

Cardboard Cutout Personality in “Cat Person”

The ending of “Cat Person,” though jarring, was unsurprising. That final moment of utter disconnect and disgust one felt seemed to be the final piece of a long chain of events, yet it’s unclear what led to this feeling, what events seemed to build towards this final moment. On the surface much of it seemed normal, seemed typical and fine. Why then was there such an aura of disconnect between Margot and Robert? Why wasn’t the reader shocked that the piece ended in such a way? Why did it *make sense*? The answer is a tough one to swallow, for the piece did read as normal, it did read as fine and typical. What “Cat Person” is doing then isn’t to show the reader the failings of a specific relationship, but to highlight the modern modes of relating to others as inherently superficial and problematic. By relying almost entirely on immaterial “signifiers of identity,” e.g. likes/dislikes, hobbies, jokes, etc, the text undercuts and reveals how empty those signifiers really are. The disconnect between Margot and Robert is due to their reliance upon these immaterial signifiers of the other’s identity as constitutive of the other; the reliance upon them forces constant self-rationalization to fit these signifiers into an increasingly imaginative portrait of the other.

This can be seen when Margot and Robert first meet. Their interaction starts when Margot makes a joke about Red Vines, and Robert’s choice to buy them. Immediately, their relationship is being built upon the immaterial. Afterall, it wasn’t the Red Vines that connected them (Margot seemed to dislike them) but the joke *behind* the Red Vines. It was in the immaterial behind the material that they found a connection. This is expanded when Margot says how “they built up an elaborate scaffolding of jokes via text,” again emphasizing how this connection was a tenuous and abstract one (Roupenian, par. 8). These jokes were elaborate, complicated, scaffolded, built on sticks and precarious. When there was an attempt to make this

joke material, to enact this scaffolding in person at a 7-Eleven, there were, of course, no Red Vines. The joke had to remain intangible to be possible.

The same can be understood through their subsequent conversation about their cats, Mu Yan and Pita. In these instances, Margot and Robert conversed *through* text *through* the imagined mouths of their pets, inventing scenario and dialogue between their pets (par. 14). They were communicating through the mouths of imagined puppets over a phone – the level of distance could not be greater. When there was an attempt to make this interaction material, to finally enter Robert's home and discover the flesh that supported the imaginative puppets, there were, of course, no cats. The interactions had to remain intangible to be possible.

This consistent play of keeping the relationship grounded upon the immaterial is most noticeable when Margot enters the home of Robert. This is when one should finally leave the realm of text messages and intangibility and finally feel the space the other lives in, yet there is no sense of connection. The scene begins with Margot rubbing Robert's back at the door, a move of pure physical connection, that "seemed to fluster him even more" (par. 64). This simple gesture, one easily read as one of compassion, is misunderstood and misinterpreted. Any effort to make their connection "material" or physical leads to disconnect.

When Margot enters the house, she notes "two large, full bookcases, a shelf of vinyl records, a collection of board games, and a lot of art—or, at least, posters that had been hung in frames, instead of being tacked or taped to the wall" (par. 66). There are two really notable items in this list: the vinyl's and the posters. The "art" here is specifically qualified as actually "posters that had been hung in frames;" what this qualification does is imply a level of superficiality to the artwork. Canvas is material, concrete – but posters? They are copies of copies, symbolic without substance, simply facades of artwork, and Margot's pulling back on calling them "art" is

indicative of the superficiality of such signifiers. Interestingly, the same can be seen with the vinyls. Whereas posters are about as insubstantial as art can get, vinyls are a true concrete and material signifier, more so than an .mp3 or audio file – yet that is exactly how Robert plays music. Margot notes how he “kneeled down and opened his laptop, an action that confused her, until she understood that he was putting on music” (par. 69). Just as with the Red Vines, and just as with the Cats, this material signifier of the vinyl couldn’t be made concrete – they had to remain intangible in order to retain their plasticity in being molded to Margot’s imaginative projection of who Robert was.

Upon entering the house, the objects Margot sees “resolved into familiarity,” and “the fact that Robert’s house gave evidence of his having interests that she shared, if only in their broadest categories—art, games, books, music—struck her as a reassuring endorsement of her choice” (pars. 66-67). Here, Margot is doing what has been done throughout the entirety of hers and Robert’s relationship: scanning the surface of superficial signifiers and reading them as indicative of Robert’s inner personality, “resolving” them into something familiar. Books, art, games, and music are not signifiers of who someone is – *everyone* enjoys those things to some degree, yet Margot takes them as reassurance of her good choices. She has no true insight into what the signifiers signify, she has no idea who Robert truly *is* behind these little placards of personality, and so must constantly shape them to fit into her imagined projection of Robert. Yet she even recognizes how flimsy this projection is, for mere moments later she “had the brief wild idea that maybe this was not a room at all but a trap meant to lure her into the false belief that Robert was a normal person, *a person like her*” (emphasis added) (par. 68). She knows that these things, these signifiers and items, are empty and nonindicative – she reads them as familiar, she intuitively feels them as showing Robert is like her, yet there is a lurking fear that he *isn’t* like her, that

these signifiers aren't relatable to who Robert truly is. Yet before this thought can be expanded, "he was kissing her, throwing her bag and their coats on the couch and ushering her into the bedroom, groping her ass and pawing at her chest" (par. 68). The moment of reflection is run over; one has a bad feeling – the reader knows this won't go well. After Margot reflected on how little these signifiers truly revealed about Robert, he starts to attempt physical intimacy, animalistically begins "pawing" and "groping" at her – like Margot, one feels they are not totally aware of what Robert will do next, since one doesn't really know who Robert is.

If the outer room Margot scans can be understood as Robert's outer personality, as a display case for what she reads as "him," then the inner room can be read as that which is truly him. His inner room "didn't have a bed frame, just a mattress and a box spring on the floor. There was a bottle of whiskey on his dresser...;" in comparison to the outer room, all one gets from his inner room is a bed and a bottle (par. 69). Which, coincidentally, are the only two things Margot does with Robert in real life: drink with him and sleep with him. Clearly then one can see how this is being framed for the reader: Margot's outer projections of signifiers, the outer room of posters and items, are not indicative of who Robert truly is, and have a trace of fear behind their veneers. She only immaterially knows Robert through scaffolds of signifiers; she only knows him physically through alcohol and sex. No wonder, then, that their sexual encounter is so strangely disconnected.

Throughout this incredibly physical form of connection, both Margot and Robert distance themselves from their actions, and end up maintaining their fantastical projections of the other even during sex. Just as Margot uses the whiskey to "bludgeon her resistance into submission," she uses her imagination to distance herself from the act that is supposed to bring her and Robert together (par. 72). Throughout their sex she was "carried away by a fantasy of ... pure ego," and

only started getting into it when she “imagined his arousal” (par. 76). In the end, her imagination couldn’t negate the reality around her, and the encounter became distasteful. Her rationalization of who Robert was fell apart when her projections couldn’t suffice any longer. Robert did the same, treating her as if she were “a prop for the movie that was playing in his head” (par. 87). He was even narrating his movie, saying “You make my dick so hard” every time he lost his erection (par. 87). That example is as clear as it gets: Robert was narrating *over* reality, supplanting the real with his own projections of it. This was the methodology of their entire relationship: a constant reliance upon empty signifiers (jokes, posters, words) as truly indicative of the other, and a constant rationalization of those signifiers into an imagined projection of who the other was; in moments of physical intimacy where the projections failed to sustain themselves (rubbing his back and sex) there was only disconnect.

Looking at the scene after sex, it makes sense. There is only one moment in the piece where there is a genuine insight into the other, and it’s when Robert “out of nowhere... started talking about his feelings for her” (par. 92). His feelings, as they were, consisted of just his projections, of a “secret drama [that] had played out in his head” when they were apart. Afterall, that is all they had of each other: secret dramas in their own heads. As Margot notes, “you could have asked me about a lot of things,” highlighting the key absence of the relationship: actual knowledge of the other person (par. 92). She only asks him his age *after* they have sex – something as basic as age is never even mentioned in their “relationship” prior to sex. The signifiers spoke for themselves, they sustained their own image – no further insight was necessary. There were constant scaffolds holding up these imaginative ideas of who the other was, a wonderfully chimaeric view of the other sustained through self-deception and rationalization. When there was a moment of true connection, true insight into the “feelings” of

the other, it happened after sex, *after* physical intimacy, and led to only a “black, hateful aura” (par. 92). Once all the signifiers of the other’s identity come crashing down, revealed to be hollow and empty, and once the physical connection/attraction is recognized as what it truly was, a “self-disgust and a humiliation that was a kind of perverse cousin to arousal,” Margot realizes that her true feelings towards Robert the man, not Robert the imagined man, are feelings of hate (par. 86). She really had no idea who he was – afterall, what did that Dolphin emoji even mean (par.110)?

The dolphin was a final nod saying, “you have no idea who this man is.” It’s an undecipherable image, a representation of all other signifiers relied upon in the piece rolled into one character. A dolphin, a Holocaust movie, Red Vines, an unused vinyl, a non-existent cat: all are equally meaningless in their emptiness. Perhaps the title of the piece could have been “Dolphin Person,” or “Red Vine Person;” these are equally insignificant signifiers. Though, it is the tangibility of the cat that makes it so potent when absent; it is the fact that there was a possibility of a living, breathing manifested sign of who Robert was that was never encountered. If jokes are immaterial signifiers, then a cat is the *most* material signifier; but like the vinyl seen but never played, the cat was discussed but never shown – it was condemned to remain an empty signifier.

It is no accident this piece was mediated through text conversations, no mistake that the author would sometimes include phrases like, “she said, ‘Lol r u serious,’” phrases that blur the line between spoken speech and written text (par. 30). Relationships mediated through a phone consist of only signifiers; dating websites group people by interests like books, Holocaust movies, Red Vines, or vinyls; online conversations necessitate scaffolding, joke building, constant reliance upon the imaginative projection to function. “Cat Person” isn’t just detailing a

problem between Margot and Robert but is highlighting the emptiness present in modern relationships mediated through technology and grounded upon empty signifiers. The end wasn't surprising to the reader because the reader knew how it would end, it all felt normal because to the reader the emptiness was familiar, present in every conversation and every relationship built on software. For Margot and Robert, the closest real connection they had was a hateful aura and an imagined past boyfriend. Perhaps Margot should have simply flirted with one of the cardboard cutouts next to Robert in the movie theater – their relationship would have been just as empty and their connection just as flat.

Works Cited

Roupenian, Kristen. ““Cat Person.”” The New Yorker, The New Yorker, 4 December 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>. Accessed 7 October 2019