

Paul's case: a study in temperament

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



In Paul's Case, Cather characterizes a young boy's over-obsession with an insular fantasy world as a deadly portal of escape from the mundanities of middle-class life. Cather equates Paul's incongruity in society and corresponding weaknesses to the life cycle of the red carnations that he adores.

The author marks Paul's attitude in the face of authority through his use of the bright, red carnations in a dull, gray environment. Cather notes Paul's repetition of the "scandalous" red carnation in his behavior through dramatic bows, falsified smiles, and unimaginable splendor. Worriedly, the teachers see Paul's vivacious adornment of his uniform as a dismissal of their authority and as a flaw to be exterminated. Further introducing Paul's diversion from the accepted, Cather innumeraably portrays the minute details of the working-class life that Paul despises.

As he returns home from an abstract world of his own creation, Paul detests arithmetic, the "horrible yellow wallpaper," and the "respectable beds, of common food, of a house penetrated by kitchen odors." Paul's every mention of the "respectable" neighborhood that he so disrespects increasingly drips with hatred for the middle class's simplistic nature.

Desiring the abstract fantasy and impossible, the gaudy and the creative, and the world beyond the glass, Paul repudiates concrete solutions in life such as hard work, logic, and arithmetic. Cather rationalizes the invariably penalized, spirited, and bright Paul's suicide, likening Paul to a red carnation.

Sitting beside the deadly train tracks, Paul admires the red carnations one last time and expresses that although the flowers bravely "mock the winter

outside the glass," they inevitably lose to the dominant " homilies by which the world was run." Like the flower's struggle to survive in the hostile winter, Paul's idiosyncratic nature cannot endure the plight of living in a world where he feels judged.

Cather marks the addictive nature of Paul's theatrical excursions through Paul's disdain for life without glamorous wealth and fame. Cather even likens the histrionic character of the boy to an " addiction to belladonna." The inescapable manner of Paul's fancy for the arts proves the fatality of having wild fantasies. After having a taste of the beauty that he religiously craves, Paul leaves the Carnegie Hall restless and irritable, despising any moment outside of this delicious enchantment that flavors his life.

Cather equates Paul's disastrous attitude to the " morbid" desire for " cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers." By labelling a seemingly harmless habit as " morbid," Cather implies that Paul's obsession is abnormal and unhealthy. As Paul delves further into his sacred place, Cather chronicles the ironic consequences of his lavish, debonair lifestyle. Although Paul falls asleep to the " chill sweetness of his wine," he wakes up one morning to a " painful throbbing in his head," resulting in his intolerance of the walls standing between him and his ideal world.

Much like a hazardous addiction, Paul's artificial attempts to escape endless swarms of duplicates ironically amplify his inability to tolerate ordinary life. Single-mindedly, Paul labels the " exotic, tropical world" that he reveres so fervently as one that he will forever watch from afar, feeling buried and entrapped by the ordinary.

Although his fanatical, private lifestyle provides him an escape from the mundanities of middle-class life, his raised expectations and brief kisses with success ultimately result in his suicide. Creating a consistently morose environment, Cather indicates that Paul's lavish lifestyle proves not only to be a sanctuary from judgment, but also a fatal method of self-isolation and reason for Paul's depressed view of ordinary life.