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No Alternatives: The Lack of Understanding about LGBT+ Issues in “Paul’s Case”

“Fight or flight?'' When faced with this question, Paul, the protagonist in Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case”*,* took the flight option. Paul was raised in the blue-collar city of Pittsburgh in the early 1900s, where men worked in factories and not much else. But Paul had bigger dreams, he dreamed of the theater, the only place where he felt alive, and of New York City. Through Paul, Cather portrays the concerns of one of the first characters from the LGBT community in American literature and teen suicide. At this time, it was illegal to be gay, and those who were, kept it to themself and told no one because of the consequnces they would face. Like many people during this time, Paul struggled with his gender identity and sexuality, feeling suppressed by his harsh father and his lack of options. Through her use of symbolism, setting, and characterization, Cather shows that he felt forced into Darwin’s question of fight or flight and Freud’s idea that we are our own worst enemies.

Throughout Cather’s short story, the reader is constantly met with the ideas of Darwin and Freud, with Darwinism playing a bigger role in Paul’s actions and Freud playing a larger role in his relationships. Paul’s relationship with his father was terrible. Paul’s father was almost disgusted by the way he acted and disappointed Paul spent so much time at the theater. “Today Paul’s father sat on the top step, talking to a young man who shifted a restless baby from knee to knee. He happened to be the young man who was daily held up to Paul as a model, and after whom it was his father’s dearest hope that he would pattern” (Cather 98). In this passage the reader is shown how Paul’s father pictured how Paul would turn out. And with Paul’s mother dying after his birth, he was left with no advocate, no one to nurture and care for him as he was facing the question of who he was. Darwinism is shown when Paul was banned from the theater, the only light in his life. As a result, he feels his only choices are fight or flight, and choosing the flight option, he steals money from the stock company and flees to New York City to live the life he had dreamed of. When Paul runs out of money and sees his father is looking for him, he’s faced with another question, to go back to Pittsburgh or commit suicide. Only seeing black and white and no alternatives, Paul knew going back to his old life after living out his dreams was never an option, portraying Freud’s idea that we are our own worst enemies.

Paul’s life in the short story is symbolized by a flower. When he first arrives at his hotel in New York City, he immediately asks for flowers. The flowers are shown as lively and beautiful, similar to how Paul was feeling as he was living out his dream. But, as time continues and Paul is forced to leave his dreams, he brings along the now dying red flowers in his jacket and buries them by the train tracks, where soon after he throws himself in front of a train. The flowers represent Paul’s short span of pure happiness while in New York City. They are first shown when he arrives, full of life, just like Paul as he felt free. The flowers are shown again at the end, dying just like his dreams, he buries the red carnations, and essentially himself. The flowers also represent Darwin’s “survival of the fittest idea”, the carnations when brought in to the winter cold by Paul quickly died, as they were not suited for the cold, the same goes for Paul, with the way he interacted and acted with his peers, he wasn’t suited for the early 1900s lack of understanding and acceptance.

 Paul’s relationships with his peers, teachers, and father, all lead to the insecurity he felt about himself. Paul was looked at as an outsider by all, including his father. Because of this treatment from his peers and teachers, Paul viewed school and the people there as frivolous and a waste of his time. “In the itch to let his instructors know how hearilty he despised them and their homilies, and how thoroughly he was appreciated elsewhere” (Cather 101). Paul did not fit in with his classmates. To impress them, he made up elaborate stories to escape them: stories of his friendships with the soloists who came to Carnegie Hall, his suppers with them and the flowers he sent them, along with the acquaintance he had with members of the stock company. And Paul also didn’t fully accept himself, because his sexuality and actions were illegal and he knew that, “There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always watching him-and Paul had done things that were not pretty to watch, he knew” (Cather 103). At school and home, Paul felt surrounded and judged by closed-minded people. Pittsburgh was stuck in the mindset that boys transitioning into adulthood work in factories and industries, but Paul never saw a life for himself this way. With no one to aid him, he took drastic measures into his own hands. The narrator states that, “It had been wonderfully simple; when they had shut him out of the theatre and concert hall, when they had taken away his bone, the whole thing was virtually determined” (Cather 103). In this passage Cather shows the reader how Paul knew he would have to flee Pittsburgh, as it was just a matter of what forced him to do so, but that thought of leaving had always been with him. Paul’s characterization as an outsider with no hope of fitting in is shown throughout the story, first when the reader is told he’s lived without his mother and again throughout with Paul’s interactions and relationships with his classmates, teachers, and father.

Paul was surrounded by the industrial Pittsburgh, while he dreamed of the welcoming and freeing city of New York, where he envisioned being himself and not feeling trapped. The settings used by Cather in *Paul’s Case,* trapped and suffocated Paul, as he was confined by closed-minded blue collar workers, both at school and home. At his house, Paul never felt truly at home. He was suppressed by his father and his unappealing ideals for Paul, and at every chance he escaped to the theatre, but even there he wasn’t truly free, because he’d always have to return home. Paul looked at Pittsburgh, school, and his home as dull and gray. So much of his life was mundane that the theatre was the only place he felt alive, “It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting” (Cather 99). Paul lived for the few hours of joy he felt at the theatre, picturing New York City to be just like it. In New York City he still didn’t belong. The way he got there only allowed for him to live out his dreams for a short week. Paul’s surroundings in Pittsburgh and its lack of the life he dreamed of ultimately led him to the fight or flight question, and in Paul’s eyes there was no life in Pittsburgh. So when faced with Darwin’s question, leaving NYC and facing the repercussions for what he had done, going back to Pittsburgh was never a choice.

The lack of acceptance and understanding about gender and vocation during Paul’s time is what ultimately led to his suicide. Paul felt misunderstood. At his age and maturity he only saw black and white, one option, and no alternative. Nobody was willing to help him. Compared to today’s society, Paul would have had people in his corner, people to help him understand who he is and accept him, but in the early 1900s they simply didn’t have that environment, and that’s why Paul felt he had no alternatives. Cather’s use of setting, characterization, and symbolism builds to answer the questions of why Paul did what he did, why he was his own worst enemy and had a poor relationship with his father, and the reader is able to see Cather’s portrayal of Freud’s theories about the tensions and, often, direct opposition of lack of communication in father and son relationships. In the end, it comes down to this and Darwin’s question of fight or flight for Paul. Fighting was never an option.

Works Cited

Cather, Willa. “Paul’s Case”, *40 Short Stories.* Bedford/St. Martin’s Macmillan Learning, New York, 2004.