



Willa Cather's
"Paul's Case"

Biographical and Historical Backgrounds



T. M. Fowler's and James Moyer's 1902 lithograph of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Cather lived in Pittsburgh from 1896 until 1906. Between her arrival in the city and 1901, she lived in three different boarding houses. This is one of them, photographed in the 1970s.

THE HOME MONTHLY

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WINDSOR PALACE, THE HOME OF THE BRITISH ROYAL HOUSE OF HANOVER

Victoria's Ancestors: The House of Hanover.

With Cather.



IT IS a sad story, when the young Queen sat in her coronation robes upon the throne of Westminster Abbey, and the golden orb and scepter lay upon her lap, and she was told that she was the first of the line of the Hanovers.

"What a grand thing!" she said to herself, "to be the first of a new line."

"But it is only a name," she thought.

She had heard it before, but never so often as now. She had heard it when she was a child, and she had heard it when she was a young girl. She had heard it when she was a bride, and she had heard it when she was a widow. She had heard it when she was a mother, and she had heard it when she was a queen.

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Cather's first job in the city was as the editor of *The Home Monthly*, a women's magazine for which she did not have a great deal of respect. But she gained a lot of experience, writing fiction, poems, and articles under a number of pseudonyms.



Ethelbert Nevin was a popular composer who lived in Pittsburgh. Cather became friends with him and included a portrait of him in her story "A Death in the Desert."

She met many artists and musicians during her time in Pittsburgh.

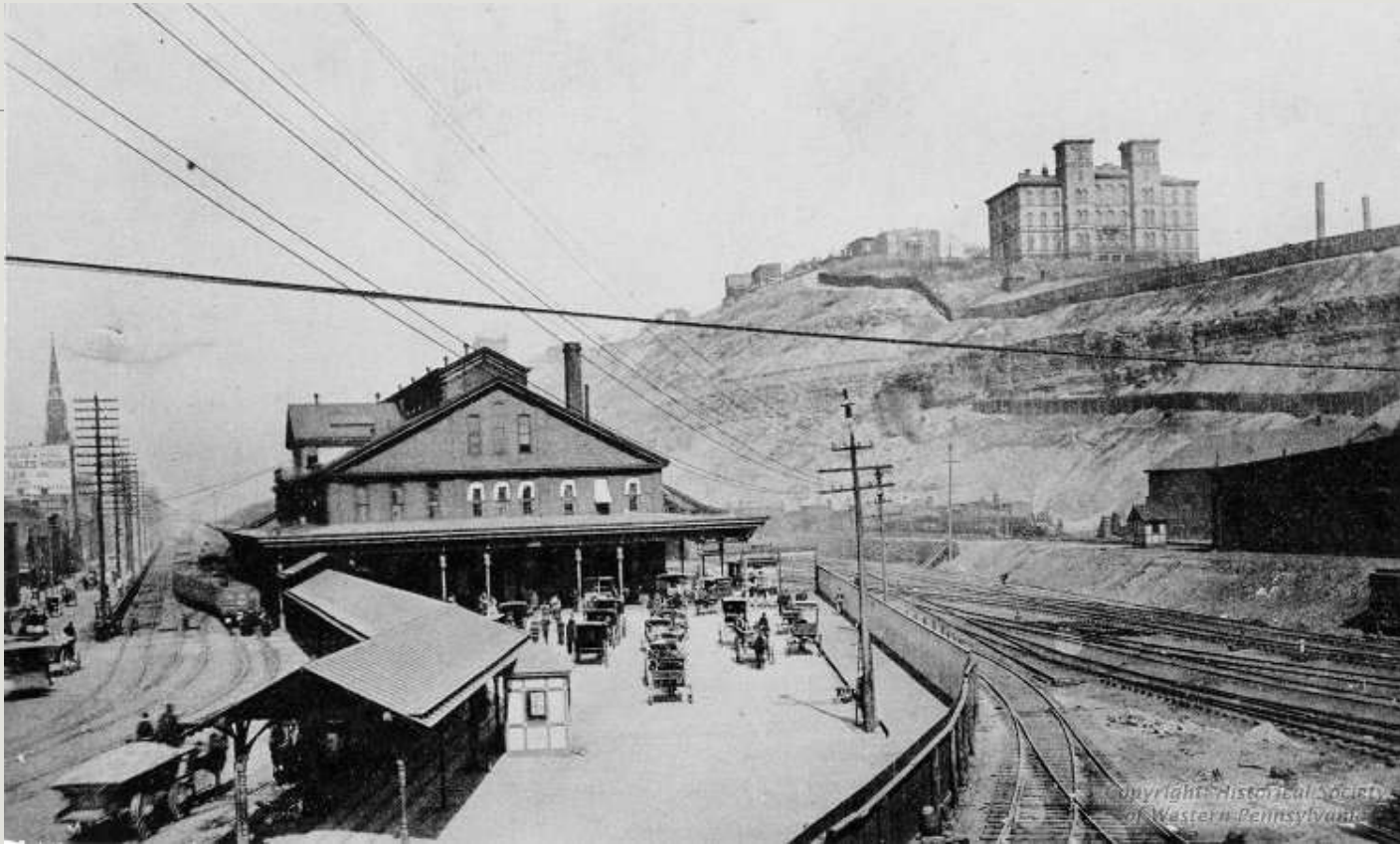


In 1899, Cather met Isabelle McClung, the daughter of an important Pittsburgh judge, and the two became close friends.



In March 1901, Cather moved into the McClung household, where she had a small space to concentrate on her writing.

In 1901, she also began teaching at Central High School.
Her subjects were Latin, Composition, and English.



Pittsburgh's Central High School perches on the hilltop above Pennsylvania Railroad Union Station.



In 1903, Cather began a new job as the head of the English Department at Allegheny High School, which was located in a better neighborhood and paid her a better salary.



Willa Cather during her
Pittsburgh teaching career.

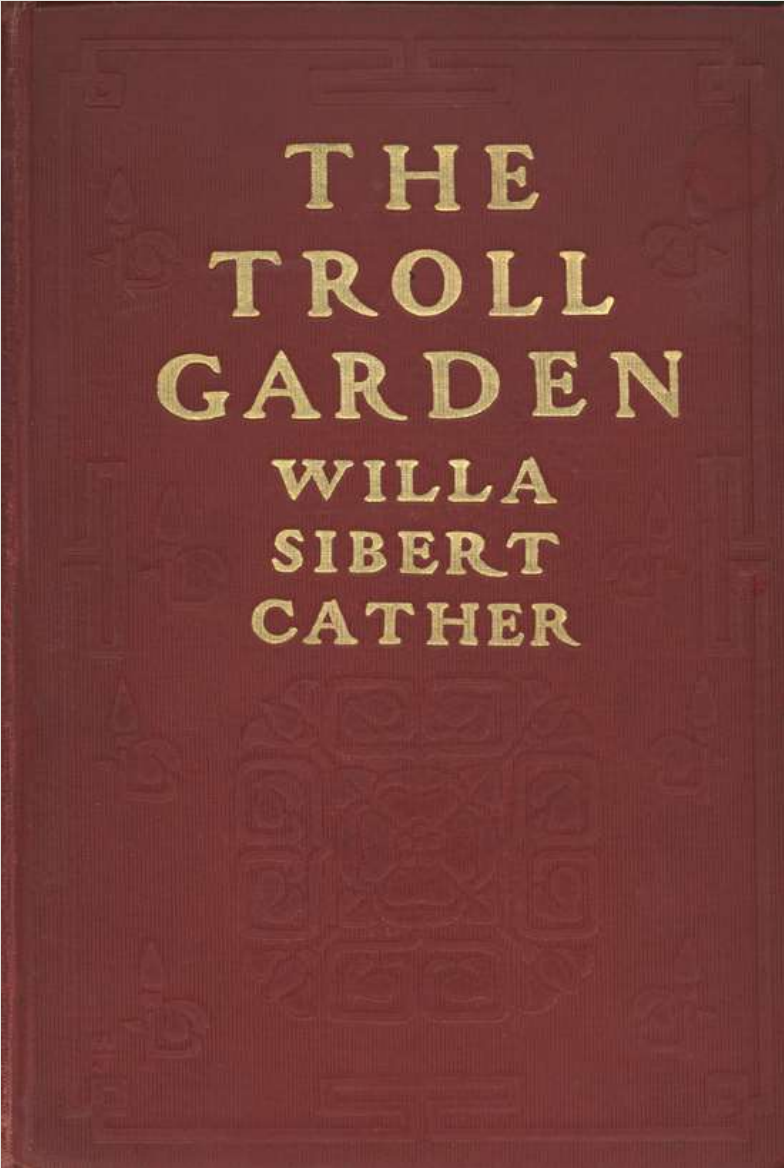
PITTSBURGH BOYS CAUGHT IN MILWAUKEE
FOR ROBBERY OF THE DENNY ESTATE SAFE.



HAROLD ORR.

JAMES J. WILSON.

In 1902, Pittsburgh papers were filled with news about how two young men, Harold Orr and James J. Wilson, had robbed the Denny estate and fled to Chicago with the money. One newspaper reported that “Millionaires could not have spent their money with more reckless extravagance.” The final newspaper article reporting on the theft stated 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.”



THE
TROLL
GARDEN
WILLA
SIBERT
CATHER

“Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament”
was published in *The Troll Garden* (1905),
Cather’s first book of short stories.

THE TROLL GARDEN

BY

WILLA SIBERT CATHER



A FAIRY PALACE, WITH A FAIRY GARDEN;
INSIDE THE TROLLS DWELL, WORKING AT
THEIR MAGIC FORGES, MAKING AND MAKING ALWAYS
THINGS RARE AND STRANGE CHARLES KINGSLEY

*"We must not look at Goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits;
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?"*

GOBLIN MARKET.

The collection featured two opening quotations, or epigraphs: one describes the wonders of art, and the other describes its dangers.

PAUL'S CASE

A STUDY IN TEMPERAMENT

BY

WILLA SIBERT CATHER*



It was Paul's afternoon to appear before the faculty of the Pittsburg High School to account for his various misdemeanors. He had been suspended a week ago, and his father had called at the principal's office and confessed his perplexity about his son. Paul entered the faculty room, suave and smiling. His clothes were a trifle outgrown, and the tan velvet on the collar of his open overcoat was frayed and worn; but, for all that, there was something of the dandy about him, and he wore an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his buttonhole. This latter adornment the faculty somehow felt was not properly significant of the contrite spirit befitting a boy under the ban of suspension.

Paul was tall for his age and very thin, with high, cramped shoulders, and a narrow chest. His eyes were remarkable for a certain hysterical brilliancy, and he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy. The pupils were abnormally large, as though he were addicted to belladonna, but there was a glassy glitter about them which that drug does not produce.

When questioned by the principal as to why he was there, Paul stated, politely enough, that he wanted to come back to school. This was a lie, but Paul was quite accustomed to lying—found it, indeed, indispensable for overcoming friction. His teachers were asked to state their respective charges, which they did with such a rancor and aggrievedness as evinced that this was not an usual case. Disorder and len-

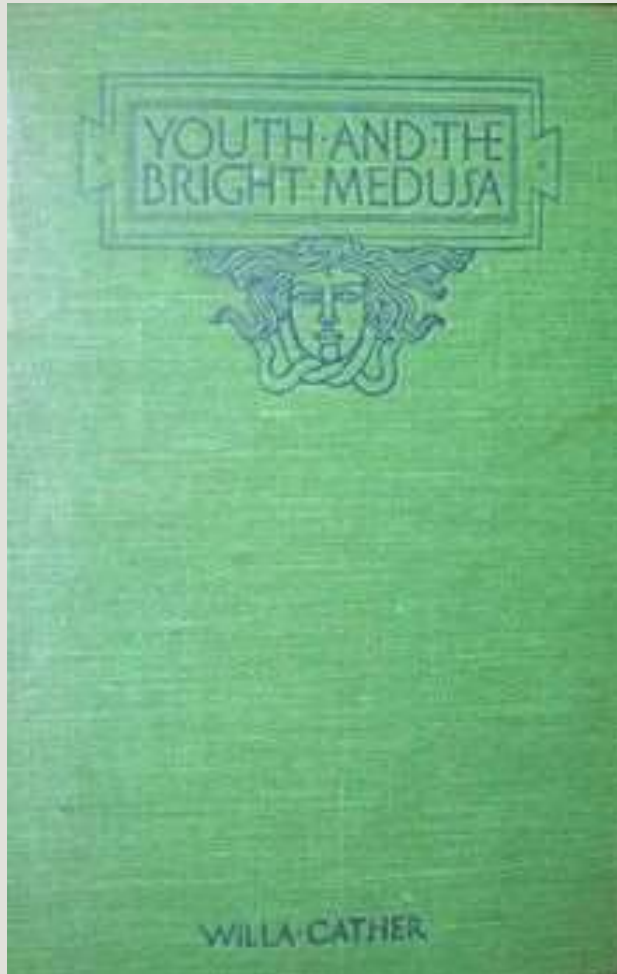
ience were among the offenses named, yet each of his instructors felt that it was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble, which lay in a sort of hysterically defiant manner of the boy's; in the contempt which they all knew he felt for them, and which he seemingly made not the least effort to conceal. Once, when he had been making a synopsis of a paragraph at the blackboard, his English teacher had stepped to his side and attempted to guide his hand. Paul had started back with a shudder, and thrust his hands violently behind him. 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. In one way and another he had made all his teachers, men and women alike, conscious of the same feeling of physical aversion.

His teachers felt, this afternoon, that his whole attitude was symbolized by his shrug and his flippantly red carnation flower, and they fell upon him without mercy. He stood through it, smiling, his pale lips parted over his white teeth. (His lips were continually twitching, and he had a habit of raising his eyebrows that was contemptuous and irritating to the last degree.) Older boys than Paul had broken down and shed tears under that baptism of fire, but his set smile did not once desert him, and his only sign of discomfort was the nervous trembling of the fingers that toyed with the buttons of his overcoat, and an occasional jerking of the other hand that held his hat. Paul was always smiling, always glancing about him, seeming to feel that people might be watching him and trying to detect something. This conscious expression, since it was as far as possible from boyish mirthfulness, was

* Author of "The Troll Garden," a book of short stories, in which this is defined.

In the time period, it was common for stories to be published in magazines first, and then in books.

“Paul’s Case” was an exception, being published in *McClure’s Magazine* in May 1905, after it was published in *The Troll Garden*.



“Paul’s Case” was also included in a slightly revised version in Cather’s later collection of stories, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, published in 1920.

The story has remained one of Cather’s most anthologized and most popular stories.



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