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Methods of Literary Study  
12 April 2019

“Paul’s Case”: Suspension In Setting

The short story “Paul’s Case,” by Willa Cather, is a story about a boy’s alienation from the world that he lives in and his choice to suspend himself from that world. Thus, each setting in “Paul’s Case,” the theater, Cordelia Street, and New York serve to put a spotlight on the aspects of the world that Paul chooses to remove himself from: performance, replication, and ephemerality. In the transition from setting to setting, Cather illuminates how Paul attempts to suspend himself from the artificial “design of things.” (Cather, 234)

To Paul, Cordelia Street represents duplication. “It was a highly respectable street, where all the houses were exactly alike... ..all of whom were exactly alike as their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived.” (208-209) Cordelia Street is the ultimate performance for society: an exhibition of “normality” that never ends. The houses are exactly the same. The people are exactly the same. Every day is exactly the same. This monotony is revolting to Paul. He describes feeling physically ill every time he enters the area and considers lying in order to not return to his own home. He does decide to go home, but he sneaks in and sleeps in the basement, out of fear of his father, who, like all the fathers on Cordelia Street, seeks “...to see their own proclivities reproduced in their offspring...” (Cather, 212) His father only allows him to be an usher to fulfill his own vision of what boyhood is: a precursor to capitalist manhood in the workforce. This manhood ultimately serves to be the basis of a reproductive adulthood. Paul’s father holds up a man who married the first woman he could as a model for Paul. That man has four children now. He is barely twenty-six. Yet Paul feels that this

reproduction is a form of death. The boy muses that “[t]he moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head.” (209) When Paul’s father is on his way to reclaim him, Paul decides that “...all the world had become Cordelia Street.” (232) He even declares that being trapped on Cordelia Street is worse than jail because Cordelia Street, unlike jail, is something that is permanent, through its replication.

After Paul is castigated by his teachers, he seeks out his sanctuary: the theater. At first, it appears that the theater is the one place that Paul is comfortable in: He is immersed in the arts, and he even works as an usher, where he is respected. However, this image begins to melt away. Even in his apparent “sanctuary,” there is little language of freedom. Instead, the language compares this life to a performance in and of itself. “As the house filled, he grew more and more vivacious and animated, and the colour came to his cheeks and lips. It was very much as though this were a great reception and Paul were the host.” (Cather, 205) Paul *plays* the role of an usher. The patrons *pretend* that they think him charming. In turn, Paul *acts* like he remembers them. This illusion is entirely shattered when Paul’s English teacher arrives at the theater, and despite Paul’s hatred of her, he concludes “...she had about as much right to sit there as he had.” (Cather, 205)

The theater is not removed from the assembly line of the education system that Paul has such a distaste for. It is, in fact, a part of it, but instead of churning out obedient children, it creates escapist experiences. In this space, desire for rebellion has an unobtrusive outlet. During the performance, the audience can be freed, but afterwards, all returns to normal. After imagining himself following the singer into her hotel, Paul reflects on what he truly does in the theater. “He felt no necessity to do any of those things; what he wanted was to see, to be in the atmosphere,

float on the wave of it, to be carried out, blue league after blue league, away from everything.”

(217) Paul has no desire to *be* an artist. What he wants is an avenue for physical escape, not just a setting to exercise thoughts of deviancy.

Paul's bid for freedom comes in the form of his journey to New York. Paul plans extensively in order to get there without being spotted. He takes a day coach and sleeps scarcely out of fear that he will be recognized on a proper train. He also has imagined a detailed idea of what New York *should* be, so much so that when he arrives in his hotel room and *one* detail is missing, he immediately completes his picture, by buying his fresh flowers. The boy wallows in the hotel room. High in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, he is suspended above even this realm of suspension. As Paul slides into a warm, luxurious bath, the boy concludes that he has found an even greater fortune than what the money he stole from his father can procure: security. “He was entirely rid of his nervous misgivings, of his forced aggressiveness, of the imperative desire to show himself different from his surroundings.” (Cather, 227) For the first time, Paul feels like he is among like-minded people. He does not need to lie, or even perform, in order to justify himself. However, this happiness is always accompanied by the omnipresent sense of borrowed time. Paul only has a week.

It is not just a week to enjoy himself. It is a week to *live*. Paul relaxes in the bath. He visits the flower display in snowy Central Park. The boy even spends a night with a college student from San Francisco. Each of these experiences, though, causes the second timer to go faster. That second timer is money: the currency of Paul's suspension. For every detail that he must get exactly correct, the flowers, the bath, the excursions, the force that is keeping him suspended, that money that enabled him to leave Cordelia Street in the first place, dwindles.

Nevertheless, Paul doubts the reality of his past. Cordelia Street seems so distant that New York must be what is everlasting. When the arrival of his father is upon him, the money having run out, Paul flees. He has no regrets, except that he should have escaped farther, so that he had more time: a longer suspension. As he comes to the train tracks, where he will commit suicide, Paul reflects on his life, his slow-motion thoughts a “picture-making mechanism.” (Cather 234)

The carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed; all their red glory over. It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the show windows that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass. (Cather 233-234)

He must die. He can not live in the mechanical world. His suicide is not cowardice, though, he reasons. It is actually valiant. It is more difficult to fight against the machine, a machine that Cordelia Street is a mere cog in, than to submit to it. Everyone has a short life, that “one splendid breath,” but there is a choice between being a passive audience member and a rebellious actor. Paul chooses to end his life before he can be reclaimed by the assembly line.

However, that decision causes Paul to drop into the “design of things.” In her essay *A Boy Under The Ban of Suspension*, critic Chung-Hao Ku laments the status of “Paul’s Case” as a queer narrative. “Paul’s adolescence is not validated in retrospect. Instead, the bourgeois arc of maturity evokes a ghostly adulthood, looks forward to a backward glance at Paul’s adolescence as a wayward stage, and threatens to replace the boy before the normative, adult Paul ever exists.” (83) Paul kills himself before his sexuality has fully developed. As a result, Ku contends, it is pointless to argue whether Paul is “protogay” or simply “effeminate.” The only person who

can determine that is Paul. A dead boy, though, can not speak up for himself. Thus, we become the locomotive that buries Paul beneath its wheels, the paragon of the mechanical modernity that he can not abide by: running over Paul as we categorize him according to our standards. In suspending himself in adolescence forever, Paul does not escape the performative, replicative, and ephemeral cycle of adulthood. Instead, he suspends himself in that adulthood's judgement for eternity.

#### Works Cited

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