4.7: Student Sample Paper: Carrie Obry’s “Homoerotic Impulses in Willa Cather’s ‘Paul’s Case’”

Carrie’s paper is guided by queer theory, which challenges the heteronormative way that readers often respond to a text. Carrie was interested in a queer reading of Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case,” Willa Cather, The Troll Garden and Selected Stories (Project Gutenberg, 2009), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/346/346-h/346-h.htm#2H_4_0013, which you can read at Project Gutenberg (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/346/346-h/346-h.htm#2H_4_0013).

Carrie was intrigued by discovering that Cather’s biographer, Sharon O’Brien, had labeled Cather a “lesbian writer” who focuses on gay and lesbian issues. Queer readings of texts often challenge the accepted interpretations of texts and open up the literary work to new critical debate. Carrie’s paper certainly does do that, as she explores how Paul is forced into compulsory heterosexuality when his desires are anything but that.

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Homoerotic Impulses in Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case”

In Victorian culture, discussing sex was inappropriate, so literature from the period could not use sexually explicit language or ideas; if it did, it would risk not being well-received, or even published. During this time, “proper women were supposed to blush at the slightest allusion to sexuality; references to sex in literature were commonly bowdlerized” (Dynes 1344). Although Willa Cather is a modernist in literary terms, her writing emerges in an age that Victorian
morality shaped, a time when sexuality was a thing not discussed. Larry Rubin claims that “Paul’s Case,” Cather’s “minor masterpiece,” appeared in 1905 “at the height of the period of Victorian repressiveness,” so we almost expect that Cather “found it necessary to avoid altogether a direct confrontation with the question of her protagonist’s sexual nature” (127). Consequently, Rubin says, many scholars have either “overlooked” or “ignored” it. Only after the 1970s did certain circles begin to recognize the homoerotic undertones of “Paul’s Case,” which had previously and consistently been labeled merely a contrast between a passionate and bourgeois lifestyle.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that as a result of overlooking or ignoring the sexual temperament of authors and their characters, readers condemn literature to remain in the field of power that misinterpreted it. Her “Epistemology of the Closet” presents the idea that virtually every important epistemological core of 20th-century Western thought has been marked by issues of modern male homoerotic and heterosexual definition. The very texts that “mobilized and promulgated the most potent images and categories for the canon of homophobic mastery” (182) simultaneously act as the lesser-known foundational texts of modern gay culture. She claims that landmark texts such as Dorian Gray and Billy Budd enact this double sexual identity. Although they both depict same-sex, erotic love, traditional interpretations veil the texts with a pretense of heterosexuality and integrate them into the literary canon as such. Contemporary thought, especially Sedgwick’s field of gender studies, develops a more sensitive approach to understanding homoerotic issues; many scholars attempt to reorder past political inequities by reconsidering those who were previously excluded.

Larry Rubin interprets “Paul’s Case” in this enlightening manner. He notes how the lifting of “social taboos” in the discussion of sex leads to highly evocative reinterpretations of literature. “Particularly in homosexuality,” he says, “this newly unfettered approach to the libidinous urges of various literary characters” has helped to reinterpret “certain dark and previously unmentionable aspects of the psychological motivation of those characters and even the overall vision of authors involved” (127). Willa Cather is one such author; the protagonist in “Paul’s Case,” the story that established Cather’s artistic maturity, is one such character. Both Cather’s artistic style and life vision have become involved, even entangled, in the web of identity-politics, largely due to her non-traditional and often elusive sexual identity.

Since Cather was very particular about transmitting her personal information and writing into the public sphere, retrieving particular insight leads to an array of conflicting images. James Woodress, who has written a significant amount about Cather, argues that “documentary evidence does not exist to dispose of the question in one way or another … [so] whether she was [a lesbian] or not will have to remain moot” (86). Yet Karla Jay, in Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions, depicts Cather as a radical lesbian by citing biographical pictures of “Willie the cross-dresser” trying to “come out” to a society that was unwilling to notice. Moreover, contemporary aspects of literature include Cather as an essential author within gay and lesbian anthologies. The certainty by which many interpretations claim Cather as a lesbian rely on her long-standing, intense female relationships and her avoidance of marriage proposals from various men. Cather famously befriended Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis, who helped form Cather’s personality, and perhaps her lesbianism. In view of this fact, and of Cather’s avoidance of marriage, Woodress claims: “It seems perfectly clear that she had no need for heterosexual relationships” (86).

Considering these conflicting ideas, scholars have more successfully shifted from speculation of sexual preference to examining the social implications of her adoption of a masculine persona. From age 14 through her first two years at the University of Nebraska, Cather cropped her hair short, wore the clothes of a young man, and called herself William, Willie, or Will (Begley 2). Evidently, creating a “female self” in the late Victorian era proved difficult. Sharon O’Brien states that Cather’s attempt “to fashion a female self that could be compatible with the artist’s role” may have been futile because there were “no acceptable models for identity and vocation in the late-Victorian culture” (qtd. in Thomas 8).
“Paul's Case” emerges as a literary manifestation of Cather's non-conformity and her assuming of a male identity. Yet Cather is not sexually explicit; she imbues the story with innuendo that signals, perhaps unmistakably, a homosexual identity of the narrator, and also a homophobia inherent in the passionless life of Cordelia Street, both of which are to blame in Paul's impending suicide.

Before analyzing the story, understanding the innuendo of “Paul's Case” is paramount. Primarily, the sexual implicitness of the story demonstrates reticence in two important ways. It shows the difficulty of writing about homosexuality in 1905. As Claude Summer states, “1905 discourse on homosexuality was couched almost exclusively in terms of criminality and psychopathology” (109). Foucault's *History of Sexuality* concentrates on the idea that we produce modern sexuality from past historically distinctive discourse; hence modern thought arises from these dogmas. Foucault locates the genesis of “homosexual” definition and discourse around 1905, a time when “nineteenth-century psychiatrists entomologized … all those minor perverts” by giving them strange names such as “sexoesthetic introverts” (43). He formulates the history of homosexuality as follows:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood … [His sexuality] was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away … [T]he psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal’s famous article of 1870 on “contrary sexual sensations” can stand as its date of birth—less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility … the homosexual was now a species. (43)

At this point in history, homosexuality was no longer act-specific; it became a type of personality, rather than perverse recreation. At the turn of the 19th century, homosexuality was realized, so people were just beginning to struggle with the new idea of “homosexual identity.”

The implicitness of “Paul's Case” also shows Cather's penchant for insinuation in her literature. A passage from her exploratory essay “The Novel Démueblé” demonstrates Cather's tacit approach to writing and particularly illuminates, along with Foucault, an exploration of “Paul’s Case”:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (Cather 41–42)

From the inception of “Paul's Case,” the reader begins to comprehend from the page what Cather has not “specifically named there.” Paul consistently suppresses a truth from his teachers, his father, and perhaps from himself and the San Francisco boy he meets while sojourning in New York. What is Paul lying about? It is not his contempt for his teachers “which he seemingly made not the least effort to conceal” (Cather 260). It is his homosexuality, subdued not only in literary discursive forces and in Cather’s life, but also at the most rudimentary level, in the psychology of an author's creation.

Cather mysteriously introduces Paul by referring to his “various misdemeanors” and to his father's own “perplexity” about him. His teachers are also perplexed. They say: “Paul's was not a usual case. It was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of trouble” (260). Paul detects the apprehension people have of him; he “was always smiling,
always glancing about him, seeming to feel that people might be watching him and trying to detect something” (260). He feels his homosexuality in Foucault’s terms: “everywhere present in him … [and] written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away.”

Although Paul cannot address his homosexuality in a direct, verbal way, he demonstrates it through his disposition: “There was something of the dandy about him, and he wore an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand” and a “scandalous red carnation” in his buttonhole (259). Besides his choice in clothing, Paul’s eyes contribute a great deal to his personality. “His eyes were remarkable for a certain hysterical brilliancy” which he “continually used … in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy” (259). Cather associates the “glassy glitter” of his eye with a “belladonna,” giving Paul a distinct effeminate quality.

Paul’s adornments and flashy countenance render him an especially flamboyant boy. He dresses in the fashion of “dandyism” reflective of Oscar Wilde and the late 19th-century aesthetes, who above everything attempted to dress elegantly and fashionably. As Richard Dellamora states, “dandyism also reflects a loss of balance between the dual imperatives of leisure and work incumbent upon Victorian gentlemen. The dandy is too relaxed, too visible, and consumes to excess while producing little or nothing” (199). Here occurs a divide between the middle-class gentleman and the Wildean dandy, a dualism Cather enacts by repeatedly contrasting “boy” with “man.” She contrasts the relaxed Paul, who produces little or nothing, and the structured, “successful” men of Cordelia street. Paul is a “mere boy”; while his disposition is “the defiant manner of the boy’s” and “his boyish mirthfulness.” A “man,” however, is quite a different person. On the street “where all the houses were exactly alike … business men begot and reared large families of children … all of whom were exactly like their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived” (263). The “young man” of Cordelia Street whom the neighborhood likens Paul to mirror “was of a ruddy complexion, with a compressed, red mouth, and faded, nearsighted eyes” (265); an unpleasant sounding gentleman. Yet, Cordelia street imagines him, unlike Paul, “a young man with a future” who works for a “chief” in the iron and railroad industry. Paul wants none of the capitalistic success of “the iron kings.” Rather, he wants to hear their “legends,” their “stories of palaces in Venice, [and] yachts on the Mediterranean” (265). He could care less about the kings; Paul “was interested in the triumphs of cash-boys who had become famous” (265).

The “boy” Paul has the same contempt for “men” of the classroom: “the prosy men who never wore frock coats, or violets in their buttonholes” (267). They never adorn their austere image with violets, while Paul splashes violet water on his body. Finally, the only acquaintance of any importance to Paul is the “wild San Francisco boy” who offers to show Paul the night life of New York City. The two click intensely: “the two boys went off together after dinner, not returning to the hotel until seven o’clock the next morning” (271). Paul traverses New York City, taking in the energy that only people like himself, the “cash-boys” and the “San Francisco boys” desire. Hence, Paul defies the strict societal codes for “masculinity” by not only his fashion sense but also by his passionate leisure life.

The “verbal mood” and “emotional aura” (in Cather’s terms) of “Paul’s Case” also have an undeniable sexual essence. Besides Paul’s disposition, the passionate glitter in his eye “that drug does not produce,” the language Cather uses to describe his surroundings is clearly delineated. “Paul never went up Cordelia Street without a shudder of loathing” (263). This “every-day existence” is “but a sleep and a forgetting” for Paul. Cather uses hopeless, sinking, defeat, ugliness, commonness, physical depression, odours, repulsion, colourless mass, and morbid to describe Paul’s monotonous home. While Cather confines the description of this bourgeois mundanity to Cordelia Street, aspects of the passionate and theatrical world Paul yearns to enter, akin to the famous triumphs of the cash-boys, are scattered throughout the story. Cather uses gayfour times; also, airy, exhilarated, flourishes, suppression, charming, exotic, glistening, perverted,
tempt, corrupt, thronged, fag, and fagged charge the story with energy. Moreover, Paul, when in New York, “burnt like a fagot in a tempest” (270), which seems to describe the pinnacle of Paul’s secret world where he can play out his true sexual identity.

Although Cather’s language never directly describes sexuality, it creates a mood that signals the homosexuality of Paul. She writes, “In Paul’s world, the natural nearly always wore the guise of ugliness” (266). Paul’s world is Pittsburgh, a city of steel-like reality where his natural identity, if revealed, would wear the guise of ugliness. Paul cannot “come out” to a society unable or unwilling to accept his sexuality. Hence, both the rigidity of Cordelia street and Paul’s secrecy of his sexuality are at fault when we analyze his suicide. His passion should be able to transform his cut-out, “proper” relationships and insensitive surroundings in more just and loving directions. Instead, he gives in, hurtling himself in front of a moving train. Paul’s sexuality overcomes him. He “dropped back into the immense design of things” (274).

Of writing, Cather said: “Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present we must select the eternal material of art” (41). She evokes the sentiment that the present is gleaming and streaming; it stops for no one and yields no second consideration. But art is eternal material; it can capture an issue or idea and allow present critics to return to a given historical point to reconsider previous discrimination, like bias against homosexuality. Although Cather did not explicitly argue issues of gender equality, her implicit response is equally as forceful.

Works Cited


