

Narcissistic Personality Disorder in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case"



Willa Cather's "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament" (1905) invites the reader to wonder, "What really is Paul's case?" Cather provides us with ample clues and descriptions of Paul's temperament with remarkable detail and insight into the human psyche considering that she had no formal background in psychology and that she was writing when Sigmund Freud was just beginning to publish his theories and was therefore writing by intuitive observation rather than by using a scientific approach. Because "Paul's Case" is written much like a descriptive analysis or case study in a patient's temperament, the reader is left with several details about Paul that are mysterious and psychiatrically and medically unexplained. The lack of a diagnosis for Paul has led many critics to develop their own diagnosis – some say Paul is a stereotypical homosexual, has Asperger's Syndrome or Autism, or that he has a combination of depression and anxiety. In my opinion, however, the most likely diagnosis for Paul is that he suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

According to the DSM-IV, people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder are "preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love" (Criterion 2) and believe that they are "special and unique and can only be understood by, or should be associated with, other special or high-status people" (Criterion 3). Paul's clothing gives us our first clue to his narcissistic attitudes about himself; in Cather's description of Paul's dress, it is apparent that Paul is attempting to rise above his lower-class status by mimicking the upper class' appearance. The collar of Paul's overcoat is velvet, and "there was something of the dandy about him, and he wore an opal pin in his neatly knotted four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his buttonhole" (685). According to the DSM-IV, narcissistic people typically "ruminate about 'long overdue' admiration and privilege and compare themselves favorably with famous or privileged people" (714). They also have a strong sense of entitlement, and "begrudge others of their success or possessions, feeling that they better deserve those achievements, admirations, or privileges" (715). Paul evidently has the desire to be a part of the privileged upper-class, or at least play the role, perhaps because it makes him feel more comfortable to be luxurious, or perhaps because he enjoys being "special, or unique" (714) in comparison to those around him.

Also related is Criterion 1, which states that people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder have "a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)" (717). Paul certainly feels superior to his living situation with his father on Cordelia Street. Paul never goes home "without a shudder of loathing," because he had an overwhelming sensation, every time he approached the street, of "sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness" (688). He preferred a neighboring street that was respectable, and filled with businessmen and large families with children who went to Sabbath school and were interested in arithmetic (688).

Paul's inner conflict as a person suffering from Narcissistic personality Disorder is his intense dissatisfaction with his common lifestyle and a strong desire for and a sense of entitlement to a more lavish one. This dilemma fits perfectly with Criterion 5, which states that people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder have "a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations" (717).

Because life does not meet Paul's lavish expectations, he seeks them himself. He escapes his "flavorless, colorless mass of everyday existence" (688) on Cordelia Street and takes a train to New York City, a symbol of ultimate glamour and sophistication, and a place of acceptance of the unorthodox and fantastical. He takes refuge from a snow storm inside a grand hotel where the environment is as luxurious and as aesthetically pleasing as he had always wanted his life to be. Having plenty of money that he stole from his father's account, Paul chooses the most high-end hotel in the city: the Waldorf. There, he is surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells that only the privileged are able to experience. Paul reminds himself that the people in the Waldorf are "his own people" (693). And as he explores the inside of the Waldorf, it is as if "he were exploring the chambers of an enchanted palace, built and peopled for him alone" (693). Paul is definitely experiencing some delusions of grandeur here, as he thinks that he is inherently superior to the rest of the population and belongs in the upper crust, and the fact that he thinks all the pleasures surrounding him are meant especially for him is a sure sign of narcissism.

Criterion 4 states that a person with Narcissistic Personality Disorder "requires excessive admiration" (717), which explains why Paul takes so much delight in his job as an usher at his local theater; "He was a model usher; gracious and smiling he ran up and down the aisles; nothing was too much trouble for him; he carried messages and brought programs as though it were his greatest pleasure in life; and all the people in his section thought him a charming boy...It was very much as though this were a great reception and Paul were the host" (686-687). Though Paul does not wish to become an actor, he performs his duties so thoroughly and theatrically that it is clear that Paul loves to be the center of attention and in social situations in which he receives a lot of praise for performance.

Criterion 9 of the DSM-IV's description of Narcissistic Personality Disorder cites that people with this disorder are arrogant and show "haughty behaviors or attitudes" (717). The faculty who are present at Paul's hearing for his misdemeanors find the carnation in his buttonhole to be "not properly significant of the contrite spirit befitting a boy under the ban of suspension" (685). In other words, the faculty takes the carnation as a sign of Paul's arrogance and his contempt for them and the entire situation, and they are offended that Paul is not more regretful of his ill-behavior. In addition to arrogance and haughtiness, people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder "often display snobbish, disdainful, or patronizing attitudes" (715). All of these Criterion 9 characteristics are evident in Paul's classroom behavior: "In one class he habitually sat with his hand shielding his eyes...in another, he made a running commentary on the lecture, with humorous intention" (685). Paul's shielding of the eyes clearly indicates that he is arrogant enough to blatantly ignore his teacher. This behavior also symbolizes Paul's attempt to dissociate himself from the average people where he lives that he devaluates. And turning his teacher's lecture into a comical mockery is a definite example of his patronizing attitude and behavior.

In a sense, this arrogance and patronization can be directly related to the lack of empathy among narcissistic people. Criterion 7 cites that people with Narcissistic Personality Disorder "have difficulty recognizing the desires, subjective experiences, and feelings of others...and are often contemptuous and impatient of others who talk about their own problems and concerns" (715). Paul is certainly impatient and contemptuous during the hearing, most likely because he is emotionally unable to understand why his teachers are upset with him or the seriousness of the situation in the first place. In his mind, there is a great divide between his concerns and the concerns of others, so Paul disregards the concerns of others and maintains his haughty attitude throughout the hearing by smiling and toying with the buttons of his coat (685).

Because of his lack of empathy for others, Paul is able to take advantage of people because he is only interested in his self-gain. Criterion 6 states that a person with Narcissistic Personality Disorder is “interpersonally exploitive, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends” (717). During Paul’s hearing, he tells the faculty members a lie when he states that he wants to come back to school. Apparently, “Paul was quite accustomed to lying; found it, indeed, indispensable for overcoming friction” (685). Later, Paul abuses his privilege of helping his father handle his bank deposits, and steals the money from his father’s account. Paul uses the money for his extravagant trip to New York City.

There are some critics, like Larry Rubin, who argue that Cather’s short story contains a strong homosexual motif throughout. This is undoubtedly a valid hypothesis if we look at Paul’s especially flamboyant behavior and appearance (the red carnation, his love of theater and the arts, his fascination with the female soprano who we may interpret to be not a love interest but an example of feminine beauty that Paul aspires to, and his relationships with other boys). However, homosexuality is not the only “diagnosis” for all of Paul’s behaviors, and it does not sufficiently account for any of Paul’s attitudes or behaviors that have already been discussed in this paper. During his stay in the city, Paul spends some time with “a wild San Francisco boy” who has come to the city for “a little flyer.” The way that Cather describes this boy sounds as if he is gay and is looking for a partner for the weekend. The boy offers to “show Paul the night side of the town,” (694), and the two stay out until 7 o’clock in the morning. However, when they leave each other that morning, their parting is “singularly cool” (694.) Critic Larry Rubin asserts that this encounter with the San Francisco boy is undoubtedly a homosexual one. In my reading, however, there is clear evidence of the San Francisco boy’s homosexuality, but no evidence that Paul was attracted to this wild boy for sexual reasons. Rubin hypothesizes that “Paul wanted something [sexual] from his companion that the latter was unprepared to give” (130), but this interpretation is reversed. Rubin previously admits that Cather’s description of the San Francisco boy indicates his homosexuality and his intent to have sexual relations with a partner that weekend, so there is no reason that the boy would be unprepared to have sex with Paul. It seems more likely that Paul mistook the wild boy for a potentially exciting and cultured tour guide of the big city, and when the wild boy attempts something more intimate with Paul, the relationship between the two goes sour, as is evident in the elevator when they leave each other.

Cather’s writing about Paul is remarkable because of its intuitive insight into human behavior, especially considering that Cather was writing about a social disorder that had not yet been identified or studied. Despite the lack of knowledge about Narcissistic Personality Disorder when Cather wrote this short story, she provides readers with plenty of details to diagnose the boy themselves. Narcissism is the only diagnosis that can explain all of Paul’s attitudes and behaviors, and that is why it is the disorder that he must be suffering from.

Works Cited

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