

Roupenian's "Cat Person": Gender, Sexuality, and Power

In Kristen Roupenian's short story "Cat Person," a 20-year-old college sophomore named Margo strikes up a relationship with a 34-year-old man named Robert, who she meets while working at a movie theater concession counter. What starts out as mere flirtation to make an otherwise boring job more amusing eventually progresses into a one-time sexual encounter. What makes the story especially relatable is that narrator privies the reader to Margo's internal dialogue, which gives us insight and understanding not only into her actions, but also into the power dynamics between her and Robert. The reader is not granted the same access into Robert's thoughts and reasonings. Instead, we are forced to guess and to speculate alongside Margo as to why he does certain things and what he is feeling.

As Margo and Robert's date continues, the power seemingly rests with Robert, if only because Margo is battling her own insecurities. From questioning whether or not he is upset with her for not taking their date seriously enough to wondering if her lack of enthusiasm for the movie he chose hurt his feelings to worrying about ordering a drink that he would make fun of, Margo is in a constant state of uncertainty. However, as Margo begins to figure out Robert—his fragile ego and insecurities—the power dynamic begins to shift. "She was starting to think that she understood him—how sensitive he was, how easily he could be wounded—and that made her feel closer to him, and also powerful, because once she knew how to hurt him she also knew how he could be soothed." What's interesting is that she turns that power on its ear, using it not to dominate him, but to appease him. Having figured out his need to be effectual and elevated, she becomes self-deprecating, shining a deliberate light on her own fears of inadequacy. The effect, the narrator notes, is "palpable and immediate, and

[Margo] felt as if she were petting a large, skittish animal, like a horse or a bear, skillfully coaxing it to eat from her hand.”

Eventually, this psychological maneuvering leads to Margo’s sexual arousal. In this sense the mental is a precursor to the physical. Having solved the puzzle of what makes Robert tick, she now wonders what sex with Robert would be like. She’s not necessarily turned on by his physical capabilities as he’s already proven himself to be a clumsy kisser. Instead, it is the thought of “how excited he would be, how hungry and eager to impress her” in bed that makes her desirous of him. She, then, becomes the sexual aggressor, straddling him in the car, kissing him until he is erect, and finally suggesting that they go to his house. The reality of sex with Robert does not live up to the fantasy. However, I think the two above-mentioned scenes, both the action and the narration of those actions, offer a poignantly nuanced critique of power as it pertains to gender. From the outside looking in, Margo might appear to be Robert’s conquest. But, in earnest, it is the other way around. Internally, Margo is playing a clever game of chess, observing, speaking, and evolving as her understanding of him deepens. While it appears that Margo is sexually aroused by her attraction to Robert, she is actually aroused by her thoughts and the anticipation they induce. In actuality, Robert’s physical appearance disgusts her and his prowess in bed leaves much to be desired. In the end, Margo forces herself to go through with the liaison almost out of a sense of polite obligation. That is to say, having been the aggressor and pushed for the sexual encounter with him, she simply does not have the heart to back out. Therefore, nearly from start to finish, the power, unbeknownst to the man, belongs exclusively to the woman. Perhaps the story’s ultimate message is that in a patriarchal society where males are lauded as superior beings, the truth is

that any influence—internally or externally, mentally or physically—they are presumed to have has, in fact, been thoroughly filtered through and graciously granted to them by women.

Works Cited

Roupenian, Kristen. "Cat Person." *New Yorker*, 2017, pp. 64-71. <https://web-b-ebshost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=edcb429b-8011-4978-8d91-9516c06fc4e9%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZW9vc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=126508759&db=asn>