

---

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Manifestations of Childhood Trauma in Willa Cather's *Paul's Case*

Mahdi Safari Monfared ✉ and Majid Sadeghzadegan

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Beheshti University, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, Tabriz Azad University, Iran

**Corresponding Author:** Mahdi Safari Monfared, **E-mail:** [m.safarimonfared@mail.sbu.ac.ir](mailto:m.safarimonfared@mail.sbu.ac.ir)

---

## ABSTRACT

The protagonist of Willa Cather's *Paul's Case* has been interpreted in different ways, especially in terms of his homosexuality and PTSD. But this short story has not been analyzed according to childhood trauma theories. Applying the theories of such thinkers as Sandra Bloom, Leonard Shengold, and Susan L. Reviere, the foregoing study is intended to examine the protagonist's alienation and isolation in the light of his childhood trauma. The trauma of losing his mother, as Reviere avers, has disrupted his schemas, turning him into an inflexible, inadaptible character, stripped of a comprehensive understanding of the world and the ability to interpret reality. Applying Bloom's theory, this paper will analyze Paul's various odd actions and behavior, arguing that due to the lack of linguistic ability and verbal communication, the protagonist resorts to the only means of self-expression at his disposal, i.e. "acting". Due to the other characters' lack of understanding of Paul's traumatized condition as well as their emotional neglect and maltreatment, Paul has grown into a psychopathic character, in line with Shengold's theory. It will be concluded that the protagonist's various tendencies and personality have been impacted by the trauma of losing his mother, thus the cause behind his alienation and anti-social behavior. Moreover, his traumatized condition is further exacerbated due to the lack of sympathy and emotional neglect on the part of the other characters, that is to say, the entire society at large, including his family members. Such a lack of understanding and maltreatment has caused various ramifications, including alienation and lack of verbal communication, psychopathy, and such like.

## KEYWORDS

Childhood Trauma; Maltreatment; Schemas; Soul-Murder; Acting

**ARTICLE DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2022.5.4.15

---

## 1. Introduction

The concept of trauma has been deployed since the 17th century to refer to physical injuries afflicted on the body by external violent and atrocious events. In the mid-and late 19th c, however, the horizon of this term was extended to incorporate not only physical wounds and also the psychological and emotional ones, brought about by the external cataclysmic event, thus the emergence of psychological trauma (Figley et al., 2017, p.2).

Lucy and Bond (2020) elaborate that trauma thinkers have traced the efflorescence of "the trauma paradigm" to the emergence of "Western modernity"; therefore, "The growing interest in nervous disorders in the mid-to-late nineteenth century can be directly traced to a number of related social, economic, political, and technological developments that contributed to a massive transformation of everyday life", which produced a pervasive "sense of insecurity" due to the high speed of the process of western modernization (chapter 1, para.1).

Even though the analysis of psychological trauma has quite emerged recently, manifestations of trauma, such as "grief, sleep disturbances, and flashbacks attributed to combat and loss" can be found in religious and literary texts (Figley et al., 2017). In fact, an article, entitled *History of trauma and posttraumatic disorders in literature*, mentions that "Recent data show that the history of PTSD dates back 4000 years" and depictions of traumatic experiences can be observed in the "writings of almost all know ancient civilizations", such as the cuneiform script, displaying the "trauma of Ur citizens, the anonymous epic of Gilgamesh, Homer's Iliad

and Odysseus, not to mention the Holy Bible and Shakespeare's King Henry IV, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet, to name just a few (Kucmin et al., 2016, pp. 270-275)

Formulating "repetition-compulsion" in *Repeating and Working-Through*, Freud has further delved into this type of compulsion in his *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, which is characterized by "a tendency to place oneself in dangerous or distressing situations that repeat similar experiences from the past" (Freud, as cited in Colman, 2015). Building on Freud's theories of trauma put forth in such seminal treatises *Moses and Monotheism* and *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, Cathy Caruth, in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, has defined trauma as "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena"; therefore, trauma is a wound "inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, 2016, p.3, 11).

Pervading the contemporary culture, the trauma aesthetic has, in recent years, found its way into numerous "novels, artworks, films, songs, and video games" as the major foci of such multitudinous cultural artifacts (Bond & Craps, 2020, Introduction, para. 4).

Having perused the first chapter of Majid Sadeghzadegan's dissertation, which includes the most salient features of trauma discourse, one could be amazed at the length of the spectra run by trauma notions. The realm of trauma studies is characterized by disparate theoretical frameworks, running the gamut from the traditional theories, such as those put forth by Cathy Carruth, contending that the victims of trauma, throughout their lives, are uncontrollably, repetitively, and unintentionally haunted by the traumatic events, to the perspectives upholding the possibility of "to some viable extent counteract ... that disabling disassociation", a process denominated as "working-through" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 42), not to mention the testimonial strand of trauma theory, initially established by Felman and Laub (1992) in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, and further embellished by other trauma thinkers such as Hartman "talking cure" as "homeopathic cure" (Hartman, 2003, p.259) and Hustvedt, to name a few. On the whole, as Hustvedt (2015) has mentioned, this branch of trauma theory emphasizes how narrativization of trauma can give the traumatized people "a greater sense of control and agency", thus helping them cope with their traumatic experience up to some extent, even though it doesn't "cure" them "of their symptom" thoroughly (Husvedt, par. 33). Therefore, the field of trauma studies is clearly endowed with diverse and, sometimes, conflicting views, devoid of a "single school of criticism" and "methodology" (Wolfreys, 2015, p. 126). One of the many conceptual frameworks within the field of trauma studies is the one addressing early childhood trauma, theorized by such thinkers as Bloom, Reviere, and Shengold. It's the childhood trauma theories that will form the underlying theoretical framework of the foregoing research.

The alienated condition and so-called "case" of the protagonist in Willa Cather's *Paul's Case* has, since its publication in 1905, been interpreted according to different psychiatric criteria such as narcissistic personality disorder (Saari, 1997), autistic spectrum disorder (Wilhelm, 2017), post-traumatic stress disorder (Obertino, 2012), not to mention in the light of Paul's homosexual proclivities (Rubin, 1975; Summers, 1990; Nardin, 2008).

Such studies as *The Homosexual Motif in Willa Cather's Paul's Case*, written by Larry Rubin in 1975, *A LOSING GAME IN THE END: AESTHETICISM AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN CATHER'S PAUL'S CASE*, penned by Claude J. Summers in 1990, and *Homosexual Identities in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case'*, penned by Jane Nardin in 2008, have brought the protagonist's homosexual tendencies under analytical investigation, averring that his alienation stems from his sexual orientations.

Unlike the above-mentioned studies, Hayley Wilhelm's *Signs and Symptoms of Autism in Willa Cather's Paul's Case*, penned in 2017, predicated on criteria provided for diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in DSM-5, has diagnosed the protagonist as an autistic character. The deficiencies gripping the protagonist's interpersonal relationships, his "obsessive in the life of the wealthy" (obsession), and the inability to adapt himself to the changes in his life, particularly "in the routine of ushering at Carnegie Hall", such like, have been regarded as the symptoms of autism (p.196).

Of close affinity to the current study, James Obertino's *Paul's Case and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* diagnoses the protagonist's case as PTSD, occasioned by "both sexual abuse and parental violence" on his father's part, an abominable "unacknowledged" traumatic experience "he has experienced, perhaps repeatedly—a trauma so shaming he must repress all memory of it"; therefore, his desperate attempt to flee the Cordelia Street and his execrable life in the house is a response to this traumatic event, which he "prefers not to recall or indeed cannot recall" (Obertino, 2012, p.51). Relying on the criteria for diagnosis of PTSD established in DSM-5, it has attempted to analyze the symptoms of PTSD in the protagonist, such as "markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities", want of empathy for others, isolation and estrangement from other characters, excessive fear of his father, which appears to stem from sexual abuse, and finally, his "hyper-vigilance", extreme anxiety, paranoid state of mind, etc. (Obertino, p.51).

While the protagonist's "case" has been analyzed in different ways, as in the above-cited studies, there appears to be a lack of critical studies analyzing the personality and identity of the protagonist through the lens of childhood trauma theories; therefore, the current study will attempt to fill this void in the literature, by applying the theories formulated by a number of childhood trauma thinkers. In other words, the researchers will strive to furnish an alternative interpretation of Paul's "case", by re-examining the alienation and temperament of the protagonist through the lens of such childhood trauma theories as articulated by Bloom, Shengold, and Reviere. Lying at the core of this paper is the hypothesis that the pervasive alienation, gripping Paul's existence, originates from the trauma of losing his mother in childhood; however, his being dis severed from society and the other characters' inability to comprehend his trauma, hence lack of understanding and care on their parts, further traumatizes this character on a daily basis. The purpose lying at the core of the paper is threefold: it will initially attempt to expatiate on the disruption of Paul's schemas in childhood and its various concomitant ramifications thereof, such as lack of flexibility, adaptability, and interpretative ability in the protagonist; in the second section, the paper will analyze and regard the character's shenanigans as a means of self-expression, in default of linguistic ability. The last part will be dedicated to the emotional neglect, maltreatment, lack of sympathy, and "responsibilities" of the other characters' towards the "face of the other" (Levinas, as cited in Wolfreys and Womack, 2015, p.115), that is to say, Paul, and the resultant repercussions thereof, such as the protagonist's self-destructive and psychopathic tendencies.

### 1. Disturbance of Schemas

The attention of the article will initially be turned to Reviere's childhood trauma theory (1996), which posits that traumatic experiences are endowed with the potential for interfering with the development of the schemas formed in childhood, hence the traumatized person's behavioral inflexibility and inadaptability, dearth of a solid self-image (identity) and comprehensive cognition of the surrounding, and inability to interpret the reality: "If trauma is encountered during childhood at a time when schemas and beliefs about the self and world are forming, traumatic experience may interface with development of subordinate, general schemas that create a sense of continuity in self, memory and meaning" (Reviere, p.37). Schemas are deemed to "expectations, rules, or axioms derived from past experience that the Individual maintains about himself, others, and the world" (Reviere, p.28).

Traumatized in his childhood by the death of his mother as Paul is, his schemas have incontrovertibly been disrupted, as a consequence of which he's totally shorn of adaptive skills and the ability to be flexible. The case in point is the fact that not only does Paul fail to accustom himself to the etiquette of the educational institution, thus refusing to abide by the mores thereof, but also refrains from adapting himself to his neighborhood and, on a larger scale, the entire society. The failure, on Paul's part, to adapt himself to the surrounding environment can be construed from the paragraph, depicting the aversion Paul expresses towards his neighborhood and the unfulfilling aspects thereof, which appear to make his blood boil. Thus, stemming from his inflexibility and inadaptability is his anti-social behavior, as a result of which he's completely alienated and disconnected from the other characters and the entire society at large.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, another facet of childhood trauma Reviere's theory addresses is the traumatized person's incapability to interpret reality as well as want of comprehensive cognition of the surrounding, which incontrovertibly comes in handy in vivisectioning Paul's proclivity to misinterpret the surrounding environment. One of the integral narrative techniques, divulging Paul's propensity to misinterpret reality, is the divergence and tension between the internalized and externalized representations, portrayed by an omniscient narrator, of the same fictional setting. As Burkhard Niederhoff has written in his paper regarding focalization, Bal has reconceptualized "Genette's typology in terms of focalizing subjects and focalized objects", positing that, in the case of internal and external focalization, it's the observed object that matters rather than the seeing subject (Genette, as cited in Niederhoff, 2009, p.118). Consequently, replacing "Genette's triple topology" is Bal's binary system, subsuming merely internal and external focalization to the exclusion of zero focalization, which involves "two types of focalized objects", namely "imperceptibles (thoughts, feelings, etc.) and perceptibles (actions, appearances, etc.)" (Bal, as cited in Niederhoff, 2009, pp.118-19). In the light of Bal's dual system, it can be posited that the narration of the entire short story oscillates between internal and external focalization, with the former depicting "the feelings and thoughts" of the protagonist and the latter "the appearances and actions" (p.118).

As the narrator observes, functioning as an external focalizer, Cordelia Street, populated by those of the middle-class, appears, in actuality, to be a "highly respectable street, where all the houses were exactly alike, and where businessmen of moderate means begot and reared large families of children", hence the "moderate" wealth of the inhabitants of this street (Cather, 1905, p. 238). However, when returning home after the performance at the concert, Paul's gripped by negative thoughts, a depressed mood, and somewhat an erroneous impression of the neighbor. Therefore, Paul, unable to adapt to the surrounding environment as an inflexible character, misinterprets the reality of the neighbor and his house, thus regarding them in a negative way. In effect, the narrator, in these passages, merely narrates Paul's thoughts and feelings (the imperceptibles) \_ observes the setting through Paul's eyes\_ thus the internal focalization. Needless to say, Paul's misinformed perception of the neighborhood has a traumatizing effect on his psyche, conveyed by his subjective impression of what seems to be a suppressive and deeply dark ambiance, as if the setting is portrayed, metaphorically, as an uncannily claustrophobic space that is suffocating him, entrapped as he is in this vicinity. As

mentioned in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, the "images or experiences of claustrophobia, of being unexpectedly and unpleasantly stuck" can be broadly related to the Freudian uncanny, as one of the "thirteen forms that uncanny can take" (Freud, 1919, as cited in Bennett & Royle, 2014, pp. 36, 38). The short story tangibly imparts the claustrophobic effect of the surrounding area, thus depicting his arrival in the neighbor, metaphorically, as a sensation of "sinking forever into ugliness and commonness" and of "the waters close above his head" (Cather, 1905, p.238), as if stuck in some sort of closed space, which there is no escaping.

However, it's not merely the setting of the neighborhood that is, in Paul's perspective, quite suffocating, for the ambiance surrounding his house is equally gloomy and suffocating, thus traumatic to the protagonist. The tone of the sentences depicting his house is quite negative, touching on all of the despicable and alienating aspects of his house, thus giving the impression of a space that is quite claustrophobic, as in the following description of the house, which is a biased explanation of the house, filtered through and colored by Paul's consciousness:

The nearer he approached the house, the more absolutely unequal Paul felt to the sight of it all; his ugly sleeping chamber; the cold bath-room with the grimy zinc tub, the cracked mirror, the dripping spigots; his father, at the top of the stairs, his hairy legs sticking out from his nightshirt, his feet thrust into carpet slippers (Cather, 1905, p.239).

However, the misinterpretation of the reality, on Paul's part, is not merely confined to the surrounding environment, extending to the description of the inhabitants of this street as well, being that he regards them as narrow-minded individuals "all of whom were as exactly alike as their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived" (Cather, 1905, p.238).

In the grand scheme of things, the portrait canvassed of the neighbor displays that it's a pleasant tranquil environment and the people are quite rich and amiable. That inhabitants are savoring in the placid and peaceful environment of this neighborhood is deducible from the fact that "The men sat placidly on gay cushions placed upon the steps that led down to the sidewalk" (Cather, 1905, p.239) and the vivacious kids' act of playing in the street, etc. On the whole, everyone appears to be enjoying themselves, engaging amicably in conversations, and so forth, save Paul, who appears to be deeply alienated, thus unable to communicate with others and nursing aversion towards banality, "ugliness and commonness" of the environment.

Paul's tendency for "loathing of respectable beds, of common food, of a house permeated by kitchen odors; a shuddering repulsion for the flavourless, colourless mass of every-day existence" (Cather, 1905, p.239), which is at odds with the other characters' high opinion of this street as well as their tendency to deeply luxuriate in every aspect thereof, attests to Paul's inability to interpret the reality and lack of comprehensive cognition of the surrounding environment, not to mention the dearth of flexibility and inadaptability on his part.

## **2. "Acting" As A Means of Self-expression**

Of close affinity to Reviere's childhood trauma theories are those articulated by Bloom, who posits that anti-social behavior is one of the most integral attributes of childhood trauma. According to Bloom, traumatized people are gripped by intrusive sensory experiences and negative feelings, with their behavior being dis severed from the social meaning system. Being that others actively refrain from listening to and engaging in a dialogue with the victims of trauma, the traumatized people are disconnected from the others; therefore, victims of trauma, stripped of the skill of speaking and linguistic ability as they are, tend to resort to the only language left before them, viz., "acting" (Bloom, 2011, p. 77). Therefore, they are obliged to act, thus expressing themselves through highly idiosyncratic or odd behavior, which is one of the defining attributes of the victims of trauma (Bloom, p.78).

Alienated from the other characters and surrounding environment, Paul, as an anti-social character, has recourse to shenanigans and idiosyncratic behavior of any ilk to express himself, shorn of communicating skills and linguistic ability as he is, being that there is a yawning gap between him and the other characters, who fail to wrap their minds around his severe traumatized condition and, far from essaying to bridge the gap by engaging in a sympathetic dialogue with him, they further exacerbate Paul's traumatized and alienated state due to a severe lack of understanding and sympathy on their parts, not to mention their unwitting maltreatment of him, which internalizes his trauma, that is to say, turns it into a norm displaying itself on a daily basis.

That the other characters lack a grasp of Paul's condition can be deduced from the following paragraph, in which, even though one of the teachers mentions that Paul is "haunted" (by trauma) and comes close to acknowledging that his shenanigans may not have originated from his "insolence", he fails to comprehend the depth of his trauma, thus deploying the phrase "wrong about the fellow", which is endowed with negative connotations and indicates that he isn't capable of grasping the psychological turmoil in which Paul's embroiled. Paul appears to be an alienated other of some sort, dis severed from the rest of the society by an unbridgeable chasm: "I don't really believe that smile of his comes altogether from insolence; there's something sort of haunted about it. The boy is not strong, for one thing. There is something wrong about the fellow" (Cather, 1905, p.235). However, the quintessential portrait of such a dearth of understanding on the teachers' part displays itself in the passage depicting how his

teachers, in a savage attack, ruthlessly "fell upon him without mercy, his English teacher leading the pack" (Cather, 1905, p.235) when Paul is still attending his disciplinary hearing before faculty members of the school.

Clearly, it is not in the teachers' power to comprehend that Paul resorts to such shenanigans and idiosyncratic behaviour in order to express himself, being that acting is the only means of self-expression at his disposal, due to the lack of linguistic ability and verbal communication with the others. Even his father fails to understand his own son's trauma, as is conspicuous in the following lines: "He (Paul) had been suspended a week ago, and his father had called at the Principal's office and confessed his perplexity about his son" (Cather, 1905, p.234).

Last but not least, even the so-called "old friends", whereby Paul had referred to the members of the theatre, with an attempt at ameliorating his alienated and solitary state, fail to comprehend the real catalyst lying at the heart of Paul's misdemeanours and his narration of fallacious stories, as they, in a detached and clinical (emotionless) way, denominate his condition as a "bad case", which attests to a lack of understanding on their part and Paul's alienation from them.

Having corroborated the hypothesis that lack of understanding has culminated in his further alienation and disconnection from the entire society, hence a lack of verbal communication with other characters, the paper will currently turn its attention to an in-depth analysis of Paul's misdemeanours and shenanigans, thus postulating that they incontrovertibly stem from his employment of "acting", in lieu of linguistic communication, as the only means of self-expression at his disposal.

The case in point is Paul's odd behaviour at the disciplinary hearing held by faculty members of the school, which attests to his idiosyncrasies on different planes. To start with, when he appears before his teachers, he is wearing "an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his button-hole. This latter adornment the faculty somehow felt was not properly significant of the contrite spirit befitting a boy under the ban of suspension" (Cather, 1905, p.243). Such odd clothes constitute one of the numerous idiosyncratic manners, which succor Paul in the process of self-expression.

Furthermore, Paul's derisive and scornful facial expressions and behavior, in the presence of the teachers, also demonstrate the character's various idiosyncrasies and his deployment of acting as a method of self-expression, deducible from the use of his eyes "in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy", his "defiant manner", "the contempt which they all knew he felt for them, and which he seemingly made not the least effort to conceal", and finally, his "habit of raising his eyebrows that were contemptuous and irritating to the last degree", not to mention "his shrug" and proclivity for "smiling" when being censured (Cather, 1905, p.235).

However, the most emblematic instance of Paul's idiosyncratic behavior displays itself when Paul, much to his English teacher's dismay, backs away from her "with a shudder", brusquely flinging "his hands violently behind him". This extremely odd and uncalled-for behavior on his part leaves his teacher flabbergasted and mortified: "The astonished woman could scarcely have been more hurt and embarrassed had he struck at her. The insult was so involuntary and definitely personal as to be unforgettable" (Cather, 1905, pp.234-5). Such an insolent and discourteous shenanigan manifests itself in the other teachers' classes as well, whereby Paul expresses his deep "physical aversion" towards all of his teachers, regardless of their gender. Some of the other misdemeanors, pulled off by Paul, that vex his teachers, run the gamut from "shading his eyes" with his hands in class to his tendency to look "out of the window during the recitation, not to mention his "running commentary on the lecture, with humorous intent" (Cather, 1905, p.235). In the light of the propositions, advanced above, it can be concluded that all such idiosyncrasies are intended as a cry for help by a helpless traumatized boy who, unable to express himself by the dint of language, resorts to acting as a *modus operandi* for self-expression.

### **3. Soul-murder, Self-annihilation, and Psychopathy**

Soul Murder is a "designation" employed by Leonard Shengold (1979) to refer to such severe and traumatic experiences as "emotional deprivation alternating with abuse of children that has lasting and profound effect" (p.534) on the psyche of the abused child. The ramifications of soul murder are diverse, materializing in multitudinous dimensions. For instance, soul murder, deemed to be an atrocious offense perpetrated by another individual against the victim of trauma, entails stripping one of his "identity\_ and of sexual identity" and the "capacity for love and joy" (Shengold, 1979, pp.534-535). Given that such brutal atrocities against children might give rise to dramatic alterations in a trauma victim, such a survivor of childhood abuse, in all probability, "may not physically even survive the assaults or they may later succumb to an inner need for annihilation analogous to Rene Spitz, being that the emotionally deprived infants might die after growing up in institutions" (Shengold, 1991, p.6). Therefore, the abused kids tend to lean towards a self-destructive path.

The repercussions of such brutal childhood abuse and atrocities, Shengold contends, are highly diverse in scope: "some abused children may sustain more abuse and transcend it better than others", whereas the other "soul-murdered murdered (sado-

masochistic) children can become psychotic, or psychopathic and criminal. Or, by using massive or primitive defences, they may be able to contain the terrifying, primarily murderous charge of affect they have been forced to bear" (Shengold, 1991, p.6). It concurs with various studies, conducted by such researchers as Craparo et al. (2013), postulating a relationship between "early traumatic experiences (emotional neglect and/or physical, sexual, emotional)" and psychopathic traits (p.3), Dargis et al. (2016), positing that psychopathy is associated with "substantial maltreatment, including both abuse (i.e., physical, emotional, sexual) and neglect (i.e., physical, emotional)" (p.7), and finally, Farina et al. (2018), suggesting that "childhood trauma was associated with psychopathy for both male and female juvenile offenders, including physical and emotional abuse as well as family stress" (p.13).

Given that the protagonist has been subjected to emotional neglect and maltreatment by the other characters, as indicated by such unwitting vituperative invectives against Paul as occur at the outset of the short story due to the teachers' lack of understanding regarding Paul's traumatized condition, Paul has incontrovertibly been soul-murdered, the impact of which is detectable in his various tendencies. Firstly, Paul has a proclivity for self-destruction, observable in the following passage, in which he imagines being in a near-death situation. The paragraph in question, which captures Paul's self-destructive propensities and masochistic flirtation with thoughts of his own murder at his father's hand, portends his committing suicide at the end of the short story. Such a masochistic hankering for self-annihilation lies in the fact that he "entertained himself until daybreak" as if he derives a great deal of pleasure from such negative self-destructive thoughts:

Then, again, suppose his father had come down, pistol in hand, and he had cried out in time to save himself and his father had been horrified to think how nearly he had killed him? Then, again, suppose a day should come; then his father would remember that night, and wish there had been no warning cry to stay his hand? With this last supposition, Paul entertained himself until daybreak (Cather, 1905, p.239).

However, if this passage merely insinuates his self-destructive tendencies, his perpetration of suicide at the end of the short story conclusively corroborates his being soul-murdered, thus drawn towards the path of self-annihilation, which is precipitated by the prevailing alienation gripping his life and his being traumatized on a daily basis. Paul's masochistic desire for death can be construed from his "frightened smile" and the tendency to imagine "being watched" by an invisible audience as if his suicide is a source of pleasure for both himself and others. As mentioned in the story, "When the right moment came, he jumped ... He felt something strike his chest, -his body was being thrown swiftly through the air, on and on, immeasurably far and fast, while his limbs gently relaxed" (Cather, 1905, p.250).

Symptoms of soul-murder in the short story, however, move beyond his predisposition towards self-annihilation, materializing in other realms of his life as well. For instance, Paul, upon being expelled from school and landing himself a job with "Denny & Carson's office", impulsively and remorselessly purloins "above two thousand dollars in checks and nearly a thousand in the bank notes" (Cather, 1905, p.245), which indisputably attests to his criminal and psychopathic traits. Undeniably endowed with a tendency to perpetrate such criminal offences, it's insinuated that emotional neglect and the abusive maltreatment inflicted on Paul by the other characters have hardwired the predilection for being "psychotic, or psychopathic and criminal" (Shengold, 1991, p.6) into his mindset, hence an inveterate and dexterous criminal. The following paragraph represents that he's quite adroit at perpetrating a transgression of such magnitude without the slightest ounce of hesitance and remorse as if it's in his nature:

His nerves had been steady enough to permit his returning to the office, where he had finished his work and asked for a full day's holiday tomorrow, Saturday, giving a perfectly reasonable pretext. The bank book, he knew, would not be returned before Monday or Tuesday, and his father would be out of town for the next week. From the time he slipped the bank notes into his pocket until he boarded the night train for New York, he had not known a moment's hesitation (Cather, 1905, p.245).

Saari's article "*Paul's Case*": A Narcissistic Personality Disorder, predicated on DSM-5, touches on the protagonist's manipulative and exploitative personality, which is deemed to be a symptom of narcissistic personality disorder. According to Saari, upon his embezzlement, he "has the audacity to return to work and ask for a paid holiday, later boarding the evening train 'without any hesitation' whatsoever and it's not the 'first time' that he has perpetrated such heinous offences (Saari, 1997). Furthermore, Paul "acts as if he had as much right to their money as they did" and while sojourning in New York "Paul experiences no remorse; it was 'characteristic' that remorse did not occur to him, and later when he knows his trip will soon end, he thinks how his exploits had 'paid indeed!'", hence a narcissist (Saari, 1997). While my study concurs with some of the arguments in Saari's paper, regarding Paul's manipulative and psychopathic personality and how the protagonist purloins that huge amount of money without the slightest iota of reluctance and contrition and that he has, in all probability, perpetrated other "treacherous" deeds earlier in his life, it takes issue with the catalyst, pinpointed in the said article, of such criminal activities, viz, Narcissistic personality disorder. Instead, it

essays to impute Paul's psychopathic tendencies to his childhood trauma, triggered by emotional neglect and maltreatment, as mentioned earlier.

Paul's predisposition towards psychopathic behaviour can be further substantiated by his tendency, without the slightest ounce of remorse, for pathological lying; hence an incorrigible liar, construed from the fact that he lies about his willingness to return to school at the outset of the short story. That he's a pathological liar can be corroborated by the statement to the effect that "Paul was quite accustomed to lying; found it, indeed, indispensable for overcoming friction" (Cather, 1905, p.234), which attests to his manipulative behaviour, given that not only does Paul manipulate others by lying with the intention of "overcoming friction", but also manipulates friends into believing his fallacious narratives. The following excerpt displays that the pathological lying and psychopathic inclinations have been inculcated into his mindset and being, to the point that it has turned into second nature for him. As mentioned, he's responsible for a lot of abominable actions, reposing in the "shadowed corner" and "dark place":

The only thing that at all surprised him was his own courage-for he realized well enough that he had always been tormented by fear, a sort of apprehensive dread that, of late years, as the meshes of the lies he had told closed about him, had been pulling the muscles of his body tighter and tighter. Until now, he could not remember a time when he had not been dreading something. Even when he was a little boy, it was always there-behind him, or before, or on either side. There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him -and Paul had done things that were not pretty to watch, he knew (Cather, 1905, p.245).

In accordance with Reviere's theory of childhood trauma and ineluctably intertwined with Shengold's concept of soul murder is loss of identity, articulated in the following excerpt "[i]n soul murder the victim's identity including the sexual identity, is lost" (Shengold, 1991, p.20), which accords with the findings of a study, conducted by Penner et al. (2019): "emotional and physical neglect retained direct associations to identity diffusion, and emotional abuse had a total effect on identity diffusion via RF" (p.71).

When brought under analytical investigation, the loss of Paul's identity disputably comes to the fore, given that he constantly essays to emulate the lifestyle and manners of the other characters, that is to say, those of the upper class, including actors and actresses, in many respects. In other words, stripped of a solid image of himself, he tends to follow in other characters' footsteps in the manner of dressing, living, etc, observable in the following excerpt, portraying Paul's tendency to loiter around the hotel where the actors, singers, and manufacturers sojourn, hence his willingness to forsake his tedious lifestyle once and for all: "Paul had often hung about the hotel, watch the people go in and out, longing to enter and leave schoolmasters and dull care behind him forever" (Cather, 1905, p.237).

Paul's lack of a solid self-image and proclivity to emulate others' lifestyles can be construed from his somewhat eerie act of chasing one of the singers after the termination of the performance at the concert. It seems as if he's totally devoid of the sense of who he is and he's desperately essaying to quench this deeply-felt desire, in modeling himself on those in possession of immense wealth and imbued with an artistic flair, but to no avail: "Paul followed the carriage over to the hotel, walking so rapidly as not to be far from the entrance when the singer alighted and disappeared behind the swinging glass doors.... (Cather, 1905, p.238).

According to Lacan, elusive and mobile, desire "is either displaced from signifier to signifier or it is substituted for—one signifier for another—and the whole process makes up a 'chain of signifiers'" (*Lacan and Language*, n.d.), which fail to reach the object-desire, or the "transcendental signified"; therefore, desire is always left unsatisfied. This elusive attribute of the desire, in this case, desire for a solid identity as well as an alienation-free life, has been reflected in the short story, for Paul is constantly trying to procure a solid self-image and a more interesting lifestyle, akin to that of the artists and those of the upper class; however, much to his dismay, Paul's attempts don't bear any fruit, for his object-desire tends to ceaselessly elude him. Moreover, such a desire for a solid self-image shift from one form of identity to another, thus the displacement from one object-desire to another:

Yet he rather liked to hear these legends of the iron kings, that were told and retold on Sundays and holidays; these stories of palaces in Venice, yachts on the Mediterranean, and high play at Monte Carlo appealed to his fancy, and he was interested in the triumphs of cash boys who had become famous, though he had no mind for the cash-boy stage (Cather, 1905, p.241).

#### 4. Conclusion

The current study, in delving into the childhood trauma of the protagonist and analyzing it through the lens of theories formulated by namely, Bloom, Shengold, and Reviere, has analyzed Paul's personality, temperament, and alienation in the light of trauma rather than his homosexuality and other psychological, hence putting forth an alternative interpretation. While there are

similar studies delving into Paul's trauma, the emphasis of the foregoing research on childhood trauma, however, sets it apart from the other such existent studies in the literature. Therefore, the scope of the present study is limited to childhood trauma theories, to the exclusion of the theories articulated by the other trauma theorists.

Initially, it was corroborated that Paul's schemas have been disturbed by his childhood trauma, hence his inflexibility and inability to adapt to the surrounding environment, including the educational system, his neighborhood, and society at large. Inflexible as he is, due to the disruption of his schemas, he is not able to fit in with the others, hence an alienated other in a social context. Moreover, he appears to be deprived of a comprehensive cognition and understanding of the surrounding environment, for he clearly misinterprets the reality and fails to appreciate the neighbor that appears to be quite tranquil and amicable; being that his family is quite well-off and belongs to the middle-class, his inability to appreciate the levities of his life conclusively substantiates misinterpretation of the reality.

Then, it is proved that the idiosyncratic behaviors and actions of Paul, such as his odd way of dressing and odd shenanigans in the classroom, represent the fact that he, is bereft of linguistic and verbal tools as he, resorts to acting in a manner of self-expression. In effect, as other characters refrain from communicating with this traumatized character, he gets dissevered from the society at large, hence his recourse to acting, as the only *modus operandi* at his disposal, to express himself.

Ultimately, it was substantiated that, despite the possibility of physical abuse on his father's part, emotional neglect and lack of understanding on others' part of his trauma and traumatized condition, hence nonphysical abuse, further traumatizes the protagonist and deepens the already existing alienation. In effect, this maltreatment and, at times, verbal abuse has worked in tandem with the original childhood trauma of losing his mother, precipitating Paul into irremediable emotional turmoil and traumatizing him on a daily basis. On the account of such abuse, Paul, soul-murdered as he is, gets predisposed towards self-annihilation, as in his masochistic flirtation with thoughts of death and his actual suicide at the end of the story.

Moreover, soul-murder inculcates criminal and psychopathic proclivities in Paul, deducible from his criminal offence of purloining a lot of money and his tendency towards pathological lying and manipulation of his friends. Another ramification of such abuse is the loss of his self-image and identity, as in his constant and obsessive tendency to emulate other characters' lifestyles, ways of dressing, etc. His odd act of following a singer after a show attests to his desperate desire to procure an identity and self-image for himself, which eludes him, however, as a Lacanian desire.

The foremost conclusion that can be drawn from the current study is that the members of society should be enlightened regarding how a traumatic event might affect the psyche of a child so that possible medical attention will be sought and the psychological issues will be solved before the trauma of such a child gets exacerbated beyond redemption. Therefore, the individuals, living in a society, have a responsibility towards (face of) the victim suffering from childhood trauma and, in lieu of widening the gap between the traumatized and themselves, they must act more sympathetically and engage in an effective dialogue with him rather than further alienating and traumatizing that person in question. It's the society's responsibility to facilitate a genial environment in which the traumatized will feel more at home, thus having a better chance of coming to terms with their trauma, that is to say, "working-through their trauma, and having more effectual means of expressing themselves and communicating with others.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**ORCID iD :** Mahdi Safari Monfared: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7492-5466>

## References

- [1] Bloom, S. L. (2011). Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma: The Evolutionary Significance of the Arts Part 2: The Arts and Evolution-What are Art For?. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 9(1), 67-82.
- [2] Bennett, A., & Royle, N. (2014). The Uncanny. In *An introduction to literature, criticism, and theory* (35–43). essay, Routledge.
- [3] Bond, L., & Craps, S. (2020). *Trauma*. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- [4] Colman, A. M. (2015). *A dictionary of psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- [5] Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. JHU Press.
- [6] Cather, W. (2006). Paul's Case. In T. R. Arp and G. Johnson (Eds), *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* (234–251). Thomson Wadsworth. Print.
- [7] Craparo, G., Schimmenti, A., & Caretti, V. (2013). Traumatic experiences in childhood and psychopathy: a study on a sample of violent offenders from Italy. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 4, 10.3402/ejpt.v4i0.21471. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v4i0.21471>
- [8] Dargis, M., Newman, J., & Koenigs, M. (2016). Clarifying the link between childhood abuse history and psychopathic traits in adult criminal offenders. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 7(3), 221.
- [9] Figley, C. R., Ellis, A. E., Reuther, B. T., & Gold, S. N. (2017). The study of trauma: A historical overview. In S. N. Gold (Ed.), *APA handbook of trauma psychology: Foundations in knowledge* (1–11). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000019-001>



- [10] Farina, A. S., Holzer, K. J., Delisi, M., & Vaughn, M. G. (2018). Childhood trauma and psychopathic features among juvenile offenders. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 62(14), 4359-4380.
- [11] Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700327>
- [12] Hartman, G. (2003). Trauma within the Limits of Literature. *European Journal of English Studies*, 7(3), 257-274.
- [13] Husvedt, S. (2015). Trauma Talk. *Sillages critiques*, (19).
- [14] Kucmin, T., Kucmin, A., Nogalski, A., Sojczuk, S., & Jojczuk, M. (2016). History of trauma and posttraumatic disorders in literature. *Psychiatria polska*, 50(1), 269-281. <https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/43039>.
- [15] LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [16] *Lacan and Language*. (n.d.). The National University of Singapore. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from <https://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/lacan.htm>
- [17] Nardin, J. (2008). Homosexual Identities in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case'. *Literature & History*, 17(2), 31-46.
- [18] Niederhoff, B. (2009). Focalization. In P. Hühn (Ed.), *Handbook of narratology* (pp. 115-123). Walter de Gruyter.
- [19] Obertino, J. (2012). PAUL'S CASE and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. *The Explicator*, 70(1), 49-52.
- [20] Penner, F., Gambin, M., & Sharp, C. (2019). Childhood maltreatment and identity diffusion among inpatient adolescents: The role of reflective function. *Journal of adolescence*, 76, 65-74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.08.002>
- [21] Reviere, S. L. (1996). *Memory of childhood trauma: A clinician's guide to the literature*. New York [u.a.: Guilford Press.
- [22] Rubin, L. (1975). The Homosexual Motif in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case". *Studies in Short Fiction*, 12(2), 127.
- [23] Shengold, L. L. (1979). Child abuse and deprivation: Soul murder. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 27(3), 533-559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306517902700302>
- [24] Sadeghzadegan, M. (2021). *Reading No Country for Old Men and The Road: Trauma in Contemporary Literature and Cinema*. University of Lisbon
- [25] Shengold, L. (1991). *Soul murder: The effects of childhood abuse and deprivation*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- [26] Saari, R. (1997). "Paul's Case": A Narcissistic Personality Disorder, 301.81. *Studies in short fiction*, 34.
- [27] Summers, C. J. (1990). A Losing Game in the End": Aestheticism and Homosexuality in Cather's "Paul's Case. *Modern fiction studies*, 36(1), 103-119.
- [28] Wilhelm, H. (2017). Signs and Symptoms of Autism in Willa Cather's PAUL'S CASE. *The Explicator*, 75(3), 194-199.
- [29] Womack, K. (2015). Ethical Criticism. In J. Wolfreys (Ed.), *Introducing criticism at the 21st Century* (108-125). Edinburgh University Press.
- [30] Wolfreys, J. (2015). Trauma, Testimony, Criticism: Witnessing, Memory, And Responsibility. In *Introducing criticism at the 21st Century* (126-148). Edinburgh University Press.