main interests seem to be fashion and working "evening[s] as an usher at Carnegie Hall... where there were some of Raffelli's gay studies of Paris streets and an airy blue Venetian scene or two that always

exhilarated him" (Cather). Paul has to share a dressing room with a half dozen other boys and unlike most high school aged males in a changing room, Paul "was always considerably excited while he dressed... and he teased and plagued the boys until, telling him that he was crazy, they put him down on the floor and sat on him," which made Paul feel "Somewhat calmed by his suppression" (Cather). Paul's overt feminine disposition is counter to the expectations and ideals of the role of males in society. This phenomenon of crossing gender norms held a constant presence in Cather's own life, who for a time "dressed as a boy, cut her hair like a man's and called herself William Cather" (Rose). Understanding Cather is only the foundation in understanding Paul. Paul's creation is not entirely encompassed in the superficial exploration of his outward appearance and inward traits; the environment in which Cather chose to place Paul as well as the story she wove around him opens a window of insight into Paul's meaning as a character. The culminating event of "Paul's Case" gives the critical understanding of Paul's identity in the story as well as Cather's influence. In the end Paul takes off the red carnation, now wilted, that has symbolized his resilience throughout the novel: "It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the glass cases that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass" (Cather). The "one splendid breath" of the flowers parallels the tribulations taken on by Paul as he enjoys the slender of the life he thought he deserved and the subsequent death of his spirit after the last breath of life left that dream and "all the world became Cordelia Street" (Cather). Paul gets to the train tracks and takes a nap. He chose not to shoot himself but jump in front of a train. These

two actions are very significant. Paul wants to give himself an out, to have hope, to have an epiphany that makes him realize he doesn't have to do what he feeling is the only option. He has to die because society won't let him live and thrive. He isn't shooting himself, the train is killing him; he is not responsible for his death, society is. Understanding Paul's thought process calls for one to look deeper – to look into Cather's mind. She did not leave the story to end with any socio-political resolution for Paul. For Cather there is no happy ending, only a society that is adamantly outspoken against homosexuals and leaves no hope for understanding or acceptance. She understands that “ it [is] a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run” (Cather). Paul has a multitude of things that make him a unique character and pose difficulties for anyone to attempt to analyze. To obtain a firm grasp on Paul as a character one must reach down between the words, through the subtext and touch the author themselves for that is where the truth lies. One cannot fully appreciate the art without first appreciating the struggles of the artist that manifested itself into their work. Works Cited Lindemann, Marilee. Willa Cather Queering America. New York: Columbia UP, 1893. Print. Cather, Willa. “ Paul's Case.” By Willa Cather. Jalic Inc., 23 Apr. 2000. Web. 25 Sept. 2012.. Rose, Phyllis. “ The Point of View Was Masculine.” The New York Times 11 Sept. 1983: n. pag. Web..