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Literary Analysis

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The Fall of Paul

Fear is typically incited by some sort of uncertainty, and fear often triggers animosity and frustration. All of these states of mind are detected in Paul, as well as in his teachers, in Willa Cather's short story, "Paul's Case." Through the recurring symbol of flowers, Cather reveals the hostility between Paul and his teachers, as well as the discordance between Paul and the environment he lives in. Both of these elements communicate the grim reality of living in a world that likes to color within the lines.

Flowers first appear in the story when Paul is meeting his teachers at school concerning his suspension. Paul is wearing casual clothes and "a red carnation in his buttonhole," and his teachers find Paul's "whole attitude [to be] symbolized by his shrug and his flippantly red carnation flower" (69,70). The teachers see defiance in everything Paul does, and in this case everything he wears, because "there [is] something about the boy which none of them underst[ands]," and they do not like not having an explanation for his behavior (70). The uncertainty that the teachers feel causes their vulnerability and embarrassment, which leads them to use defensive instincts and treat Paul with hostility. In the eyes of the teachers the flower is not just a plant, it is a symbol of everything that they cannot make sense of and deem threatening in Paul.

In Paul's eyes the flower has a much different meaning. The flower is an aesthetic, it is abnormal, just like him; perhaps he even finds satisfaction in how it confuses people, because he knows that he already does. Not only do Paul's abnormalities emerge in the flowers, but Paul finds them necessary to experience the world of luxury and artificial life that he desires to be a part of. For example, when Paul escapes to New York, he thinks "everything [is] as it should be" until he realizes there are no flowers in his room, so he calls to the front desk to ask for them (79). "He move[s] about nervously until the boy return[s]" with the flowers (79). Paul's behavior is anxious and stressful without flowers. He needs some sort of aesthetic reassurance of the excessive life he is visiting, in order to know he is away from his melancholy life. Even more so, he needs reassurance that something that is not natural in this environment is still able to survive.

On a walk, Paul sees "whole flower gardens blooming under glass" and finds them "somehow vastly more lovely and alluring that they bloomed thus unnaturally in the snow" (80-81). The flowers are not intended to grow and survive during the winter; they are unnatural and abnormal. There is hope in the flowers, because they defy reality. Realistically they should die, and not bloom until spring, or whenever their season is, but with artificial aid, like the glass box, they survive. Paul sees this hope in the flowers. He sees the possibility of his own life reflected in the flowers; just because he does not fit in at his life at home, does not mean that he may not survive in the artificial world he dreams to live in.

Unfortunately, Paul is blind for a long time to the reality of the flowers. They may be alive when he sees them in a glass box, but ultimately they will die. The flowers and Paul have the same fate; neither of them will survive in this world. Paul realizes this when he buries his flower in the snow right before he kills himself (85). He comprehends his fate: he does not and

would not last in a world that attacks the people who do not fit in, “without mercy,” (70). The world, just like his teachers, aims to eliminate people that cause uncertainty and fear, and treats them harshly until they bring them to their downfall. Paul accepts this fate, and buries the flower in the snow just as he is buried by his cold reality.

Works Cited

Cather, Willa. "Paul's Case." *Literature: A Pocket Anthology*. 6th Ed. Ed. R. S. Gwynn. New York: Longman P, 2015. 69-85.