

# Good example of research paper on sociology of homosexuality in pauls case

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In Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case," the titular character has no shortage of problems – his middle-class malaise, his dissatisfaction with life as it is, and the frustration of the ideals of art not matching the mundane nature of his existence. However, one implicit, unspoken frustration he has is Paul's sexuality, which is either latent or difficult to openly express in his life: "Central to the full experience of the story is recognition of the fact of Paul's homosexuality, a 'fact' that is nowhere stated openly" (Summers 108). Combined with the aforementioned issues, it is no wonder that Paul is driven to suicide – everything in his life does not match up to what he wants it to be. The homosexuality implicit in Paul's "case" becomes clearer in modern readings and contexts, as the varying aspects of Paul's personality are illuminated as being part and parcel of an often-stereotyped version of homosexuality.

On the surface, Paul's life is already miserable for a number of reasons, most of them relating to the unsatisfying middle-class status his family enjoys. Much of Paul's life and sense of satisfaction is tied to money and consumerism – he firmly believes that money is the solution to his problems: "he knew now, more than ever, that money was everything, the wall that stood between all he loathed and all he wanted" (Cather 60-61). Because of this, he is deeply troubled by the fact that he grew up impoverished and cannot stand the lower class aesthetics that surround him – he continually judges people's clothes, homes, and behavior negatively, as though he is better than them. This kind of behavior is symptomatic of Narcissistic Personality Disorder; after all, "Paul's problem drives him to take his own life, and simple adolescent arrogance does not lead to such drastic

measures” (Saari 389). By placing such importance on such aesthetic and material matters, Paul evinces a distinctly existential malaise that will not be satisfied by anything life can realistically offer him.

When reviewing Paul’s behavior, attitudes and personality, it becomes clear that Cather intended for Paul’s misery to stem (at least partially) from his status as a gay man. Paul’s gayness is “ clearly linked to his aestheticism, his preference for the artificial rather than the natural, and his immersion in art at the expense of life” (Summers 109). Much of the time, Paul occupies himself with judging others for their improper appearance, which also conveniently gives him an excuse for not wanting to associate with people who may not want to associate with him because of his homosexuality.

Paul’s behavior involves “ the invidious need of a hungry young talent to distinguish itself once and for all from the ‘ hysterical’ artifice of the hapless youth who needs talent but hasn’t it” (Sedgwick 65). He is clearly desperate for attention, playing into his narcissism, and conducts himself in a way often seen as stereotypical of gay men; he loves the opera, is prissy and effeminate, cares greatly about his appearance and that of others, and is effectively repulsed by women. The only woman Paul is even interested in is the Carnegie Hall soprano he witnesses, a swarthy, middle-aged woman performing opera, whom in Paul’s eyes has “ that indefinable air of achievement, that world-shine upon her, which, in Paul’s eyes, made her a veritable queen of Romance” (Cather 14). This maternal sort of figure offers a middle ground between the aestheticism of Paul and his need for comfort and belonging, making her womanhood something to be respected rather than desired.

These traits are rather stereotypical, as if to define Paul's homosexuality through his personality, but there are other indicators specifically alluding to his preference for men. His wrestling matches with the other ushers in the theater and his attachment to Charley Edwards, for example, indicate him finding ways to ingratiate himself with other boys in ways he does not attempt with women, whether through his efforts in Carnegie Hall or elsewhere. Charley even alludes to sensing that Paul is gay, as he lets Paul dress him because "he recognized in Paul something akin to what churchmen term 'vocation'" (Cather 28). These indicators and more are sufficient evidence to see that Paul is not just miserable because of his own failing narcissism and judgmental nature, but because he is alienated from others due to his homosexuality. He can only really find peace among those in the arts and theater, and even then these affections seemingly go unmentioned.

Because of Paul's dissatisfaction with his life and the loneliness of his homosexuality, Paul chooses to take his own life – but not before fulfilling these needs for a glamorous life, the one he feels he deserves. Paul's later status as a transient man who is living it up in New York City on stolen money is part of his need to fulfill his own dreams of being rich and having the material goods he craves: "Through his Bohemian upper-class slumming, in effect, Paul becomes faceless, unidentifiable, and indeterminate; he moves past regimes of sexual surveillance and finds himself beyond queer visibility" (Herring 115). In a way, he loses himself in New York City by making this move, immersing himself in a culture of transience where he, like other homosexuals during that time, had no home

and no purpose – slumming it in a frenetic, high-class illusion in which he is “far removed from communal identifications” (Herring 115). This lack of home or stability is still Paul’s preference, however, showing just how much he may have secretly craved the danger of illegality and irresponsibility, the lack of centering that being a member of the homosexual community was perceived to entail at the time.

The homosexual relationships that Paul engages in are fleeting and superficial, but play into Paul’s desire for a better life than he can afford (or which even exists). After going to New York City, he “fell in with a wild San Francisco boy, [who] offered to show Paul the night side of the town” (Cather 54). While this night is exciting for Paul, and their time together begins “in the confiding warmth of a champagne friendship,” their departure from each other is described as “singularly cool,” creating the implication of a very hurried one-night stand (or a rejected sexual overture) (Cather 54). Through these actions, Paul makes one last final push to live the life he dreamed of, although he knows it can only last so long – whether his stolen money runs out, or he is caught, Paul looks at his sojourn to New York City as his last hurrah before dying.

Though Paul’s middle-class upbringing brings with it a sense of ennui, it is through Paul’s implied homosexuality and the difficulties such lifestyles entailed in the early 20th century that a more fully-fleshed image of his anxieties become clear. While Cather does not explicitly state that he is gay, “the startling number and pervasiveness of such terms as gay [and others] create a verbal ambience that subtly but persistently calls attention to the issue” (Summers 109). There are more issues at stake than just his

homosexuality, of course – the aestheticism and narcissism he suffers from make him singularly miserable, in a way that is not wholly sympathetic: “Paul is not merely the homosexual victim hounded to his suicide by a society that persecutes him the youth himself partakes of the lack of imagination that culminates in tragedy” (Summers 110).

It can certainly be argued that Paul succumbs to his own superficial ideas of what life should be like, and his inability to settle for anything less leads him to a premature death. That being said, Cather also uses this story to show the idealism and passion of someone who does not settle, which is a very romantic notion. The tragedy that Cather shows in Paul’s life is not that he is arrogant and wrong for wanting all he can get out of life, but that he is somewhat courageous for taking bold steps to achieving his dreams, even if only for a night. Between the ability to fulfill his aesthetic desires for money, clothes and status, as well as his desire to be close to other men, Paul’s implied homosexuality is able to be fully realized in a way that his middle-class life could not.

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