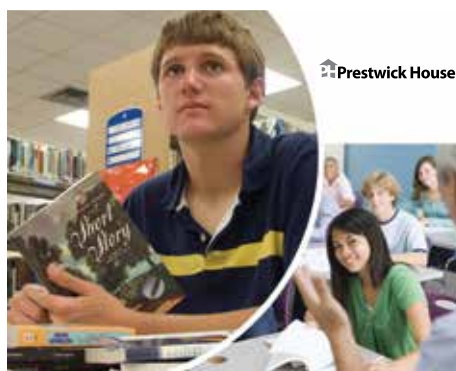




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Paul's Case

by Willa Cather

written by Emily Peterson

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Paul's Case

Author Biography

Willa Cather was born December 7, 1873, in Back Creek Valley, Virginia. She was the oldest of seven children. The family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska when Cather was about nine years old. Cather was always a tomboy, cutting her hair short, dressing in boyish clothes, and even referring to herself as “William” for a while. After befriending the town’s doctors, Cather decided to pursue a career in medicine—something that was very uncommon for a woman at that time.

Cather attended the University of Nebraska with the goal of becoming a doctor. However, after her first English professor had one of her essays published, Cather revised her ambition. She later said she considered that to be the moment she decided to be a writer. In college, Cather became the managing editor of her school’s student newspaper and the literary editor of the yearbook. Furthermore, she began writing and reviewing articles for two local newspapers, thus establishing her reputation as a writer and intellectual before earning her college degree.

After graduating in June of 1895, Cather returned to Red Cloud for a year. She was then offered a job in Pittsburgh at a magazine called *Home Monthly*. She worked there for a year before taking a job as a telegraph editor and part-time journalist. In 1901, Cather accepted a teaching position in a Pittsburgh high school. While living in Pittsburgh, Cather developed a close relationship with a young woman named Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a wealthy judge. McClung was a positive influence on Cather and encouraged her to continue writing.

Cather’s first book, *April Twilights*, was published in 1903. It caught the attention of one of the most reputable editors in the country, S. S. McClure, in New York, who later published *The Troll Garden*, a collection of short stories in which “Paul’s Case” first appeared. The following year, McClure offered Cather a job in New York, and she accepted. There, she became reacquainted with Edith Lewis, a girl she had known in Nebraska who would become her lifetime companion. Shortly after Cather’s arrival, the two moved to an apartment in lower Manhattan, where they lived for the rest of Cather’s life. Some scholars argue that Cather’s relationship with McClung and Lewis was romantic, but Cather kept her personal life private and left no evidence to support or refute that claim.

McClure helped Cather establish her career. Even after Cather left her full-time position with the company in 1912, McClure continued to publish her work. He serialized her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, the year she quit. Cather published many other novels that received great critical acclaim, including *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940).

Cather died on April 24, 1947, and is buried in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire.

Paul's Case

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify several themes of the story:
 - Is it better to follow or break social conventions?
 - What is the significance of art and beauty to life?
 - Are gender roles inflexible?
 - What happens because of alienation from others?
 - Is suicide an answer to life's problems?
2. describe how Cather characterizes Paul and what sets him apart.
3. discuss the importance and effect of point of view in the story.
4. explain how Cather uses symbols and motifs throughout the story, including:
 - colors
 - flowers
 - art and beauty
 - water
 - glass
5. define and cite examples of the following terms:
 - metaphor
 - simile
 - symbolism
 - motif
 - theme
 - foreshadowing
 - climax
 - conflict
 - tone
 - hyperbole
 - irony
6. interpret how historical context affects plot and character
7. discuss the inferences Cather makes about Paul's sexuality

slatternly – sloppy; not well-groomed
sodden – soaking wet
succumbing – giving in to a stronger force
supplement – an addition to something
supposition – an opinion or guess
synopsis – a summary or outline
taboret – a stool or low table
tangibly – physically; actually
temperament – the general attitude or personality
tepid – uninteresting; lukewarm
thoroughfare – a main road or path
thronged – swarmed or flocked
togs – clothing
toilettes – [*archaic*] stylish fashions
turret – a small tower
undulating – moving in a wavelike pattern
vehemence – force; intensity
vindictive – vengeful
vivacious – full of life and spirit
vocation – a strong calling to a particular career
worsted – a type of wool

1. Though consistently told in third person, there is a noticeable shift in point of view midway through the story. Where does this change occur, and why is it important to the story?

2. Is Paul an artistic boy? In answering this question, explain what “artistic” means to you and cite examples of how Paul does or does not fit your definition.

Activities

1. Consider the title and the story's clinical, detached tone. The reader may get the impression that the story is being narrated by a psychologist or doctor and that "Paul's Case" is a case study of a patient. Imagine how the story would be different if told from a different point of view. Choose one of the following characters and then complete the tasks listed:

- Characters:
- Paul
- His father
- The English teacher
- Charley Edwards
- A newspaper reporter covering the suicide (not a character present in the story)

Tasks:

- Create a new title that reflects the attitudes and perceptions of your selected narrator.
 - Describe the tone of your new version of the story. Use at least 3-5 sentences.
 - Describe what information would be omitted or added in your version. For instance, if told from the perspective of Paul's father, the story might center on raising a boy he does not understand.
 - Write the opening paragraph (6-10) lines of your story.
2. Assume the identity of a psychologist who has been treating Paul. Write a report of your diagnosis or diagnoses of your patient, explaining what actions or events led you to your diagnosis. This story was first published in 1905, but use the knowledge about psychology we have available today to draw your conclusions. You may want to look up the signs or symptoms of the following conditions as possibilities:
- Narcissistic Disorder
 - Attention Deficit Disorder
 - Antisocial Disorder
 - Asperger's Syndrome

You may also decide that Paul does not need a clinical diagnosis, in which case you must explain his decisions and actions in another way. Consider the possibility of gender issues, moral apathy, or other non-clinical explanations.