

# THE HOMOSEXUAL MOTIF IN WILLA CATHER'S "PAUL'S CASE"

by LARRY RUBIN

With the virtual lifting of social taboos in the discussion of sex in recent years—a new freedom reflected both in the creation of literature and in its analysis—we have been getting some highly evocative (and sometimes highly provocative) reinterpretations of works considered classics of American literature. Particularly in the area of homosexuality, this newly unfettered approach to the libidinous urges of various literary characters has thrown the light of Freud upon certain dark and previously unmentionable aspects of the psychological motivation of those characters and even of the overall vision of the authors involved. Familiar examples include Leslie Fiedler's bold look at the relationship of Huck Finn and Nigger Jim, and his suggestion of homosexual motifs in such aspects of *Moby Dick* as the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, and the famous sperm-squeezing passage, depicted by Melville as symbolizing the ultimate in loving brotherhood.<sup>1</sup>

One short story that seems unusually susceptible to this type of psychological re-evaluation is Willa Cather's minor masterpiece "Paul's Case." This story first appeared in 1905, at the height of the period of Victorian repressiveness, and in view of this fact it is not surprising that the author found it necessary to avoid altogether a direct confrontation with the question of her protagonist's sexual nature and to be satisfied with dropping a number of broad hints that, taken cumulatively, point strongly, if not unmistakably, in this direction.

But hint she does, and so very broadly, indeed, that one wonders how critics could have overlooked (or ignored?) this aspect of the story for so long after it became socially acceptable to mention such delicate matters. True, some of the critics have dropped some broad hints of their own. Way back in 1957 Winifred Lynskey, for example, stuck one timid toe into these frigid waters. "The reader of this story can play the role of psychiatrist," said she darkly, without, however, risking an answer as to what the reader who took upon himself such a role might come up with. In an even more daring vein, John Randall in 1960 called "Paul's Case" "a decadent story," though without developing the psychological implications

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1. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, Criterion Books, 1960), pp. 571 and 532, respectively.

of that sinister epithet. On the other hand, James Leslie Woodress would go no further in 1970 than to declare that the depiction of Paul represented "a remarkable psychological portrait," which seems a curiously bland and innocuous assessment, coming so late in the season.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, a careful—and candid—reading of the story will show that Cather has given us all the clues we need—and then some—to help us put together the pieces of the puzzle presented by the character of Paul. Such a re-evaluation would be of great help to the reader, for it would intensify his awareness of the truly abysmal gap between the young male protagonist and the hometown milieu in which he feels so hideously trapped.

As for the story line itself, it is, as in the case of most memorable literature, quite simple. A sensitive and lonely boy of about seventeen, living in a provincial neighborhood of a provincial city (Pittsburgh), defies the conformity of his environment and the stern authoritarianism of his square teachers and even squarer father by dressing as a dandy (complete with carnation) and immersing himself, whenever, possible, in the relatively sophisticated and elegant atmosphere of the concert hall and local repertory theatre. When these modes of escape are made unavailable to him by the irrevocable decree of his father, he steals some money from the firm where he now works and runs away to New York, the symbol of ultimate glamor and cosmopolitan sophistication at that time. Here he purchases the most elegant attire he can lay his hands on and ensconces himself in a suite at the Waldorf (no piker, he!), where he spends a week or so in the luxurious and aesthetically delectable style he has always dreamed of. Ultimately, of course, his whereabouts are discovered, and Paul faces the intolerable prospect of being brought home to Pittsburgh—not to be sent to reform school or prison—but to suffer an even more horrible fate: that of being trapped forever in the petty bourgeois milieu and narrow value structure of what we have come today to call Middle America. It is, of course, an unthinkable prospect, and Paul escapes by the only route he sees as being left to him: suicide.

To the modern reader even the above summary contains the germs of conjecture regarding the possible psychological sources of Paul's deep feelings of alienation. The picture of the sensitive young male adolescent, cruelly misunderstood by a harsh and demanding father, presents a familiar pattern: rejection of the father as a masculine image to imitate is the clinical side of the coin, and, as the very title "Paul's Case" suggests, Cather's story does have the aura of case history, on one level. However, it is a measure of the author's art that she has absorbed the clinical level into the literary, so that the story may be read and enjoyed on the human-

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2. References are, respectively, to Winifred Lynskey, *Reading Modern Fiction* (New York: Scribner, 1957), p. 81; John H. Randall, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 275; and James Leslie Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 118.

istic level as an insight into the human condition, rather than simply as a Freudian case study. (Freud, we should recall, was only beginning to publish his theories at this time, so that Cather, like Sophocles and Shakespeare, Melville and Twain, is working through intuitive apprehension and perspicacious observation, rather than along the lines of any codified or systematized "scientific" approach. This, too, is all to her credit.)

What, then, are the clues with which Cather has been so lavish? These are so numerous that one despairs of setting them all down in a short paper, but mention of the most prominent ones should suffice to indicate the unmistakable direction in which she is pointing the reader. To begin with, there is the question of Paul's physical appearance. Here the most prominent feature, aside from his predilection for the clothing of the dandy, already noted, is "a certain hysterical brilliancy in his eyes" as he confronts his bewildered teachers; "he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy."<sup>3</sup> Cather gives us this information in the second paragraph of her story, and it becomes one of the first links in a growing chain of evidence of Paul's deviation from what the culture of her day (and, to a great extent, of our own) would consider the sexual norm.<sup>4</sup>

Of all Paul's teachers, only his drawing instructor shows any compassion for his differentness, though they all feel vaguely guilty for harassing him. Says the drawing master, "I don't really believe that smile of his comes altogether from insolence; there's something sort of haunted about it. The boy is not strong, for one thing. There is something wrong about the fellow" (p. 202).<sup>5</sup>

Then, too, there is the business about Paul's use of violet water (p. 214), conveying as it does a sense of his fastidious nature, and thus seeming to reinforce the reader's impression of the feminine side of his nature—at least when judged within the framework of the standards set by the Middle America of his time. The fact that Paul feels it necessary to keep his bottle of violet water carefully hidden from his father could almost symbolize his sense of alienation from a society that has only contempt for what it considers effeminacy in a young man.

3. Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (New York, Knopf, 1920), p. 199. All subsequent page references are to this collection of Cather's stories.

4. Even earlier in the same paragraph, Paul's very physique becomes a clue; for those who feel that genetic factors are at least partially responsible for homosexual development, the boy's "narrow chest" and "high cramped shoulders" (p. 199) might well look suspicious, in the light of all the other clues. (The role played in homosexuality by hereditary factors, as opposed to psychological ones, remains, of course, unresolved even today.)

5. Another genetic clue, perhaps: the drawing teacher, we are told, is thinking about Paul's "white, blue-veined face, drawn and wrinkled like an old man's about the eyes. . ." (p. 202).

It is also notable that, throughout the story, Paul's only social relationships are with boys of his own age, or perhaps slightly older. Two such associations are mentioned. The first is with a young actor who plays juvenile leads at a downtown Pittsburgh theatre and who finds Paul useful as a dresser, and the second is with a Yale freshman with whom Paul spends a night on the town, while both are registered at the Waldorf in New York. No special hints are dropped by Cather regarding the former relationship, but the latter ends on a curious note. The Yale man is described as "a wild San Francisco boy" who has come into the city for "a little flyer' over Sunday." Thus he is clearly intended to serve, albeit briefly, as a foil to Paul; we are to understand that the college boy is a red-blooded American youth who is in town over the weekend to relieve his sexual drive through the customary channels. He offers to "show Paul the night side of the town," but, though they start out on friendly terms, "their parting in the elevator was singularly cool" (p. 227). Cather never tells us why—but does she have to? True, one might simply suggest that the college youth wanted to go to a brothel, or else just to pick up a couple of girls, whereas Paul preferred to go to a concert or play; but this explanation fails to account, really, for the frostiness of their parting, as suggested by the heavily loaded phrase "singularly cool." Given the lack of any further elucidation of the situation, on Cather's part, the reader is left with an unshakable sense of innuendo. At this point it is important to remember that the date of publication is 1905, and that certain matters are simply not discussed, even in literature—at least, not in American literature. Thus it seems quite possible to conjecture that Paul wanted something from his companion that the latter was unprepared to give. Admittedly, this would be an extravagant interpretation, and obviously unwarranted, were it not for all the other hints that Cather drops along the way.

One of the strongest of these hints appears when the author describes Paul's feeling of relief and freedom from fear after he checks in at the Waldorf. Apparently, he has always been haunted by some unnameable fear:

Until now, he could not remember a time when he had not been dreading something. Even when he was a little boy, it was always there—behind him, or before, or on either side. There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him—and Paul had done things that were not pretty to watch, he knew (p. 222).

What those things may be, Cather does not say. But again, does she have to spell it out? The perceptive reader will get the message.

One final clue must be mentioned. Early in the story, Paul gets home very late after ushering at a concert, and, rather than risk waking his father—and provoking his father's wrath—he spends the night cowering in the basement, troubled by increasingly morbid thoughts:

Suppose his father had heard him getting in at the window and had come down and shot him for a burglar? Then, again, suppose his father had come down, pistol in hand, and he had cried out in time to save himself, and his father had been horrified to think how nearly he had killed him? Then, again, suppose a day should come when his father would remember that night, and wish there had been no warning cry to stay his hand (p. 210)?

It is difficult to imagine a situation in which Paul's father would feel so completely disgraced by his son that he could actually wish he had shot his son beforehand. Difficult, yes—but, given the sternness of the man and the offbeat nature of Paul's temperament, as depicted in the story and discussed in this article, not completely impossible.

The importance of all this for a balanced critical evaluation of the story lies not so much in the fact that Paul is very probably homosexual by nature and temperament, but that Cather is trying to show us the tragic consequences of the conflict between a sensitive and hence alienated temperament, on the one hand, and a narrowly "moral," bourgeois environment, on the other. It is one of her more familiar themes, and has been widely dealt with by critics; but here it would seem important to be aware of the homosexuality of the sensitive protagonist in order to comprehend the full depth of his alienation from the "normal" American society in which he feels trapped and hence the full pathos of his situation. It is, I believe, a measure of Willa Cather's superb craftsmanship that she was able to convey a sense of this previously unmentionable dimension of her protagonist's inner being without violating any of the literary taboos of her time.

