

Dying to live in paul's case by willa cather



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For people contemplating suicide, there will always be that thing in the corner that looms over everything and will not go away. There needs to be a reason as to why that person is so seriously hurt that they feel the need to no longer be alive. "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather is a story about a boy who runs away to New York City for a week with stolen money to live a life that he has always dreamed of living.

The boy's ideas of what life should be like eventually leads him to commit suicide and knowing that many things will forever remain undone. Paul leads a life that gets him into trouble and eventually kicked out of school as well as kicked out of the music hall he so much enjoys working at. Paul's feelings of needing to live a life that is better than the one he had eventually leads to his suicide.

In school Paul acts as though he is better than his classmates. He consciously does things that he knows will get him in trouble such as making a running commentary during his teacher's lectures, not paying attention in class and staring at the window instead, and sitting with his hand shading his eyes.

Cather states that he does things "with humorous intent" (92; this and all subsequent citations are to Cather) because he wants his teacher's and classmates to know that he does not want to be there. Paul strived to live a life that had more to it than what he had. When it came to the way he looked and the way he dressed Paul did things to stand out among his classmates such as wearing a red carnation in one of his buttonholes and wearing an opal pin in his tie.

His teachers felt as though his features also contributed to how he stood out among his classmates. Paul had eyes that were "remarkable... and he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way..." (91). What is important to note is that Paul was always very self aware of what he is doing. He makes the choice to attempt being funny and to mock his teachers as well as being aware of how his facial expressions and use of eye contact reflect how he feels toward everyone.

While Paul is under the scrutiny of his teachers during his teacher's evaluation as to whether or not he can return to school, Cather says, " Paul was always smiling always glancing about him, seeming to feel that people might be watching him and trying to detect something" (92). Paul is constantly hiding something and is always hoping that no one will figure out what that is. He believes that he doesn't belong in the school and that he is better than everyone around him.

There was something about him that no one could understand because that thing was something that only someone living the life he wanted would understand. Outside of school Paul detested his life. The only time he felt alive and amazed at something was when he was working in the music hall as an usher.

Paul even decides to go straight to the music hall instead of going home first after school. When it came time to begin ushering, Paul threw on his uniform excitedly, which was the first time he did anything with such emotion in the story, and he dashed into the hall to start seating people. He felt as though "... this were a great reception and Paul was the host" (93) this feeling

makes Paul come alive in the story like a real person. As he is working Paul sees one of his teachers and is immediately annoyed.

This example shows just how arrogant Paul would act around his teachers; he thought the teacher was only there because someone gave her the tickets. When the performance starts Paul really comes to life, "... it seemed to free some hilarious spirit within him; something that struggled there like the Genius in the bottle found by the Arab fisherman" (94).

Paul felt some zest of life that he never felt before, he only ever feels it when he is around those that he holds to this high standard that he one day hopes to be held at as well. After the show is over, Paul follows the performer out of the venue and seems to have an out of body experience while imagining what his life could be like if he was that person or had a life like theirs. He walks out of the music hall not willing to let go of the way he is feeling, it was "... delicious excitement which was the only thing that could be called living at all" (94).

He felt this way because he craved more to life. Paul waits for the performer after the show and while he did so he stared longingly at the hotel that the singer stayed at "... longing to enter and leave school-masters and dull care behind him forever" (94). When the singer finally exits the music hall Paul rapidly follows behind as to not miss her entering the hotel, when she did enter Paul "... too entered. He seemed to feel himself go after her up the steps into the building..." (94).

This experience only seems to increase the need for Paul to leave his life behind and truly divulge into what he wants. When Paul seems to come back

to himself he acknowledges that what he wanted stood right before him and he wondered if he was destined to always be the one on the outside looking in which would come to not be true.

At the end of this story, Paul has been kicked out of school as well as forbidden to work as an usher. He has gotten what he wanted by no longer having to surround himself by those he feels he is better than, but at the same time he has gotten what he cares for the most taken away from him.

He is with and without, and this feeling sets off a plan that Paul has always been afraid to execute. The one thing Paul has never wanted was to end up like the people on Cordelia Street, especially the man that Paul's father is always holding up as an example to him. He didn't like where he lived or those who lived around him. What tips Paul past his stage of sole arrogance is the fact that someone tells him he is capable of living the life that he dreams of.

Charley Edwards, a performer at the music hall Paul worked at, had told Paul that he had something he termed "vocation" (98). This makes Paul feel as though his dreams are obtainable, even though he ultimately knows otherwise. The only place he ever seemed to really live was the music hall, "This was Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love" (98).

His secret love was his want for a luxurious life like those of the performers and those who attended the shows with the correct intent and the correct way of getting there. What Paul truly wanted was "... to see, to be in the atmosphere, float on the wave of it, be carried out, blue league after blue

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league, away from everything" (98). Paul dreamed of being in this life. When this is all taken away Paul steals money from his place of employment and runs away to New York City to have the excursion of his dreams. On his first day there, he had already decided how his trip would end. He'd purchased a gun.

Paul knew that he was going to use it eventually and when he figured out that there was no way of getting away from Cordelia Street for good he made use of it. On his first day in the city Paul also exercised his free will and spent quite a bit of the money he'd stolen on things he'd probably only dreamed of ever purchasing.

Cather makes a point to let it be known that Paul had always had this plan in the back of his mind; " Not once, but a hundred times Paul had planned this entry into New York."(101). The only thing that had held Paul from acting on this plan was fear; Cather says, "... he could not remember a time when he had not been dreading something" (101).

He was afraid that he could not continue on living the way he was living with the lies built up and the dislike toward his family and classmates without knowing what it was like to finally making the trip to New York. His stay in the nice hotel with his new possessions was perfect for him because he was finally living the life he wanted. In the city, people who wanted what he wanted surrounded Paul or who had what he wanted, "... on every side of him towered the glaring affirmation of the omnipotence of wealth" (102).

Everyone had money here, money was everything, but the only way Paul could ever experience what he was experiencing was by lying and stealing

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because he knew that he could never get what he wanted. At the end of this psychotic trip, Paul reads in the newspaper that his father had recovered the money he had stolen and he knew that his trip was up. After reading this Paul knows he could never continue to live this way happily.

He could never truly be happy because his knowledge of what this life was like would always push him over the edge into an abyss of disgust for his life on Cordelia Street. On the first day in New York Paul purchased a gun, "... he had thought of that on his first glorious day in New York, and had even provided a way to snap the thread..." (106). That thread was his life.

He provided himself an out and used it. Paul was a boy who had big aspirations and who could have probably done so much more had his head not been filled with luxury and wealth. Paul had an "I know I deserve more, but I'm not going to try to get it the right way"-complex, and that resulted in a family losing a loved one and in Paul losing himself. It does no good to dwell on the impossible when the impossible will not even be attempted.

Paul consciously acted higher and mightier than his peers as well as his teachers because he was well aware of himself and of the fact that this life was not the one he wanted to be living. When he got what he liked taken away from him he decided to finally bow out and leave the things he disliked behind.

Paul reached New York with a plan to kill himself at the end of it and he leaves behind an unfinished life that he despised. Cather's last words about how Paul feels are "... the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone." (107). Paul knew what

he was deciding to leave, which was completely unfinished and unsatisfactory to his liking. But he had the knowledge that he could not live the way he wanted to live and he found a way out. His death is a direct result of his want for more in life.