

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Being intensely interested in someone is a universal thing. Sometimes it happens unexpectedly in the sense that people did not expect that earlier. This feeling is complex since people can easily translate every movement of someone they like as reciprocations, always wanting to be close but do not have the guts to be close, and desperately seeking the attention of the subject in the story although the subject does not respond the same. All that leads to an infatuation or obsessive behaviour that can sometimes harm the person feeling it or the person who becomes the dartboard. However, in some other cases it can benefit them as well, though the chance is low.

People would go through such emotional obsessions characterized by persistent intrusive thoughts, causing a person to constantly think about someone, along with intense emotional highs and lows. For example, where receiving a simple text from that person can bring euphoria, while being ignored can feel devastating. There is often a tendency to perceive individuals as perfect despite their flaws, and a deep craving for their attention and approval while also fearing their rejection. Excessive daydreaming or delusions, where past conversations are replayed, and imagined romantic scenarios take shape are common things people pass when the situation directs to this destiny. This phenomenon is commonly linked to unrequited love, either in the form of receiving no response at all or feeling that any reciprocation falls short of expectations.

In this digital era, many young people experience the aforementioned phenomenon simply because they feel comfort and safety from someone through cyberspace, even though they do not truly know if that person is good or bad. For some people, social media serves as a platform to seek love without fully considering the potential consequences. Those people are drawn to the online persona of someone they admire, creating an early illusion of attraction. Oftentimes, they remain uncertain about whether they can truly capture the attention of that person or not.

Such phenomena can be seen in literary works as a reflection of everyday life, with most conflicts being drawn from real experiences. "Cat Person", a short story by Kristen Roupenian, is one of the good examples. It was published by *The New Yorker* in December 2017 and quickly went viral, surpassing its usual readership through social media. Under the heading "The Ethics of Writing Short Stories", Stuart notes that the short story was widely shared online, with social media users discussing its strong relevance to modern dating experiences. Likewise, it was selected by Sheila Heti for "The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2018". This short story was recently adapted into a film in 2023.

The short story is about Margot, a 20-year-old college student who works at a movie theater. One day, while serving snacks, she meets Robert, a 34-year-old man. Their conversation is a bit awkward but playful, and they end up exchanging numbers. They start texting a lot, and Margot feels both excited and unsure about him as they get to know each other. However, at this stage, her feelings are actually more connected to the person she imagines him to be, rather than who he really is. Eventually, they go on

a movie date, but it does not go as she expected since he barely talks, and there is no physical connection during the film. Later on, over drinks, she starts to feel more comfortable, but things take a turn when they go to his house. Margot notices some things are different with the house, especially with the emptiness that it has. At some point, she even has a wild idea that his house is a trap full of horrors. In his house, their intimate moment turns to be awkward. When they collapse together on his bed, she asks him his age. He responds that he is thirty-four which at that moment, Margot instantly feels the fears and discomfort. Margot begins feeling uncomfortable and disconnected from the idealized version of Robert she had in her head. Afterward, Robert expresses his feelings for her, showing his insecurities. However, she is now feeling regretful and uneasy, and decides to pull away. At that time, after everything that happens in the house, she just notices that she has not seen any cats which Robert used to brag a lot on the chat and even he warns her about it before entering the house. Margot wonders if Robert made them up. Afterwards, their relationship becomes tense, and when they finally run into each other at a bar. He sits there silently without doing anything, meanwhile Margot is being shielded by her friends so that Robert does not see her. The story ends with Robert sending a bunch of messages containing statements that he misses her, questions regarding why she pulls away from that relationship, and horrible accusations about her which highlight the toxic side of Robert.

1.2. Research Questions

The love at first sight Margot experiences is not strong, but gradually becomes something that is detrimental to herself. Initially, their relationship seems fine, but Margot's high expectations of Robert, along with the differences between his online persona and his real-life behavior, causes her interest to fade.

1. How are the narrative elements reflected in Roupenian's "Cat Person"?
2. How are the components of limerence experienced by Margot in Roupenian's "Cat Person"?
3. How are the courses of limerence experienced by Margot in Roupenian's "Cat Person"?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to answer the research questions mentioned earlier and tries to explore them in more detail. Each objective helps guide the analysis so that the discussion stays clear and on track, making it easier to understand the main ideas more deeply.

1. To analyze the narrative elements that are reflected in Roupenian's short story "Cat Person".
2. To analyze the components of limerence that are experienced by Margot throughout the story.
3. To analyze the courses of limerence that are experienced by Margot in the short story.

1.4. Previous Studies

There have been some studies conducted to explore this specific short story as the object. Those studies consist of journal articles, none of which explores the theme of limerence. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge a gap in literature study by presenting a fresh analytical viewpoint. The first study that explores the same story is a journal article by Filipa Melo Lopes, published in 2021 in *ERGO: an Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, titled “‘Half Victim, Half Accomplice’: Cat Person and Narcissism”. In this article, Lopes applies a feminist philosophical perspective using Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of narcissism. She suggests that Margot should not be viewed only as a victim of subtle coercion, but also as someone who unknowingly contributes to her own emotional struggles. By interpreting Margot as a narcissistic figure, Lopes challenges the common view that the story is simply about victimization. Instead, she emphasizes how internalized oppression can shape women’s experiences and argues that personal change, or self-transformation, is an important part of feminist resistance.

Unlike Lopes who applies Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of narcissism in feminist philosophical perspective, the next article takes a psychoanalytic approach rooted in Lacanian theory. The journal article is titled “There’s No Such Thing as a Cat Person: A Lacanian Approach to Literary Criticism in Light of #MeToo” by Luke Johnson, published in 2020 in *Symploke*. Johnson offers a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach of Roupenian’s “Cat Person”, which focuses on the symbolic, imaginary, and real forces that shape sexual relationships. Johnson applies Lacan’s theory of “there’s

no such thing as sexual relationship” in the sense that men and women do not actually interact as man-to-woman and woman-to-man, but rather through fantasies and symbolic structures influenced by castration and desire. Ultimately, Johnson argues that “Cat Person” not only reflects the socio-cultural moment of #MeToo movement, but also reveals the fundamental impossibility and complexity of sexual relationships as theorized by Lacan.

While Johnson analyzes “Cat Person” through Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of “there’s no such thing as sexual relationship” to explore themes of gender and power dynamics, the following study takes a different path by focusing on how the story’s ambiguous ending shapes readers’ interpretations and emotional responses. The journal article is titled "Irresolute Endings and Rhetorical Poetics: Readers Respond to Roupenian's 'Cat Person'" by Kelly Walsh and Terry Murphy, published in 2019 in *Style*. Walsh and Murphy argue that the mixed reactions, particularly among millennials, stem not only from the story’s themes of modern dating, gender, and consent in the #MeToo era but also from its narrative style, which leads readers to fill in gaps and interpret events differently. By focusing on the readers' attempts to resolve the story’s open ending, Walsh and Murphy emphasize how the story's form plays a key role in sparking thoughtful discussions and debates.

The next article takes a feminist approach also in the context of the #MeToo movement, but it uses a Bakhtinian idea. The article is titled "The Collapse of Dialogue, Consent, and the Controversy Over Kristen Roupenian’s ‘Cat Person’" by Natalie Roxburgh, published in 2022 in *Language and Dialogue*. Roxburgh analyzes the story

focusing on how it explores issues of sexual coercion and consent within the context of the movement. Roxburgh identifies two central discourses in the narrative: feminist critiques of domination, which address the structural gender imbalances that position men above women, and sex-positive feminism, which emphasizes female sexual agency. Roxburgh argues that the clash between these viewpoints contributes to the breakdown of dialogue in the story. Her study also considers how “Cat Person” mirrors the broader difficulties in media conversations about gender and consent, revealing a deeper failure in how these topics are discussed.

As the last journal article, still in the context of #MeToo movement, it uses Miranda Fricker’s idea of hermeneutical injustice which is an occurrence when someone experiences something important, but they cannot fully fathom the experiences since the society does not have the words or ideas to describe it yet. The title of the article is “Self-Silencing: Hermeneutical Injustice & Kristen Roupenian’s ‘Cat Person’” by Clare Maunder published in 2021 in *Trinity Women & Gender Minorities Review*. With Fricker’s theory, Maunder explains how Margot, the main character, finds it hard to express her discomfort because she does not have the right words or concepts to describe what she is going through. Maunder also argues, this reflects a bigger problem where people, especially women, struggle to make sense of certain experiences because society has not given them the language to do so. The study shows many readers related to Margot’s silence, which shows how the story speaks to a wider, shared feeling of not being able to fully explain or validate one’s own experience.

It can be concluded that the differences between this study to the articles above are most of them discuss and dissect the object, “Cat Person”, in the realm of feminist approach and philosophical approach, while this study mainly discusses the main character, Margot, using psychological approach in literature. Although there is one journal article that discusses using a theory that has the same philosophical roots as limerence, namely Lacanian theory, the two still yield different results when examined in this short story. For example, in the journal article that was written by Johnson, the Lacanian theory view desire as something directed toward an idealized figure rather than the actual person, supported by fantasy rather than real fulfilment which that also happens in Tennov's concept of limerence. In “Cat Person,” this is evident in Margot's attraction to the version of Robert she constructs in her mind, rather than the actual reality. The real difference lies in the focus of the two theories: Lacanian theory explains the relationship between Margot and Robert as resulting from fantasy through the structural and symbolic mechanisms of Margot's desire, while Tennov's theory of limerence analyzes the ups and downs of Margot's feelings, one of which is caused by her fantasy, indicating a concrete psychological condition of obsession. In addition, this study sees that Margot's emotional journey throughout her relationship with Robert leads to the experience of limerence, which at the end the phenomenon results in negative impacts towards herself. This study aims to address a gap in existing research by using a theory and approach that have not been applied to this object before.

1.5. Research Methods

This research employs two methods to analyze the main character's psychological state in the short story: library research and psychological approach in literature. Library research is the most suitable method to collect the data and information that helps to analyze the problems in this research. According to George, library research "involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research question; a necessary component of every other research method at some point" (2008:6). In this study, library research is used to collect data from primary and secondary sources which assists the analysis of the short story.

Primary data refers to information that is collected firsthand and is completely original, while secondary data comes from existing sources that were gathered by others and often already processed or analyzed. Primary data is "the data obtained by the researcher or the agent hired by the researcher. While secondary data is the data already obtained and compiled by other parties such as government departments, company's annual report, newspaper, business magazines, or the internet web pages" (Awang, 2012:115). The primary data of this study is a short story by Kristen Reoupenian's "Cat Person". While the secondary data is collected from written texts such as books, journal articles, theses, essays and other sources from the internet that are related to the topic of this research.

Psychological approach is often used to see the deeper meanings in literary works, which also means that it helps the readers to spot hidden messages in the

characters or other aspects in the literary work. Gardner explains “the most typical psychological literary criticism examines the internal mental states, the desires, and the motivations of literary characters” (2024:174). With that definition, this psychological approach is applied to demonstrate the emotional journey the main character, Margot, experiences during her relationship with Robert using Dorothy Tennov’s theory on limerence. This also shows that her emotional journey is what makes limerence seem fit to be the psychological deviance she encountered. Likewise, using this definition can help the research to be more specific in which way this thesis will end up facing.

1.6. Scope of the Study

In responding to the research problems provided, this thesis limits the discussion and the analysis of limerence in Kristen Roupenian’s “Cat Person” by only discussing and analyzing the narrative elements and interpreting the story using psychological theory of limerence. The analysis of the narrative elements focuses on the characters and their characterization, the setting, and the conflict portrayed. To analyze the relationship between the main characters, this study borrows Dorothy Tennov’s theory on limerence. Moreover, the theory is used to examine Margot’s emotional journey during her relationship with Robert, especially her experience in falling in love and falling out of love with him, evidenced by the components and the course of limerence she endured throughout the story.

1.7. Writing Organization

This study is divided into four chapters, which are outlined as follows:

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter includes the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, previous study, research method, scope of the study, and writing organization of the study.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter provides theories of the intrinsic and extrinsic elements to the analysis of the object. The intrinsic elements include character and characterization, setting, and conflict. Meanwhile, the extrinsic elements focus on the correlation of the topic "limerence" by Dorothy Tennov to the object of the study "Cat Person" by Kristen Roupenian.

CHAPTER III: RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter covers the discussion and the result of the analysis of the intrinsic and Tennov's idea of limerence in Kristen Roupenian's short story titled "Cat Person". This chapter contains the analysis of Margot's emotional journey throughout her relationship with Robert and how it can reflect limerence theory that is seen from its components and courses.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes all of the things written throughout the whole thesis, essentially the results and the discussion in chapter three.