

Pathology of Body Politics: Bio-Power in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case"

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Abstract

Willa Cather's 1905 short story "Paul's Case" is set at the time when psychological and medical interpretations of human behaviors were still considerably guided by moral or religious discourses. The purpose of this paper is to explicate and explore how the conception of "abnormality" is constructed under the discursive practices of bio-power in "Paul's Case." Michel Foucault's insights into discourse analysis of power/knowledge relations and of bio-power are employed to help navigate the discursive formations of abnormality. The first part of this paper centers on the power of medical gaze as an epistemological gaze. Engrossed in detailed descriptions of Paul's symptoms, Paul's teachers, peers, and even readers of the story undertake the practice of clinical gaze and come up with the diagnosis of Paul's abnormality and illness. The second part analyzes the milieu of why and how Paul's "sexual deviation" is pathologized as well as how Paul's family are driven to rectify, namely, to "normalize" and "docilize" Paul's body through the exercise of bio-power. Embedded in a field of power/knowledge network, bodies are transformed from something physical into something discursive. According to Foucault, "Where there is power, there is resistance."¹ The third part deals with Paul's "technologies of self" which substantiate his resistance: by staying in the concert hall and theater which are regarded as "heterotopias," he flees from the hegemonic network that attempts to subjugate him and normalize him into a governable subject. Paul's decision to leave, to a certain degree, echoes Foucault's concept of "the practice of freedom."

Keywords: "Paul's Case", Michel Foucault, medical gaze, bio-power, discourse analysis, normalization, heterotopia

¹ Michel Foucault. "The Deployment of Sexuality." *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p. 95.