

Compare and
contrast the
characters of paul in
'paul's case' and the
narrator of ...

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Thesis Statement:

The author of this essay wants to prove that Paul's actions are both influenced by economical and religious issues while the narrator's deeds in "I'm a Fool" are only economically influenced and happen mostly by mistake.

"Paul's Case" by Willa Cather is set in Pittsburgh at the beginning of the 20th century. The main character, Paul, is a high school student. He feels very frustrated with his life. He works as an usher at Carnegie Hall, but his father forbids him to work there. He eventually gets so fed up with his new work that he steals money from his employer and runs away to New York City. When he has to return home he chooses death over life as it was before.

"I'm a Fool" by Sherwood Anderson is also set at the beginning of the 20th century. It is told through the eyes of a young man who works as a horse swiper. He meets a girl of a higher social class at a horse race and is fascinated by her. He makes up a story about who he is and where he is from. He makes the girl believe that he is someone else. When he finally realizes that she likes him for whom and what he is he is too embarrassed to tell her the truth.

The narrator in "I'm a Fool" shows quite a strong resemblance to Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye". He does not seem to long for worldly greatness, but makes himself believe that he already is and has achieved all that he wants (to be). This can be described as "perceived perfection" and many young people suffer from it. Perceived perfection for

young people is when there are standards you just have to conform to to be accepted by the other teenagers. This might be the style of clothing, etc.

The narrator also thinks that he does not have the mental capacity to become greater and therefore is of the opinion that the way he is now is the best he could become.

But at the same time he feels himself to be inferior to other people and his actions therefore result from the yearning to make himself seem more important. The fact that he is friends with Burt makes this even more obvious: this makes the narrator appear superior as he does not have any prejudices towards colored people.

Furthermore, his longing to be nicely dressed shows his subconscious feeling of inappropriateness, he feels he is what he wants to be, but subconsciously he still needs to wear good clothes to feel even better: “ I left the job at noon and had on my good clothes and my new brown derby hat, I’d just bought the Saturday before, and a stand-up collar.” (“ I’m a Fool” 2)

The narrator’s easy going nature, his simple and straightforward character make him easily believable, the reader can relate to him. Because of his thoughts and desires, which are being revealed through the text by the author, and by studying the actions the reader becomes to understand the narrator. Paul is harder to understand for the reader, he is not as easily comprehensible. His emotionally instable character needs a more specific analysis to be understood.

Paul is still an adolescent. He wants more from life than he has right now and cannot wait to get out of Cordelia Street, the place where he lives. As mentioned above Paul does not have any close friends but it seems as if the teasing of his fellow students does not insult him. His mother's death affects him deeply and there are also indications that his father abuses him, at least emotionally:

The nearer he approached the house, the more unequal he felt to the sight of it all; [...] his father at the top of the stairs, his hairy legs sticking out from his night-shirt, his feet thrust into carpet slippers. He [Paul] was so much later than usual that there would certainly be inquiries and reproaches. Paul stopped short before the door. He felt that he could not be accosted by his father tonight; that he could not toss in again on that miserable bed. He would not go in. He would tell his father that he had no car fare, and it was raining so hard he had gone home with one of the boys and stayed all night. (" Paul's Case" 4)

Paul is very much intimidated by his father. This can be seen from his being afraid to just going to his room when he comes back late. He sleeps in the cellar instead just because he does not want to meet his father. He also chooses death over going back to his " normal" life and accepting his father's punishment. The narrator in " I'm a Fool" punishes himself for his deeds by not telling the girl the truth about himself. He is not sure enough of himself to face the consequences when telling her.

He is very materialistic; admiring the people he sees at work in Carnegie Hall (meaning the upper (middle) class who can afford visits there). But furthermore he also shows a strong interest in any kind of beauty: he appreciates a floral arrangement in a flower shop he passes by and he can get excited over the beginning of a symphony: “ When the symphony began Paul sank into one of the rear seats with a long sigh of relief, and lost himself as he had done before in Rico.” (“ Paul’s Case” 3)

It is hard for the reader to relate to Paul as he is introverted. He is not especially the typical teenager and his thoughts are therefore harder to relate to for the reader.

Altogether Paul is a very sensitive character and even if he appears to be the dandy and invulnerable for his teachers he is very hurt on the inside:

Paul stopped short before the door. He felt that he could not be accosted by his father to-night; that he could not toss again on that miserable bed. He would not go in. He would tell his father that he had no car fare, and it was raining so hard he had gone home with one of the boys and stayed all night. (“ Paul’s Case” 4)

Paul tries to avoid any kind of conflict with his father, he does not want to be hurt emotionally and therefore avoids and flees from arguments and fights.

The narrator in “ I’m a Fool” does not show any signs of religiousness. There are no indications about his religion. As a young man he swears quite a lot while telling the story and most of his swearwords go back to religious

swearing. When he says Gee whizz it is really the colloquial form of “ Jesus” (parallel to this: gosh amighty meaning “ God almighty”). It is very common in the United States that young people use words that are phonetically close instead of using the original “ religious” swear words. This way they can never be accused of blasphemy.

Paul has a totally different relation towards religion than the narrator in “ I’m a Fool”. When describing his room, Cather remarks that there are two pictures on the wall over Paul’s bed. One of them is George Washington (the first President of the United States of America, therefore an important person for patriotic Americans) and another one of John Calvin who has founded Calvinism and is therefore a very important person for believers of this faith. Paul and his family are Calvinists. Calvinists believe in the “ original sin” which says that man’s natural disposition and will is of an evil quality (<http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/dabney/5points.htm#p>). It is said to be “ original” because every human being is born with it, there is nothing one can do about it.

Calvinists also believe that God has already chosen the “ Elect”, the people he will spare and take to heaven at Judgement Day and therefore he has also chosen those who will go to hell. Men’s deed during their time on Earth cannot change anything about this. As no sinner will ever chose God and holiness he will never regenerate himself either (ibid). Paul is very fascinated by arts and beauty and has a very materialistic attitude towards life. He steals the money from his employer without feeling bad about it and, seeing it from his point of view, why should he? As God has already chosen the elect

and as he, if he is a sinner, does not have any chance to escape God's punishment on Judgement Day, he knows that there is no way to change his destiny. If God has chosen him to be one of the " Elect", he will still remain one of them, even if he steals the money and if God has not chosen him, stealing the money will not change this either.

Moreover, because of this belief he does not need to have an awful lot of thought about his suicide. Suicide itself does not make one a sinner, it is God's election that make one a sinner.

When reading " Paul's Case" for the first time, the reader might get the impression that Paul acts only out of economical reasons, merely because he wants to get out of the mediocre life he has been living up until then. But for Paul there is more to it as he loves art and beauty so much that he would do anything to enjoy it. He does not really want to be rich and belong to the upper class, the only thing that he desires is to be able to spend his life around and in art.

On the other hand, the narrator in " I'm a Fool" might feel that he is content with his belongings, but all his actions indicate that he attaches importance to having worldly goods. His attitude towards the man with the Windsor tie shows that very clearly. The narrator probably grew up at the height of the industrial revolution and saw people of his class grow rich and in consequence it does not seem farfetched to desire for more than he has.

Paul is really a very sensitive person, even if his character seems to be very superficial on first reading. But looking at the details he is very much

influenced by his belief. Reckoning that the deeds one does during their lifetime do not influence whether one goes to heaven or hell makes it easy for Paul to act the way he does.

In contrast to this, the narrator in “ I’m a Fool” creates the first impression of a juvenile liar, but a good-hearted one when he really is very much affected by his surroundings (industrial revolution) and therefore materialistic. It is not his choice to be money-oriented, it is more his surrounding that makes him feel discontent with what belongs to him even if he tries to make believe that he does not care for worldly goods.

Works Cited

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