

Invalidation, Desire and Destruction in Willa Cather's Paul Case

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Abstract

Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case" depicts how constant reproaches and invalidation of parents and teachers make an adverse effect on a child's personality growth that might lead to tragic end of life. Paul, a motherless child, is suspended from the class and is brought in front of the inquisition jury at the office of Pittsburg High School for his clarification of his ill manners. He could not satisfy the jury the reasons for his manners and they suggest his father not to let Paul to work in the concert where he works as an usher. Then his father finds him a job in a business office from which he steals money and goes to New York. There he spends money lavishly but as the amount lowers and he comes to know that his father is coming to receive, he fears to meet him and commits suicide. This article explores how constant reproaches and invalidation mar the personality of a child from humanistic psychological perspective. Carl Roger's Humanistic perspective of personality growth assumes that a child possesses full potentials for his or her growth and if he or she is given appropriate environment for his growth, he experiences full growth. But the social or familial imposition of their obligations mar the growth and sometimes such obligations lead to death of a child. Paul, who is suppressed and invalidated at home and at school uses concert as a place to comfort. As his father does not let him work there, he finds no palace to ease him. In the desperate mood, he steals money and spends lavishly for sometimes. But the thought of meeting his father distresses him so much that he finds no other ways than committing suicide.

Keywords: Concert, humanistic, inquisition, jury, reproaches, suicide

Introduction

Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case" depicts how constant reproaches and invalidation made by his father and teachers obstruct Paul's personality growth and ultimately lead him to death by jumping front of moving train. As his teachers see Paul sitting in the class "with his hand shading his eye... in another (class) he always looked out of the window during the recitation; in another he made a running commentary on the lecture, with humorous intent" (*Paul's Case* 469), they label these behaviors as insolent and ill manners and for such behaviors he is suspended from school. Then he is called in front of the authority of Pittsburg High School to defend against the accusation of ill manners that he displays constantly in the class room. But Paul is not aware of his behaviors and how the teachers are affected with such behaviors. During the inquisition, Paul is confused for the accusation. For him, his behaviors are "a sort of way" (PC 469) he usually acts. After the inquisition of the school authority, Paul feels more humiliated and his sense of worthlessness grows. In the desperate mood, he goes to Carnegie Hall, a concert hall, where he works as an usher. In the concert hall, he feels safe and fully alive and enjoy music and song. He feels relief of the distress he experiences outside it. But when concert is over, Paul's enthusiasm and liveliness wanes and he is fraught with the thought of meeting his father at home. Mustering the strength to face his father, he goes home but that day he just sneaks at the

basement. He chooses to the misty, cold basement for the whole night to his room, for he has little courage to meet his father and narrate what happens in the inquisition.

Then, his father gets the report from the school that Paul's work at the Hall increases his impulsiveness and decreases his interest in his study. With this report, he forces Paul to quit his job of the usher. Then he helps Paul to get a job at a business office. But Paul can't be as enthusiastic in the new job as he was in the Carnegie Hall. His unhappiness and restlessness grow as he confronts the monotony of the work. Then he starts believing that his situation can't be improved unless he obtains certain amount of money.

With the thought that money can only save him, he steals money from an employer, goes to New York City, and spends several decadent days at the Waldorf Hotel in a state of excited fantasy. With the stolen amount, he fulfills all his desires - fine clothes, food, wine, and flowers. For a week, he enjoys all the luxuries he dreams about. Then he receives message that his father has refunded the amount and he is on his way to retrieve him. He leaves the Waldorf in a state of deep depression, takes a cab to the outskirts of town, and throws himself in front of a train. Paul's decision of jumping in front of the moving train has not come as an impulsive decision. Since he has never been listened and validated at home and at school, he can't adopt the healthy way for his growth. His obstacle of growth that leads him to tragic end is observed from humanistic psychological approach developed or discussed by Carl Roger Karen and Horney. It values to individual unique traits and the striving towards self-actualization. It assumes that people have an innate capacity toward self-understanding and psychological health. Humanistic approach assumes that "individuals access and understand their feelings, gain a sense of meaning in life, and reach self-actualization" (Kabir 146). It values to human potentiality rather than seeing human being in defective forms.

Discussion

When the story begins, Paul, a student of Pittsburg High school, is under suspension for misbehaving teachers in the class. He is brought in front of the teachers to inform his ill-defined infractions that have created distress and humiliation to teachers and his friends. The teachers enlist Paul's ill manners that they have noticed constantly. But Paul appears to be innocent or unaware of the impact of his behaviors on others and simply responds that "I didn't mean to be polite or impolite, either. I guess it's a sort of way I have, of saying things regardless" (PC 469). Such remark does not satisfy the inquisition team, for it hopes that Paul would realize how his ill behaviors are "contemptuous and irritating to the last degree." (PC 469) The team had expected that Paul would apologize for his misbehaviors and the new course would begin but nothing of that sort happens.

Paul's responds further make the inquisition team confirm that "The boy is not strong, for one thing. There is something wrong about the fellow" (PC 470). The teachers get more clues to doubt his sanity. The only tendency to measure the students from the gauge of compliance and loyalty gives no place to the behaviors that are unusual or different. The teachers seem to deny the fact that some students undergo unpleasant situation and learn to behave differently. They have not noticed the fact that Paul has undergone unpleasant situation at home as his father is not supportive and his mother died while he was a child. The right growth or the good life of an individual, according to Carl Roger, is "the process of movement in a direction which the human organism selects when it is inwardly free to move in any direction, and the general qualities of this selected direction appears to have a certain universality" (187). Paul never experiences the inward freedom to move any direction he selects as he is only asked to comply what his teachers or his father instruct him to.

As Paul's father and school teachers are conscious to insert Paul the middle-class value, ritual and manners, they have no faith on inward freedom of an individual. They are intolerant to any activities of a child which goes against their beliefs, assumption and values. To them Paul's connection to the Concert, the artists and music is a breach to their values as these activities generate and foster pleasure. The teaching only focuses to the growth of rationality and intellectual striving. So, they see Paul's connection to Carnegie Hall a great threat to Paul's rational and intellectual growth and the teachers recommend his father to disconnect Paul from the concert. This act of banning Paul from working in the concert, might satisfy them for a while, but this does not give the way for Paul's growth. Carl R. Rogers, a humanistic psychologist, states that when a person is troubled by his unique combination of difficulties, he needs to "create a relation with him in which he is safe and free. It is (the therapist's) purpose to understand the way he feels in his own inner world, to accept him as he is, to create atmosphere of freedom in which he can move in his thinking and feeling and being, in any direction he desires (Rogers,109). His father and his teachers never accept Paul as he is. Rather they only impose him to accept their instruction. The strict rules and values of teachers and parents can't help a child for his or her growth. Karen Horney states:

. . . the human individual, given a chance, tends to develop his particular human potentialities. He will develop then the unique alive forces of his real self: the clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests; the ability to tap his own resources, the strength of his will power; the special capacities or gifts he may have; the faculty to express himself, and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings. (17)

According to Horney, human potentialities will develop only when he is given chance to tap his own resources and strength. The child will not grow through the imposition of outward forces. But Paul never gets chance to develop his potentialities. The teachers see no inward resources with Paul. They draw the conclusion that he is defective and his connection to Hall is making his situation worse.

In fact, Paul uses music and art as false fronts, ways of defending of his self from belittling. He continues wearing these false fronts to defend himself from the outer hostilities. When he protects himself from the outer threat from these false fronts like art and music, he will have space to search the real resources within him. With this acceptance "he appears to be trying to discover something more basic, something more truly himself" (Rogers109). Then, he discovers that "much of his behaviors, even how much of the feeling he experiences is not real, is not something, which flows from the genuine reaction of his organism, but a façade, a front, behind which he has been hiding" (Rogers 109-110). According to Carl Rogers, an individual development is possible only when he understands how he has been masking with the façade to tear it up with which a genuine growth comes up.

After the inquisition Paul directly goes to Carnegie Hall, where he works as an usher. The theatre is "Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love" (PC 477). At the theatre, he "felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant, poetic things, for all the stupid and ugly things slid from him" (PC 477). He is excited and lively in his work and "As the house filled, he grew more and more vivacious and animated, and the color came to his cheeks and lips" (PC471). He is fully occupied physically and mentally in his work. It appears that "Nothing was too much trouble for him; he carried messages and brought programs as though it were his greatest pleasure in life...He felt a sudden zest of life" (PC 471). As Paul's real world is ugly, he needs artificial allurements and the hall serves that purpose to hide or distract his pain.

But Paul's zest of life wanes as soon as he comes out of the concert. The thought of meeting his father with his inquiries and reproaches at once turns him miserable and restless. That day he is more miserable because he has faced the teachers' attack to his ill-infectious behavior and he wants to avoid the details of what happens in the inquisition trail. As he reaches home with a "sense of defeat, the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness" (PC 473), Paul does not dare to enter his room directly. Rather, he chooses to sneak in the basement to avoid meeting with his father. This choice of cold place for the whole night shows how Paul is uncomfortable with his father. Martha Czernicki states "While the basement illustrates the poor relation between Paul and his father, the pages that follow do as well, and they provide a reason for estrangement" (242). With a heavy mind of fear, he enters the basement through the back window, but he is dreaded with another fear, the fear that his father will mistake him as a burglar and he might shoot Paul.

Paul fears of constant reproaches and inquiry from his father and his teachers and he hardly feels himself with them. The only the place where Paul feels a full and complete man is the Carnegie Hall where he is, "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." (PC4 71). He never feels that the Hall scratches his self to the slightest form. The Hall is a fairy land where he is fully secured. There "he felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant. His self is uplifted there, his real life outside the Hall is "like a weight of black water" (PC 486). Paul's liveliness wanes as soon as he comes out of the hall.

In the Hall, Paul is uplifted through fantasy, the fantasy he finds in the sound of orchestra or the paintings of the Hall or his journey to New York. This fantasy saves Paul from distress and unhappiness caused by the reproaches and inquiry at home and at school, the chill relation with his father, and the mocking look of the people around Cordelia Street. Michael N Salda notes that "During these fantasies, he lacks track of time, place and self. They occur in each case after period of physical and mental excitement, in moments when Paul is relaxing and allowing his mind to wander" (114). Paul can remain excited and relax only in his fantasy as he finds real world is unpleasant from the query and labeling of good or ill manners, the obligations he has to maintain. At least, he finds solace in the Hall with art, music and songs. After the inquisition trial Paul's faith on teachers lowers and he sees no reason to continue his study. The teachers ask his father to disconnect him from the Hall as they conclude that the Hall increases Paul's impulsivity. His father being convinced with the teachers for the reason of increasing impulsivity and lowering interest in his study force Paul to quit the job and helps him find a job in a business office. But the new job demands the calculating and accuracy skills of accounts and reports that Paul is not used to. Moreover, Paul does not see the chances of meeting People with high celebration in the business office as in the concert Hall. So, he finds the job monotonous. In the desperate state, he steals money with the belief that only money will give him life and comfort that he dreams.

With the stolen money with him, he feels he is full of energy for the first time. Then he purchases the things he desires, enjoys fully with the feel of his clothes and the flowers. David A. Carpenter rightly states, "Paul favors the satisfaction he can draw from the appearances whose sole worth he determines by how well they reflect what he wishes to see of himself and the world" (597). Since he remains depressed at home and at school with the reproaches, he wants to mask his sadness with the fake appearance. With the materials he consumes "He was not the least abashed or lonely. He had no especial desire to meet or to know any of these people; all he

demanded was the right to look on and conjecture, to watch the pageant (PC 484). Now he has a sense of completeness and does not fear of the look of people around him.

He spends the week in an extravagant way spilling the money on the things he desires. He imagines his life as of fairy tales or the life of celebrity that he sees in the concert Hall. He sees that he can act independently without any criticism and without any obligation. The clothes, the flowers and other articles he has bought, give him a sense of complete man. At the end of the week, when he finds that he has not much money left, he realizes more than ever that "money was everything, the wall between all he loathed and all he wanted" (PC 486). Now he fears that he can't live his life the way he is living in New York. He realizes that he has uplifted his sense of identity in a false way. This understanding frights him as he knows that he can't spend his day lavishly. He gets the message that the stolen amount has been refunded and his father is on his way to New York.

Now Paul sees that he will meet his father and he has to return back to his home at the Cordelia Street. This thought revives his miserable days where he will be again look down more than ever. Paul does not want to live in the miserable days. The unpleasant past starts haunting more and more and it triggers the suicidal ideation. "He drummed a nervous accompaniment to the music and looked about him, telling himself over and over that it had paid" (PC 486). in such nervous state, he sets out from the hotel, takes a cab, directing the driver to follow the Pennsylvania tracks out of the town. Then he jumps in front of the moving train and ends his life. As he dies, Paul sees "the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone" (PC 488). But his plan to commit suicide is not his crime. He finds nobody to listen him, nobody shares his painful emotion that how each query and each criticism has turn him worthless and why he does seek a world of fantasy. Now he knows that his attempt to live in fantasy is just an escape, the escape to more distant lands, "to the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands" (PC 488). As he is victimized to the victim of rigid outlook of his father, he never finds courage to face the real world.

Conclusion

Paul, a motherless child, brought up in strict home environment, always faces reproaches and invalidation both at home and at school. These behaviors impact in healthy growth. These cause him dissatisfied with his situation and feels worthless. But he finds his work in concert comforting as he does his work freely, enjoys art and music. But his involvement in the concert is taken as a source of corrupting his mind and his father compel him to quit the job. His father helps him find a job in a business office. This new job does not help him reduce the stress. Then in a desperate state, he moves to New York stealing money from that office. In New York, he spends money lavishly on the materials with a hope of getting comfort. As the money has not come from his regular income, he feels fear that he has not moved a right way. The thought that his stealing has revealed and he will have to confront his father again, agitates him and at last commits suicide.

This story reveals that the child who confronts reproaches does not get the psychological environment for his or her growth. Such a child moves desperately without knowing the direction and consequences of his or action. This spoils the growth and sometimes the total destruction occurs. Paul's growth is obstructed form the act of his father and his school teachers. As they never pay attention to what needs to Paul, he gets spoilt.

In fact, what Paul needs is someone whom Paul can share his painful emotions that he has. Paul is in need of a person who will show him his strength, his courage and his qualities with which Paul can overcome his difficulties and becomes a person he wants to be. In reality, Paul is

crushed with the demand of strict father, and rigid norms of school and cold look of people around Cordelia Street. His dream to live in the world of fantasy is only a way to mask his distress. He longs to live in a world of fantasy as the real world is unpleasant to him. As long as he uses the mask, his growth is not possible. Carl Rogers states “To remove a mask which you had thought was part of your real self can be deeply disturbing experience, yet when there is freedom to think and feel and be, the individual moves towards a goal” (110). When Paul finds he is listened and when freedom of work is provided, he needs no facades and he will move towards healthy growth. This could have saved Paul from committing suicide.

“Paul’s Case” is not a case of a Paul, there are many Pauls in the society who are victimized due the demand and imposed obligation of parents and school teachers. Unless the teachers and parents learn to accept the children as they are and unless they believe the inward freedom of children with which they choose to live the way they love, the children are bound to adopt the same path that Paul adopts. The realization of differences in the choices, strength, interests will only helpful to their growth.

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