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Doomed for Life: Modernist Representations of Male Homosexuality in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands"[402]

Rodrigo Vega Ochoa[403]

Abstract:

This paper explores the personality traits and social circumstances of two gay male literary characters in the context of US small towns of early 20th century. These are Paul and Wing, protagonists of Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case" (1905) and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" (1916), respectively. Their unhappiness stems from the homophobic beliefs and behaviors that their respective communities hold and exert. In the case of Paul, he learns to survive by hating others back, thus viciously increasing the contempt that others feel for him. His perceived arrogance precludes him from making meaningful connections with other individuals, and, thus, he tends to live immersed in his imagination to escape a reality where he does not seem to stand a chance. In contrast, Wing holds deep feelings of tenderness for other people, but he lives in constant fear of himself, ashamed of his identity and desires, trying to stay hidden from civilization despite his genuine longing for company. I contend that both writers present the harrowing living conditions that their homosexual characters must endure, and how the absence of hope and social understanding influence the development of their personalities and self-esteem to the point of misery, isolation, and self-destruction. I discuss how both short stories demonstrate the increasing Modernist sensitivity toward what was perceived as 'outside the norm' in the early decades of the 20th century, even

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though homosexuality remained a taboo subject that, for the most part, could only be suggested through symbols rather than explicitly named.

Keywords: Willa Cather; Sherwood Anderson; Homosexuality; Homophobia; Modernism; Short story

1. Introduction

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Modernism as a "self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression."[404] This artistic and cultural movement that emerged at the turn of the 20th century was, by no means, homogeneous. But what unified all Modernist authors was the shared venture to break with literary tradition. Quintessential Modernist Virginia Woolf asserted that authors must "attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests them and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist."[405] Modernism advocated for deeply personal, subjective, unique perceptions of reality so that its representation in fiction would purportedly become more truthful than what literary conventions had prescribed in the previous century. And, among the multiple ways in which Modernism accomplished this self-appointed endeavor, there was an attempt to expand the variety of human voices and perspectives that could be included in literature, namely through the addition of LGBTQ+ characters.

Modernism was an eclectic movement. Not every Modernist author was concerned with further explorations of gender and sexuality. There were plenty of authors —Ezra Pound among them— "whose conceptions of creativity seemed to promote manly virility and emotional hardness."[406] However, the beginning of the Modernist period coincided with the first systematized enquiry about human sexuality, which was conducted by Sigmund Freud. Although some of his perspectives are considered outdated as of today, it is undeniable that, in terms of sexuality,

[404] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "Modernism."
[405] Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 161.
[406] Peter Nagy, "The Woman in the Man," 776.

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psychoanalytic theory "appeared to promise a new plurality of possible classifications."[407] Therefore, the wide acceptance of Freud's works in the 1900s and 1910s may have played a significant part in the emergence of literary authors who decided to put non-heterosexual individuals front and center of their stories. As is widely known, Virginia Woolf defied the invisibility of non-normative sexualities in her work. But she was not the only one nor the first. Before her, American Modernists Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson brought sensitive awareness to these issues, opening a window into the lives of those who had remained —and still would have to remain for decades— on the very margins of society due to their non-compliance with the rigid heteronormative conventions of their environment.

This paper examines Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" (1905, 1920) and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" (1916), which would later be included into his celebrated story cycle Winesburg, Ohio (1919). "Paul's Case" never explicitly states that its protagonist Paul is a homosexual. But it is strongly hinted at "through a distinct emotional aura and verbal mood […] reflect[ing] both the difficulty of writing about homosexuality in 1905 and Cather's own preference for insinuation and implication."[408] Thus, Cather takes advantage of the Modernist tendency to employ symbolism for the purpose of shedding some light into what had to remain in obscurity. Anderson also applies symbolism in "Hands," but goes further into explicit reference about the homosexual feelings of its protagonist Wing while showing a substantial degree of empathy and compassion that proves how he "refused the authorial aggression toward non-normative masculinity displayed by some of his contemporaries."[409] Nonetheless, both works are pessimistic and brutal in the portrayal of the harrowing social conditions that their male homosexual protagonists must endure due to their perceived queerness—understood both through its association to their non-normative sexualities and gender roles, as well as through the more general meaning of 'strangeness' or 'oddity'—.

[407] Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, eds. "Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theories," 245.
[408] Claude J. Summers, "A Losing Game in the End," 108.
[409] Nagy, 776.

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In this essay, I explore the personality traits and social circumstances of the protagonists of Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands." The lives of these two homosexual males reflect a time and place in the early twentieth-century Middle America that could not be more ill-suited to their emotional well-being and safety. Teenager Paul and the middle-aged Wing may be considered almost opposites to one another in terms of psyche and behavior —Paul is defiant and individualist, Wing is shy and tender—, but both men's temperaments and attitudes are marked and determined by the hostile society that they belong to. This unmerciful environment is key to understanding their inability to legitimize themselves and their sexuality. The following section will explain that this circumstance eventually results in their doomed destiny as miserable outcasts who cannot find a chance at happiness.

2. "Paul's Case"

Unlike the literary tradition of the 19th century *Bildungsroman*—fictional narratives about the physical, intellectual, and emotional growth and development of an individual—Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" could be considered its antithesis, evidencing the author's Modernist tendency of breaking with the past. This short story provides an account in which immature behavior is perpetrated, and adulthood is never reached. Paul does not grow or learn to become a responsible individual, to the incomprehension of the society that surrounds him: "The protagonist, the title implies, is a fitting subject for a psychological or criminal case history."[410] He lies, cheats, steals, never wants to make an effort, and shows contempt and depreciation toward his school, his teachers, his father, and his neighborhood. However, it would be an oversimplification to hold Paul fully accountable for his infantile attitudes. Simply "reading Paul as a boyish character seems insensitive to the history of gay representation. […] In light of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet, we should not ignore the 'gay hints' in Cather's story."[411] "Paul's Case" never addresses Paul's homosexuality explicitly. This

[410] Summers, 109.
[411] Chung-Hao Ku, "A Boy Under the Ban of Suspension," 71.

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went beyond the limits of what was deemed acceptable in literature. But it is strongly suggested all throughout the story. From the very first paragraphs, Cather is able to trace the interrelationship between Paul's homosexuality, the prejudice that he awakens in others and his despise of everything that surrounds him. The story begins with Paul's teachers making a subjective conflation between his choice to wear a carnation —which, as it will be later argued, represents his sexuality— and his behavioral shortcomings as a pupil. This is exemplified in how they "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."[412] It looks like they are equating Paul's personal choice of accessory with a provoking, harmful attitude on his part. This leads to inferring that, from the very beginning, Paul does not have a chance at acquittal. He might be already predetermined to be perceived in a certain negative manner, infused with subjectivity and bias. In turn, this predisposition may be what makes Paul resort to the individualism, lack of empathy, and misanthropy that he showcases throughout the story. He behaves unpleasantly because his own nature is instinctively rejected by others. His apparent defiance is even the way through which he has learnt to survive.

As Paul is facing a reprimand executed by all the schoolteachers assembled, "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."[413] This description is quite telling. The use of the adjectives 'hysterical' and 'theatrical' already suggests some sort of womanly behavior, if the rigid gender conventions of the time are to be considered in combination with Cather's predilection for verbal hints, as "she was able to convey a sense of this previously unmentionable dimension of her protagonist's inner being without violating any of the literary taboos of her time."[414] Besides, the mention of 'peculiarly offensive in a boy' can work in two separate ways that are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. The reference to 'boy' could be understood as opposed to 'grown-up,' considering that Paul's immature attitude is what is being openly

[412] Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," 469.
[413] Cather, 468.
[414] Larry Rubin, "The Homosexual Motif," 131.

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denounced by his teachers, as "disorder and impertinence were among the offences named."[415]

However, it should be noted that the use of 'boy' can be understood in terms of gender, as opposed to 'girl.' Therefore, the fact that Paul's use of his own gaze results particularly offensive in a boy —in his teachers' perception— can be thought of as their repudiation of anything that differs from the prescribed gender roles. In other words, effeminacy in a man seems to be regarded as something that instinctively ignites hate and disgust. It is just another example that can be compared to their irrational contempt for his carnation. As Claude J. Summers asserts, "the teachers are not unkind by nature, but they lack the imagination to understand sympathetically Paul's temperament and consequently allow themselves to be goaded into actions that contradict their own values."[416] They cannot stand the way in which he seems to defy them with his eyes at a moment in which he should be supposed to show humility, even if it were only a conscious strategy on his part so as not to be suspended from the school. However, Paul seems to have no interest whatsoever in keeping appearances for his own sake, given that "older boys than Paul had broken down and shed tears under that ordeal, but his set smile did not once desert him. […] This conscious expression, since it was as far as possible from boyish mirthfulness, was usually attributed to insolence or 'smartness'."[417]

Paul's "defensively contemptuous response to life"[418] does not spark any attempt at sympathy on the part of his father or his teachers, who are precisely the figures that are supposed to help him grow into an emotionally integrated individual. The only instance in the whole story in which they try to understand him is when his art teacher mentions to the others the following: "I don't really believe that smile of his comes altogether from insolence; there's something sort of haunted about it. […] There is something wrong about the fellow."[419] The fact that this is mentioned by the art

[415] *Ibid.*
[416] Summers, 111.
[417] Cather, 469.
[418] Summers, 109.
[419] Cather, 470.

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teacher instead of by someone from any other academic discipline is not fortuitous. It is commonly believed that artistic disciplines require a certain amount of intuitive wisdom. It is possible that his art teacher notices that what lies beneath Paul's rocky surface is pain and suffering. However, his concern does not go beyond that remark. In connection with the matter of the arts, it should be noted that the only place that Paul does not loathe in his hometown is the theater where he works as an usher. He delights in the flashy atmosphere of fantasy that he finds there: "This was Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurement of a secret love. The moment he inhaled the gassy, painty, dusty odour behind the scenes, he breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant things."[420] The world of the performing arts consists of making believe and creating fictions, and this is something that matches his personality.

Paul is "able to alter mundane reality by fantasizing more exciting, romantic alternatives."[421] He creates fictions and dreams in his head to survive the reality that he abhors. The problem that this entails is that he deludes himself into believing that the 'theater people' love and admire him when that is not the case. In fact, they feel contempt and laugh at him. "They laughed rather bitterly at having stirred the boy to such fervid and florid inventions. They agreed with the faculty and with his father, that Paul's was a bad case."[422] It seems that Paul cannot find a single ally even in a place — the theater— where he might have had a better chance at acceptance.

As previously suggested, Paul's relationship with his father is a failed one. There is no productive communication between them. His father is incapable of legitimizing the natural interests of his son, which include the theater, music, and dressing up. In fact, Paul literally tries to hide all this from him. This physical action works as a symbol for the underlying problem. "The fact that Paul feels it necessary to keep his bottle of violet water carefully hidden from his father could almost symbolize his sense of

[420] Cather, 477.
[421] Summers, 112.
[422] Cather, 479.

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alienation from a society that has only contempt for what it considers effeminacy in a young man."[423]

The only path that his father can conceive for Paul is the normative one, and he wants Paul to follow the steps of their neighbor, a "young man who was daily held up to Paul as a model, and after whom it was his father's dearest hope that he would pattern."[424] This neighbor is described as someone who had been 'dissipated' in the past but who, through hard work, has been able to prosper. The narrator specifies that for this man to change his attitude, "he had taken his chief's advice, oft reiterated to his employees, and at twenty-one had married the first woman whom he could persuade to share his fortunes." This reveals how the fact of settling down through the institution of heterosexual marriage appears to be socially regarded as a facilitating factor for reaching maturity. This example contributes to showing that what would be expected of Paul would be contrary to his innates desires and sexual identity. However, Paul's father may have a point regarding Paul's attitude to labor. In his rejection of ordinary existence as a survival mechanism, Paul also ignores the fact that one must be disciplined and persevere to attain wealth. His childish beliefs fall in line with Ku's assertion that "Paul seems to suffer from arrested development."[425] He is oblivious to the aspect of reality that consists of making a compromise to get the benefits. He wants a life of luxury but is unwilling to put in the work. He prefers to steal instead.

The second part of the story sees Paul travel by himself to New York after having stolen thousands of dollars from his workplace in his hometown. "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. How astonishingly easy it had all been; here he was, the thing done."[426] He uses the money to keep constructing the delusion of being a wealthy, sophisticated young man. He spends it, "with endless reconsidering and great care,"[427] on luxury goods and premium services, including his stay at the Waldorf-Astoria

[423] Rubin, 119.
[424] Cather, 475.
[425] Ku, 82.
[426] Cather, 482.
[427] Cather, 480.

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hotel. This escape provides Paul with a sense of relief and freedom that he had never experienced, and he is able to resolve that he will never come back to his hometown, as "he realized well enough that he had always been tormented by fear, a sort of apprehensive dread that, of late years, […] had been pulling the muscles of his body tighter and tighter."[428] This reflection leads the reader to confirm that remark that his art teacher made in his defense. On the inside, Paul has had to integrate a state of constant fear into his everyday reality. And he has learnt to defend himself in the only way in which he knew how, and without any external help. Summers points out that Paul's dread toward his environment explains "his immersion in art at the expense of life."[429] He has spent his whole life escaping into a made-up world inside his head so as to shelter himself. Now, he has finally turned this escape into a physical one. Nonetheless, one of his problems is that he does not know how to include other people in his world. He enjoys the luxuries of New York entirely by himself, and the only time in which he meets someone else —another young man—, it does not end well. Although left unexplained, there are enough hints that lead "to conjecture that Paul wanted something from his companion that the latter was unprepared to give."[430] But even if this fallout were not due to a sexual misunderstanding, it seems clear that Paul is neither able to make meaningful connections with other human beings nor to function in interpersonal relationships. There is only room for one in his world. This protects him from the mistreatment that he has received from others just for being who he is. However, his escape also deprives him of evolving in real life.

When Paul reads in the newspaper that he has been exposed to a thief, and that his father is coming to New York to bring him back, he gets a reality check that sinks him into a depression that also manifests through physical symptoms: "He rose and moved about with a painful effort, succumbing now and again to attacks of nausea. It was the old depression exaggerated."[431] Going back home does not merely entail the return of his old dread and disdain for his environment. Neither does it only imply going back to

[428] Cather, 481.
[429] Summers, 109.
[430] Rubin, 130.
[431] Cather, 487.

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survival mode against the contempt that he knows he rouses in everyone else. It also results in facing the shameful consequences of the crime that he has committed. Paul cannot take responsibility for his actions. For him to take responsibility, he would need to possess authentic self-esteem that he lacks, especially considering his eventual self-destruction. His selfishness and recklessness may be seen as the result of his absence of true self-validation. And the lack of this quality has been inevitably determined by his immediate context. His inability to legalize himself might be "the result of the homophobia that pervades society and that he himself internalizes."[432] Thus, his nature cannot prosper when his nurturing has already determined that he does not stand a chance.

The values he lacks should have been taught to him by treating him compassionately, but all he ever received was the opposite. Due to that, at the prospect of returning home, Paul knows that there is no acceptable place for him. He cannot become the adult that society tells him he must be, and he has not been able to acquire the values of effort and determination that would have made him self-sufficient. Consequently, he sees no way out. Rather than having to live in the reality he is allowed, he will leave this world. Before committing suicide by jumping in front of a train, "Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up."[433] The ending circles back to the beginning of the story. The flower that he buries can be understood as a representation of his non-normative sexuality, as a symbol for his own salient identity, the identity that his teachers instinctively rejected. Paul buries his own sexuality before bringing his own life to an end. Cather's pessimistic portrayal of a young gay man does not offer any hope for Paul, but the short story suggests that the root of Paul's self-destructive behavior does not originally come from any inherent trait of his. Instead,, it has been fueled by the dehumanizing treatment of the homophobic community that he was a part of. Subsequently, I will analyze male homosexuality in Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" to offer another reading about modernist representations of male homosexuality.

[432] Summers, 110.
[433] Cather, 488.

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3. "Hands"

As mentioned before, the protagonist of Anderson's "Hands" is Wing Biddlebaum, a middle-aged man who lives on the margins of Winesburg, Ohio, both literally —in an adjacent field— and metaphorically, seeing as he, "forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years."[434] Wing is an outsider who feels alienated from his community. The fact that he protects himself by living in seclusion does not prevent him from experiencing tremendous amounts of anxiety and fear, which are embedded in his psyche. The very first paragraph of the story already hints at the reasons that lie behind Wing's seemingly irrational conduct. As a group of teenagers pass through his house, one of them yells to him: "Comb your hair, it's falling into your eyes,"[435] even though Wing is completely bald. The reason they yell that to him is because his "nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks."[436] In other words, Wing is mocked and bullied by other townies for his effeminate mannerisms, out of which the way that he moves and uses his hands is the most evident one: "In the context of Winesburg, Ohio, queerness appears first and foremost as the incapability of 'fitting in' […] The failure to fit in is projected upon the character's hands, which seem to have a tendency of running out of control."[437]

Wing's hands are a symbol for his sexual identity at a time in which homosexuality and non-adherence to the prescribed gender roles were considered sodomy and a sin. His hands are the most telling part of the identity that he desperately tries to maintain hidden. This is why he always tries to conceal and hide his hands in his pockets, an action that could function as a symbol for him repressing and denying both his homosexuality and his naturally feminine physicality: "The hands alarmed their

[434] Anderson, "Hands," 9.
[435] *Ibid.*
[436] *Ibid.*
[437] Ruth Mayer, "Periodically Queer," 457, 458.

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owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields."[438] The fact that Wing negatively compares his own salient hands to the ordinary-looking ones of other men suggests his own shame and sense of inadequacy, as if he were an inferior, defective man. Therefore, he wishes he could keep his hands quiet and under control, and he lives in a constant fight against that part of himself, trying to conceal it both metaphorically and physically.

Wing only seems to open up, mildly, when he is visited by George Willard, a handsome young man with aspirations of becoming a journalist. They form an unlikely bond that benefits both. When accompanied by George, Wing "lost something of his timidity, and his shadowy personality […] came forth to look at the world."[439] In turn, George's natural curiosity draws him to Wing, who "for twenty years had been the town's mystery."[440] As Peter Nagy asserts, "George enables Wing to express dormant aspects of himself."[441] The young man awakens in Wing a desire for meaningful connection that he normally forces himself to repress, and which also manifests in how he uses his hands. Wing "talked much with his hands. The slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression."[442]

Thus, George's presence may allow Wing to feel more comfortable in his own skin, and this is illustrated by how he allows himself to liberate his hands in their interactions. Wing genuinely acts toward George like a spiritual guide or mentor. He encourages young George to be himself and follow his dreams. But, as Wing gets carried away with the excitement of their conversation, he discovers himself attempting to caress George's face and immediately stops, horrified of himself. He fears his own nature, and of making it evident to other people: "With a convulsive movement of his body, Wing Biddlebaum sprang to his feet and thrust his hands deep into his trousers

[438] Anderson, 11.
[439] Anderson, 10.
[440] *Ibid.*
[441] Nagy, 788.
[442] Anderson, 10.

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pockets. Tears came to his eyes. 'I must be getting along home. I can talk no more with you,' he said nervously."[443] Wing's sense of freedom does not last because his traumatic past always comes back to haunt him. To understand Wing's predicament, it is crucial to consider his life twenty years prior to the events depicted above. His name was not Wing Biddlebaum, but Adolph Myers, and he was a schoolteacher in a small town in Pennsylvania. He was admired and respected in his profession, which gave him a purpose in life to which he genuinely felt inclined. Being an instructor and mentor to younger men was in his nature, and his hands were an instrument for encouragement, a purely innocent instrument: "Under the caress of his hands, doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys, and they began also to dream."[444] However, there came a moment in which Adolph's attitudes toward the boys began to be misinterpreted. This could conceivably have come to happen due to the pervasive homophobia at the time. Adolph's soft, feminine manners had never gone unnoticed by the boys' parents, but when a pupil falsely accuses Adolph of inappropriate touching, the "hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men's minds concerning Adolph Myers were galvanized into beliefs."[445] Adolph was falsely accused of pedophilia because of a kid's slander, and his effeminate manners were the only aspect that was considered as evidence. Especially in that temporal context, ignorant beliefs made many people equate homosexuality with pedophilia, as both were taboo topics that belonged to the cluster of deviant behavior. This stereotyped, bigoted connection has existed for ages:

> Attempts to claim that members of the LGBTQ+ community pose a danger to children are nothing new, and such narratives have resurfaced in different geographies for decades. These claims range from attempting to conflate homosexuality with child abuse to those implying children can be manipulated into becoming queer through exposure to the LGBTQ+ community.[446]

Due to this misguided and ultimately false association, Adolph had to endure persecution, physical abuse, and torture at the hands of a pack of fathers while they

[443] Anderson, 12.
[444] *Ibid.*
[445] Anderson, 13.
[446] Aoife Gallagher and Tim Squirrel, "The 'Groomer' Slur."

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yelled the following: "I'll teach you to put your hands on my boy, you beast."[447] Then, he was literally forced to move out and disappear from Pennsylvania. This is when he arrived in Winesburg and changed his name. All these past traumatic events make Wing wallow "in his own sense of marginality […] This past stigmatization has become an integral part of Biddlebaum's self-perception."[448] Wing cannot help feeling consumed by shame, even if he never did anything of what he was accused.

Back to the present, Wing's inability to legalize his homosexual desire is connected to the unspeakable horror he had to endure in the past: "He was but forty but looked sixty-five […] [and] had been ill for a year after the experience in Pennsylvania."[449] Thus, his identity becomes inevitably intertwined with trauma, shame, and repression of the self. Additionally, he does not have the tools to understand the matter: "Although he did not understand what had happened he felt that the hands must be to blame. Again and again the fathers of the boys had talked of the hands."[450] In the end, Wing perceives his own hands as instruments of sin. It is likely that he does not even understand the distinction between homosexuality and pedophilia. He came to associate one with the other because of the traumatic attack that he suffered. This is why he feels afraid of following his impulse and touching George's face.

When he engages with George, he replicates his former role as a teacher, and then he remembers that he had to leave behind and repress that part of his identity. As his terrible past experience has come to be inextricably linked to his natural desire for men, he fears touching one, even if it is not on sexual terms: "Wing suffers from a diminished capacity for emotionally open relations with other men, from an inability to express his own pain, loneliness, and need to be comforted."[451] He has internalized homophobia. He is ashamed of himself for being someone who is considered a deviant abomination by most of society. At the end of the story, the narrator alludes to the resemblance that Wing, secluded back into loneliness, holds with the figure of a Catholic

[447] Anderson, 13.
[448] Mayer, 457, 458.
[449] Anderson, 13, 14.
[450] Anderson, 14.
[451] Nagy, 788.

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priest going through his rosary. Wing "looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church. The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary."[452] In turn, this reference functions as another symbol can be associated with the celibacy and lack of intimate companionship that the Catholic church imposes on its clergymen, which Wing also seems doomed to endure for the rest of his life.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has explored the character features and social conditions of two gay men in the context of early 20th century Middle America. While the two characters differ significantly in terms of personality, their reactions and in how they deal with their lives, they are both subjected to the judgment, prejudice, and mistreatment of an unforgiving environment that not only does not accept them for their homosexuality, but also does not allow them to accept it themselves. Paul senses the disgust he provokes in others. In return, he goes through life with an unpleasant and defiant attitude that protects him from other people, but also prevents him from making sympathetic connections with others. He escapes to his made-up world of luxurious fantasies so that he can avoid the reality that he despises. But ultimately, this is not enough to avoid his feelings of deep fear and utter depression that drive him to commit suicide.

In the case of Wing Biddlebaum, a past traumatic experience rooted upon the ignorance and homophobia of his context forever erases his capacity to engage successfully in interpersonal relationships. As a consequence, he even begins to feel ashamed of his own physicality, an issue manifested in his hands. His loneliness keeps him reasonably safe from further harm, but it also makes him deeply unhappy. He was a man with a gift for bringing out the best in others, but he ends up falsely believing the worst in himself. These fictional portrayals of gay men in a context in which they were associated with sin and crime can be considered a testament to the literary talent and

[452] Anderson, 14.

social consciousness of Modernist authors Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson. Thus, both artists can be seen as agents of the new social sensibilities that were beginning to scratch the surface during the first two decades of the 20th century.

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