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## The Unspeakable Self: Fantasy, Reality, and Queer Identity in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case"

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### Abstract

Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" is much more than a tale of teenage rebellion. It deals with an exploration of what happens to a sensitive person in a rigid society. This is a society that values conformity and materialism. It represses creativity and enforces strict gender roles. The effects are devastating. This analysis considers the issue of Paul's struggle from a number of angles. It relates the story to Oscar Wilde looking at the queer subtext of the time, according to critic Claude J. Summers. The paper also looks at the psychological view of Rob Saari who reads Paul as a narcissist. Then, it critically assesses the analysis of the narrative structure by Martha Czernicki, which discusses the use of fantasy and reality in the story. Paul's fate was not due to one factor. It was a perfect storm of failures. Society failed him because society could not accept difference. His love for beauty failed him because it could not support him. He failed himself because he was not able to relate with others and his own identity. "Paul's Case" is a heartbreaking story, which demonstrates the struggle for self-discovery in a hostile world.

**Keywords:** aestheticism, queer identity, narcissism, fantasy, alienation, imagination

### Introduction

The story is interesting because it is difficult to define. At first glance, the plot seems simple. It tells the short and sad story of a teenage boy from Pittsburgh who steals money, runs away to New York, and then jumps in front of a train. Beneath this simple plot, however, is a much more complex psychological and cultural narrative. For over a century, critics have interpreted Paul in many different ways. They have seen him as a tortured artist, a closeted homosexual, a clinical narcissist, or a victim of his social class. No single one of these readings seems to be enough by itself. It can be said that the best thing about the story is that it is hard to understand. The title itself, "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament," is a provocation. As Claude J. Summers observes, "The very title of the story, with its medical and legal overtones, is suggestive, for in 1905 discourse on homosexuality was couched almost exclusively in terms of criminality or psychopathology. The protagonist, the title implies, is a fitting subject for a psychological or criminal case history. The subtitle, "A Study in Temperament," is particularly telling insofar as it implies a psychological condition and insofar as "temperament" is practically a code-word for sexual orientation." (109). Rob Saari, approaching the text through the lens of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, argues that, "To receive the diagnosis of a narcissistic personality disorder, a person must meet five of nine criteria: Paul appears to be a prototypical case, meeting all nine. Amazingly, it seems that Willa Cather intuitively set forth the diagnostic criteria for a narcissistic personality disorder about ninety years before scientists reached a firm, empirically validated consensus" (389). Martha Czernicki, reading the story through Freudian psychoanalysis, proposes that much of the New York episode is a fantasy occurring in Paul's mind during a train ride, and that his suicide is a return to the harsh reality from which the fantasy offered only temporary refuge (242-43). This paper brings these three readings into dialogue to argue that the real strength of the story lies in the convergence of aesthetic, psychological, and social pressures that make Paul's fate feel at once inevitable and unnecessary.

## **Willa Cather and the context of "Paul's Case"**

To understand "Paul's Case," it helps to know about the author and the time in which she wrote. Willa Cather's own life was a complex journey of figuring out her identity, especially her sexuality. In his influential study, Sharon O'Brien shows how Cather slowly grew from thinking herself as a male in her youth to realising her identity as a woman writer. Cather guardedly referred to her sexuality as "the thing not named" (Summers 103). As O'Brien says, during her career Cather was both "the writer transforming the self in art and the lesbian writer at times compelled to conceal her feelings by projecting herself into male disguises" (O'Brien 215).

The story cannot be discussed outside of the massive Oscar Wilde scandal of 1895. That incident created a shadowy cloud on the dialogue related to art, effete men, and homosexuality. The young Cather was in some way profoundly hostile to Wilde and to the aesthetic movement. Even in the 1890s in her columns in the newspapers she attacked him with a ferocity that was far beyond mere criticism. She despised his artificiality, his parody of gender roles, and what she referred to as his "drivelling effeminacy" (Summers 104). To her, his incarceration marked the conclusion of a "fatal and dangerous school of art" (Summers 105). Summers opines that her hostility was so intense that it showed a greater anxiety. To Cather Wilde was not simply an artist whom she did not like. He was a personal psychological threat due to her own unrecognized lesbianism.

Her point of view had altered a lot by the time she wrote "Paul's Case" in 1904 and 1905. Five years after Wilde's death, people became interested in his work again. Indeed, the main character Paul, is a Wildean figure. He has a carnation in his buttonhole. He thinks fake things are pretty, and regards the theatre as a sacred place. But Cather does not only talk about how much Paul loves beauty. She looks at it intently, with kindness as well as a steady gaze. So, the story is more than a character study. Cather carefully thinks about how art, identity, and the persecution of outsiders are all related.

### **Alienation and the critique of bourgeois society**

A deep feeling of alienation is at the heart of "Paul's Case". Paul's feeling like an outcast is not merely related to his teen age. It is a direct outcome of the stifling middle-class culture of Pittsburgh. Cather depicts this world as unattractive and mundane. Paul lives in Cordelia Street. The nasty smell of the kitchen and the ugly wallpaper symbolise the life that he despises in the family (Czernicki 245). His father is exactly like Cordelia Street who represents the ideals of this civilisation. It is a place where one has to struggle to earn money and a place where there is little space to express the artistic feelings that characterise his son (Czernicki 242). Although his father has good intentions, his inquiries and criticism only contribute to Paul being alienated.

The education system adds to the alienation of Paul. Similar to his family, the school does not comprehend or patronise his personality. Cather writes, "His teachers were asked to state their respective charges against him, which they did with such a rancour and aggrievedness as evinced that this was not a usual case" (Cather 243). They scorn him in their attempts to reform him which they find irritating and alarming. The comment of the drawing teacher concerning Paul is significant. He says, "...there was something about the boy which none of them understood" (Cather 244). It is not only arrogance that Paul has towards his teachers and classmates. It is a means of shielding himself against a world that appears to be unfriendly to him. He invents fantasies of having friends among the actors at the local theatre. This is a plea of trying to prove that he is not like the rest of the boys in Cordelia Street. This is the acting all the time, the necessity to lie in order to get attention, which merely isolates him further and makes him get into a trap of his own making.

But Cather complicates the situation. The very name of the street, Cordelia, reminds one about King Lear's daughter. It is a sign that the demise of Paul will be just as sad and meaningless as the death of Cordelia. According to Summers, Cordelia is both—individually good and good for the community (Summers 115). The story is also haunted by a framed motto that reads "Feed My Lambs" that was made by Paul's late mother. It represents pure unconditional love (Summers 116). However, opposite to this symbol of community, there is the red carnation. It is an artificial bloom that links Paul to Wilde and to a beauty that can only flourish under glass, never in the open air.

### **The allure and peril of aestheticism**

The most powerful way that Paul shows he is against the conformity of his cultural background is by adopting aestheticism. As Summers argues, Paul is a classic "Willean aesthete." He is a figure who finds a safe haven in art and artificial things to escape the ugliness of the material world (108). For Paul, the theatre, the opera, and the glamorous world of Carnegie Hall are not just simple entertainment. They are sacred places where he can get away from the "stupid and ugly things" of his everyday life. In these places, he feels he has the potential to do or say splendid, brilliant, and poetic things (Cather 251). Cather further says, "It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting. This was Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love" (Cather 251).

Cather's portrayal of aestheticism is not without critique, though. While she had come to a more considered understanding of the movement since her vitriolic attacks on Wilde, she remained wary of its dangers. As Summers points out, the story is an indictment of the failure of imagination in American society, but it also implicates the Willean aesthete in that indictment (Summers 108). Paul's aestheticism is ultimately passive and consumerist. He has no desire to become an actor or a musician; he simply wants to float on the wave of it, away from everything (Cather 252). He is singularly uncreative despite his addiction to art: neither "artist, musician, writer, actor, nor reader" (Summers 112). His artistic taste is not a sign of depth. Instead, it is a symptom of his disconnection from real life. This is the paradox at the core of Cather's critique. He is different from the unrefined people on Cordelia Street because he is sensitive. This is also what keeps him from making the connections that could have saved him.

Cather explains this idea with a degree of controlled sympathy. She writes that perhaps it was because, in Paul's world, the natural world almost always looked like ugliness. For that reason, a certain amount of artificiality seemed necessary for something to be beautiful (Cather 251). In her unflattering depiction of American middle-class life, Cather provides a context that makes aestheticism understandable and attractive. At the same time, she exposes the unreality on which it is based and condemns it for its disdainful rejection of mundane life and human relationships. She convicts in turn both Presbyteria and Bohemia, to use her private terms, for failures of imagination: the one for its dullness and conformity, the other for its lack of generosity in divining the motives of ordinary people (Summers 117).

### **Gender, sexuality, and the unspeakable self**

Paul's passion for beauty hides his more profound and intimate conflict. His gender and sexual identity are strongly associated with this conflict. As Summers convincingly argues, "Paul's Case" is a significant but coded contribution to gay male literature. The unspoken secret of the story is Paul's homosexuality (108). Cather was a lesbian herself and understood the need to be discreet. She uses hints and suggestions to create a feeling around Paul's sexuality without ever saying it directly. The story is full of hints that point to his queer identity. These clues include his small size, the strange brightness of his eyes, his fancy clothes, his attraction to a young actor and a Yale student, his fussiness, his use of violet water, and his secret fears (Summers 108).

Summers finds a consistent pattern of suggestive language. He notes the repeated use of words like gay, fairy, faggot, queen, tormented, secret love, and unnatural. Even if these words are used innocently in their context, they create a verbal mood that subtly suggests homosexuality is an important part of the work (109). Paul's homosexuality is most powerfully symbolized by the unnamed fear that has haunted him for years. Cather describes it as that shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him (Cather 255). Summers argues that this fearful dread deeply shapes "Paul's defensively contemptuous response to life." It is also obviously connected with his aestheticism, his dislike of nature in favour of the artificial and his devotion to art rather than the real human contact (109).

Paul is a menace to the patriarchal world of Cordelia Street with his effeminacy and his artistic fascinations. His father is puzzled by the behaviour of his son. He is unable to comprehend such a personality, which is unlike the anticipated norm. The role model that is introduced to Paul is that of the young neighbour who married at the age of twenty-one on the advice of his boss. This rebellion of Paul is not only against the ugliness of his surroundings. It goes against the very definition of being a man in the early twentieth century America. It is at this point that Paul decides to steal the money and escape his life in Pittsburgh and, in doing so, he goes through what Summers refers to as a symbolic coming out (109). According to Cather at that point, he felt "a curious sense of relief, as though he had at last thrown down the gauntlet to the thing in the corner" (255). But this act of defiance is not an acceptance of his sexuality. It is a rejection of everything. It does not lead to freedom but to death.

### **A psychological portrait: narcissism and the fragile self**

A psychological viewpoint has been added to social, cultural, and queer readings of the narrative by Rob Saari. Saari says that Paul is a classic narcissist. He has determined that Paul fulfils all nine diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. These include his exaggerated sense of self-worth, his fantasy life, his desire for admiration, his belief that he is better than other people, and his incapacity to empathise with others. It is interesting that Cather wrote about this character in 1905. This was around ninety years before psychologists officially agreed on what narcissistic personality disorder looked like. She seemed to get there instinctively.

Saari's study is especially useful because he looks at what lies beneath the narcissistic surface. He observes that a brittle sense of self-worth that yearns for continual attention—real or imagined—is what holds the narcissistic personality together (390). Without this constant attention, the self-esteem of the narcissist declines. This leads to depression, social withdrawal, or suicide. Karen Horney talking about a narcissist explains: "...repeated failures in enterprises or in human relations—rejections—may also crush him altogether. The self-hate and self-contempt, successfully held in abeyance otherwise, may then operate in full force. He may go into depressions, psychotic episodes, or even kill himself or (more often), through self-destructive urges, incur an accident or succumb to an illness" (Horney 195). Beneath Paul's arrogance lies a deep-seated dread that has haunted him since childhood. Cather tells us he had always been tormented by fear, a sort of apprehensive dread, that there had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place (Cather 255). This feeling of smallness, of underlying low self-esteem, leads to his imperative desire to show himself different from his surroundings and hide beneath an attire that would assure safety from humiliation (Saari 393).

Summers and Saari's interpretations do not contradict each other. Saari's description of a narcissistic personality can be interpreted as Paul's way of protecting himself from the homophobic environment that Summers talks about. Paul's grandiosity, disdain for normal people, and frantic desire for praise are all things that happen to a sensitive young guy who finds out that his deepest sentiments are shameful and cannot be put into words. In this perspective, narcissistic armour is a psychological adaptation to an untenable social circumstance. Paul's teachers seem to be aware of this dynamic. As Saari notes, the feelings they experience are typical for therapists who work with narcissistic patients. They feel self-protective and angry, but they also recognize that something is genuinely wrong (391). The drawing master's hesitant observation captures this double awareness perfectly.

Beyond Saari's diagnosis, James Obertino has argued that Paul's case is "virtually a textbook instance of post-traumatic stress disorder" (49). He notes that Paul's lifelong dread fits the official criteria for PTSD. Cather describes this dread as "the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him" (51). This fits the PTSD symptoms of hypervigilance and a feeling that one's future is cut short (51). This perspective complements Saari's reading. Trauma and narcissistic defences can exist at the same time and even reinforce each other.

### **The interplay of fantasy and reality**

The psychological and thematic complexities of "Paul's Case" are made even richer by Martha Czernicki's analysis. She studies the blurry line in the story between fantasy and reality. Responding to an earlier argument from Michael Salda that much of the story happens only in Paul's imagination, Czernicki agrees that the New York episode is largely a fantasy. However, she believes the break between reality and fantasy occurs at a different point in the story. She argues that the fantasy begins not after the basement scene, but during the train ride. She also argues that Paul's death by suicide is his return to reality (243).

Her argument rests on compelling evidence. Most striking is her identification of two nearly identical passages describing the landscape near Newark that frame the New York episode. In the first, Paul wakes on the train and sees snow whirling above white bottom lands. Twenty-five paragraphs later, when he arrives at Newark, the snow lies heavy on the roadways and the weed stalks project singularly black above it. If the New York trip were real, more than a week would have passed between these descriptions, yet the landscape has barely changed. Czernicki proposes that only the time of a short train ride has elapsed, during which the entire New York fantasy unfolds in Paul's mind (244). The shift from whirling to heavy snow mirrors the shift from fantasy to the depression that characteristically follows his reveries.

Czernicki also shows that the New York episode is structured in much the same way as the earlier Schenley Hotel episode in Pittsburgh, where Paul stands outside in the rain, imagines the glamorous life inside, and is then jolted back to reality by a gust of wind. Both episodes involve a newspaper supplying material for the fantasy, a bright warm interior viewed from the cold outside, and an abrupt return to unpleasant reality. The structural parallel signals that the New York episode is also a fantasy, Paul's most elaborate one, constructed from the same materials he has used before (244-45). Within this fantasy, the wish fulfilment is transparent: the shabby and frayed boy becomes resplendent in new clothes; the grimy bathroom is replaced by the deliciously soft and fragrant air of the Waldorf; the authority figures who have long tormented him are replaced by a world in which he commands a superior position (245). Czernicki draws a thought-provoking comparison with Jorge Luis Borges's "The South," in which a dying protagonist dreams up a romanticised death rather than accept the humiliation of dying in a hospital bed (246).

Whether you accept Czernicki's reading quite literally or simply interpret it as Cather's way of demonstrating Paul's powerful imagination, the consequences for the story are significant. If New York is a fantasy, then Paul never actually escapes Cordelia Street. His whole rebellion occurs only in his head. His death becomes the only act of defiance he ever commits in reality. This makes his story far tragic. It also supports Summers's point of Paul's failure of imagination in the 'Wildean' sense. Even in his most detailed fantasy, Paul can only use materials that come from a limited world that he already knows. He imagines things from the Sunday supplements, the Schenley Hotel and the theatre company. As Salda puts it, his imagination is "constricted and circumscribed" (Salda 118). The dead grass and dried weeds sticking out of the snow are grim reminders of the reality that is waiting for him (Czernicki 244). The fantasy, with all its splendour, is only a short interlude before he gives in to the immense design of things.

## **The mutual failure of imagination**

The concept of imagination, which Summers uses, is especially important here. For Wilde imagination was about knowing what your own experiences meant and what your relationships with others meant. It was the quality that separated real depth from just being clever. Summers makes the argument that this is the very quality that is lacking in nearly every character in "Paul's Case" (110). Paul's teachers do not have the imagination to understand his personality, so they allow themselves to be pushed into vicious behaviour. His father does not have the imagination to see his son's interest in art as a positive thing instead of a problem. So, he reacts by isolating Paul from the only things that give him pleasure. The neighbourhood, though generous enough to forgive Paul's theft, does not have the imagination to think that Paul might need more than just home and church.

But Cather also demonstrates a failure of imagination on Paul's part. His enjoyment of art is totally passive and is only a form of escape. He does not have any deep relationships with anyone. His encounter with the Yale student is concluded by a very cool goodbye. He does not feel lonely and embarrassed in New York because he does not want anything from other people except the right to watch them and guess about their lives (Summers 113). As Summers smartly observes, Paul's values are not actually different from the values of Cordelia Street. Both Paul and his neighbours idolize wealth. The only difference is that Paul does not have the patience for the initial stages of earning it (Summers 113).

This common failure of imagination results in what Summers refers to as a bitterly ironic tragedy of errors (110). Paul is not just a victim. He is also the cause of his destruction. His contempt of other people, his inability to perceive the real concern behind his father's clumsy actions, and his refusal to take anything but the life he imagines in his fantasies are all personal failures. These failures are directly related to his fate.

## Conclusion

When looking at the works of Summers, Saari and Czernicki together, one senses insights which are not expressed by any of these individually. Paul is not overawed by any one thing. He is trapped in three barriers. Society does not accommodate him. The aestheticism he clings to as an escape cannot sustain him. It is passive, consumerist, and cut off from genuine feeling. His narcissistic disdain, meanwhile, walls him off from the people around him, even when they try to reach out. Each of these failures feeds the others. Together, they make Paul's fate feel inevitable, though tragically, it need never have happened at all.

The final image of the narrative remains in the mind. Paul throws himself before a train after burying his withered carnation in snow. His mechanism of image-creation is crushed, so he returns to the grand scheme of existence. Summers sees this as Cather's final judgment against the aesthete's self-destructive alienation from society. Czernicki sees it as a final dissolution of dream into reality. Saari feels it is the culmination of a personality too fragile to survive without constant validation. I think all three are correct, and that is precisely the point of it all. Paul's demise is a release and a waste at the same time.

The closing image stays with the reader. Paul buries his withered carnation in the snow and steps in front of a train. His capacity for fantasy is finally destroyed, and he falls back into what Cather calls the immense design of things. Summers reads this as Cather's verdict on the aesthete's self-destructive withdrawal from the world. Czernicki sees it as the last dream dissolving into hard reality. For Saari, it marks the collapse of a personality too fragile to hold itself together without constant approval. All three readings, I believe, are right, and that is precisely the point. Paul's death is at once a release and a waste.

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