Paul's Case

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLA CATHER

Though born in Virginia, Willa Cather has come to be associated with the plains of Nebraska, where she and her family moved when she was ten years old. She initially dreamed of becoming a doctor, but after publishing a literary essay in a newspaper while a student at the University of Nebraska, she decided to become a writer. After college, she became the managing editor of a women's magazine. She later worked for the successful *McClure's Magazine* in New York, and wrote arts reviews for other newspapers as well. "Paul's Case" was fist published in *McClure's*, along with a number of her other short stories. In 1911, Cather left the magazine editing world and began writing fiction full-time, publishing a series of novels in the next years, including *O Pioneers* (1913), *My Antonia* (1918) (probably her best-known and most-praised novel), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), which solidified her reputation as one of the great female writers of the early 20th century. By the 1930s, she had become nationally famous, but also came under fire by certain critics who claimed that she was increasingly out of touch with the changing issues of contemporary America. In 1947, she died in New York City, where she had been living for almost forty years, many of them in domestic partnership with the editor Edith Lewis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The turn of the 20th century saw the continued rise of industrialization in America. Pittsburgh, a major steel industry center, is described in the story as a "smoke-palled city." But the turn of the century was also the peak of the Gilded Age, an era defined by increasing wealth and extravagance but also corruption and extreme income inequality. In some ways, the Cordelia Street milieu in "Paul's Case" seems to have imbibed the Gilded Age values of upward mobility without limit, assuming that life's main purpose consists of making money and that success in business is the greatest good to which one should aspire. But in other ways it is Paul who yearns after the greatest excesses of the Gilded Age as represented by the wealth and splendor of New York City. It's also important to note, given the heavy implication in "Paul's Case" that Paul is gay, that sodomy (sexual acts between men) was a crime in every American state during this time, and would continue to be for many more decades. Apart from the illegality of homosexual acts, homosexuality was highly stigmatized socially. New York emerged as America's greatest haven for homosexuals. In the words of historian George Chauncey, "In the half-century between 1890 and the beginning of the Second World War, a highly visible, remarkably complex, and continually changing gay male world took shape in New York City." It is likely for this reason, in part, that Paul dreams of escaping to New York—and it is against the far more socially liberal backdrop of New York that the second half of "Paul's Case" plays out.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Paul's Case" was written in the context of a number of literary movements at the turn of the twentieth century, but naturalism—which sought to portray everyday life realistically while also study the effect of environment on individual characters—was particularly thriving. Writers like Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser attempted to examine social issues like gender inequality, the negative effects of industrialization, and the uglier aspects of the American Dream. At the same time, "Paul's Case" can be set within a longer lineage of literary representations of suicide, from the German writer Goethe's sentimentalist *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877). What was perhaps slightly different in the early 1900s was the relatively newly available psychological language of the "case" that is used in this title's story: Sigmund Freud's famous study, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, was published in 1905 as well.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament"
- **When Written:** 1905
- **Where Written:** Pittsburgh
- **When Published:** 1905 in the collection *The Troll Garden*; republished that year in *McClure's Magazine*
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story; Naturalism
- **Antagonist:** Paul's father and teachers; normalcy; heteronormativity
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Burn After Reading Before her death, Willa Cather tried to burn her entire archive of correspondences, preventing anyone from reading her private letters—although many letters survived. The attempt to destroy her letters was likely motivated by a fear that her lesbianism, if widely publicized, would ruin her legacy.

Eyes on the Prize *My Antonia* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize the first year the prize existed, though it didn't win. She would go on to win the prize for her now lesser-known 1923 book, *One of Ours*.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Paul's Case" begins with adolescent Paul going before a panel of teachers and his Principal at Pittsburgh High School, where he's been suspended for insolent behavior—the exact nature of which is never fully revealed. His teachers feel personally offended at Paul's evident disdain for them, particularly his English teacher, who leads the set of accusations against him (though afterwards, once they decide they'll allow him to return, they all feel somewhat abashed at how dramatic they have been).

Paul, tall and thin with a **red carnation** in his button-hole, listens to it all with a typically defiantly smile, though his hands are slightly shaking. After he's permitted to go, he races down the hill from school whistling, and heads immediately to Carnegie Hall, where he works as an usher. Full of nervous energy, Paul races up and down the aisles, only temporarily stymied by the arrival of his English teacher to the show. As soon as it starts, he's enraptured by the German soloist, whom he finds romantic and alluring despite being advanced in her years. After the show he begins to feel depressed and irritable, and rather than returning home he follows the soloist to the Schenley (a hotel), and gazes longingly through the **windows** into the luxurious interior. Finally, he takes the streetcar home to the respectable, middle-class **Cordelia Street**. Loathing his drab, dull house, Paul can't bear to face his father and try to explain where he's been, so he sneaks in through a basement window and stays awake for hours, fearing the rats but also entertaining himself by making up fanciful stories.

That Sunday, after Sabbath-school, Paul's father and sisters sit on the stoop with the other neighbors and talk about business and other everyday matters. Paul feels boredom verging on despair, except for brief moments like when a clerk tells of his boss's trip to the Mediterranean: Paul's imagination is once again fired up by picturing such exotic colors and sights. After dinner he anxiously asks his father if he can go to a friend's house for homework help, and his father reluctantly gives Paul a dime for the streetcar. Paul heads not to his friend's but to the Sunday-night rehearsals of a company at a downtown theatre, where one of the actors, Charley Edwards, allows Paul to hang around and help him dress. The theatre is described as Paul's fairy-tale realm that allows him to escape the prison of his home and school. It is strongly implied, here and repeatedly throughout the story, that Paul is gay. It is also strongly implied that Edwards is gay, and has taken Paul under his wing (though the nature of their relationship remains ambiguous).

Paul feels even worse, however, when he returns to the schoolroom from such escapes. He deals with this by telling his classmates tales about his actor friends and by making up stories about his imminent travels to California or abroad. He can only manage the alienation he feels at school by either making a joke out of everything or by scoffing at his teachers and coursework. Eventually, he makes the mistake of suggesting in front of his teachers that his work at the theatre is interfering with schoolwork, and the Principal talks to Paul's father, who takes Paul out of school and puts him to work at a firm called Denny & Carlson's. The company actors laugh bitterly when they hear how Paul has glamorized their lives in his imagination; they, like Paul's father and teachers, think that his is a "bad case."

The second part of the story opens on a train from Pittsburgh to New York. Paul is escaping his life in Pittsburgh with the help of several thousand dollars he's stolen from Denny & Carlson's. When he arrives in New York, he immediately goes on a spending spree, buying a new suit, linens, dress clothes, hat, silver scarf pin, shoes, and travel bags. He then heads to his hotel, the Waldorf. Everything there seems perfect after Paul has the bell-boy bring up some flowers. He bathes and puts on a luxurious red robe before napping—then springing up once he realizes he's wasting hours of his precious freedom. It's snowing outside, and Paul takes a carriage to Central Park and back. On the way he sees bright bouquets of flowers framed in windows that pop out against the white snow, and he reflects that they are being kept safe from the cruel world. When he returns to the hotel, he feels overwhelmed by the sensory pleasures and visual spectacle of the hotel dining room, as well as by the Opera that he attends later that night. He isn't lonely at all: it seems that Cordelia Street is no longer real, that all of New York has been created just for him, and that he can be however he wants without having to explain it.

The next day, Sunday, Paul happens to meet a wild Yale freshman from San Francisco, with whom he spends a spectacular night on the town, though the freshman parts ways with Paul coolly in the morning—and the narrator does not say why. After eight nearly perfect days, Paul reads about himself in the Pittsburgh papers—his father has paid back the theft and is on his way to New York, where it is rumored Paul has fled. Paul suddenly feels that the show is over, and decides that he will "finish the thing splendidly." After drinking too much wine, he wakes up the next morning and stares at the revolver in his hotel room. He decides, however, that this is not the way to kill himself. Though he feels depressed once again, as if all the world is Cordelia Street and it is swallowing him up, he's no longer as afraid as he used to be. He seems to admit to himself that he is gay, and realizes that it is not as bad as his fear of it had been. He takes the train to Newark, then takes a cab out of town following the Pennsylvania train tracks. He leaves the cab and notices that the red carnation he has bought is drooping.

He buries it in the snow, then dozes for a time. He awakens to hear an approaching train and leaps in front of it. His last thoughts are of colorful, exotic locales like Algeria and the Adriatic Sea, before all goes black.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Paul – The protagonist of Cather's story is described in careful physical and behavioral detail. Tall and thin, with bright, glassy eyes, Paul sticks out from his fellow students both in his appearance—he wears dandyish accessories like an opal pin and a **red carnation**—and in his flamboyant demeanor. Although he is often playful, performative, and defiant, he is privately quite depressed. Paul feels deeply alienated from everyone around him in Pittsburgh High School and on **Cordelia Street**, where he lives with his father and sisters. The narrator doesn't identify the roots of this alienation and despair in explicit terms, but through the liberal use of innuendo makes it clear that Paul is a homosexual—an identity that, at the turn of the twentieth century in suburban Pittsburgh, was forbidden, and even dangerous to express. Caught between warring impulses to repress his sexuality and to express his difference defiantly and flamboyantly, Paul deals with his alienation in a number of ways, though most dramatically by inventing fairy-tale worlds of art and sensual pleasure, imagining that these might allow him to escape an environment that he finds both hostile and depressingly dull. The narrator describes Paul's wild mood swings, his defiant attitude toward the disapproving authority figures in his life, and his rash behavior and decisions, showing them to be understandable in light of his difficult situation, gently suggesting that what seems at first to be simply rude, selfish, and inexplicable behavior stems from a much deeper issue—with Paul and with his society. The story shows how an outcome as tragic as suicide might result from such a situation, as the story's overt symbolism shows: Paul's bright, young life is crushed by the cruel, cold world like a red carnation in the snow.

Paul's father – A Pittsburgh businessman who, having lost his wife, is raising Paul and his daughters alone. Paul's father is unable to connect with or understand his son. He seems to have embraced the plodding, bourgeois life of **Cordelia Street**, and his greatest hope for his son is that he get a good job, earn a living, marry, and settle down into a comfortable existence. The narrator doesn't condemn Paul's father or his practical sensibility, even as Paul loathes everything his father represents. Paul's father is depicted as loving his son, but exhibits a radical failure to perceive—and perhaps a willed blindness—regarding what his son is actually experiencing and suffering. However, it's implied that he may not be so unaware of his son's homosexuality when Paul is forbidden from seeing Charley Edwards. Toward the end of the story, Paul's father pays back the money Paul stole from work and comes looking for Paul in New York, which is the terror that prompts Paul to kill himself.

Charley Edwards – A young actor who works in the "stock company" of a theatre in Pittsburgh, Charley Edwards has developed a liking for Paul, who loiters around his dressing-room, watching him get ready for the shows. Edwards is one of the male figures in the story whom, it's implied, Paul may have stronger feelings for than mere friendship. It is also strongly implied that Edwards himself is gay. Charley helps usher Paul into the world of theatre and art by inviting him to performances and rehearsals.

The English Teacher – One of Paul's teachers at school, this teacher is particularly angry about what she sees as Paul's impertinence—she feels personally offended by Paul's seemingly physical aversion to her, and she leads the attack against him in the suspension hearing. Although Paul tries to forget about her after he leaves school, the fact that she shows up to Carnegie Hall, where he is ushering, underlines the difficulties Paul has in containing and separating his two lives and identities from one another.

The Yale Freshman – A boy from San Francisco whom Paul meets in New York, described as "wild." The two boys share a late night out on the town together. This is another male character who, it's implied, might have a more than friendly relationship with Paul; at the very least the shifting register in their relationship, from warm and friendly at the start to cool when they say goodbye, suggests a certain level of uncertainty or ambiguity in their brief relationship.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Principal – The Principal of Pittsburgh High School convenes the hearing that opens the story, in which the other teachers try to describe what Paul has done to deserve suspension. The Principal, like the other teachers, is suspicious of Paul's plucky attitude, interpreting it as utter disrespect.

The Drawing Master – Another teacher at Paul's school, who is the first to wonder if there's something truly wrong with Paul beyond mere impertinence.

The German soloist – A middle-aged singer who performs at Carnegie Hall. The fact that Paul imagines her as a kind of romantic princess in her tiara and gown emphasizes his idealization of the world of the arts, and also reveals his fascination with feminine things that most young men wouldn't find interesting.

The Clerk – One of the **Cordelia Street** neighbors, who was once more rebellious but has since settled down and married an older woman. He works in business and represents, to Paul's father, the ideal kind of bourgeois life to which Paul should aspire.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ART AND ARTIFICIALITY VS. REALITY

Paul, the adolescent protagonist of "Paul's Case," suffers from worse than usual teenage angst. The story begins in Pittsburgh, where Paul seeks an escape from his drab, dismal home and school life through the world of theatre and performances at Carnegie Hall. In the second half of the story, the plot shifts to New York City, when Paul flees Pittsburgh to live a lavish lifestyle out of the Waldorf Hotel. In escaping to the big city, Paul seeks to seize for himself the alluring and beautiful life he sees captured onstage and in his favorite music and art. It is through art that Paul finds a way of escaping his everyday life—even as art also redefines the very way he sees his reality. Early on in the story, Paul decides that artificiality is "necessary" to beauty. Cather sympathetically portrays Paul's embrace of artifice, showing it to be part of art's power as well as a source of solace against a hostile world. At the same time, however, the story also warns of the dangers in collapsing the boundaries between art and life—and of imagining that life can ever reach the mystical splendor of the stage.

The story describes how Paul sees Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall as an *imagined* universe—"Paul's fairy tale"—which Paul finds all the more alluring in contrast to the "Sabbath-school picnics" and "petty economies" of his **Cordelia Street** home. Though he feels depressed every time he leaves the symphony or the theater, Paul also tries his best to live according to the fanciful logic of this world of performance even after he leaves it—making everything into a flamboyantly performative spectacle and telling elaborate lies about the romantic, exotic places he travels. Although the story is told from Paul's perspective, at times the narrator steps outside his mind to suggest that his way of seeing things might not be altogether accurate: the made-up stories he tells his classmates about his life at the theater company are, it's implied, transparently false to everyone except himself.

Paul is self-consciously theatrical in his everyday life, seeing himself as an actor who needs to perform at all times. In turn, he treats New York as another kind of stage, costuming himself decadently and describing Central Park as "a wonderful stage winter-piece." His eagerness to put flowers in his hotel bedroom, meanwhile, is further evidence of his belief that aesthetic beauty and symbols of wealth can make up for lack of control elsewhere in his life. And yet at the same time, it's in New York that Paul realizes that he *doesn't* need to be self-conscious about his quirks, his identity, or even his repressed homosexuality—feeling that suddenly his environment "explains" all this, so he doesn't have to. The story thus also suggests that Paul doesn't always *want* to perform—that he's *forced* to put on an act because his home environment wouldn't accept his true identity. He feels constantly scrutinized, as if he is being watched; the narrator notes that Paul worries that people are looking at him and "trying to detect something." This—along with many other hints in the text—suggests that Paul is gay, and that his theatrical behavior is a device he uses to create further distance between the outside world and his true self. His insistence on living as if on stage is thus an understandable defense mechanism against a world he sees as being hostile to him, and against the overwhelming dullness of middle-class Pittsburgh life, where "business men of moderate means" are all "exactly as alike as their houses, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived."

While the story is in many ways sympathetic to Paul's theatricality as a defense mechanism, it also suggests that his attempt to avoid the difficulties of his life by escaping into art is ultimately doomed. Readers are reminded, for instance, that the romantic actors whose lives Paul so admires are real people working by the hour, often to support unglamorous lives. There is something painfully naïve, the story suggests, about his notion that the realm of art is a separate reality peopled by exotic characters and sensuous pleasures. Meanwhile, once Paul learns that his father has come to New York to fetch him, his first response is to glance into his hotel room mirror, wink, and flash a winning smile—becoming performative once more in response to the threat of his discovery. Paul's suicide at the end of the story can be read as his final theatrical act, especially since the narrator repeats his sense that he is "being watched." However, the fact that he buries his **red carnation** in the snow just before he jumps in front of an approaching train suggests, chillingly, that in burying his flair for the theatrical, Paul has no more reason to live.

"Paul's Case" thus paints a complex, subtle portrait of an alienated individual who escapes into art both because his reality is painfully dull and because the people around him fail to understand—or accept—his true identity. But the glamorous world of art of which Paul yearns to be a part, and with which he attempts to replace his Cordelia Street life, is ultimately, the story suggests, just a mirage—artificial, and bound to vanish in the end. Part of the tragedy of Paul's death is that, failing to have escaped from the painful realities of life through art, he remains unable to face those painful realities or deal with them directly, and feels he has no option but to take his own life. While art and artificiality can be beautiful, if temporary, escapes from reality, the story also warns of the dangers of becoming so entranced in the beauty of art's illusion that one forgets how to deal with the difficulties of real life.

ALIENATION AND HOMOSEXUALITY

As the story describes the way Paul perceives his dull, drab life in Pittsburgh—a dullness that he attempts to mitigate by constructing fantasy worlds full of wealth and art—it is in many ways sympathetic to Paul's despair and alienation. The mundane, middle-class world of **Cordelia Street** and Pittsburgh High School does not know what to make of Paul—in large part, the story suggests, because he is gay. Through subtle and not-so-subtle allusions to Paul's sexual identity and frustrations, the story explores how the need to hide one's identity, as well as the difficulty of finding kindred or even sympathetic people, can lead to the deep feelings of alienation that lead Paul to act out, steal money, run away from home, and ultimately take his own life.

The story describes in acute detail Paul's wild mood swings between elation and despondency, showing how what Paul calls the "grey monotony" of his life is a source of intense, even physical despair for him. At Carnegie Hall, he first dashes into the usher's room and can't calm down, then finally manages to listen to the show, enraptured, then immediately becomes "irritable and wretched" as he heads home. These intense mood swings stem from Paul's whirring mind and his creative imagination, but also from his inability to find people to confide in and express what he's truly thinking and feeling. At times it does seem that Paul might be able to find figures who can ease his feelings of alienation, especially Charley Edwards and the Yale freshman in New York. However, in describing Paul's relationships to these young men with subtle implications of erotic attraction, the story underlines Paul's inability to overtly address his sexuality. These relationships, though they initially suggest the possibility of finding comfort or refuge in connection, ultimately fizzle out or fade away. In general, Paul remains painfully trapped in a world that forces him to hide his homosexuality from others as well as himself.

In response, the story suggests, Paul resorts to an attitude of scorn and flamboyant self-absorption. Paul looks on his father, his teachers, and his neighbors with poorly-concealed contempt, feeling he "must convey to them that he considered it all trivial, and was there only by way of a joke, anyway." The story calls into question the extent to which Paul is accurate in his descriptions of the monotony and tedium that characterize his life in Pittsburgh, suggesting at times that Paul's own alienation has made him unable to sympathetically imagine his way into the minds of other people around him, just as they have been unable to empathize with or understand him. In New York, Paul's loneliness turns into a feeling of independence: though he knows no one, "he had no especial desire to meet or know any of these people," and his solitude becomes less troubling than in the more restricted territory of his own community, where his views of his neighbors are at times dehumanizing. New York is a refuge for Paul and a relief from his feelings of alienation in part because of its comparatively more permissive attitudes toward all types of "deviants," homosexuals included. Thus, in this environment where he no longer feels he has to hide his identity, Paul begins to feel more at peace with himself.

Ultimately, Paul's suicide is a testament to the tragic nature of his story—a story of a young man whose life was crushed prematurely by a world that would not accept him for who he was. Cather shows that the feelings of alienation that arise from being homosexual in an oppressively heteronormative society can make life seem unbearable. However, in the last moments of the story, as Cather shows Paul's suicide to have been a "folly" executed with "haste," she encourages her reader to believe that even for the most seemingly hopeless "case," there is always hope for self-acceptance, self-realization, love, and connection—and that these things that can alleviate the most crippling feelings of alienation.

MONEY AND WEALTH

"Paul's Case" describes Paul's socioeconomic background as middle-class and his neighbors as "burghers" (a term originally describing people who had to work to make money rather than living off inherited wealth). That term is, in fact, a clue to how Cather wants to both explore and critique Paul's own disdain for hard work and the need to make a living. For Paul, the need to worry about money at all is depressing and embarrassing: for him wealth, when there's enough of it, becomes a near-magical elixir that will grant him the freedom he craves. But the story cautions against such a mystical view of money, suggesting that there's no shortcut to the hard work it takes to earn it—and even that the more humdrum, realistic view of money as espoused by the **Cordelia Street** burghers is not as horrifying as Paul finds it to be.

Though Cordelia Street is not poor per se, its inhabitants, including Paul's father, do have to worry about money. His sisters exchange tips on mending dresses, and the family washes with "ill-smelling soap." Horrified by such dreariness, Paul keeps a small vial of violet water to use instead—one of the many ways he chooses the values of an aesthete over those of Cordelia Street. Paul's father, meanwhile, only allows him to work as an usher in Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall (the space of Paul's "fairy-tale" imagination) because he thinks that it's good for a boy to have a job. Paul's father would love for his son to follow the path of the neighbor, a clerk—a formerly dissolute young man who now has a stable job, a wife, and four kids, and from whose life Paul recoils in horror. In some ways, the story's damning descriptions of the Cordelia Street neighbors with their potbellied husbands and children's love of arithmetic reflects Cather's sympathy with Paul's horror. In other ways, though, such as by briefly noting that Paul's mother has died, the story implies that there might be good reasons for Paul's father to embrace hard work and slow progress—reasons

having do with his own desires for stability and comfort.

At the same time, the story also shows Paul's attitude toward money to be deeply unrealistic. His inability to grasp that even actors are just people with families making a living underlines his own idealistic, fantastical way of seeing the world. More strikingly, his theft from Denny & Carson, which funds his trip to New York, underlines Paul's failure to understand money as tied to work, rather than as a kind of golden ticket to another kind of life. This money is ultimately paid back by Paul's father, though, notably, Paul hardly lingers over that sacrifice. Once he arrives in New York, Paul sees the city itself as the "glaring affirmation of the omnipotence of wealth," a wealth that seems scrubbed free from any of the labor that went into producing it.

Paul can't imagine working in order to earn money. Before New York, he works as an usher only because it gives him access to a realm of musical and artistic splendor. By the end of "Paul's Case," the money he's stolen is running out, and it never seems to occur to Paul that he might have to work to support himself, failing yet again to see any connection between wealth and hard work. Depicting Paul as wanting only to "float on the wave" of such wealth, the story critiques such a naïve view, showing it to be both unsustainable and tragically limited in its understanding of reality. Paul's death is a product of many converging forces—having to do, first and foremost, with the alienation he feels due to his homosexuality—but it is perhaps just as much a product of his unrealistic views of money and wealth. In this way, Cather reminds readers that idealism must be tempered with a practical and realistic outlook on what it takes to achieve any form of adulthood and independence in this world—and that is money.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RED CARNATIONS

Even as Paul sheds his shabby overcoat for a much smarter usher's uniform, and—once in New York—for a much more expensive dress coat, one aspect of his costume remains the same: the red carnation that he tucks into his button-hole. Because it is worn on his breast, the red carnation bears some symbolic resemblance to the scarlet letter A worn by Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which is symbol of her adultery. The red carnation that Paul wears, because it is such an obvious sign of his dandyism, also represents his sins of the flesh, actual or imminent, in the sense that it is yet another of the many clues Cather gives that Paul is gay. Small but conspicuous, the carnation is for Paul a burst of color amid a dull world—a world that he often imagines in terms of color, the rich hues of red and purple contrasting with the gray schoolroom or **yellow wallpaper** of his room at home. Paul's teachers find the flower almost personally offensive, representative of Paul's disregard for their authority and defiance of their values. He opts instead for the aesthetics of a dandy, cheerful and jaunty rather than serious and scholarly. Though Paul can only wear a single snipped-off bud in his buttonhole, each one represents and is linked to the bouquets that Paul admires in New York, flowers that represent a vibrant realm of artistic and sensory pleasures Paul dreams of joining. The story, however, represents these red carnations as just that—a dream of an alternative reality, and one with a limited time span. After all, the flowers only last so long before drooping, just as Paul's escapade in New York bears the an expiration date that aligns with his father's imminent arrival. Beautiful and alluring but also fragile and limited, flowers come to represent Paul's life itself, in addition to what he imagines it could be.

CORDELIA STREET

In Pittsburgh, Paul lives with his father and sisters on Cordelia Street, part of a middle-class neighborhood some distance from downtown. On Cordelia Street, the houses all look the same and contain the same kind of people—businessmen whose families dutifully attend church and have few interests outside gossip and business. Cordelia Street represents all that Paul despises about his home—its shabbiness, its humdrum concern for moneymaking, its embrace of the common and the ordinary, and its ethic of limited improvement. As with many aspects of Paul's life, the street is associated with a visual characteristic—that of colorlessness—as well as with an odor: that of daily cooking. The story refers to "Cordelia Street" as a shorthand for everyday life itself, one that Paul dreams of leaving behind for a life of luxury and excitement. But the story also represents Cordelia Street as possibly worse than just dull: its values leave no room for difference, including sexual difference, and thus exacerbate Paul's feelings of alienation. Cordelia Street is variously imagined as a jail or as a place where Paul might drown, and by the end of the story, when he imagines that Cordelia Street has become the entire world, the infinite expansion of this dreary place underlines just how trapped Paul has come to feel in his failure to escape his hometown and its values.

YELLOW WALLPAPER

If the **red carnations** give Paul a chance to express himself and to take solace in beauty, the yellow wallpaper coating his room has the opposite function. Its drab, dull quality reminds Paul of the painful contrast between his own dreams and the comparatively conservative values of **Cordelia Street**. Yellow is coded for him as an ugly, even sickly

color. Once again, it's a reminder of how the story uses visual descriptions to differentiate between the value systems that Paul embraces or rejects. In referring back to Paul's yellow-wallpapered room at various points, the story links this visual characteristic to the emotional and cultural atmosphere of Cordelia Street. Like Cordelia Street more generally, the wallpaper from his room on Cordelia street becomes a symbol of everything he dreads about his home life, including the suffocating atmosphere that make him feel it is impossible for him to be himself.

WINDOWS

Paul spends much of the story gazing longingly through windows, from the swinging glass doors of the Schenley hotel where the Carnegie Hall soloist is staying, to the storefront windows in Manhattan that Paul zooms past in a carriage, with their bright bouquets of flowers framed within. Glass windows seem to invite Paul inside: they give him a glimpse of another world, allowing him to imagine himself as belonging to it. But, as Paul realizes when he is drawn to the Schenley in the midst of a rainstorm, even as windows give transparency and the illusion of accessibility, they also create boundaries, separating the inside from the outside, and those who belong from those who don't. Windows thus represent, in the story, both a dream of inclusion and the inaccessibility of the life Paul desires for himself. Paul longs to live a fabulous life in New York, viewing the city as a kind of haven for him with its arts and culture and its relatively tolerant attitude toward gay people—but living in New York takes money Paul doesn't have, and as his past crimes threaten to catch up with him, he ultimately falls victim to the harsh realities of the world beyond the New York bubble. In this way, windows represent the barrier between Paul and the life he aspires—but ultimately fails—to win for himself.

PURPLE

Cather uses the color purple, much like she uses the **red carnations**, to represent Paul's flamboyant dandyism and his queerness. Apart from the fact that the color purple has historically been associated with homosexuality in a broad range of contexts, Cather associates the color purple with Paul's homosexuality in several passages. When Paul visits the Metropolitan Opera, Cather writes that "He felt now that his surroundings explained him. Nobody questioned the purple; he had only to wear it passively." Elsewhere she asks whether Paul was not, "after all, one of those fortunate beings born to the purple." In this way, Cather employs the color purple to symbolize Paul's particular strangeness and quirk, which is attributable in part, it would seem, to the fact of his sexual difference. It is perhaps worth noting that purple is opposite, on the color wheel, to the yellow of Paul's **wallpaper**.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1992.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ Paul was always smiling, always glancing about him, seeming to feel that people might be watching him and trying to detect something.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Paul has been invited before a panel and subjected to a kind of trial, in which his teachers attempt to characterize the nature of his "crimes." Here the narrator describes Paul's attitude during this hearing: unlike many other boys in similar situations, he doesn't grow visibly or angry, instead "smiling" and maintaining a seemingly casual, carefree mood. This happy-go-lucky demeanor is part of what the teachers find so infuriating and incomprehensible about him.

At the same time, however, this passage also signals that there is more to Paul's attitude than meets the eye. His smile, it seems, might be more nervous, defensive, or bitter than merely careless. The fact that Paul constantly feels that he's being watched also suggests that he does care more about what people think of him than he lets on. The story suggests that this fear is rooted in Paul's homosexuality, which he feels he must keep hidden from his community. Therefore, he puts on an act of cavalier disdain as the only means he can imagine of remaining afloat.

❝ He seemed to feel himself go after her up the steps, into the warm, lighted building, into an exotic, a tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease.

Related Characters: The German soloist, Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Paul has just left Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall, where he was enraptured by the German soloist, who represents for him the peak of glamor and beauty. After the show, dreading his return home, Paul instead follows the soloist to the hotel where she is staying, and stares in through the windows. The hotel, like Carnegie Hall, represents for Paul an entirely different universe, one that doesn't obey the same rules and middle-class dreariness of his own environment. This other world is described in terms of both aesthetic beauty and leisure: the "glistening surfaces" reflect Paul's desire for everything around him to be touched with beauty, while the "basking ease" underlines his covetous attitude toward luxury, and his unwillingness to do something so dull as work for a living.

The story doesn't quote Paul here, and yet the adjectives used, from "exotic" and "tropical" to "glistening," are meant to capture Paul's perspective. And yet, the story cautions against Paul's idealistic view of such places like the hotel, seeking to expose such idealism as ultimately naïve and unsustainable.

❝ It was a highly respectable street, 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.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Paul is returning home to Cordelia Street from the concert, and the narrator begins to describe the neighborhood where he lives with his father and sister. The repetition of language in this passage contributes to the depiction of Cordelia Street as deadening in its monotony, almost unbearable in the homogeneity of its inhabitants. Paul, it's suggested, is one of the only people who is different—or in any case he imagines himself to be so. Indeed, it seems in this passage that Cather herself is rather sympathetic to Paul's disdain for Cordelia Street (even if the story will go on to paint a slightly more nuanced portrait of the place, or at least hint at the limitations of Paul's own viewpoint). Still, there's a clear set of values evident in this neighborhood, many of which link success to hard work, regular attendance at church, and decent grades at school. Life on Cordelia Street, in other words, is *regular*—the kind of life that Paul sees as anathema to everything he is, loves, and believes in.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ When he was shown to his sitting-room on the eighth floor, he saw at a glance that everything was as it should be; there was but one detail in his mental picture that the place did not realize, so he rang for the bell boy and sent him down for flowers.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Paul has arrived in his room at the Waldorf Hotel in New York, and at this moment it appears that the distance between reality and his fantasies has finally been bridged. A devout aesthete and a dandy, Paul revels in aesthetic beauty, especially when coupled with luxury and wealth. He has a mental image of how a room "should be" that is constructed in large part in opposition to what it *shouldn't* be: no yellow wall-paper, no smells of cooking, no sappy, embroidered, scriptural mottos on the walls, like in his room at home. Colorful, bright, and alive, flowers are the only thing missing from Paul's "mental picture," an addition that he thinks will make of his hotel room both a home and a space of sensory pleasures from smell to sight. At the same time, flowers are a fleeting beauty; once cut they have only a limited period before they droop and die. The flowers in Paul's hotel room, like his red carnation, will come to signify both Paul's dreams of another kind of life, and the limited term of his escape from reality.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Paul is reflecting on his successful escape from Pittsburgh to New York, and is thinking about how he feels freer and lighter in his hotel room than he's ever felt before. Here, the narrator closely follows Paul's stream of consciousness in describing, somewhat cryptically his feelings of alienation and despair in a very private sense. It's not solely, that is, that Paul feels like he cannot express himself to the people around him, but also that there's something within himself that he doesn't fully understand.

This is one of the places in the story where Cather's oblique language serves to suggest that Paul's sexuality may be a major source of his alienation. With the unfeasibility of being openly gay in his middle-class Pittsburgh community around the turn of the twentieth century, Paul has had to conceal his identity—even, to a great extent, to himself. It's impossible to know exactly what is meant by the mention of things Paul has done that "were not pretty to watch;" it could be a reference to sexual encounters he may have had with other men. However, the very ambiguity points to the fact that much is happening in this story that is only veiled or hinted at, and that this need for concealment is crucial to the way Paul behaves throughout the story.

❝ Here and there on the corners whole flower gardens blooming behind glass windows, against 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.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

Paul has left the Waldorf Hotel just after the snow has stopped falling, and is taking a carriage ride to Central Park. As he rides past the shops on Manhattan's grand avenues, he looks through the shop windows at the bouquets of flowers—far more extravagant arrangements than the one he had asked to be placed in his hotel room. This passage emphasizes the way in which Paul sees New York itself as a theatrical stage, designed and performed for his own benefit. Just as the narrator had, earlier, depicted Paul's love of beauty as being a love of all things artificial, this passage signals the artificiality (the "unnatural" aspect) of bright, blooming flowers against the snow. His affection for all things unnatural parallels his love of men, which many would have thought to be "unnatural."

However, the story also implicitly critiques Paul's embrace of the artificial and the unnatural, linking it to his unrealistic view of reality and his doomed attempt to escape everyday life by indulging in fantasies that there is another, less complicated world awaiting him. Cather suggests that, in reality, such a world can only ever be staged and isolated within the small, safe space of a theatre or a store window. The flowers would never survive in the harsh, cold environment outside.

❝ Had he ever known a place called Cordelia Street, a place where fagged looking business men boarded the early car? Mere rivets in a machine they seemed to Paul—sickening men, with combings of children's hair always hanging to their coats, and the smell of cooking in their clothes.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

The longer Paul stays in New York, the more his hometown comes to seem unreal and far-away. Here, however, Paul does think back to Cordelia Street, only to consider how much of a contrast it makes with the luxurious, elegant world that he is inhabiting at the Waldorf. This passage is one of the places where the story, in recording how Paul views the people around him, shows how he dehumanizes others just as they have dehumanized him. The details that he's chosen—the smell of cooking, and their exhausted ("fagged") demeanor—have more to do with their socioeconomic status than with any ethical characteristics. In response to his own feelings of alienation, this passage suggests, Paul becomes scornful and even cruel toward people who fail to understand or empathize with him. Perhaps Cather intends to illustrate the ways in which all people sometimes fail to understand each other as more than "mere rivets in a machine."

❝ He felt now that his surroundings explained him. Nobody questioned the purple; he had only to wear it passively.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

One of Paul's first tasks once he arrived in New York was to purchase an entirely new set of clothing, transforming his costume from the shabby overcoat he was wearing in the story's first scenes to a fancy "street suit." The change signals in many ways Paul's attempt to fashion a fantasy world of pleasure and spectacle for himself, and leave behind everyday life on Cordelia Street—its banality only further emphasized by its penny-pinching values—for good. Paul's new wardrobe is continuous with his dandyish aesthetic throughout the story, and is of a piece with the red carnation he wears and the violet water he sprinkles onto his wrists. This quote is from Paul's evening at the Opera, where he no longer feels so out of place for his flamboyance—his "purple"—a color long associated with queerness.

What's changed in New York is that no one questions or challenges Paul's difference. Paul is surrounded by many different kinds of people, and also by great wealth. This passage thus serves as a clue to Paul's defiant attitude in Pittsburgh, which was such a source of angst and incomprehensibility to those around him: he felt that he had to "explain" or defend his aesthetic choices in response to an environment that couldn't grasp what these things meant. The story thus suggests that large cities like New York can be, even if anonymous and overwhelming, more welcoming to people who are different.

> It was to be worse than jail, even; the tepid waters of Cordelia Street were to close over him finally and forever [...] He had the old feeling that the orchestra had suddenly stopped, the sinking sensation that the play was over.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Paul has read in the newspapers that his father has paid back his theft and is on his way to New York to fetch him and bring him back to Pittsburgh. In this passage, the accumulation of different metaphors serves to underline Paul's intensely evocative sensations at this particular moment. Cordelia Street is compared to a jail and then to a river where he might drown, while his situation is compared to the end of a play or orchestra performance—a particularly notable metaphor given that, as the narrator described earlier in the story, the end of a show always makes Paul nervous and irritable.

The orchestra imagery also highlights the ways in which Paul's entire escapade in New York has been a kind of theatrical act. He thought he was replacing his humdrum reality with another reality, and yet it turns out that New York has only amounted to a fleeting, fantastical performance, one that inevitably must come to its end. The stakes, however, are higher now that the return home is no longer simply from Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall to Cordelia Street, but a "final" return from New York. The story follows the path of Paul's own thoughts here without explicitly questioning the extent to which they are accurate; it is likely an exaggeration, for instance, that Paul's life will be irrevocably tied to Cordelia Street once his father comes to get him. This indicates that Paul is not thinking clearly. He's caught up in the fever of the play's final moments, and unfortunately it is in this fever that he decides to take his own life. This passage emphasizes the intensity and pathos of Paul's feelings of confinement and entrapment.

> He had not a hundred dollars left; and he knew now, more than ever, that money was everything, the wall that stood between all he loathed and all he wanted.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Although Paul's despair is initially triggered by learning that his father has come to fetch him in New York, he also must come to terms with the fact that his theft from Denny & Carson has only gotten him so far. Now, even if it weren't for his father's imminent arrival, Paul would no longer be able to afford his luxurious costume, meals, and hotel room, all of which have allowed him to live out his dreams of aesthetic pleasure as if they constituted his new reality. Money is the key to freedom for Paul, the vehicle to "all he wanted;" and yet this passage highlights his inability to think of money as something that must be earned or worked for rather than

something that simply, magically appears and makes everything splendid. Paul's unrealistic fantasies are thus comparable too (and tied up with) his fanciful embrace of wealth as the solution to all his problems.

> Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Having taken the train back from New York to Newark, Paul is now wandering next to the train tracks as snow is falling. He thinks back to the bright bouquets of flowers in the shop windows he'd seen his first night, and as it occurs to him that those flowers must all have died by now, he comes to terms with the fact that these objects—for him symbolic of life and brilliancy and cheer—have a limited shelf life, an expiration date. So, too, he recognizes that the theatrical act of his escape to New York was necessarily limited. By burying his carnation—the flower that Paul has kept tucked into his button hole throughout the story which signifies his love of beauty and his queerness—Paul signals his acceptance of the fact that his dreams have been no more than illusions, and that he's finally been able to see through them to the stark reality that they conceal.

And yet at the same time, this scene is another kind of performance, an act that is symbolically powerful rather than fulfilling a specific function. The burial prefigures, finally and chillingly, Paul's sense of absolute despair and his belief that suicide is the only response to his difficult situation. Having felt trapped in his home, at school, and even, ultimately, in New York, he stages his own burial by burying the flower that is so closely tied to his own identity.

> As he fell, the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone. There flashed through his brain, clearer than ever before, the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Paul hurls himself in front of an approaching train, and the narration follows his consciousness all the way up to the moment of his death. Here, the narrator suggests that Paul's suicide was a mistake—that despite what seemed to be a clear-cut decision and carefully executed plan, it was in fact one taken in "folly" and "haste." Paul seemed to have no other option than to kill himself; here, however, the story implies that his feelings of confinement and alienation are themselves limited, that there is a larger world with more possibilities and opportunities for happiness in it than Paul has been able to see or experience as an adolescent. The final images of Adriatic water and Algerian sands are reminiscent of the stories told by the clerk, earlier in the story, about his boss's travels to the Mediterranean. At the time, such tales had allowed Paul to indulge in fantasies of exotic destinations; here such dreams return, but with the tragic added suggestion that there truly are far-away, exotic places that Paul will never have the chance to see. Although the story tends to refrain from explicit judgment, these elegiac images underline the contrast between Paul's alienation and sense of confinement with a world that contains more possibilities than he is able, in his youth, to see.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Paul, the protagonist of the story, has been suspended from his Pittsburgh high school for a week, and as the story opens he's called in to the faculty room to account for his actions. As he enters he seems calm and sanguine.

The beginning of the story characterizes Paul as someone at odds with his environment, and defiantly so—refusing to appear either anxious or contrite about his suspension.

Paul is described as tall and thin, with slightly shabby clothes that, despite their shabbiness, identify him as a kind of dandy: he's wearing an opal pin and a **red carnation** in his button-hole, which the faculty finds overly jaunty for the occasion.

Paul's changing clothing will be an important marker of his yearning and process of self-discovery throughout the story, while the red carnation remains a consistent, deeply symbolic, element of his dress. The carnation is the flamboyant symbol of his difference, his effeminacy, and his illicit homosexuality—which, though never addressed in explicit terms, is made clear throughout the story beginning with this description of his dandyish outfit.

Paul tells the Principal that he would like to come back to school: he's quite used to lying this way. One by one, all the teachers state their grievances against him, most of which have to do with "disorder" and "impertinence." The intensity and anger with which they make their accusations suggests that this is "not a usual case."

The narrator describes Paul's lying as something he feels he must do, while also employing the clinical language (i.e., Paul's "case") through which other people try to understand Paul's strange behavior.

Paul generally seems intensely, even physically disgusted by his teachers: he never pays attention, whether he ignores them or jokily disrupts the class. His English teacher in particular feels personally aggrieved by his attitude, and in the meeting she leads the attack against Paul and his behavior. Paul, however, never loses his smile, though his fingers do nervously tremble a bit. He's constantly looking around him as if being watched, as if people are trying to figure him out.

Paul's sense of alienation from his environment is described in visceral terms as something that affects his body as well as his mind. These descriptions also reveal the contrast between the jaunty, defiant stance that Paul takes in response to his teacher's complaints, and his insecurity and sense of being scrutinized, as signaled by his shaking fingers.

At one point, Paul answers a question about one of his impertinent remarks by shrugging, twitching his eyebrows, and saying he didn't mean to be either polite or impolite. The Principal rebukes him for his attitude, but then tells him he can go. Paul grins and bows, which the teachers find as scandalous as the **red carnation**.

Paul's bow, like his red carnation, is seen as insolent in large part because it's so theatrical. He treats the whole event as a show that fails to affect him.

After Paul leaves, the drawing master wonders if Paul's smile is really more haunted than insolent: there's something wrong with him, he says. The teachers are all unsatisfied: with the way the meeting went, with their own desire for vengeance, for the attacks they waged against a mere teenager.

Paul is incomprehensible to his teachers, who vaguely grasp that something more is going on than the normal rudeness of a student. The story emphasizes such an inability to understand Paul as part of the tragedy of his alienation.

Meanwhile, Paul runs down the hill whistling, deciding he'll go straight to Carnegie Hall, where he is working as an usher that evening, rather than going home for dinner. When he arrives he is happy to find no one else in the picture gallery, where he's enchanted by the classic artworks of Parisian streets and Venetian scenes. He almost loses track of time, then races downstairs to the ushers' room, where he is so over-excited in getting dressed—teasing and bothering the other usher boys—that finally they tackle him to the ground and sit on him. "Somewhat calmed by his suppression," Paul races out to seat the arriving patrons.

Paul is often described as responding to moments of anxiety or stress with wild gestures or movements, running or jumping or whistling, as if to shake off his feelings of oppression by playing with and stretching his own body to its limits. His overflow of energy gets channeled in part into a performativity and a concern for aesthetic beauty. In the description of his dynamic with the other ushers, there is the implication that he enjoys provoking other boys in part because it gives him the excuse to engage with them physically. That Paul's nerves are calmed by having the other boys "suppress" him by sitting atop him is another clear instance of Cather's use of innuendo to alert the reader to Paul's queerness.

Paul is eager to perform as a model usher, and imagines himself as the host of a great party. At one point his mood is dampened by the arrival of his English teacher, whom he decides must have had tickets sent to her as a favor, since she doesn't belong there, he thinks.

To Paul, Carnegie Hall represents an alternative universe, one distant from and entirely unlike his drab, oppressive school, so he has to find a way to explain his teacher's presence there.

Paul feels better once he can lose himself in the symphony: the music itself is not as important to him as the feelings and spirit that are released by the instruments. Though the German soloist is by no means young, Paul marvels at her tiara and gown.

Paul uses the music at Carnegie Hall to escape the more unpleasant realities of his daily life. He marvels at the soloist's tiara and gown, demonstrating further his rapt interest in feminine things that most boys don't even notice.

After the concert, as he often does, Paul feels irritable and unable to recover from the sensory overload. He waits outside for the soloist to emerge, gazing across the street at the Schenley (a hotel) where the actors and singers stay, and where Paul often goes to stare at those coming and going. When the soloist leaves the Hall, Paul follows her carriage to the hotel, where a black man in a tall hat opens the door for her. Peeking in the **window**, Paul feels that he too should belong to this exotic, tropical, gleaming world. Suddenly it begins to rain, and Paul is surprised to find that he's still outside, susceptible to the cold and wet—unlike the "fairy world" within the hotel.

Paul's voyeurism is shown to stem from a longing to escape his own everyday life as a Pittsburgh schoolboy, even as that longing is revealed to be based on an unrealistic view of the life of a traveling musician. There is a real contrast between the warm hotel and the frigid street outside, and the window both joins and divides the two. The glowing warmth of Paul's vision of the hotel is a testament to the ways in which he has glamorized and romanticized that world. The word "fairy" was common slang for a gay man—making its use here another clear instance of Cather's use of innuendo to alert the reader to Paul's queerness.

Paul knows that the excitement is coming to an end: he's now faced with the prospect of his father in pajamas awaiting him, with lies and attempted explanations, with his room with its dismal **yellow wallpaper** and pictures of famous men above his bed, and the motto "Feed my lambs" which his mother had embroidered. Paul cannot remember his mother.

"Feed my lambs" is a line from scripture spoken by Jesus before his death. Other characters in the story will try to explain Paul's behavior by the fact that his mother has died, but this brief mention seems to suggest that he barely thinks of her. The pictures of men above his bed are another hint of his homosexuality. The yellow wallpaper becomes a symbol of the drabness that Paul longs to escape.

Paul takes the streetcar home to respectable **Cordelia Street**, where the houses are identical, filled with moderately successful businessmen with large families that all attend Sabbath-school and are all just as alike as their houses. He feels defeat and loathing as he walks—loathing for all that the street represents: respectability, common food, and the mundanity of everyday life that is the opposite of the "soft lights and fresh flowers" that he craves.

For Paul, the contrast between his home and his "fairy world" is as much aesthetic and sensory as social and class-based. He longs to escape the normalcy of his neighborhood and the life that transpires there.

Paul almost can't bear the thought of his father's reproaches for his late arrival and the improvised excuses he'll have to make. He decides to tell his father he'd gone home with one of the other boys, and he goes to the back of the house to open a basement window and jump down to the floor. He doesn't sleep because of his fear of rats. He entertains himself with thoughts of what his father would do if he thought the noise came from a burglar, if he came down with a pistol and nearly killed his son.

While readers have seen Paul successfully put on an act in front of his teachers, here it becomes clear that he can find such performances exhausting—and he'll go to extreme lengths just to avoid having to interact with his father, with whom he feels unable to communicate. The tension of his relationship with his father is evident in this fantasy about his father nearly killing him.

The next Sunday is warm for November, and after Sabbath-school Paul's neighbors all sit out on their stoops to chat while the children pack the streets. The men talk about prices or tell anecdotes about their bosses at work. Their stomachs protruding, they smile out at their children, self-satisfied about their grades in arithmetic and their savings in their toy banks.

Again, a set of well-chosen details serve to paint a pretty damning portrait of the Cordelia Street milieu as seen through Paul's eyes—one characterized by petty material interests and stunted, uninspiring dreams and desires.

Paul's sisters talk to their neighbors about the shirt-waists they've embroidered recently. Paul's father chats with a young man holding a baby, a clerk for a steel company magnate who seems to have a bright future ahead of him. He used to be a bit wild, but he shaped up and married an older school-mistress at 21. Their children are all near-sighted, like her.

The clerk represents the life awaiting Paul if he follows his father's desires and embraces the norms and values of Pittsburgh and Cordelia Street. He speaks of the clerk and his wife with disdain.

The clerk now tells of his boss who's currently trying to arrange all the business from abroad while yachting on the Mediterranean. These are the kinds of stories Paul likes: his "fancy" is piqued by stories of Europe and yachts and gambling at Monte Carlo.

Although Paul cannot stand the vision of bourgeois family life that the clerk represents, he does manage to wrest some idealized images of life beyond Pittsburgh from the otherwise banal conversation.

After dinner Paul asks his father if he can have a dime for the streetcar to see his friend George and ask for homework help. His father isn't excited about it—he's not poor but has upward ambitions—but he does give Paul the dime. He only lets Paul usher because a young man should earn something, he thinks.

Paul's father represents a certain view of the American Dream as something which is attainable through hard work, reasonable ambition, and an emphasis on the bottom line—a pragmatism that Paul finds appallingly dreary.

Paul bounds upstairs, shakes a few drops of violet-water hidden in his drawer onto his hands, and boards a downtown car. Immediately the **Cordelia Street** stupor leaves him, as he looks forward to the Sunday-night rehearsals of the stock company playing at one of the downtown theaters. Charley Edwards, an acquaintance of Paul's, has invited him. Edwards is the "leading juvenile" of the stock company—an actor—who has taken a liking to Paul and allows him to hang about his dressing room, in part because Edwards had "recognized in Paul something akin to what Churchmen term 'vocation.'" For a year or so, Paul has spent as much time as possible "loitering" in Edwards' dressing room.

The hidden violet water is yet another detail of Paul's dandyism that clues readers into his homosexuality. Though these details may seem to a modern reader to play into simplistic stereotypes of gay men, it's worth keeping in mind that the story was written in 1905, when such stereotypes were not quite so familiar in the public imagination. Another such clue emerges with the character of Charley Edwards, who recognizes in Paul a "vocation"—a subtle innuendo implying that both young men are gay. The story is littered with such subtle clues.

The narrator notes that "it was at the theatre and Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived. This was Paul's fairy tale," where he feels like a prisoner who has just set free from the stupidity and ugliness of everyday life. Perhaps, the narrator notes, such ugliness—the banality of Sabbath-school picnics and smells of cooking—is why Paul believes that beauty depends on "a certain element of artificiality."

The calls attention to the irony that Paul understands his "real life" to transpire in theatres—a place where fictions are staged. Yet the narrator is also deeply sympathetic to Paul's embrace of the artificial as a necessary refuge for him, since he feels unable to be himself in a world that rejects homosexuality.

The theatre is Romance for Paul, though none of the actors working there quite understood that. Paul imagines it like the old London of rich Jews with underground palaces filled with fountains and soft lamps, with women who never emerged to the day. Paul's secret temple is here in the midst of the smoky Pittsburgh city.

Again, the story points to the idealism of Paul's view of the world of the theatre. There is a vast discrepancy between how Paul views the theater and the banal reality of the workers on stage.

Paul's teachers think he's being corrupted by fiction, but Paul isn't tempted by novels—he prefers music and the stage. He doesn't want to become a professional actor himself—he just wants to be in the middle of it. After a night at the rehearsals, school repels Paul even more, with its naked walls, with the shrill, serious voices of the schoolmistresses. He must have his fellow students know that he himself is only there as a joke, that he won't take anything seriously. He regales his classmates with stories of Carnegie Hall and the theatre, and when they grow bored, he makes up stories about his upcoming travels to Naples or Egypt, before making up excuses the next week about why he's still there.

Paul weaves elaborate fictions for his classmates as a way of trying to play his difference from them—which is painfully obvious to all—to his advantage. His lies are not particularly convincing, so more than demonstrating Paul's superiority they seem to demonstrate his insecurity and his compulsive need to perform. Paul's exaggerated and constant performativity perhaps extends from a feeling that, because he cannot be himself, he must always relate to the outside world as though he is "in character"—because others see him already as a character.

At one point, Paul goes too far, letting slip to his teachers that he has no time for theorems because of the work he's doing at the stock company. The Principal goes to Paul's father. Paul is taken out of school, "put to work," and barred from being an usher or visiting Charley Edwards.

This abrupt transition underlines the limits of Paul's ability to fashion a different life for himself just by imagining it. "Real life" intrudes in the form of authority figures forcing Paul to get a job.

When the stock company actors catch wind of Paul's stories, they laugh bitterly. The women are mostly supporting their lazy husbands, and the idea that they've inspired such wild and romantic inventions is preposterous to them. They, the teachers, and Paul's father all think Paul's is a "bad case."

This section concludes with the implication that Paul's dreams are unrealistic in part because even art relies on money—and that there's no escaping from the difficult realities of everyday life.

PART 2

Paul is now in an east-bound train amidst a January snowstorm. He wakes up as the train is leaving Newark, and stares out at the drifts with dead grass and weed stalks protruding above them. Paul feels uncomfortable and tired. He's been traveling all night in a day coach, worrying that if he took a Pullman (the night carriage) he'd be spotted by someone who had seen him in Denny & Carson's office.

The rapid shift from the first section to the next suggests a kind of theatrical set-up to the story itself: it's now Act II, and the story unfolds against a different stage set. Contextual information about Denny & Carson's office is not given, leaving the reader to infer that this is where Paul went to work after leaving school.

Paul arrives at the 23rd street station in New York City and takes a cab to a men's clothing store, where he buys a new suit. Then he goes to the hatter, and a shoe store, and to Tiffany's to select "his silver and a new scarf-pin." Finally, he goes to a trunk shop to have all his new purchases packed into traveling bags.

It seems that Paul's circumstances have changed overnight. Once a poor boy from Pittsburgh, he now has enough money to go on a spending spree at some of New York's finest establishments. This, in combination with his purchase of traveling bags, suggests that he may be on the run.

In the early afternoon, Paul drives up to the Waldorf and registers as being from Washington, saying that he's awaiting his parents who are arriving from abroad. He pays in advance for a suite of three rooms. He has arranged all this for months in advance, poring over every detail with Charley Edwards, cutting out pages of New York hotel descriptions from the Sunday papers.

Although Paul has gone to New York in order to finally unite his dreams with reality, from the start he's forced to put on another act in order to evade suspicion. This act, like Paul's mannerisms, is a well-studied and well-prepared one.

On arriving to the room, everything seems perfect, except for the lack of flowers—Paul rings for the bell boy to bring them, arranges them, and then takes a hot bath and dons a luxurious red robe. The warmth and coziness inside contrasts with the intense snowstorm outside the **window**. He sinks into thought about the success of his venture.

Paul's dandyish demeanor and taste for beauty and color is evident in both his request for flowers and the red robe that he dons in the hotel room, reminiscent of the red carnation that he often wears—which symbolize his flamboyance and queerness.

Paul is surprised at his own courage, the way he managed to overcome his overwhelming sense of fear, dread, and sense that his lies were increasingly closing around him. He has always felt dread, as there has always been a "shadowed corner" of his being into which he hasn't dared to look, plagued by the sense that something there was watching him—and he "had done things that were not pretty to watch, he knew." Now he feels relieved, as though he has "at last thrown down the gauntlet to the thing in the corner."

This is one passage in which Cather seems to deal more directly (though she is still quite oblique) with Paul's homosexuality—the thing in the shadowed corner into which he feels afraid of looking. Here, Cather suggests that, until now, Paul has yet to fully admit to himself that he is gay—and that he is only now beginning to do so, having escaped from Pittsburgh. Despite the implication that Paul is repressed in his sexuality, Cather also implies that perhaps he has "done things" with other men.

Just yesterday, Paul had gone to the bank with Denny & Carson's deposits as usual: he'd taken two thousand dollars in checks and a thousand in bank notes from the balance book, before returning to the office and asking to take the day off on Saturday, knowing the bank-book wouldn't be returned until Monday or Tuesday. As he dozes off, he marvels at how easy it was.

Paul doesn't seem to recognize the link between money and work, a connection his father and other businessmen embrace. In his mind, money is a kind of magical talisman that will give him the freedom to be who he truly is—but he is unwilling to work to get the money he so badly desires.

Paul wakes up in the afternoon, bounding up in horror that one of his days is nearly gone. After spending an hour dressing, Paul leaves and takes a carriage toward the Park, marveling at the sights and the bouquets blooming behind the **windows**, all set off against the blinding white snow. The Park is "a wonderful stage winter-piece." As he returns, cabs are packing the entrance of the hotel, boys in livery running in and out of the awning. It seems that everyone is hunting after pleasure as much as Paul. Around him, the "omnipotence of wealth" is clear. Paul realizes that "the plot of all dramas, the text of all romances, the nerve-stuff of all sensations was whirling about him like the snow-flakes. He burnt like a faggot in a tempest."

Once again, Cather uses windows as symbol of both connection and separation: looking at the flowers through the windows, Paul sees them as representative of New York's beauty and splendor, but they're also blooming in insistent and artificial contrast to the winter weather outside. By framing the scene as a stage set, Cather emphasizes that New York remains "unreal" for Paul; the fact that the money Paul has stolen will eventually run out makes his time there more of a performance and an escape than a sustainable reality. Once again, Cather uses a double-entendre to playfully clue readers into Paul's sexuality with the use of the word "faggot"—slang which would have been quite new at the time of the story's publication in 1905.

As Paul goes downstairs to dinner, orchestra music floats up from the lobby. Arriving in the dining room, he almost stumbles in response to the overwhelming colors, perfumes, and chatter. He moves through the smoking and reception rooms as if through an "enchanted palace" built for him alone. He sits down and marvels at the flowers, white linen, and the colored wine glasses. When his champagne is poured, he doubts once again that he ever lived in **Cordelia Street** with its businessmen—men who now seem "mere rivets in a machine" to him. Paul feels no loneliness or self-consciousness here, or later in his private box at the Metropolitan Opera. "He felt now that his surroundings explained him. Nobody questioned the **purple**; he had only to wear it passively."

Earlier, Paul had looked longingly through a hotel window at the "fairy world" inside. Now he seems to have become part of the scene himself, and he relishes this. But these lines also warn of Paul's self-absorption, and his own inability to see and treat others as fully human, even if this is a result of his own inability to express his true identity. In New York, however, he feels free. Cather uses purple as a euphemistic way of referring to Paul's queerness, as purple has long been associated with homosexuality.

When he returns to his room that night, Paul goes to sleep with the lights on so that if he wakes in the middle of the night, he won't think for a moment that he is back at home in his **yellow-papered** room.

Incidentally, the wallpaper that signifies dreary old Pittsburgh for Paul, and which Paul thinks is so drab, is yellow—opposite on the color wheel to purple, which Cather associates with Paul's flamboyant queerness.

On Sunday Paul "[falls] in with" a wild San Francisco Yale freshman who offers to show him the town. They go to dinner, immediately drawn to each other, but when they say goodbye in the elevator at seven the next morning their tone is "singularly cool." Paul wakes up at two the next day and asks for water, coffee, and the Pittsburgh newspapers.

In another gap in the story, Cather suggests that more may have happened between Paul and the Yale boy than is said. Perhaps their budding friendship spoiled because Paul made a pass at the young man—or simply because the young man came to understand more about Paul's "case."

Paul passes his days without arousing suspicion from the hotel management. He is content simply to take in the sights and sounds of the hotel, and to not have to lie anymore, as he had felt he had to lie every day back in Pittsburgh. Now he could be himself; he could, "as his actor friends used to say, 'dress the part.'"

The narrator suggests that Paul's love of money is merely a vehicle for accessing the sensory pleasures he craves. No longer wearing a shabby overcoat, Paul feels that money and new clothes allow him to express his true self. Whereas he once had to hide his difference, here he feels able to celebrate it.

Eight days after arriving, Paul reads about himself in the Pittsburgh papers. Denny & Carson announced that Paul's father has paid back the full amount his son stole, and that the minister is still hopeful of reclaiming the motherless boy. His father has departed to New York, following a rumor that his son is at a hotel there.

Paul doesn't linger over the fact that his father had to pay thousands of dollars in his son's place, but the story balances sympathy for Paul's own plight with an implicit suggestion that sympathy is owed to his father too.

Paul sinks to his knees, knowing that the waters of **Cordelia Street**, his jail, will now close over him forever. Years of Sabbath-school, the repulsion of the **yellow-papered** room, all rush back at him. He feels that the orchestra has stopped playing. Looking at himself in the mirror, Paul suddenly smiles and winks; he rushes down the corridor to the elevator, whistling. He resolves to "finish the thing splendidly." He drinks his wine recklessly, ever more doubtful that Cordelia Street really exists. He thinks, "Was he not, after all, one of those fortunate beings born to the **purple**, was he not still himself and in his own place?" He thinks he could have caught a steamer abroad, but that distance had felt too overwhelming. He has no regrets. He looks around at the dining room, thinking to himself that "it had paid"—his time was worth it.

Here Cather suggests subtly and for the first time that Paul, in his despair at his impending discovery by his father, is considering "ending" his life "splendidly." In a series of different metaphors, the story compares Cordelia Street to a prison and to a river where one might drown. The narrator returns to the symbolism of the drab yellow wallpaper before suggesting that Paul's trip to New York is a theatrical act in its own right, which is now winding down. Paul, though, refuses to distinguish between life and artifice; in looking in the mirror, he now is acting no longer for his teachers and classmates but for himself. Again, Cather uses the term "purple" as a synonym for queerness.

The next morning Paul wakes up with a headache. He hadn't undressed before going to bed the night before. He finds he has a rare feeling of clear-headedness. He realizes that his father is now in New York. He has barely a hundred dollars left, and he has learned that money is everything—the wall keeping him from the life he longs to live. He had procured "a way to snap the thread:" the revolver sat on his dressing table. He had taken it out the night before.

Upon awakening with a hangover, Paul does recognize that the show is almost over: with characteristic abruptness, the story turns to Paul's decision of suicide as the only answer.

Paul begins to feel nauseous as an exaggerated version of "the old depression" overtakes him. It seems the whole world has become **Cordelia Street**. He feels calm; "he had looked into the dark corner at last and knew. It was bad enough, what he saw there, but somehow not so bad as his long fear of it had been." He feels he has lived the life he was meant to live. Paul stares at the revolver, no longer afraid, but then decides "that isn't the way" and takes a cab to the ferry.

The "prison" of Cordelia Street has widened to become the entire world, meaning that there's no longer anywhere Paul can escape. Cather again almost *deals directly with Paul's homosexuality here as she describes his own process of realizing fully that he is gay. By saying that Paul "looked into the dark corner at last and knew," she implies that what he "knows" now, and what he had been afraid of for so long, is the fact of his homosexuality. In this moment of realization, he finds that this truth is not as fearsome as he had thought it would be.*

Paul takes a ferry to Newark, where he tells another cab to follow the Pennsylvania train tracks out of town. The snow has drifted deep, only at rare places with dead grass or weed stalks protruding from it. Paul leaves the car and walks along the tracks. He recalls every detail from the morning, including his cab drivers and the old woman from whom he'd bought his **red carnation**.

This passage returns to the setting of the beginning of this section, when Paul had gazed out the window at the same grass and weed stalks—their deadness proving ominous for Paul's plans. Paul's purchasing of a red carnation reminds readers that he has an eye for aesthetic details, even now in what he expects to be his final moments, but it also suggests that the carnation has greater symbolic significance.

The **carnations** are drooping in the cold. Paul realizes that all the flowers he'd seen in the shop **windows** that first night must now be suffering the same fate. They had but one chance against a hostile world. Paul carefully buries one of the flowers in the snow, before dozing off for a while. He awakens with the sound of an approaching train and scrambles to his feet. His teeth chatter and he maintains a scared smile, glancing back and forth as if he's being watched.

These last paragraphs suggest that Paul is finally recognizing that certain pleasures and objects of beauty in which he placed all his hopes for the future might not be the answers he was hoping for. More explicitly, however, his burying of the carnation is a symbol of his own life ending because he is unable to be himself. Even having "escaped," Paul now feels again like he's being watched—a feeling he hasn't been able to shake since the story's beginning, suggesting he is oppressed by his awareness of other's expectations.

Paul jumps at just the right moment, and as he falls he realizes how overly hasty he was, how much he left still undone. He thinks of the blue Adriatic water or yellow Algerian stands. Something strikes his body, which he feels is hurtling through the air, and then "because the picture-making mechanism was crushed," his vision fades to black and he drops "back into the immense design of things."

In Paul's final moments, images of his hopes and dreams for the future flash before his eyes, and he is filled with regret that he has abandoned this future in taking his own life. The story's tragic ending suggests that, like the red carnation, Paul's life was a beautiful and flamboyant blossom, crushed in its prime by a cold and cruel world.

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