

Why Willa Cather Revised "Paul's Case": The Work in Art and Those Sunday Afternoons

DAVID A. CARPENTER
Eastern Illinois University

I

IN a recent anthology of American short stories, the editors have included "Paul's Case," one of Willa Cather's earliest and best known short stories, "for many years . . . the only one she would allow to be reprinted in anthologies or textbooks."¹ It is right and good that the editors chose to reprint this story in a collection by which they intend to offer the student of American literature "the best of the old and the most promising among the newest short stories by American authors."² It is appropriate, furthermore, that the editors should, in the author headnote for Cather, call the story "naturalistic," and then go on to explain: "The story embodies the concept that human fate is determined by the interplay between inherited or inward traits and environment or outward circumstances. When the inward and outward forces are in conflict, as they usually are in naturalistic fiction, the character is doomed to suffer tragic consequences."³ This is, again, appropriate—to the version of "Paul's Case" printed in *The Troll Garden* (1905), Cather's first collection of short stories. Yet when this story appeared again fifteen years after the publication of *The Troll Garden*, in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), Cather had progressed artistically

¹ E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 121.

² *American Short Stories*, ed. Eugene Current-García and Walton R. Patrick (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982), p. [i].

³ Current-García and Patrick, p. 359. These editors note in their "Acknowledgments" section that they have reprinted the story from *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, whereas the fact of the matter is that they present Cather's first version of the story, as it appeared in *The Troll Garden*.

from apprentice to master craftsman, and what she had done to the story would preclude its being placed accurately beneath the rubric of Naturalism. Although she was not the life-long reviser of her writing that, say, Whitman and Yeats and Auden and Lowell were of theirs, Cather was frequently critical of her early artistic efforts, and she was very careful when deciding both what of her writing to revise and what to allow to be reprinted. For instance, out of the seven short stories composing *The Troll Garden*, she would permit only three to be reprinted in the 1937 autograph edition of her work; "Paul's Case" was one of these, and one she had revised considerably even before it appeared in the earlier, 1920 collection. In fact, several of the changes she made in this story represent her deliberate efforts to erase, as it were, lines once drawn too heavily in her apprentice years, as well as to de-emphasize "inward traits" or heredity as a dominant force in her fiction.

Until James Woodress published his definitive edition of *The Troll Garden* (1983), Cather's revisions of "Paul's Case" had gone unnoticed by all except David Daiches, who himself only noted one change, in his *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*. Also noteworthy is that the story has received consistently superficial interpretations—perhaps partly because it is early Cather, and partly because its companion stories in *The Troll Garden*, and later in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, all seem to be variations of the same theme: simply put, how the artist is frequently frustrated, unrecognized or undervalued by society, and how he is ultimately destroyed by his own frustrations or society or both. In the face of the numerous oversights apparent in past analyses of this story, then, my purpose here is two-fold: I shall attempt to explain why Cather changed Paul's story (a story *not* about an artist), and I shall show how, with her revisions, she expresses an extremely bleak and seemingly irremediable type of determinism—a determinism derived not from heredity but solely from environment.

Writing about "Paul's Case," as it appeared in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, David Daiches asserts that Cather made only one change in the story after its earlier publication: "a phrase is added: . . . in reference to Paul's mother Willa Cather has added the significant phrase 'whom Paul could not remember' and thus

provides an important clue to Paul's behavior and character."⁴ Although Daiches nowhere explains why this added phrase is "significant," or what, within Paul's behavior and character, it is a "clue" to, this phrase—one of several which Cather added to the later version of the story—is not meant to be significant so much as it is meant to dispense with the issue of Paul's mother completely, while simultaneously providing the reader with the essentials of Paul's background and thereby knotting the loose ends of his "case." At any rate this added phrase is not as significant as the information Cather omitted regarding Paul's mother. In the 1905 version, that is, not only is the mother given a past but the history of Paul and his family is different from its later portrayal. For example, just after Paul is excused from his "inquisition" by the faculty at the Pittsburgh High School, the drawing master says, "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. *I happen to know that he was born in Colorado, only a few months before his mother died out there of a long illness.* There is something wrong about the fellow"⁵ (I have underlined the words Cather later omitted). Complementing this hauntedness is the "certain hysterical brilliancy" of his eyes, as well as his "sort of hysterically defiant manner" (p. 102), his "continually twitching" lips, and his "always smiling" (p. 103). Importantly, all of the attributes of the boy's hauntedness are connected to his mother who, since she died from "a long illness," "only a few months" after Paul's birth, was obviously ill during her pregnancy. So, what there is "wrong" about Paul was made wrong before he was born, according to this early version of the story. Yet Cather later omitted all of this and replaced it with the innocuous reference, later in the story, to a mother "whom Paul could not remember";⁶ thus she has dispensed with the single, most crucial hereditary link between Paul's character and either one of his parents.

Cather would also later omit the mention of Colorado, a historical and ideological reference point for Paul and his family

⁴ *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), p. 104.

⁵ *The Troll Garden*, ed. James L. Woodress (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 104.

⁶ *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. 219.

that she decided not to associate them with. In other words, according to the original version of the story the family would have been living in Colorado during the middle to late 1880s, before the American frontier was officially closed by the U.S. Census Bureau (1890); placing the family in the West during this time would have identified them as pioneers and—in Cather's characteristic view—as admirable because by necessity relatively original, self-sufficient creators of a new life and new identities. Nevertheless, when she revised the story, by omitting reference to Colorado, she stripped any suggestion of authentic discovery from the character of Paul's father, and she willfully restricted the family's history and ideology exclusively to Cordelia Street, Pittsburgh. Paul himself never gets any further west than western Pennsylvania, and this will be important when considering why he cannot be viewed as an artist, potentially or otherwise; but before I discuss this last point, several other significant changes Cather made in the story deserve noting.

Anyone who has read Frank Norris' *McTeague* is familiar with the brutal role teeth play in the animalistic world of this brand of naturalism—beastly teeth that take what the various human cravings demand, even a woman's fingers if they are connected to money. Teeth, for Norris, are the products and agents of—indeed, the symbols of—heredity. Cather was impressed by Norris' novel and had praised it highly in two of her *Courier* reviews (8 April 1899 and 7 April 1900). In the earlier review she says that Norris' approach to his subject "is perhaps the only truthful literary method of dealing with that part of society which environment and heredity hedge about like walls of a prison."⁷ Four and a half years later Cather would enclose Paul within these "walls" but then reconsider and dispense with heredity as one of them. Thus, in her later revisions, she omitted yet another thing Paul's drawing master, in the 1905 version, had noticed—that is, a particular image of the boy's teeth: "The drawing master had come to realize that, in looking at Paul, one saw only his white teeth and the forced animation of his eyes. One warm afternoon the boy had gone to sleep at

⁷ Willa Cather, *The World and the Parish*, ed. William M. Curtin (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 608.

his drawing-board, and his master had noted with amazement what a white, blue-veined face it was; drawn and wrinkled like an old man's about the eyes, the lips twitching even in his sleep, *and stiff with nervous tension that drew them back from the teeth*" (p. 104; words underlined were later omitted). Compared to the earlier, pleasing image of Paul's "white teeth," which is what the drawing master noticed when the boy was awake and intensely conscious with that "forced animation of his eyes," the second image is snarling and dangerous, a subhuman manifestation of the dark, unconscious and uncivilized area of the boy's being. Simply put, in this naturalistic story the drawn-back lips expose Paul's heredity. Furthermore, originally Cather wanted her readers to see the snarling lips and teeth as animalistic, for one paragraph later, as she describes Paul running away from the high school, she tells us he looked "wildly behind him . . . to see whether some of his teachers were not there to writhe under his light-heartedness" (p. 104). It is not surprising that when revising the story she would, along with the above-mentioned image of Paul's teeth, omit the adverb "wildly"; and where the boy imagines that some of his teachers might, snake-like, "writhe under his light-heartedness," in the later version Cather has him imagine that some of his teachers might simply "witness his light-heartedness" (p. 213). In essence, then, with her revisions Cather takes the wildness out of Paul's actions and imaginings, covers up his tense, drawn-back lips and bared teeth, and leaves him with a constant smile and "white teeth."

In an early interview, given eight years after the publication of *The Troll Garden*, Cather was speaking from experience when she said, "I think many story writers try to multiply their ideas instead of trying to simplify them; that is, they often try to make a story out of every idea they have, to get returns on every situation that suggests itself. . . . Whether it is a pianist, or a singer, or a writer, art ought to simplify—that seems to me to be the whole process."⁸ Indeed, she cut to "simplify" "Paul's Case," pulled out at least one idea, which she had probably acquired through reading Norris' fiction, and that was the idea

⁸ *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 447.

of heredity as an inexorable determiner of an individual's life. In fact, even in the original version of the story Cather seems much less committed to the heredity factor of determinism than to the environmental one; that is, the few references she made to implicate heredity as a force in Paul's life seem more like deliberate insertions (especially where the drawing master "happen[s] to know" about the mother's long illness out in Colorado) than facts germane to the boy's actions and consequent demise. Besides, Cather surely saw, as she set out to revise the story, that the vague notion of Paul's mother-related hauntedness paled as superfluous in the face of the vividly detailed and oppressive bourgeois environment she portrays as Cordelia Street. From this street came Paul's motivation; there, in fact, was Paul.

Aside from the revisions already noted, and aside from the numerous changes she made in punctuation, diction, and sentence and paragraph structure, Cather simplified and improved the story in another way, by cutting out a needless double-entendre. In the 1905 version, when Paul is in New York he notices that, even in winter, "on the corners were stands, with whole flower gardens blooming *under glass cases*, against *the sides of* which the snow flakes stuck and melted; violets, roses, carnations, lilies of the valley—somehow vastly more lovely and alluring that they blossomed thus unnaturally in the snow" (p. 115; words underlined were later omitted). Cather would change "under glass cases" to "behind glass windows" in the later version (p. 235), a change that seems intended to limit the possible interpretations of the story's title, "Paul's Case." Throughout the story, beginning with the first paragraph, the boy is identified with flowers—specifically the red carnation he wears in his lapel (at the end of the story he wears two but sacrifices one to the snow just before he commits suicide). So these glass cases, and especially the cut flowers preserved for a time within them against the snow, mean a great deal to the boy. Cather intends for them to mean a lot to her readers too; for, as Paul is later trudging through the snow toward his death in the final scene, we are reminded of those flowers in glass cases—but this time the relation between these and Paul is made explicit: "The carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed; their red glory all over. It occurred to him that all the flowers

he had seen in the *glass cases* 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; and it was a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run" (p. 120; words underlined were later omitted). This time Cather would change "glass cases" to "show windows" in the later version (p. 244). "The revolt against the homilies by which the world is run" is Paul's, of course, and it is significant that after he steals a thousand dollars from his employers (not two thousand, as Philip Gerber asserts⁹), and then escapes by train to New York, we are frequently reminded of the "winter outside the glass." For instance, in the first paragraph beginning the escape episode, where Paul is on the train nearing New York City, the narrator tells us: "Paul started up from the seat where he had lain curled in uneasy slumber, rubbed the breath-misted window-glass with his hand, and peered out. The snow was whirling in curling eddies . . . and the drifts lay already deep in the fields and along the fences, while here and there the tall dead grass and dried weed stalks protruded black above it."¹⁰ And while Paul is no longer protected like a flower by glass from the winter at the end of the story, Cather closes the circle of the escape episode by repeating the description of the snow and weeds: "The snow lay heavy on the roadways and had drifted deep in the open fields. Only here and there the dead grass or dried weed stalks projected, singularly black, above it" (p. 243).

So Cather succeeds in linking Paul symbolically to flowers—flowers cut from their roots, preserved for a time behind glass against both the cold world and the appearance of their own death (for they are dead to their natural environment just as Paul is dead to his once he steals the money and uproots himself to run away from Cordelia Street). She succeeds, that is, without forcing the point by insisting that the flowers be contained in "glass cases," and then entitling her story "Paul's Case." Cather knew more about the subtleties of her art when she revised the

⁹ *Willa Cather* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), p. 73.

¹⁰ *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, p. 230. Hereafter all citations from "Paul's Case" will be taken from this later version.

story for publication fifteen years after its first appearance. "Art . . . should simplify," she would write. "That, indeed, is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole—so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page."¹¹ She could afford to trust herself, and to trust her readers' ability to see Paul's relation to the cut flowers and glass enclosures or windows; after all, in both versions of the story she makes specific reference to Paul in relation to windows or glass no fewer than twelve times. Yet, when Paul is studied as a supposed artist what becomes clear is that Cather thought of *glass* as representing more than a symbolic link between the boy and flowers; it also represents his pretentiously fraudulent temperament. Essentially a philistine and characteristically inclined to avoid any meaningful entry into a substantive life, Paul favors the satisfaction he can draw from appearances whose sole worth he determines by how well they reflect what he wishes to see of himself and the world. In fact, Cather was thinking and writing disparagingly about Paul's sort of temperament as early as 1900.

II

In her second laudatory review of Norris' *McTeague* (mentioned earlier), Cather calls his artistic approach "realism of the most uncompromising kind." Then she adds, "His art strikes deep down into the roots of life and the foundation of Things as They Are—not as we tell each other they are at the tea-table." She viewed Norris as truly exceptional compared to other young American writers at the time, most of whom "observe the world through a temperament. . . . And temperament is a glass which distorts most astonishingly." Thus she waves Norris' accomplishment before her readers' eyes and announces that we should "rejoice that he is not a 'temperamental' artist."¹² I cite

¹¹ *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 102.

¹² *The World and the Parish*, pp. 746–49.

this review because, first, with "Paul's Case" Cather attempts to accomplish at least half of what she praises Norris for doing—that is, she attempts to strike at "the foundation of Things as They Are," at least as she saw the way things were in the essentially Calvinistic/Presbyterian society of Pittsburgh during the time she lived there (from 1896 to 1905); and, second, because what she says about "temperament" being "a glass," through which the temperamental individual receives distorted views of things, is important in terms of understanding how Cather perceived Paul, as well as how she intended her readers to see him. Generally she views Paul with as much disdain as she has for Cordelia Street, Pittsburgh, and it is significant that she gave the original version of "Paul's Case" the subtitle "A Study of Temperament" but later omitted it.¹³

Were one to read the various critical statements available about "Paul's Case" before reading the story itself, it is likely one would tend to agree with Daiches' appraisal of the story as more or less a "manifesto rather than an effective work of imaginative literature in its own right."¹⁴ For example, E. K. Brown, Cather's first biographer, asserts that the story is "a sort of coda" in and for *The Troll Garden*, in that all seven stories in the collection were but variations on the same theme.¹⁵ Lillian and Edward Bloom maintain that *The Troll Garden* "is primarily an extended colloquy between the artist as hero and a personified middle-class society as the villain."¹⁶ And speaking of "Paul's Case" in the context of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Daiches himself says, "The theme that runs through all these stories is the special status of the artist in society, the fight of the artist to preserve his integrity in a world of Philistines, [and] the struggle of sensitivity to maintain itself in a world of routine and convention."¹⁷ This "world of Philistines" is certainly apparent in the story, as most readers have noticed, for Cather's appraisal of the Cordelia Street microcosm is clear: "It was a highly respectable

¹³ In his otherwise thorough definitive edition of *The Troll Garden*, Woodress neglects to note this important omission.

¹⁴ Daiches, p. 147.

¹⁵ Brown, p. 114.

¹⁶ *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. 117.

¹⁷ Daiches, p. 144.

street," her narrator tells us, "where all the houses were exactly alike, and where business men of moderate means begot and reared large families of children, all of whom went to Sabbath School and learned the shorter catechism, and were interested in arithmetic; all of whom were as exactly alike as their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived. Paul never went up Cordelia Street without a shudder of loathing" (p. 219). Paul's "loathing" of this world and what the Blooms call its "deadening conformity"¹⁸ seems to set him apart from it. From the first scene of the story, in fact, he seems set apart by his demeanor and apparent underlying rebellion, as his teachers "fell upon him without mercy" (p. 211); he seems set apart, furthermore, from his fellow-students and his fellow-ushers at Carnegie Hall who, as Paul "teased and plagued" them in the dressing room one evening, call him "crazy" and then "put him down on the floor and sat on him" (p. 214). Perhaps more obvious an indicator of Paul's uniqueness in the Pittsburgh world of monotony and conformity is his "genuine if excessive feeling for art," as Bernice Slote says.¹⁹ Cather does seem to engender Paul with "excessive feeling," and this would appear to be an essential ingredient in a conscious attack upon Cordelia Street and the deadening conformity of Pittsburgh Presbyterianism, especially when we recall an earlier and similar attack Cather made in an 1897 newspaper article, wherein she asserted that "the Presbyterian church of Pittsburgh objects to enjoyment of all kinds, particularly aesthetic enjoyment. . . . There is nothing on earth that a Pittsburgh Presbyterian fears and hates as he does the 'human emotions.' He has no particular objection to greed or ignorance or selfishness . . . but emotion is his synonym for wrong."²⁰ Nevertheless, Paul's "excessive feeling" is not an artist's "genuine" feeling for art.

An immediate objection to the last assertion might be that Paul's feeling for art is illustrated by his visit to the art gallery, which he has apparently visited frequently in the past, and his overwhelming enthusiasm for his position as usher in Carnegie Hall because this permits him a delicious exposure to the music

¹⁸ Bloom, p. 84.

¹⁹ Cather, *The Kingdom of Art*, p. 96.

²⁰ Cather, *The World and the Parish*, p. 507.

and operatic singing there. So let us look briefly at the single visit he makes to the art gallery.

Paul's initial reasons for going to the gallery are that it is too early for him to go to usher at Carnegie Hall (he attempts to enter before his shift begins but the doors are locked), he doesn't want to go home to supper, and it is "chilly outside." In other words, as he sees them his options are narrowed to one—the art gallery, "always deserted at this hour." Here there were "some of Raffelli's gay studies of Paris streets and an airy Venetian scene or two that always exhilarated him. . . . Paul possessed himself of the place and walked confidently up and down, whistling under his breath. After a while he sat down before a blue Rico and lost himself." While it may be true that the various paintings "always exhilarated him," the paintings are only noticed, from Paul's perspective, in passing, and when he does place himself before one of Rico's Venetian scenes, in which he notices no more details than the color blue, he does this to *lose* himself. In an effort to keep her readers from mistakenly interpolating any feeling for art into Paul's character, Cather ends this scene of Paul's visit to the gallery by telling us that, "when he bethought him to look at his watch, it was after seven o'clock, and he rose with a start and ran downstairs, making a face at Augustus Caesar, peering out from the cast-room, and an evil gesture at the Venus of Milo as he passed her on the stairway" (pp. 213–14). Clearly Cather doesn't portray Paul as a boy with a "genuine" or even "excessive feeling for art," as Slote maintains; she portrays him as little more than irreverent and infantile. If she had intended to relate Paul to art in any significantly genuine way, she might have had him focus upon the paintings there in the gallery a bit more carefully, might have at least permitted him to notice a title of one of Rico's or Raffaelli's paintings, as she herself did when, in "A Philistine in the Gallery" (1900), she wrote of Raffaelli's "Boulevard des Italians": "The flavor and atmosphere of the picture, its freedom and strength are characteristic of Rafaelli at his best. The woman in the foreground is painted with exquisite refinement, the battered-looking gentleman rolling a cigarette has his whole history painted in the set of his clothes." Without a doubt Cather had the ability to endow Paul's perception and appreciation of art with more refinement

and specificity; she could have, if she had intended to, allowed him to notice detail in Rico's Venetian scenes, as she also did in the above-mentioned essay when she describes one as having a "very blue sky, a silvery canal, white and red houses, bridges and gay gondolas, and in the foreground the dear Lombard poplar, the gayest and saddest of trees, rustling green and silver in the sunlight."²¹ Instead, in the midst of this same art Paul "lost himself," made a sneering face at the bust of Augustus Caesar and "an evil gesture at the Venus of Milo as he passed her on the stairway."

Why, then, does Cather place Paul in the art gallery at all? She does so for two reasons: first, because it is an illustration of his intense desire to escape his environment and, since essentially he *is* his environment, to escape himself; and, second, to imagine ownership of a world he is in no way a part of, for Cather is careful to tell us that "Paul possessed himself of the place and walked confidently up and down." These are the same two motivating reasons for his intense attraction to Carnegie Hall. During the single scene where we are allowed to watch Paul as an usher, for example, the narrator tells us that, 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." Again Paul imagines possessing a world of which he is actually not a part; and not only would he possess this world but he would be the "host," the "great" link connecting *his* guests to *his* "great reception." However, his momentary revelry is broken when "his English teacher arrived with cheques for the seats which a prominent manufacturer had taken for the season." Paul is "startled," wants to "put her out," but seats her while thinking that "she had about as much right to sit there as he had." Thus he is reminded of the oppressive environment he is a member of, and his urge to escape emerges immediately after he seats his teacher: "When the symphony began, Paul sank into one of the rear seats with a long sigh of relief, and lost himself as he had done before the Rico." And, again, Cather insists that her readers not identify Paul with art, for her narrator next says, "It

²¹ *The World and the Parish*, pp. 762-64.

was not that symphonies, as such, meant anything in particular to Paul, but the first sigh of the instruments seemed to free some hilarious spirit within him; something that struggled like the Genius in the bottle found by the Arab fisherman" (pp. 215-16).

Cather's reference to a fairy tale, the Genius in the bottle, is part of an important motif in Paul's story, as it also serves to undercut any possible evaluation of him as artistically serious or mature. For example, he later views the Schenley Hotel, "where the actors and singers of any importance stayed," as "glowing like . . . a lighted cardboard house under a Christmas tree"; such a world was "what he wanted—[there] tangibly before him, like the fairy world of a Christmas pantomime" (pp. 217-18). Then when he visits the theater where his friend Charley Edwards is a leading juvenile actor, Paul's perceptions are again connected to fairy tales; but in this instance Cather is intentionally ironic when her narrator informs us, "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." I suggest this is intentionally ironic because Cather has shown us that the art gallery, Carnegie Hall and the theater are, in fact, the places wherein Paul is able to lose himself in a sleep-like trance and thereby forget the actual world of Cordelia Street and the powerful claims it has upon his life. He escapes to the "fairy tale" places for the "sleep" and "forgetting" they permit him; and Cather is nowhere more explicit about Paul's reactionary attraction to a fairy tale world than when her narrator tells us:

Perhaps it was because, in Paul's world, the natural nearly always wore the guise of ugliness, that a certain element of artificiality seemed to him necessary in beauty. Perhaps it was because his experience of life elsewhere was so full of Sabbath-School picnics, petty economies, wholesome advice as to how to succeed in life, and the unescapable odours of cooking, that he found this existence [in the theater] so alluring, these smartly clad men and women so attractive, that he was so moved by these starry apple orchards that bloomed perennially under the limelight. . . . So, in the midst of that smoke-palled city, enamoured figures and grimy toil, Paul had his secret temple, his wishing carpet, his bit of blue-and-white Mediterranean shore bathed in perpetual sunshine. (Pp. 226-27)

Yet while this world of art is a temporary—and, ultimately, illusory—anodyne to Paul's dis-ease, it is a world of work, similar to his father's world in this regard. The business of the artist's life, Cather insisted, is "ceaseless and unremitting labor," for the artist "has but one care, one purpose, one hope—his work."²² This is another, and perhaps the most crucial, reason why Cather doesn't view Paul as an artist, or even as a potential artist: Paul has a general dislike for serious work of any kind. In order to succeed in his father's business world he would have to work his way up from the position of "cash-boy"; but while he is "interested in the triumphs of the cash-boys who had become famous, . . . he had no mind for the cash-boy stage" (p. 224). Likewise, Paul wants the appearance of belonging to the "secret temple" of art, so he tells his classmates "incredible stories" about his connections to this temple and its working members, deriving his feeling of success from no more than a passive and casual association; but it is in regard to Paul's fabrications that Cather makes an important distinction between this boy and real artists: "The members of the stock company were vastly amused when some of Paul's stories reached them—especially the women. They were hard-working women, most of them supporting indolent husbands or brothers, and they laughed rather bitterly at having stirred the boy to such fervid and florid inventions. They agreed with the faculty and with his father, that Paul's was a bad case" (p. 229). Cather attempts to guarantee her readers' appreciation of this distinction, between Paul and the working artists, by the several disclaimers that precede this passage. Specifically, the narrator informs us that Paul "scarcely ever read at all," as reading would not grant him escape quickly enough; "he got what he wanted much more quickly from music; any sort of music, from an orchestra to a barrel-organ"; nor had he any "desire to become an actor, any more than he had to become a musician. He felt no necessity to do any of these 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 league, away from everything" (pp. 227–28). It should come as no surprise, then, when after Paul is taken

²² *The Kingdom of Art*, pp. 413, 142.

out of school because of his insolence, and then put to work as a "cash-boy," he decides he can get what he wants "more quickly" by stealing a thousand dollars from his employers and escaping to New York where, he imagines, everyone is "as hot for pleasure as himself" (p. 236). Regardless of his imaginings, even if he had stolen more money and thereby afforded himself a longer stay than his nine days in New York, his life would have come to the same end: Cordelia Street, Pittsburgh, not as it existed external to Paul, but as it existed as a force within him.

It is inaccurate to say that, once in New York, Paul "fits easily into his new environment."²³ Only if we believe Paul's perceptions, and fail to see Cather's dramatic irony, can we come to such a conclusion. It is true that Paul himself thinks "he was exactly the kind of boy he had always wanted to be" (p. 234), after he has purchased a new wardrobe and situated himself in the plush environment of the Waldorf Hotel; it is true that in his view "everything was as it should be"—that is, as he had learned from the Pittsburgh Sunday papers how it should be (p. 232). But what he *wants* to see differs frequently from what he does see. When he takes a carriage along Fifth Avenue, what he notices are workers: "carriages and tradesmen's wagons were hurrying soundlessly to and fro in the winter twilight; boys in woolen mufflers were shovelling off the door-steps"; and, returning to his hotel, he notices "a score of cabs about the entrance of his hotel, and his driver had to wait. Boys in livery were running in and out of the awning stretched across the sidewalk." Against the actual, however, Paul superimposes what he needs: "Above, about, within it all, was the rumble and roar, the hurry and toss of thousands of human beings as hot for pleasure as himself, and on every side of him towered the glaring affirmation of the omnipotence of wealth" (p. 236). One might suggest that Paul's focus on workers is the result of his having only recently escaped his working-class environment of Pittsburgh; but Cather undercuts the possibility of this qualification at the end of Paul's story when, as he is walking towards his death, images endemic to his natural environment occupy his mind:

²³ Daiches, p. 146.

He seemed to hold in his brain an actual picture of everything he had seen that morning. He remembered every feature of both his drivers, the toothless old woman from whom he had bought the red flowers in his coat, the agent from whom he had got his ticket, and all his fellow-passengers on the ferry. His mind, unable to cope with vital matters near at hand, worked feverishly and deftly at sorting and grouping these images. They made for him a part of the ugliness of the world, of the ache in his head, and the bitter burning on his tongue. (P. 244)

His attempt to sort and group these images is an attempt to objectify and thus distance himself from his environmental and subjective association with these people he remembers; they are, of course, already of a group, the working class, his fellows in an "ugliness" germane to both Paul's outer and inner worlds. And the most important of those "vital matters" he is "unable to cope with" is his identity, for he is unable to accept as his own the external and internal ugliness he perceives.

Even before he spends all of the stolen money, Paul's final and defeating confrontation with himself and his actual place of belonging is determined by his basic inability to fit into the Waldorf environment. While he seems relatively satisfied to sit alone in his rooms, wearing his silk pajamas or new suits and watching the snow fall outside his windows, he sleeps with his bedroom lights on, "partly because of his old timidity, and partly so that, if he should wake up in the night, there would be no wretched moment of doubt" (p. 238). And when he does leave his rooms and goes down into the hotel lobby or dining room, despite how much he wants to belong to this world, he is overwhelmed: "The lights, the chatter, the perfumes, the bewildering medley of colour—he had, for a moment, the feeling of not being able to stand it." Cather's dramatic irony becomes apparent when the narrator next says, from Paul's perspective, "But only for a moment; these were his own people, he told himself." In the dining room Paul sits alone "at a table near a window," and again with dramatic irony implicit we are told of the boy's reflections: "Had he not always been thus, had he not sat here night after night, from as far back as he could remember, looking pensively over just such shimmering textures, and

slowly twirling the stem of a glass like this one between his thumb and middle finger? He rather thought he had." The mere appearance of success is enough for Paul, and he is most willing to base his identity on such an appearance: "The mere stage properties were all he contended for" (p. 237); and his "dearest pleasures were the grey winter twilights in his sitting-room; his quiet enjoyment of his flowers, his clothes, his wide divan, his cigarette, and his sense of power." And if Cather's readers are fooled into believing that Paul feels a sense of belonging here, it is a testament to how thoroughly the boy fools himself when, sitting alone in his room, he reflects: "He could not remember a time when he had felt so at peace with himself. The mere release from the necessity of petty lying, lying every day and every day, restored his self-respect" (p. 239). Then again, of course, if readers are fooled by Paul it is also evidence that they have missed Cather's irony here as elsewhere, because the boy hasn't been released from lying; he has consumed himself morally and ethically by living a lie—one purchased through someone else's hard work. None of this occurs to him; what does occur to him is what he had been taught implicitly by his father and the other "burghers" of Cordelia Street long before he entered the Waldorf environment of "shimmering textures": "This [opulence] was what all the world was fighting for, he reflected; this was what all the struggle was about" (p. 237).

Indeed, during those Sunday afternoons on Cordelia Street, when the "burghers . . . usually sat on their front 'stoops,' and talked to their neighbours on the next stoop, or called to those across the street in neighbourly fashion," Paul received the lessons which would compel him to steal the money and flee to New York, lessons which emphasized getting instead of doing, ends instead of means. On those Sunday afternoons, we are told, Paul's father and the other male neighbors "talked of the prices of things, or told anecdotes of the sagacity of their various chiefs and overlords," and "interspersed their legends of the iron kings with remarks about their sons' progress at school, their grades in arithmetic, and the amounts they had saved in their toy banks" (p. 222). Acquisition, therefore, is emphasized as synonymous with success. On the particular Sunday that Cather describes as being more or less representative of them all, we meet a young

man who is—despite his genetic defects—“daily held up to Paul as a model, and after whom it was his father’s dearest hope that he would pattern. . . . He was clerk to one of the magnates of a great steel corporation, and was looked upon in Cordelia Street as a young man with a future.” Not surprisingly this young and “near-sighted” paradigm of success lives his life by appearances to the extent that “he had taken his chief’s advice, oft reiterated to his employés, and at twenty-one had married the first woman whom he could persuade to share his fortunes” (p. 223). While Paul’s father and this “model” of success swap stories about their respective “overlords” and corporations, the narrator informs us that Paul “rather liked to hear these legends of the iron kings, that were told and retold on Sundays and holidays; these stories of palaces in Venice, yachts on the Mediterranean, and high play at Monte Carlo appealed to his fancy” (p. 224). Cather makes it abundantly clear that these stories did more than appeal to Paul’s “fancy”; they created it, fed it with legendary illusions and pumped it up within an environment that could neither contain it nor offer the boy any alternatives, other than the pursuit of money, for its expression. And since Paul himself could not contain or discipline his fancy, could not distinguish between ideal appearances and real substances, he steals a self-image by stealing the fruit of another’s labor, and “he would do the same thing to-morrow” (p. 242). In this respect, at least, Paul may be seen as the prototype of Arthur Miller’s Biff Loman, himself a near fatality of the belief one can get everything for nothing—though Cather permits her protagonist no self-discovery. Instead, she views—or at least portrays—Paul as locked within a circle, paradoxically lunging toward what he thinks he is escaping: that is, the train he throws himself in front of is on the Pennsylvania tracks (Pennsylvania is Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh is Cordelia Street).

“There is no getting away from a Presbyterian environment,” Cather once wrote, “no getting around it, or behind it or above it. It is ever present. . . .”²⁴ It was exactly this environment she was attempting to excoriate with “Paul’s Case”; and she must have realized, as she revised the story, that to identify Paul or his

²⁴ *The World and the Parish*, p. 510.

father with the West—and, in so doing, with independence and originality—would have needlessly complicated the cause and effect pattern, between environment and the individual, that she portrays in the story. We need to recall, however, that in Paul's home on Cordelia Street, on the bedroom wall above his bed, Cather placed two pictures, one of George Washington and the other of John Calvin; by so doing she seems to suggest that the uncreative, superficial and life-destroying values perpetuated in the homes of Pittsburgh are essentially American values, though stripped of any Calvinistic notion of divine grace in a society where business has become a religion. Paul himself comes to believe, a short time before his suicide, that "all the world had become Cordelia Street" (p. 243). Regardless of whether Cather was thinking of Pittsburgh's ethos as America's, and of America's as ultimately the world's (and apparently she was), since there is absolutely no possibility of grace, divine or otherwise, in Paul's case, the determinism she portrays is even more extreme than Calvin's, as it is nowhere shown to be controlled by God. Instead, it is controlled by an essentially amoral industrial society and what it teaches its youth: that is, monetary and material wealth—no matter how it is come by—is "what all the world [is] fighting for." And although her revisions of "Paul's Case" exemplify her artistic move away from a heavy-handed type of naturalism, and toward the romantically shaded realism of her later work, the role environment plays in her fiction remains primary. One needs only to glance at *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, or *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to see that, while Cather's more mature fiction tends not to be as conclusively bleak as "Paul's Case," environment is consistently portrayed as the inexhaustible determiner of human lives.

Copyright of American Literature is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.