

English 30
Questions on "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather
Set 1

Point of view

At times, Cather describes Paul objectively, much as a psychologist might have describe him. At other times, she presents his thoughts and feelings with subjective sympathy.

1. Initially, Paul is described objectively, from the outside, as an observer might describe him. What is the effect of this objectivity on reader sympathy for Paul up to the end of paragraph 2?
2. The third through tenth paragraphs reveal the thoughts and feelings of Paul's teachers. The narrator becomes more subjective as the teachers' attitudes toward Paul are revealed. Cite various words and phrases that indicate the teachers' unsympathetic attitude. What effect does their attitude toward Paul have on the *reader's* attitude toward Paul?
3. Even when the narrator looks into Paul's mind to see his thoughts and feelings, the descriptions are mainly objective in tone. Little in the diction is overtly subjective or judgmental. For example, in the following passage, the word "horrible" is the only word that suggests Paul's actual feeling about his home:

The end had to come sometime; his father in his night-clothes at the top of the stairs, explanations that did not explain, hastily improvised fictions that were forever tripping him up, his upstairs room and its horrible yellow wallpaper, the creaking bureau with the greasy plush collar-box, and over his painted wooden bed the pictures of George Washington and John Calvin, and the framed motto, "Feed my Lambs," which had been worked in red worsted by his mother, whom Paul could not remember. (170-175)

It is, therefore, mainly through connotative diction—here in words like "hastily," "tripping," "creaking," and "greasy"—that Cather suggests Paul's aversion to the utilitarian world of Cordelia Street. Similarly, through connotative diction, Cather also suggests other feelings in Paul—not least of all his yearning for that which is exotic and beautiful. Quote one or two other passages in which Cather reveals Paul's feelings about the exotic, beautiful world he desires. Then list, out of the passage(s), about five to ten significant word choices that especially connote his feelings.

4. Some critics feel that the last sentence of the story parodies naturalism, a school of narrative that emphasizes clinical, coldly dispassionate observation of life without idealization or avoidance of the ugly:

Then, because the picture-making mechanism was crushed, the disturbing visions flashed into black, and Paul dropped back into the immense design of things. (186)

Examine the language in this sentence to determine what Cather's attitude seems to be 1) toward Paul, 2) toward the occasion of his death, and 3) toward the society that has brought Paul to this pass.

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Set 2

Theme

1. In "Paul's Case," Cather implies criticism of a society that produces spiritually impaired people, people who are unable to experience the rich complexity of life. Cite illustrations from the text of these features of Paul's world.
 - quantity being more important than quality
 - intellect and emotion being viewed as separate components of experience; emotion being regarded as unimportant
 - diversity being discouraged; conformity being rewarded
 - usefulness being valued over beauty

2. Discuss the thematic importance of each of the following quotations.
 - He [Paul] had the feeling of not being able to let down; of its being impossible to give up this delicious excitement which was the only thing that could be called living at all. (174)

 - Perhaps it was because, in Paul's world, the natural nearly always wore the guise of ugliness, that a certain element of artificiality seemed to him necessary in beauty. (178)

 - Above, about, within it all, was the rumble and roar, the hurry and toss of thousands of human beings as hot for pleasure as himself, and on every side of him towered the glaring affirmation of the omnipotence of wealth. (182)

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Setting

Setting refers not only to the time and place of a narrative but to the social, intellectual, political, and philosophical milieu of that time and place. In "Paul's Case," this milieu is effectively summarized by reference to the Industrial Revolution and the Protestant Work Ethic, conditions that are associated with such specifics as these: an emphasis on objectivity (distrust of intuition and emotion), intensity of personal discipline and competitiveness, joyless existence, and the methodical accumulation of wealth.

1. Discuss the elements of various physical settings in Cather's narrative—for example:

- school room
- Carnegie Hall
- The Schenley Hotel
- stoop on Cordelia Street on Sunday
- Fifth Avenue
- The Waldorf Hotel

Focus especially on connotative diction and on Paul's response to each setting (remembering that sometimes his response will be directly indicated by the narrator, sometimes only implied).

2. The young man held up to Paul as a model serves principally as a symbol of the society that Paul feels himself trapped in. Comment on the values that are represented in the description of the young man and his circumstances.

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Character

The only thoroughly developed character in "Paul's Case" is, of course, Paul himself. Consider the various tonal and thematic effects of this obvious highlighting of one character and shadowing of all others.

1. Find one or two quotations, for each of the following, that clearly show Paul's:
 - penchant for escape into sensation
 - disinclination to interact with others in any meaningful way
 - amorality (lack of understanding of right and wrong)
2. It is not coincidental that a mother figure is absent in the narrative. Comment on the significance of mothering in "Paul's Case." (Consider how Paul's case might have been different under the influence of a positive mother figure in his life.)
3. Locate two or three references to Paul's unhealthiness. For what purpose might Cather create a protagonist who is unwell?