

SYMBOLISM IN "PAUL'S CASE"

Renée Carpenter-Houde

"Paul's Case," published in 1905 by Willa Cather, tells the story of a depressed young man named Paul whose feelings of superiority and desire for the finer things in life make him a misfit in his own world. He yearns to find romance and escape the drab reality of his daily life. Paul isolates himself from the common, small-minded people he so despises, and lives in a dream world, which comforts and accepts him. Despair and frustration force Paul to revolt. He escapes to the life of his dreams before resolving to a final and unfortunate solution. The story refers to several colors, which symbolize his frustrations, feelings and desires: yellow, blue, red, purple, and black. Yellow illustrates the ugliness and fear in Paul's life. The story begins with his teachers verbally attacking his demeanor within the bare, ugly walls of the school. Selfish behavior further surrounds Paul at home with his father's lack of understanding and emotional support. His upstairs bedroom is covered in dingy, old "horrible yellow wallpaper" (116). Paul feels as though he cannot stand "the sight of it all; his ugly sleeping chamber; the cold bathroom with the grimy zinc tub, the cracked mirror, the dripping spigots" (117). Cordelia Street and Paul's home make him feel frustrated and despondent, helpless to change the situation:

Paul never went up Cordelia Street without a shudder of loathing. . . . He approached it tonight with the nerveless sense of defeat, the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness that he had always had when he came home. The moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head. (117)

These feelings are threatening to Paul, reflecting cowardice and fear. Paul desires to stand tall, fearless of his teachers and the burghers of Cordelia Street, but is frightened of being weak. He has been afraid of something for as long as he can remember, "a sort of comprehensive dread" (123). Paul is terrified of becoming just like the people he has grown to detest!

Another yellow streak in Paul's growing list of personality flaws is his lack of integrity, revealed by his chronic lying: "Paul was quite accustomed to lying; found it, indeed indispensable for overcoming friction" (112). However, Paul "never lied for pleasure... but to be noticed and admired, to assert his difference" (126). He lies to impress his peers, to escape to the theater, and to flee to New York.

Paul is further able to escape his insufferable world through the enchantment of blue. Blue indicates Paul's dream world and allows him to revel in pompous lifestyles of his choosing. He fantasizes about the opera, romance, and the finer things that do not exist in his own life. Music and art rapture Paul's soul and set it free. In the picture gallery of Carnegie Hall, this introverted lad dreams of leaving Pittsburgh, exhilarated by "Raffelli's gay studies of Paris streets and an airy blue Venetian scene" (114). He sits down before a "blue Rico" and loses himself (114). His imaginary world even includes a "blue-and-white Mediterranean shore" (120). Paul's one real desire behind all of his actions is

"to be carried out, blue league after blue league, away from everything," to float on the cloud of the accomplished and feel its magic change his world (121). This blue dream world eventually makes it impossible for Paul to endure life in Pittsburgh and causes him to take drastic measures to fulfill his fantasies.

The next color depicts Paul and how he desires to see himself: strong, confident and in control -- painted in vivid red! It symbolizes his revolt to those beneath him as well as his rebellious and materialistic attitude. Paul loves to defy those around him and lives life as he chooses, unconcerned with the consequences that might befall him. This is manifested in his "shuddering repulsion for the flavourless, colourless mass of everyday existence" (117). His need to distinguish himself from the rest of society and to see himself as superior is evident in his fascination for red. By wearing the "scandalous red carnation," Paul portrays his contempt, arrogance and defiance to a society with middle-class values, declaring his independence from them. The proud purchase of a new "red robe" while in New York enables him to express his audacity in a daring way (123). While at the Waldorf, the "red velvet carpet laid from the door to the street" for him to walk up and down, proclaiming his freedom (125). Red not only provides Paul courage but also is a continual reminder of his own power of choice as he prepares for his grand finale.

In turn, purple vibrates with luxury, royalty and prosperity -- the new life Paul is indulging in since his move to New York. Surrounded with all the beautiful people, fresh flowers and champagne, Paul "felt now that his surroundings explained him. Nobody questioned the purple; he had only to wear it passively" (126). Paul has finally become the man of his dreams and truly believes this is the society he deserves to live in, doubting that his past even exists: "Was he not, after all, one of the fortunate beings born to the purple?" (127). Paul now stands tall amidst those who are worthy of his presence, the powerful and influential, those of style and wealth: "The lights, the chatter, the perfumes, the bewildering medley of colour . . . these were his own people" (125). This sphere of purple is his protection from the ravages of Cordelia Street. Paul can now accept himself in his new role of nobility, which carries a unique sense of importance and power. He continues to show his colors even as the merry-go-round slows to a stop.

Consequently, only the color black can indicate the next stage in Paul's life. Black denotes darkness, loneliness, and death. Once the money runs out and "the orchestra had suddenly stopped," he knew "that the play was over" (127). Paul stands alone at the dark fork in the road as the burden of his misfit life weighs heavily on his thin shoulders. He can no longer endure his drab existence and decides to "finish the thing splendidly" (127). Darkness envelopes Paul as the gloomy shadow of fear comes back to haunt him, catching him unprepared:

The memory of successive summers on the front stoop fell upon him like a weight of black water. 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. . . . It was the old depression exaggerated; all the world had become Cordelia Street. (128)

He pictures himself trapped in a world of burghers, imprisoned within walls of horrible yellow wallpaper! As Paul rides out of town, the black, dead weeds sticking up through the snow in the passing fields signify his approaching death.

At this time, black and red join forces as the power of free will holds hands with death. Paul takes a profound glimpse into his soul when he notices the fading of the red flowers he is wearing and realizes that his brave mockery against society fails to make a permanent change in his life:

The carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed; their red glory all over. It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the glass cases that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass; and it was a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run. (129)

Paul stands shivering in the snow as the train approaches, waiting for the time to jump. As his body flies through the air, he instantly visualizes all the things he will never get to do, and then “the disturbing visions flashed into black” as death directs the final scene of Paul’s life (129).

As illustrated in the story, life without color is more than merely the passing hues of a rainbow; it is a life without passion and meaning. Paul’s life is a vibrant rainbow of expressions, creating and displaying a masterpiece of his own choosing. Even as Paul falls to his death, “there flashed through his brain, clearer than ever before, the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands” (129). His ability to dream is still in motion up to the very last second of his life -- and in vivid colors!

EDITOR’S NOTE: This is a literary analysis paper written for English 100, Expository Writing.

Work Cited

Cather, Willa. “Paul’s Case.” Great Short Stories by American Women. Ed. Candace Ward. New York: Dover Publications, 1996. 111-129.