



Understanding and Interpreting
Willa Cather's
“Paul’s Case”

Does place matter?
Does being in different places allow us to try out different identities?



Cather in Red Cloud, around 1890



Cather in Pittsburgh, 1905



Cather in New York City, around 1910

“Paul’s Case” is a story that takes place in two different cities, Pittsburgh and New York.



Pittsburgh, about 1905: home to steel mills and other industries



In Pittsburgh Paul dislikes his neighborhood, “where all the houses are exactly alike” and all his neighbors “are as exactly alike as their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived” (pp. 208-209).

Cather probably named Paul’s street—Cordelia Street—for Pittsburgh’s Aurelia Street.

Pictured here is present day Aurelia Street.

But he enjoys the stories his neighbors tell about their wealthy and powerful bosses, men such as Andrew Carnegie, who travel to other, more exciting places: “Yet he rather liked to hear these legends of the iron kings . . . These stories of palaces in Venice, yachts on the Mediterranean, and high play at Monte Carlo” (p. 214).



Canaletto's *Venice: The Grand Canal with S. Simeone Piccolo*



Hubert Sattler's 1904 painting of the casino at Monte Carlo



Paul likes to escape to Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall, home of an art museum and performance hall. In the art gallery he admires "some of Rafaëlli's gay studies of Paris streets . . ." (pp. 203-204)

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“ . . . After a while he sat down before a
blue Rico and lost himself.” (pp. 203-204)



Paul works as an usher at concerts in the Carnegie Music Hall.

“As the house filled, he grew more and more vivacious and animated ... as though this were a great reception and Paul were the host.... When the symphony began Paul sank into one of the rear seats and ... lost himself [in the music] as he had done before the Rico.” (p. 205)

Why do art and music matter so much to Paul?

But then as now, New York was a much larger, livelier, and more affluent city than Pittsburgh.



City view of Herald Square



Fifth Ave. mansions, where millionaires lived

PITTSBURGH BOYS CAUGHT IN MILWAUKEE
FOR ROBBERY OF THE DENNY ESTATE SAFE.



HAROLD ORR.

JAMES J. WILSON.

Is money the key to “the good life”?

Cather based “Paul’s Case” partly on a theft which had occurred in Pittsburgh in 1902. A young man, James J. Wilson, and his cousin, Harold Orr, had stolen money from Wilson’s employer. They fled to Chicago to live the high life.

The newspaper reported that Wilson had “a longing to know how it would feel to have enough money to have just as good a time as any boy would care about having” (324-325)

Youth and the Bright Medusa. Willa Cather
Scholarly Edition. Historical Essay and Explanatory
Notes by Mark J. Madigan. Textual editing by
Frederick M. Link, Charles W. Mignon, Judith Boss,
and Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2009.



After Paul steals the money from his employer, he goes to New York and checks in at the Waldorf-Astoria, one of the most expensive and elegant hotels in New York. “When he reached the dining-room he sat down at a table near a window. The flowers, the white linen, the many-coloured wine glasses, the gay toilettes [dresses] of the women, the low popping of corks, the undulating repetitions of the ‘Blue Danube’ from the orchestra, all flooded Paul’s dream with bewildering radiance.... Paul wondered that there were honest men in the world at all. This was what the world was fighting for, he reflected” (p. 226).



Cather in New York City, 1912.

In a letter, Cather wrote that the story had roots in her own experiences.

“I once had in my latin [sic] class a nervous, jerky boy who was always trying to make himself ‘interesting’, and to prove that he had special recognition and special favours from members of a stock company then playing in the town theater. You will recognize one part of Paul. The other part of Paul is simply the feeling I myself had about New York City and the old Waldorf-Astoria.... I used to come to New York occasionally then, and that is the way the City seemed to me.

“You speak of a ‘universal longing for a world beautiful’. In the first place, this longing is by no means universal. It is rather exceptional.... But a desire for beauty—a strong desire—is the important thing, is the real gift.”

(The Selected Letters of Willa Cather, 614)

Does this letter change the way you think about the story? If so, how?



“The carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed; all their red glory over.... It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass. It was a losing game in the end ... this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run. Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up.” (pp. 233-34)



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This presentation was created by:
Dr. Julie Olin-Ammentorp, Le Moyne College
Dr. Charles Johanningsmeier, University of Nebraska, Omaha
and the Willa Cather Foundation