

‘Half Victim, Half Accomplice’: Cat Person and Narcissism

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Abstract: At the end of 2017, Kristen Roupenian’s short story, *Cat Person*, went viral. Published at the height of the #MeToo movement, it depicted a ‘toxic date’ and a disturbing sexual encounter between Margot, a college student, and Robert, an older man she meets at work. The story was widely viewed as a relatable denunciation of women’s powerlessness and routine victimization. In this paper, I push against this common reading. I propose an alternative feminist interpretation through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of narcissism: a form of alienation that consists in making oneself both the subject and the ultimate project of one’s life. Framing Margot as a narcissist casts her as engaging, not in subtly coerced, undesired sex, but rather in sex that is desired in a tragically alienated way. I argue that Beauvoir’s notion of narcissism is an important tool for feminists today—well beyond the interpretation of *Cat Person*. It presses us to see systematic subordination not just as something done to women, but also as something women do to themselves. This in turn highlights the neglected role of self-transformation as a key aspect of feminist political resistance.

In December 2017, a short story published in *The New Yorker* went viral. Kristen Roupenian’s *Cat Person* described the brief relationship between twenty-year-old Margot and Robert, an older man in his mid-thirties. The narrative, focused on Margot’s perspective and thoughts, described what some called a “toxic date” and culminated in a “skin-crawling” sex scene (Nicolaou 2019). Within a week, the internet was filled with a fierce online controversy. For some, this was a story about power and about how women are subtly coerced into sex that they do not want. For others, it was about a manipulative young woman who used and discarded an awkward man. Most importantly, a surprising number of women (and many men) found the story remarkably relatable, “more like a

documentary than fiction”. Published during the explosion of the #MeToo movement, *Cat Person* certainly “captured the zeitgeist” (Nicolaou 2019).

Cat Person became emblematic of a certain kind of fraught, but mundane sexual interaction and its reception turned into a fascinating crystallization of our contemporary debates about men, women, and sex. In this paper, I want to push back against what became the main feminist reading of the short story, where coercion and victimization were seen as the driving forces of the narrative. I want to propose instead a feminist reading of *Cat Person* through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of *narcissism*. Narcissism, in Beauvoir’s technical sense, is a particular form of alienation that consists in making oneself both the subject and the ultimate project of one’s life. Casting Margot as a narcissist frames her, not as engaging in subtly coerced, undesired sex, but in *sex that is desired in a tragically alienated way*. I argue that, far from dated, Beauvoir’s conception of narcissism is particularly valuable for contemporary feminism.¹ It illuminates complex features of our social reality and reminds us that patriarchal modes of social relations do not just constrain and coerce, but also work on agents ‘from the inside’. Focusing on changing these internal processes is therefore crucial to envisioning new, better ways of relating to each other.

To show this, I will start by recounting some of the key elements of the short story and of its online reception. In doing so, I will sketch what I will call the dominant pop feminist reading,² on which Margot is understood to be a subtly coerced victim, acting self-protectively in the face of a threatening and risky patriarchal social environment. Secondly, I will give a characterization of Beauvoir’s critical conception of narcissism, as articulated in *The Second Sex*. I will then present, in the third section, my alternative reading of *Cat Person* as a study in the phenomenology of

¹ For another use of Beauvoirian narcissism in an analysis of contemporary culture, see Ahmed’s commentary (2018) of the film *I Feel Pretty*, featuring comedian Amy Schumer. For a recent use of Beauvoir’s work more broadly to interpret popular historical and contemporary fiction see Tolentino (2019: 95–129).

² The term ‘pop feminist’ is meant to track the fact that I am referring here primarily to online commentary and publications outside of academic or scholarly venues.

narcissism. I will suggest that Margot is positively driven by this pathological self-involvement in her interactions with Robert, who predatorily encourages her self-glorification. In the last two sections, I will argue that this notion of narcissism is valuable more broadly, adding ethical nuance and political fruitfulness to our contemporary feminist thinking. Narcissism problematizes the pop feminist reliance on coercion as an explanatory tool and draws our attention to the way women can be actively complicit in their own unfreedom. Politically, this places a burden of self-transformation on both men *and* women. But it also makes feminist politics a much more hopeful project. Refusing the temptations of narcissism is a way of making our lives better, right here and right now.

1. The Reception of Cat Person

Roupenian's short story starts with a classic 'boy-meets-girl' moment. Margot is a college student working at an independent cinema. Robert is the somewhat "cute" older customer she flirts with. He comes back and asks for her number. We then follow their text-mediated exchange, punctuated by a brief in-person encounter at a 7-Eleven, and leading up to their first 'official' date. Robert meets Margot, drives them to see a movie ("a very depressing drama about the Holocaust"), followed by drinks at a local bar. Margot starts thinking of what it would be like to have sex with Robert and decides to go to his house. What ensues is a deeply disturbing sexual encounter. Margot is repulsed by Robert's body. But she thinks of how hard it would be "to stop what she had set in motion". Instead of leaving, she goes on to have sex with him while retreating into a state of "pinned stasis", focusing at times on her own beauty, on Robert's excitement, and on how awkward, ridiculous and humiliating the situation becomes. Robert behaves "as if they were in a porno" but minutes later starts talking about his feelings, his insecurities, and his desires for the future. After he drives her home, Margot tries to cautiously end communication with Robert. But, in relentless texts, he says

he misses her, he does not know what he did wrong, he gets jealous and wonders if she might be seeing someone else. The story ends with Robert's last text, an accusation in a single word: "whore" (Roupenian 2017).

Cat Person was a relatively unprecedented cultural phenomenon.³ It became the most read piece in the *New Yorker's* website for the whole year, even though it was published only a few weeks before the end of 2017.⁴ Never had a short story gone viral in this way, sparking visceral and intense debate on social media networks and in published opinion pieces. Within days, the internet became "saturated" with references to it and *Cat Person* became an obligatory point of conversation on and offline (Noyes 2017; Halls 2017).

Recall that this was also the year of #MeToo.⁵ Accusations against Harvey Weinstein surfaced in the Fall, kick-starting a string of other high-profile cases. *Cat Person* became part of this collective reckoning and was often cast as emblematic of it. *The Guardian* claimed that "the *New Yorker* short story encapsulates the dynamics of the #MeToo discussion, where at last the voices of women's experiences are being heard" (Cosslett 2017). Like other denunciations, *Cat Person* was thought to be breaking the silence, touching on previously taboo topics.⁶ Two factors made it stand out from other #MeToo episodes though. Firstly, this was a story about anonymous everyday people, not about the rich and the famous of Hollywood. And, secondly, unlike the Weinstein allegations, this was not a clear case of criminal behavior. Preceding the debate around

³ McClay (2019) points to Marie Calloway's 2011 story *Adrien Brody* as a possible precedent, though it is not clear it had quite the same viral impact.

⁴ This success started a bidding war that landed the author a \$1.3 million book deal, a television series in development and a sold screenplay (Nicolaou 2019). Kristen Roupenian's book, *You Know You Want This* was published in 2019.

⁵ This was also the year after Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency. It is worth noting that Roupenian said she wrote the short story in April, feeling "poisoned by the news at that time. Everybody's teeth were on edge. And I . . . feel like that shapes the grey menace, the atmosphere of threat [in the story]" (Nicolaou 2019).

⁶ As some commentators put it: "I think a lot of women have these bad dates, or bad sex, and they don't necessarily talk about it—it just gets shoved in the bottom drawer with all the other bad experiences, because of this politeness thing" (Donoughue 2017). This "piece expresses something we've long desired to articulate, but never quite trusted ourselves to say" (Glosswitch 2017). See also Tsai (2017).

Aziz Ansari by a month,⁷ *Cat Person* was the catalyst for a shift in the public conversation. From sexual assault and harassment in elite circles, the debate was now moving to the ‘grey areas’ of “soul-crushing” sex that seemed to involve everyone (Smith 2017).

This shift also brought about an increasingly fractured public response. As some put it, the story became like a Rorschach test: everyone seemed to see something different in it (Noyes 2017; Daum 2018). Most concurred with Deborah Treisman, *The New Yorker’s* fiction editor, when she said: “it isn’t a story about rape or sexual harassment, but about the fine lines that get drawn in human interaction” (Khazan 2017).⁸ The point of disagreement lay in the details. What exactly made Margot and Robert’s date so fraught, so “skin-crawling”, and so “toxic”?

One influential diagnosis of what had gone wrong began to form both among anonymous women on Twitter and feminist-influenced opinion columns. This was a tale of “heterosexual dating, gender, power imbalances and the blurry edges of sexual consent” (Parker & Wilkinson 2017).

“Cat Person” is about power—about what benefits it can confer, and at whose expense. It is about who gets to exercise power, and who must face its consequences. Indeed, Margot’s struggle to articulate her disinterest to Robert amounts to more than discomfort, more than awkwardness. It is an overt struggle for dominance. (Tsai 2017)

This interpretation had the notions of power, hierarchy and coercion at its center.⁹ According to it, Margot’s apparent choice to have sex with Robert was no choice at all. It was actually the product of subtle and systemic coercion, either embodied by Robert or present more diffusely in the social

⁷ The debate was sparked by a story published on the website *Babe* entitled “I Went on a Date with Aziz Ansari. It Turned into the Worst Night of my Life” (Way 2018).

⁸ Some men reflecting on the story seemed to take a stronger stance, claiming that Margot had “withdrawn her consent”, that she was “mistreated”, and “ensnare[d]” (Silman 2017).

⁹ Consent was often mentioned, but the most plausible and sophisticated articulations of this pop feminist interpretation all readily noted how standards of consent were uninformative or too complicated in this case.

context. The short story was then about the undesired sex women have anyways, because of their powerlessness. Call this the dominant pop feminist reading of *Cat Person*.

On this picture, Margot only chooses to have sex as a reaction to an unjustly threatening patriarchal world, and to the threat Robert himself represents within it. This is the story of a “man trying to coax a woman he doesn’t really know into bed” and “an example of how patriarchal culture and male violence, even if only potential [...] compel women into unpleasant or even nonconsensual sexual encounters” (MacDougald 2019). Margot is young and drunk, she is vulnerable in the car of a virtual stranger, she wonders if he might rape and kill her, she is preoccupied with being ‘nice’ and what may happen if she is not.¹⁰ The story was summarized by one journalist using a well-known Margaret Atwood quote: “men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them” (Treisman 2017).¹¹ *Cat Person* revealed then “the lengths women go to in order to manage men’s feelings”, conditioned by the reality of sexual violence and subordination (Khazan 2017; see also Cosslett 2017). Margot’s attitude is therefore “self-protective” in face of this background “undercurrent of nastiness, and misogyny, and difficult power dynamics, and the quiet terror of 21st century dating for women” (Donoughue 2017; see also Cosslett 2017).¹² As a character, she became emblematic of a hidden reality of victimization that women pervasively endure. It was under this description that *Cat Person* became something around

¹⁰ Many focused on the following passages from the short story: “as they got on the highway, it occurred to her that he could take her someplace and rape and murder her; she hardly knew anything about him, after all. Just as she thought this, he said, ‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to murder you,’ and she wondered if the discomfort in the car was her fault, because she was acting jumpy and nervous, like the kind of girl who thought she was going to get murdered every time she went on a date. ‘It’s O.K.—you can murder me if you want,’ she said, and he laughed and patted her knee.”; “The thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming [...] It would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon” (Roupenian 2017).

¹¹ Some, taking a cue from Roupenian herself, focused on how these background risks were amplified by the brave new world of dating apps and text-based interaction, which features prominently in the story. See Daum (2018).

¹² See also Khazan (2017): “if she feels so uneasy, why is she going ahead with it? Is she just afraid to be rude? Is it out of self-protection?”

which so many women united “in a collective cry of recognition and a release of righteous gratitude towards it” (Parker & Wilkinson 2017).

But not everyone agreed. Many online feminist-influenced commentators raised some more nuanced worries about self-deception and self-centeredness, though these were most often briefly mentioned as relatable flaws—proof that you did not have to be morally perfect to be a *victim* of the patriarchy.¹³ The real disagreement, however, came from more hostile, predominantly male corners of the internet. Here Margot was seen as vain, shallow, manipulative, and self-serving. Many did not understand what Robert had done wrong. To these readers he was, after all, just a clumsy and unattractive man (MacDougald 2019).¹⁴ Others emphatically agreed that this was a fraught and even miserable experience but highlighted that Margot had cornered herself into a “terrible situation”. She did not know Robert, he was older, she drank too much, they did not have any meaningful connection—how could she possibly have suggested that they go back to his place (Smith 2017)? And yet she had. The twitter account “Men React to Cat Person” started an infamous compilation of screenshots of men decrying the story, in more or less subtle ways.¹⁵ Tweet after

¹³ “We are left in little doubt about Margot’s vanity, the lies she tells herself, the way in which self-interest and self-protection intersect in the choices she makes” (Glosswitch 2017). “Roupenian did an excellent job at capturing the mental gymnastics a young woman might go through in order to acquiesce not only to men, but also to herself” (Tang 2017). “What I liked about Margot is how she shared some of my least admirable private thoughts. She was, at times, more than a little self-centered and vain” (Parker & Wilkinson 2017). A minority of other articles in 2017 were less sympathetic to Margot, for example Noyes (2017). For more critical comments published later see McClay (2019) and Berg (2018).

¹⁴ This interpretation of the story was documented by the twitter account “Men React to Cat Person”. Examples included: “This happens to me all the time. Women just use me and cast me aside”; “Obscenely vain young woman uses man to fulfill power/degradation fantasy”; “Some guys are bad at kissing, and bad at relationships”; “Could any guy be expected to navigate the maze of thoughts and feelings in her head?”; “I was really bothered for and by Robert . . . he ultimately is the victim in this story” (<https://twitter.com/MenCatPerson>).

¹⁵ “Margot comes off as a borderline sociopath who only cares about how people perceive her”; “The guy was a creep for dating a woman so young and for calling her a whore, and the woman was hyper judgmental of damn near everything about him”; “Summary. Judgmental, egotistical girl hooks up with guy that she finds physically unattractive. They have sex before they established any emotional connection. Unsurprising the loveless act is sad and depressing” (<https://twitter.com/MenCatPerson>).

tweet, this was taken to be evidence that men lacked empathy towards women, that they missed the point, and that they were refusing to listen (Tang 2017; Berg 2018).¹⁶

It is worth mentioning some other unsympathetic responses. Some accused the story of fat-shaming and pointed to Margot's disgust at Robert's body as reprehensible (Donoughue 2017; Ashcraft 2017).¹⁷ Others claimed that "the story only amplifies a certain kind of voice: middle class, college-educated, and most likely white". The experience was taken to be unrepresentative of the lives of women of color.¹⁸ The viral attention paid to Margot was the sign, not of a feminist reckoning, but of the continuing cultural hegemony of white middle-class experience in America (Tsai 2017). Nevertheless, the basic framework of analysis here remained close to the dominant pop feminist reading. This was still a story about the powerful and powerless, except that it failed to show how bad powerlessness can really get.

Fueling the entire debate was an overwhelming sense that the story was "relatable", that it "resonated" with countless women and men (Jalili 2017; Khazan 2017; Cosslett 2017; Noyes 2017; Tsai 2017; Silman 2017; Berg 2018; Glosswitch 2017). Finally, the terribleness of everyday life was out in the open and, suddenly, everyone wanted to recount their own 'cat person moments' (Khazan 2017; Belz 2017).

2. The Narcissist

But, reading through the online 'wars' on the short story, it felt like something was being missed. The acute feeling of nausea that it conveyed, its striking "skin-crawling" character, pointed to

¹⁶ There were also important strands of online discussion focused on whether *Cat Person* was a work of fiction, whether it had artistic merit, and whether these questions were just a reflection of how women's experiences are deemed 'unliterary' by our culture. See Garber (2017). I am bracketing these debates here.

¹⁷ Writer Roxane Gay claimed she "was really bothered by the fat stuff. Which doesn't mean it shouldn't be there. That's how people think. And it's fiction. It's fine. But it came up so much! Like we get it?" (Grandy 2017).

¹⁸ "Her experience is not representative of a woman of color—had Margot been black, or Asian, or Latinx, her story would have been very different. [. . .] Part of me wonders, too, if such a story would even gain the same amount of online traction" (Tsai 2017). See also Beauchamp (2017).

something much more insidious (Nicolaou 2019; Noyes 2017). I want to suggest that what was left out of the dominant pop feminist reading was a substantial engagement with the rich phenomenological description in *Cat Person*. I propose that we re-center that dimension of the story by looking at the figure of the *narcissist* in Simone de Beauvoir's classic work, *The Second Sex*.¹⁹

Narcissism is, for Beauvoir, “a well-defined process of alienation” (2011: 667).²⁰ The narcissist, in this technical sense, is someone who makes herself both *the subject* of her life and also *the absolute project* of her life. She is pathologically self-involved.²¹ Put differently, the narcissist is someone who regards herself in a deeply incoherent way: as primarily a passive object that she herself—as an active subject—can glorify. In actively striving to become an exalted object, she demonstrates precisely that she is not one (Bauer 2015: 48).

Beauvoirian narcissism is not the exclusive domain of women, but circumstances in a patriarchal society can be such that they invite women much more than men to turn to it. What circumstances are these? Firstly, women are often frustrated subjects. They are actively discouraged

¹⁹ There were some allusions to ‘narcissism’ during the online controversy in late 2017. But, again, this was mostly depicted as an incidental character flaw that made Margot realistic: she “comes off as polite, a little narcissistic, and more than a little confused” (Khazan 2017); “The version of him she builds in her head seems partly a product of her own narcissism (she is beautiful and sophisticated, he is under her spell) but that doesn’t mean it’s totally inaccurate” (Parker & Wilkinson 2017). See also Treisman (2017). More interestingly, Noyes (2017) thought Margot responded to Robert’s advances “more out of curiosity and the thrill of attracting his attention than any real desire on her part” and mentioned explicitly “Margot’s underlying self-loathing and narcissistic gaze (she’s attracted to the fact that Robert desires her, rather than Robert himself)”. I take this last comment to be in line with my reading of the story.

²⁰ Beauvoir’s concept has an ambivalent relation with the notion of ‘narcissism’ in psychoanalysis. It is often taken to be an “existential reinterpretation” or “appropriation” of the Freudian psychoanalytic conception (Björk 2010: 54; Zakin 2017: 100; Bartky 1982: 132–34, 137). The key difference is that Beauvoir’s notion is not a clinical one, but a socio-political one. Beauvoirian narcissism is a way in which women, as human agents, can respond to their situation—not an innate feature of female psychology. Beauvoir carries over the psychoanalytic emphasis on the development of girls, re-conceptualized as a primarily *social* development, in her explanation of adult narcissists (Beauvoir 2011: 294, 310, 354–55, 359–64; Zakin 2017: 107). For an analysis of the similarities between Freud and Beauvoir see Björk (2011: 198–200; 2010 54–55) and Zakin (2017). For discussion of Lacan’s influence on Beauvoir’s account of narcissism see Zakin (2017), Roudinesco (2011), and Björk (2011: 201). For a note on the influence of Clérambault’s conception of ‘erotomania’ on Beauvoir see Roudinesco (2011: 42). For an extended analysis of the influence of Hélène Deutsch on Beauvoir see Lecarme-Taborne (2011).

²¹ For recent defenses of ‘narcissism’ see Downing (2019) and DeArmitt (2013). These accounts rely on different, more positive notions of narcissism as self-love or self-valorization. These are necessary, desirable parts of our psychic life and they are liberating from a feminist perspective. I do not take these positions to necessarily stand in tension with Beauvoir’s.

from having projects and aims that would turn them outwards, towards the world. In the sexual domain, social constraints frustrate women's "aggressive sexuality", leaving them in a fraught wait for male initiative.²² Throughout the rest of their lives, women are barred or pushed away from activities at which they could succeed or fail in the eyes of others. Men build houses, clear forests, cure patients, while women—even though they are very busy—do not *do* anything. In her "functions as wife, mother, and housewife", a woman often finds herself only doing work for which "she is not recognized in her singularity" as a person with opinions, plans, and accomplishments of her own.²³ Narcissism can then be a very appealing way to overcome this frustration, to engage in a project that can never be thwarted: being oneself. In this way, the narcissist "gives herself sovereign importance because no important object is accessible to her" (Beauvoir 2011: 667). Narcissism can represent a woman's attempt "to achieve her individual salvation by realizing her transcendence in the immanence to which she has been condemned by her upbringing and culture" (Arp 1995: 169).

Secondly, women are better able to place themselves as absolute projects, as the absolute objects of value in their eyes, because they often already see themselves as *primarily* objects. There is a persistent positive encouragement for women to alienate themselves in their bodies (Bartky 1982: 134). Girls enter adulthood through a revelation of their bodies "as passive and desirable" things that are looked at by others and that they themselves "can [also] contemplate with a lover's gaze" (Beauvoir 2011: 668).²⁴ The transition from playing with dolls to 'dolling up' in front of a

²² "As a subject, she is frustrated; as a little girl, she was deprived of this alter ego that the penis is for the boy; later, her aggressive sexuality remained unsatisfied" (Beauvoir 2011: 667). For an illustrative passage on this unsatisfaction see Beauvoir (2011: 388–90). For a description of aggressive sexuality see Beauvoir's discussion of Brigitte Bardot: "Her eroticism is not magical, but aggressive. In the game of love, she is as much a hunter as she is a prey. The male is an object to her, just as she is to him" (Beauvoir 1972: 20).

²³ This passage may raise the worry that Beauvoir is devaluing child-raising and domestic work *qua* work. However, the claim need not be that strong. All that is needed to establish women as frustrated subjects is that women have these occupations within a social context that devalues these activities—where they do not constitute something one *does* in the eyes of others, at which one could excel, or through which one could be distinguished from others. This social setting then is likely to influence the *attitude* with which one pursues this kind of work. Raising a child can be a fulfilling life project, but it can also be a series of repetitive, self-effacing routines.

²⁴ For a discussion of Beauvoir's analysis of young women's apprehension of their bodies see Björk (2011: 200–3).

mirror encapsulates the banality of this encouragement. In this way, when watching themselves in the mirror, many women come to apprehend themselves primarily as the thing *watched*. They come to identify with their own image. Narcissism can be a way to try to overcome this alienating ‘doubling’ by, incoherently, also affirming oneself as the subject who watches: she becomes the object of her *own* loving gaze. This prompts the narcissist to work towards the glorification of that imaginary double that is herself. “Narcissism is [then also] the attempt to realize the union with one’s own body—one’s own self—that has been denied through the process of bodily alienation” (Arp 1995: 169). As we will see, however, narcissism is not *merely* about the body. It is the person of the narcissist, as a whole, that becomes the object of her self-referential endeavors.

In delineating these two “convergent paths” that guide women towards narcissism, Beauvoir casts this as a distinctively *feminine* notion of narcissism.²⁵ It is both made appealing by the distinctive societal pressures flowing from one’s position *as a woman* in the world; and it is suggested and encouraged by a socialization into *femininity* and its rituals. This narcissism is not a property of women per se, nor is it associated with some immutable feminine essence. It is a deeply cultural pathology, an “existential type” connected to a gendered social position (Björk 2010: 43). Beauvoir’s notion has then a clear place within a broader structural feminist account. It articulates one important way in which our place in social structures systematically conditions and explains our individual attitudes towards our own existence.²⁶

²⁵ For a similar point see Zakin (2017: 102). This is compatible with the idea that narcissism, as an existential attitude, is not exclusive to women. Bartky also uses the term “feminine narcissism”, but she restricts it to “an infatuation with one’s bodily being” (1982: 131–32). I take Beauvoir’s notion of narcissism to be broader than the glorification of one’s body, as I have indicated above.

²⁶ My use of ‘structural’ here is in line with a characterization like Haslanger’s: “explanation of individual action in structural terms situates individuals within ‘offices’ or nodes in a [social] structure. We explain the behavior of the individual given their place in a structure. This offers insight into why the particular individual behaved as he/she did, but it also contributes to our understanding of the individual as the instance of a type—a type defined by the conditions for existing at that node” (2016: 128–29).

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that societal pressures are only part of the Beauvoirian picture. They “*invite* woman more than man to *turn* toward self and *dedicate* her love to herself” (my emphasis), but they certainly do not make all women narcissists. Although narcissism is particularly attractive, “there are many other—authentic and inauthentic—attitudes found in woman” (Beauvoir 2011: 667). Indeed, narcissism is not ever something just passively accepted in the face of circumstances. It is rather something *actively adopted*: an enthusiastic turning of oneself towards oneself. And why would anyone ever do this? Narcissism is an appealing temptation for any human being confronted with the burdens of subjectivity (Bartky 1982: 134).²⁷ In narcissism, the “self is posited as an absolute end, and the subject escapes itself in it” (Beauvoir 2011: 667). By thinking of herself as the only object of value, the narcissistic subject foregoes the angst and perils of actually having projects, of being judged by others—the burdens of subjectivity. The narcissist is engaged in something at which she cannot fail, a ‘faux-project’: being herself. This allows her “to be an actor in the world, [. . .] express her sense of what matters in the world; and have a say in it”, but also “avoid the anguish and strain of an authentically assumed existence” (Bauer 2015: 51, 49). Positing herself as the only thing that matters, is a way for the narcissist to have her cake and eat it too.

However, for all its allure, narcissism always has a horrifying result: an atrophied subject, tragically out of touch with world (Beauvoir 2011: 680). I take this to be a crucial point in Beauvoir’s discussion. The problem with narcissism is not that it is an abstract moral fault. It is an ethically criticizable attitude because it makes the narcissist’s life close up in an all too concrete manner.

[. . .] the narcissist drama plays itself out at the expense of real life; [. . .] a woman tormented by her ego loses all hold on the concrete world, she does not care about

²⁷ This tempting character of narcissism is well captured by what Knowles calls the “metaphysical benefits” of attitudes of “active complicity” (2019a: 251–52). See also Kruks (2013: 71).

establishing any real relationship with others; [. . .] so busy contemplating herself, she totally fails to judge herself, and she falls so easily into ridiculousness. [. . .] In the worship of self, the adolescent girl can muster the courage to face the disturbing future, but it is a stage she must go beyond quickly: if not, the future closes up. [. . .] the narcissist, alienating herself in her imaginary double, destroys herself. (2011: 681)

Narcissism is deeply appealing, but self-destructive. If it is allowed to take root, it infects and attacks the relation between the subject and the world. It replaces acting and living with a “paranoid delirium” (2011: 682). To rationalize her unmeasured investment in herself, the narcissist usually comes to consider herself both *special* and *misunderstood*. She will conjure up a “hidden principle”, a “mystery” that inhabits her and that cannot be expressed in words or deeds (2011: 674). She understands it, and hence loves it, of course. But, inevitably, the mysterious hidden qualities she loves become “misunderstood treasures” to all others. Furthermore, the narcissist adopts “the tragic hero’s need to be governed by destiny. Her whole life is transfigured into a sacred drama” (2011: 674). Things happen *to* her. She lives by looking at her life as a plot governed by magical forces. It is that “hidden principle” to which she attributes all her doings that propels her life in her eyes and that disconnects her so deeply from the world. Ultimately, she ends up totally dependent, demanding to be valued by a world to which she denies all value “since she alone counts in her own eyes” (2011: 682). In making herself her “supreme end”, she “dooms herself to the most severe slavery” (2011: 681).

This individual unfreedom is intimately linked to the social subordination of women. To better understand this, we should note some significant consequences of narcissism. Firstly, the narcissist will never experience artistic or intellectual accomplishment. She will be tempted to glorify herself in professional and artistic life. But, because of the attitude with which she undertakes all these projects—as really all in the service of the absolute project that is herself—she

will never be any good at them (Hengehold 2017: 80). She will never know “how to give herself” to the pursuit of some end other than herself (Beauvoir 2011: 677). The narcissist lacks then a “positive desire to create” and she simply ‘plays’ at working. Focusing on the case of writers, Beauvoir claims that “one of the burdens that weighs on many women writers is [precisely] a self-indulgence that hurts their sincerity, limits and diminishes them” (2011: 677). The narcissist is not serious about writing. She just thinks it would be a wonderful ornament in her life. No wonder her books have the quality of hollow props.

Secondly, in the absence of artistic, intellectual or professional glory, the narcissist is likely to turn to personal relationships as the arena of choice for pursuing self-aggrandizement. But she is never going to be able to engage in genuine relationships with others.

She talks about herself to her women friends; more avidly than anything else, she seeks a witness in the lover. [. . .] many women are incapable of real love, precisely because they never forget themselves. (2011: 675)

The thought here is simple enough. “All love demands the duality of a subject and an object” (2011: 667). Without this separation there can be no reciprocity, no mutuality and no genuine engagement. If one cannot take someone as an object of love, one cannot love. The narcissist, however, engages with everyone, not as an object of value, but only as an audience for herself.²⁸ She may very well be generous and agreeable, but this is a “generosity [that] is profitable to her: better than in mirrors, it is in other’s admiring eyes she sees her double haloed in glory” (2011: 675). In the end, this continuous self-referential engagement is also bound to become off-putting to others. As a result, the narcissist is likely to be increasingly alone and frustrated, delving into ever more sociopathic modes of behavior.

²⁸ In one of her most chilling examples, Beauvoir quotes a passage in dancer Isadora Duncan’s memoir where she is spreading the ashes of her children and is, at the same time, entranced by her own beautiful body (Beauvoir 2011: 681–82).

Thirdly, this search for self-glorification is not cheap. Beauvoir is very explicit: “from a practical point of view it is a costly enterprise to adorn the idol, to put her on a pedestal, to erect a temple to her” (2011: 681). This means narcissism also has a class dimension: it is an attitude difficult to sustain without a steady stream of material resources. Additionally, narcissistic self-aggrandizement takes time and energy away from professional and productive activities, damaging women’s ability to make money in the first place (Bartky 1982: 136). This is not to say that this is an existential attitude restricted to affluent women, but it is in the world of glamorous wealth that narcissism can really thrive.²⁹ The unoccupied socialite can excel at narcissism, while the working single mother may only be able to engage in it fleetingly. Consequently, narcissism positively moves women to seek the trappings of affluence by the quickest means possible. Beauvoir notes that “to preserve her form in immortal marble, Marie Bashkirtseff had to consent to marry for money. Masculine fortunes paid for the gold, incense and myrrh that Isadora Duncan and Cécile de Sorel laid at the foot of their thrones” (2011: 681).³⁰ Narcissism motivates women like these to make compromising bargains to finance their own cult of self, setting up and reinforcing gendered relations of economic dependency.

Finally, narcissism is also intimately linked to gender-based subordination because it serves and complements a kind of *masculine vanity* “at the root of woman’s oppression” (Kruks 2013: 69).³¹ On Beauvoir’s picture, at the very basis of patriarchal social relations we find men overinvesting themselves with value—not qua objects—but qua subjects. They consider themselves as pure activity, pure ‘doing’ in the world. In this “affirmation of himself as Sovereign”, “man

²⁹ Reality TV shows like ‘Keeping up with the Kardashians’ or ‘Real Housewives’ are very plausible examples of this alignment of wealth and narcissism.

³⁰ Other examples of famous narcissists cited by Beauvoir include noblewomen like Anne de Noailles and Barbara von Krüdener, reinforcing this class dimension of her analysis.

³¹ I am here borrowing the term ‘masculine vanity’ from Beauvoir (1972: 15), to distinguish this attitude from narcissism, used in the technical sense of *The Second Sex*.

endeavors to sunder the attributes of reason, consciousness, and autonomy from his own embodiment by fraudulently arrogating only the former to himself” (Kruks 2013: 69). Like the narcissist, this vain man is also fleeing his ambiguous nature as a human being: as both a subject capable of transcending what he is and, simultaneously, as a fixed being under the eyes of others.³² However, he does so, not by distancing himself from his subjectivity, but by distancing himself from his embodiment as an object. He thinks of himself as a sovereign subject.³³ Once again, note that this kind of plan is rife with incoherence: “to ‘be’ something, once and for all [e.g., a sovereign subject], is precisely not to be a subject” (Bauer 2015: 48).

To affirm himself as Sovereign, a vain man needs help. To think of himself as a great actor in the world, he needs the acknowledgement of others. Without that, he is simply alone. But others’ judgement is also unbearable to him: it threatens his illusion of ultimate sovereignty and control, it is a source of conflict and rivalry (Beauvoir 2011: 159). What he wants then “instead of a truthful revelation [of who he is and what he has done], [is] a glowing image of admiration and gratitude”, a way to shore up his subjecthood, without rivaling it (2011: 203). A docile woman is a great way to get this.³⁴ She can look upon him as a separate person, but her “gaze is not a masculine, abstract, severe one—it allows itself to be charmed” (2011: 201–2). A woman can support masculine vanity then, as long as she is not a full person, as long as she remains an inessential complement: a prey

³² Bauer highlights that this ambiguity is articulated by Beauvoir as a “phenomenological dilemma” for human beings: “our experience is one of dualism or, more precisely, of a tension between our drive to transcend ourselves and our drive to cement our identities in ways that we and others will find ceaselessly praiseworthy” (2015: 47). See also Kruks (2013: 6–8), Keltner (2006), and Knowles (2019a: 252).

³³ Here, I am briefly sketching the complex story Beauvoir tells in ‘Myths’, in *The Second Sex* (2011: 159–213). She relates the establishment of the “myth of woman” as Other to this masculine attitude of self-assertion as a subject (2011: 162). For a more succinct formulation of this dynamic see the ‘Introduction’: “He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (2011: 6).

³⁴ As Beauvoir puts it, “she is the mirror in which the male Narcissus contemplates himself” (Beauvoir 2011: 202). The allusion to Narcissus brings out the points of contact between ‘feminine narcissism’ and ‘masculine vanity’, as both species of self-centered alienation and failures of intersubjective recognition.

he hunts, a muse from which *he* draws inspiration, a treasure *he* keeps.³⁵ Narcissism provides the ideal woman to play this role: someone who already enthusiastically sees herself primarily as an object, who is already distant from her subjectivity. Narcissism plays then into a foundational dynamic of patriarchal social relations. He will make himself the subject, she will make herself the object in this gendered “metaphysical division of labor” (Bauer 2015: 48, 50).

We are now in a position to see that the feminist significance of Beauvoir’s notion of narcissism is two-fold. It describes an “existential type” that is gendered, in that it is explained with reference to the pressures and rituals associated with being a woman (Björk 2010: 43). But narcissism is also a mechanism through which the subordination of women is reinforced and perpetuated. It contributes to hallmark phenomena of gender-based subordination, such as the lower levels of artistic achievement of women, their volatile need for the good opinion of others, and well-known patterns of economic dependency. Interpersonally, narcissism puts women at the service of vain men who adopt an alienated self-conception as sovereign subjects. Feminine narcissism can thus be harnessed and exploited to sustain masculine vanity.

3. Margot as a Narcissist

Margot embodies a contemporary version of this Beauvoirian feminine narcissism. She likes Robert, but what she *really* loves is seeing herself as a desirable character in his eyes. She is both subject and object at these moments, reveling in what seems to be a relationship with herself, first and foremost. Only this project of unmeasured self-love can make sense of her reaction to otherwise

³⁵ “She is his complement in the inessential mode. Thus, she appears as a privileged prey. [. . .] And therein lies the marvelous hope that man has often placed in woman: he hopes to accomplish himself as being though carnally possessing a being while being confirmed in his freedom by a docile freedom” (Beauvoir 2011: 161); “Treasure, prey, game and risk, muse, guide, judge, mediator, mirror, the woman is the Other in which the subject surpasses himself without being limited; who opposes him without negating him [. . .]” (2011: 203).

bizarre interactions, to forms of treatment that seem to so obviously foreshadow an unequal and humiliating outcome.

Margot may have a “crush” on Robert, but, most of all, she is infatuated with the way he looks at her. Robert kisses her on the forehead, calls her “honey” and “sweetheart” in ways that seem more parental than romantic. As one commentator pointed out, it is this “fatherly affection” that Margot seems to want from him (Noyes 2017). Margot enjoys this treatment because she is made to feel like “a delicate, precious thing”, as she says. She is not physically attracted to Robert, but she enjoys his protective attention. She seems to think of it as an accomplishment, to get this burly creature to be so enamored with her: “as if she were petting a large, skittish animal, [. . .] skillfully coaxing it to eat from her hand” (Roupenian 2017). For Margot, like for Beauvoir’s narcissist, “outside approbation is an inhuman, mysterious and capricious force that must be trapped magically” (Beauvoir 2011: 682).

Robert seems to relish the opportunity to be protective of this infantilized, fragile girl. As one commentator put it, “each time she diminishes herself in his presence, he rewards her with affection” (Noyes 2017). He relaxes when she cries, he lights up when Margot shares her worries that she might not be “smart enough to form her own opinions on anything” (Roupenian 2017). He enjoys comforting Margot and being older than her. This gives Robert an opportunity to be in control, to reap gratitude and admiration, and to inflate his sense of himself as active in the world. These are precisely the “delights” of domination and mastery that Beauvoir associates with masculine vanity (2011: 193). Understanding Margot as a narcissist yields then a characterization of Robert as vain in this distinctively masculine way.

Consider the key moment in the plot when Margot is turned away from the first bar they go to because she is underage, younger than Robert thought. Humiliated and embarrassed, Margot

is left on the verge of tears. Robert, who had been cold and distant, changes attitude and Margot is herself newly invested in the encounter:

But, when Robert saw her face crumpling, a kind of magic happened. [. . .] he stood up straight and wrapped his bearlike arms around her. “Oh, sweetheart,” he said. “Oh, honey, it’s O.K., it’s all right. Please don’t feel bad.” She let herself be folded against him, and she was flooded with the same feeling she’d had outside the 7-Eleven—that she was a delicate, precious thing he was afraid he might break. He kissed the top of her head, and she laughed and wiped her tears away. [. . .] “You must think I’m such an idiot.” But she knew he didn’t think that, from the way he was gazing at her; in his eyes, she could see how pretty she looked, smiling through her tears in the chalky glow of the streetlight, with a few flakes of snow coming down. (Roupenian 2017)

What follows is Margot and Robert’s first kiss, which she thinks is terrible. And yet she proceeds to laugh at his jokes, and to eventually kiss him again. Robert’s response to her crying functions then as an encouraging cue, a promise of how much he could want her if she was willing to “let herself be folded against him”. Margot, as a narcissist, very much enjoys being able to elicit this response. She finds that her tears are like a magical spell she can cast to control someone into coming back to her.

Margot’s decision to have sex with Robert is then a continuation of this attitude of self-interested generosity. After several drinks, she considers what sex with Robert would be like. She thinks it would probably be bad, but she feels “a twinge of desire” in “imagining how excited he would be, how hungry and eager to impress her”. It is feeling like “an irresistible temptation” to others that is sexually attractive to Margot. She is both subject and object of desire in this scene, both “priestess and idol” (Beauvoir 2011: 670).

As they kissed, she found herself carried away by a fantasy of such pure ego that she could hardly admit even to herself that she was having it. Look at this beautiful

girl, she imagined him thinking. She's so perfect, her body is perfect, everything about her is perfect, she's only twenty years old, her skin is flawless [. . .].
(Roupenian 2017)

This is no mere fantasy. This is a narcissistic mode of engagement with the world, where a sexual partner becomes just another mirror. Later in the story, Margot wonders if maybe what she likes most about sex is the way young men look at her, stunned, drunk-looking, needy.³⁶ This is exactly the kind of moment that gives the story its uncomfortable and 'skin-crawling' quality. I think it is no coincidence that this is also an articulation of the self-referential sexual enjoyment that Beauvoir so clearly identifies: "when she abandons herself on the arms of a lover, the [narcissist] accomplishes her mission: she is Venus dispensing the treasure of her beauty to the world" (2011: 675).

The framework of Beauvoirian narcissism also sheds light on other controversial moments of the narrative. Firstly, it explains part of why Margot is so willing to get into a car with someone she knows nothing about—and who may be a rapist or a serial killer. She has little interest in getting to know Robert. Margot wants to know how to entice him, appease him, and control him, but that is all about managing him merely as a member of the audience for her performance. Secondly, Margot is constantly surprised by what she does: giving Robert her phone number, getting in a car with him, and going to his house. After they have sex, we are told she "marveled at herself for a while, at the mystery of this person who'd just done this bizarre, inexplicable thing" (Roupenian 2017). Margot is not really present in these moments. She experiences her life as something *happening to her*: she is compelled by destiny in a play where she is the tragic heroine.

³⁶ "He looked stunned and stupid with pleasure, like a milk-drunk baby, and she thought that maybe this was what she loved most about sex—a guy revealed like that. Robert showed her more open need than any of the others, even though he was older, and must have seen more breasts, more bodies, than they had—but maybe that was part of it for him, the fact that he was older, and she was young" (Roupenian 2017).

Margot's narcissistic balancing act is not perfect, of course. She is aware of the emptiness of her pursuits, of her absence of connection to the world and of the actual humiliation that becomes the price of her enjoyment. As Beauvoir points out, even the most perfect narcissist realizes the hollow, alienating nature of her existence (2011: 681). Margot worries that she may seem "capricious" if she suddenly decided to leave Robert's house. Although she may be abiding by a norm of feminine niceness, she is also recognizing the self-centered nature of her engagement with Robert which is, indeed, capricious. Most importantly, Margot finds the price of her narcissistic project hard to bear.³⁷ She calls it a "humiliation that was a kind of perverse cousin to arousal" (Roupenian 2017). This is a telling expression. What excites Margot is getting Robert's attention and being adored as a beautiful thing. But, to achieve that, she must make herself vulnerable and compromised.

Indeed, narcissistic arousal always breeds passivity and an abject disregard for one's nature as a *subject* of desire. But, in our gendered world, narcissism also exposes women to a perverse gendered bargain. Vain men like Robert need a woman they can conquer and possess, an Other through which they can confirm themselves as sovereign subjects (Beauvoir 2011: 213). To obtain this, they propose an exchange: a woman will be adored as an idol, if she offers herself as a cooperative prey.³⁸ One commentator of Roupenian's story articulated the core logic of this gendered bargain in the following way:

Men want and women want to be wanted; sex is a staged encounter that she does not enjoy but passively endures because she knows it shows her off to good effect.

³⁷ It is worth noting that, when the price is too hard to bear—when she is having sex with Robert—Margot doubles down on her narcissistic strategy. She finds herself floating above the whole scene, imagining how she must look in his eyes. "The more she imagined his arousal, the more turned-on she got" (Roupenian 2017).

³⁸ In the same vein, Tolentino describes 'white weddings' as offering women "an unspoken trade-off": "Here, our culture says, is an event that will center you absolutely—that will crystalize your image when you were young and gorgeous [. . .]. In exchange, from that point forward, [. . .] your needs will slowly cease to exist. [. . .] becoming a bride still means being flattered into submission [. . .]" (2019: 290).

Or, to put it more crudely: sex is the price women are willing to pay for men's attention. (McClay 2019)

This is the humiliating exchange that Robert proposes, and that Margot finds both exceedingly appealing and too hard to bear. As Beauvoir puts it, in “attempting to make the male her instrument, [the narcissist] does not free herself from him [. . .], because, to catch him, she must please him” (Beauvoir 2011: 682). This is why feeling like a precious doll being kissed on the forehead outside of 7-Eleven is disturbingly continuous with feeling like a rubber doll in Robert's bedroom.

This Beauvoirian reading then also tells against those online critics that characterized Margot as a manipulative temptress deceiving a clumsy, well-intentioned young man. Robert is not just a “comically bad lover” (MacDougald 2019; see also Treisman 2017). He is alienated and predatory. Robert seeks in Margot not a peer but a pair of docile approving eyes that can “confirm him in his being” (Beauvoir 2011: 213). In so doing, he tries to reduce her to an Other onto which he can project his own fantasies (Kruks 2013: 70). We see this in a chilling manner in the story's sex scene. There, Robert makes Margot “not just an object of pleasure but a means of reaching this hubris” of masculine vanity (Beauvoir 2011: 171).³⁹ Nevertheless, this “dream of possession” is bound to fail, for “as soon as he opens his arms, his prey once again becomes foreign to him” and is ready to be taken by others (2011: 181). This is why Robert is eternally tortured by the possibility that Margot may have an “old high-school boyfriend” or may be laughing at him with a new lover (Roupenian 2017).⁴⁰ Margot is “everlasting disappointment” for Robert, she is fickle and treacherous

³⁹ Robert's porn-inspired script is one of conquest and domination, so disconnected from the reality of intersubjective exchange that it veers into absurdity: “[. . .] he slapped her thigh and said, ‘Yeah, yeah, you like that,’ with an intonation that made it impossible to tell whether he meant it as a question, an observation, or an order, and when he turned her over he growled in her ear, ‘I always wanted to fuck a girl with nice tits,’ and she had to smother her face in the pillow to keep from laughing again. [. . .] he kept losing his erection, and every time he did he would say, aggressively, ‘You make my dick so hard,’ as though lying about it could make it true” (Roupenian 2017).

⁴⁰ It is certainly not by accident that Margot fantasizes about one day having a boyfriend with whom she could *laugh* at Robert. Laughter as a bond rather than a weapon evokes a very different future. For Beauvoir's remarks on the role of laughter as a weapon against masculine, patriarchal arrogance see (2011: 213, 367).

(Beauvoir 2011: 213). But that is not a function of her narcissism. It is rather a product of his own delusional vanity.

Reading *Cat Person* through Beauvoir's work makes clear why Margot, as a narcissist, propels herself into situations where she is clearly made unfree. It better explains both the twists and turns of the plot and its deeply disturbing effect. But narcissism is not just a good tool for contemporary literary interpretation. The point is deeper. If *Cat Person* is as documentary-like as many thought it was, then the fact that Beauvoir's concept can illuminate the story speaks to its relevance to our lives. Narcissism is a valuable notion for a feminist analysis of our current social reality. Indeed, I want to suggest that thinking with Beauvoir about this kind of fraught sexual encounter may breathe new life into our popular feminist thinking. It can lend nuance to our ethical framework and it can reinvigorate our political outlook. This is why reading Margot as a narcissist matters.

4. Complicating Responsibility

Beauvoir's notion of narcissism reminds us that patriarchal ways of life do not just operate on women 'from the outside'. They also depend on women *actively* sustaining them. Although circumstances invite narcissism, and vain men like Robert certainly encourage it, it is women themselves who enthusiastically embrace this attitude. This insight moves us towards a more nuanced way of thinking about ethical responsibility under conditions of gender-based hierarchy.

The dominant pop feminist reading operates with a particular background theory of women's subordination: one that emphasizes *coercion*. It assumes that being dominated by others is a bad way to be and that no one could ever genuinely want to take up such a position. Therefore, subordination must be something imposed from outside, something we are always forced into. This is why, in the case of *Cat Person*, pop feminism centers explanatory elements like the systemic and

coercive nature of sexual violence, the punishment of women for not being ‘nice’, or the threat that individual men represent. Coercion emerges then as *the* theoretical vocabulary available to explain subordination. The result is a picture where social subordination cancels out responsibility—because occupying a lower position is something one is always *made to do* by others. This makes it inappropriate, if not impossible, to criticize individual women who seem to embrace and entrench their gendered unfreedom. On this framework, there are the powerful and the powerless, and it is clear who is in the wrong and deserves criticism.

Beauvoir’s notion of narcissism complicates this background theory of responsibility. Coercive patriarchal forces are real, and they do operate in our social context. Social customs and arrangements limit women’s opportunities. Men reduce women to pornographic props and sentimental projections of their hopes and feelings. The threat of sexual violence is all too real. But, for Beauvoir, recognizing this is perfectly compatible with holding women responsible because the path to subordination is not always reducible to coercion. Narcissism is one way in which women embrace and even enjoy their role as the Other, actively participating in sustaining their own unfreedom. It is a mode of “active complicity” in patriarchal subordination (Kruks 2013: 71–72; Knowles 2019a: 250–51; Hengehold 2017: 83).⁴¹

It is not simply that women accept their position as the Other because they have no other option. [. . .] Complicity implies the ability to do otherwise. I cannot be complicit in something I cannot avoid doing. The unfreedom of complicity is not simply something that is imposed from without [. . .]. [it] is something that is embraced from within. Complicity is thus distinctive in being a form of unfreedom that is reinforced and perpetuated by unfree agents themselves, even if they are not the initial cause of this unfreedom. (Knowles 2019a: 246)

⁴¹ The idea of complicity is present in key passages of *The Second Sex*, e.g., “the man who constitutes woman as *Other* will [. . .] find in her a deep complicity” (Beauvoir 2011: 10).

Seeking narcissistic pleasure and satisfaction is then not just a way of being constrained or pushed around by a patriarchal world. The actions of narcissistic women are not just self-protective, nor are they an unavoidable side effect of existing as a woman. Margot, for instance, will not suffer strong social penalties for not going home with Robert. There are multiple moments where she could have stopped what was happening. But she does not. She actively propels the plot because it feeds her need for self-glorification. Pop feminism makes us choose between thinking of women as responsible or as unfree. For Beauvoir, this is a false dichotomy. The way *women make themselves unfree* is central to sustaining patriarchal social dynamics.

At this point, one could insist, however, that the challenge of narcissism is overstated. One could argue that coercion continues to have the primary explanatory role—narcissism merely moves it one level up. Maybe the world does not force women into these fraught sexual encounters, but it forces them into becoming narcissists in the first place.⁴² Patriarchal conditions and constraints make women develop a pathologically self-centered psychology that can then operate on behalf of those oppressive forces. If this were the case, then talk of responsibility would be rather hollow and ethical criticism would seem inappropriate.

But this is a misguided understanding of feminine narcissism for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, as an existential attitude, narcissism is not a brute psychological feature. Even though this is a socially encouraged way of being, the relation between narcissistic agents and their circumstances is not the same as the relation between a piece of clay and a mold. After all, even under patriarchal pressure, women are always complex human agents. Although “circumstances

⁴² Knowles attributes a similar position to Susan James: “women’s situation of dependence and subordination distorts their psychology leading women to become complicit in ways of life they would not otherwise choose” (2019a 245). Another way to elaborate this objection would be to cast it in terms of the notion of adaptive preferences. For discussions of the limits of the adaptive preferences framework and its relation to active complicity see Knowles (2016: 18–20; 2019b).

invite” women to engage in this pathological form of self-love, they can never force them to take it up (Beauvoir 2011: 667; Knowles 2019a: 252). Part of what it is to be a narcissist is to *actively* adopt a certain way of thinking about oneself. This closing of oneself onto a narcissistic project always requires as part of its explanation an *active* reaction by the agent herself, a positive investment of oneself in oneself.

Secondly, women do not adopt narcissism simply because it is the only thing on the table. They are moved by something much more positive and more enticing. Narcissistic women are particularly *enthusiastic accomplices*. In this respect, narcissism is different from other forms of active complicity marked by a tone of “resignation” or “stoicism” (Beauvoir 2011: 642; Knowles 2019a: 255). Narcissism is not just about making the best of what is available, or about finding pride in one’s hardship. It is clearly about pleasure and enjoyment. And there is *real pleasure* to be found by young women in experiencing the world as dolls—be it the precious kind or those made out of rubber. This is why they take up narcissism. As Nancy Bauer points out in her remarks about ‘hook-up culture’ on college campuses, “there is pleasure in pleasuring guys, and this pleasure is real. And yet it is not unadulterated” (2015: 46).

Being the focus of attention is insidiously attractive, particularly for young women encouraged to see themselves as things to be looked at. This enjoyment of adoration is also something actively proposed to women by individual men, often in a predatory way. But while some women resist this compromising deal, others readily embrace it. This phenomenological account of narcissism as a mode of active complicity complicates our current pop feminist thinking. Narcissism highlights “the active role agents can play in embracing and reinforcing their own unfreedom”, making room for individual responsibility within a structural feminist analysis (Knowles 2019a: 246). This moves us from coercion and helplessness to a more nuanced picture of

temptations and resistance. Although we cannot break free from our socialization, “a woman has certain choices within this framework” (Arp 1995: 173). And we are all responsible and criticizable for the choices we make.

5. Social Change and Self-transformation

Not only can we engage in a critique of narcissism as an existential attitude, but we also positively *should*. Without such criticism there will be no pressure to change the patriarchal dynamics of alienation that plague relations between men and women. And without such a change we cannot expect to make substantial social progress. Narcissism highlights then the key role of psychological self-transformation as part of feminist liberation.

Recall that, on the dominant pop feminist reading, Roupenian’s viral story was taken as a call for change in the power dynamics between men and women. The zeitgeist it captured was one where women were finally speaking out and revealing how mundane behaviors actually constituted ways of navigating risk, of responding self-protectively to a threatening patriarchal world. The solution was then to eliminate the threat and the risk, no matter how subtle. This was the thrust of the pop feminist political agenda. Men needed to listen, to apologize, to understand that they too may be making women uncomfortable, coercing them without even noticing (Silman 2017; Glosswitch 2017). They had power, so there needed to be sanctions, guidelines, guardrails, and more protective measures against them. By keeping these problematic social actors in check, we could remove the barriers that held women back and made them unfree.

Let me be clear: eliminating the threat of sexual violence is crucial to changing the way men and women relate to each other in our society. There is certainly a background of risk that constrains the way women navigate the world. These are all elements of our gender-hierarchical

culture. But, as thinking with Beauvoir suggests, that is not the whole story. There are also existential attitudes, like masculine vanity and feminine narcissism, which are crucial in structuring and propelling these ethically fraught heterosexual encounters. Narcissism leads women to positively set up and pursue interactions that further constitute them as unfree. This troubles a political assumption at the heart of the pop feminist political agenda: that “people will naturally gravitate toward freedom as long as there is no ‘blockage’” (Knowles 2019a: 251). Holding back the powerful and eliminating violence—the potential ‘blockages’ to women’s freedom—is not enough. Beauvoir’s phenomenological account tell us the problem is deeper. It starts within agents themselves.

Indeed, between the Margots and the Roberts of this world, there is something tragically unavoidable about these ‘toxic dates’. Given their existential attitudes, there will always be a tendency towards this perverse trade of adoration for sexual submission—no matter how many guardrails we put in place. This is reflected in the despair that permeates *Cat Person*. In a small interlude, Margot imagines someday having a boyfriend who would understand her and cringe along with her at Robert’s faults. But he will never exist, Margot quickly concludes. This echoes author Kristen Roupenian’s own words. “Sometimes I talk to men who mean so much to me and I don’t understand why we are not connecting,” she says. “It can be very lonely trying to explain what it’s like being a woman, and that’s a feature of all heterosexual relationships” (Nicolau 2019).⁴³ As one commentator put it, Roupenian’s bleak remarks seem to say that:

relations between men and women are grim and unsatisfying but, at the same time, everybody is getting what they want. There isn’t a better way for things to be; there

⁴³ Roupenian is here in line with the dominant pop feminist reading: “It is remarkably difficult for women to talk to our romantic partners about what, exactly, it’s like for us out there” (Khazan 2017). See Berg (2018) regarding how the author’s public interventions after the publication of the story interacted with its online readership.

is nothing else to expect. Heterosexuality is, and is only, the negotiation between two fundamentally incompatible sets of desires [. . .]. (McClay 2019)

The pop feminist framework leaves us then with this picture of the world where we lament our unfortunate natures, but we do not nothing to change them because we cannot. Men are vain and predatorial, women are narcissistic. Feminist politics becomes a “struggle for dominance” between these antithetical and ethically compromised beings (Tsai 2017).⁴⁴

A Beauvoirian account breaks out of this hopelessness. It allows us to envision different ways in which we could desire each other, bringing back with it the possibility of freedom and reciprocity. For that to be possible, *both men and* women need to engage in efforts towards self-transformation. Women need to shed their need for self-glorification and men need to relinquish their aspiration to being uncontested sovereign subjects. As Nancy Bauer puts it,

a great theme of *The Second Sex*—one that, alas, has yet to find sufficient resonance among feminists—is that the achievement of full personhood for women requires not only that men stop objectifying women in pernicious sexual and nonsexual ways but also that women care about abjuring the temptation to objectify themselves. (Bauer 2015: 51)

What the debate about *Cat Person* shows us is precisely a continued underappreciation among feminists today of this difficult and necessary internal work of “abjuring the temptation” of making oneself unfree. Women must relinquish the “repressive satisfaction” of narcissism, if they are ever to exit their subordinate position (Bartky 1982: 138). They must actively unlearn this way of being in the world for the thrill of being seen, just as men must unlearn their vanity. This is not easy, but it is far from impossible. As one reader said about Roupenian’s story, “Margot’s problematic

⁴⁴ B. D. McClay goes further and argues that narcissism itself explains the public thirst for stories like *Cat Person*. “These stories give at least one half of this toxic dynamic what they want by reflecting back their experience: *there, you’re seen now*” (McClay 2019). See also Berg (2018).

approach to dating and sex with Robert resonates hard with many women because it's something many of us have had to work hard to *unlearn*" (Noyes 2017, my emphasis).

Many will be weary, however, of placing this burden of self-transformation on women, alongside men. Asking those who are socially subordinated to struggle against themselves in this way may seem problematic, reinforcing the hierarchical disadvantages that already exist. One may even concede that women's self-transformation is important but argue that we should prioritize fighting on other fronts. We should worry first about changing men's vain and predatory attitudes, about doing away with the cultural alienation of women's bodies and undoing the constraints that still shape women's lives. Why not start with these things, instead of demanding that *women* change here and now?

This is a helpful challenge that pushes us to further clarify the political dimension of Beauvoir's notion of narcissism. Indeed, it is important to highlight that Beauvoir's account does direct us to a politics of socio-cultural change, well beyond women's self-transformation.⁴⁵ After all, her conception of narcissism is that of a cultural pathology. If we are worried about feminine narcissism, we should attack the social and cultural factors that explain why this is still a large-scale social phenomenon. We should ask what kind of constraints are still in place keeping women from real engagement with the world. Are young women like Margot still 'busy' going to college without 'doing anything'? Are they still encouraged to regard themselves as mostly things to be looked at? Narcissism sheds a particularly critical light on thriving rituals of femininity, like those that feed the make-up and beauty industries, as highly suggestive of an alienating, self-referential

⁴⁵ This self-transformation is therefore both intersubjective and part of a broader socio-cultural project of change. This distances it from what Kruks terms "the politics of self-transformation" employed by privileged social actors, such as white antiracists: individuals should "struggle to become aware of their racist ways so that they may choose to shed them" (2013: 23). Kruks argues that this project easily collapses into a "personal therapeutic" and that it reaffirms a problematic conception of the self as a radically free, implausibly autonomous subject (2013: 23, 96–105). I take the self-transformation that Beauvoir's critique of narcissism calls for to involve neither these exclusively inwards-looking efforts, nor a view of the self as radically free.

attitude.⁴⁶ These worries extend to more recent developments like the ubiquitous ‘selfie’, the new practices of ‘self-curation’ associated with social media,⁴⁷ and the mainstream celebration of openly narcissistic cultural figures like Kim Kardashian.⁴⁸ All of these are important points of criticism and change, in response to the phenomenon of narcissism.

However, to say that women should only strive to change themselves *once we take care of all these other factors* would be a mistake. To relegate the unlearning of narcissism to a low priority in a feminist agenda is to doom us all to having to wait for the world to change for our lives to get any better. This means tying any hope of progress to changes so large that they can become a vague and tenuous horizon for individual women living today. This should be unacceptable for the many who saw themselves in Margot. To lift the burden of change from these women is to usher in again the despairing tone of Roupenian’s remarks and to return to a conception of feminist politics as a futile lamentation.

A Beauvoirian conception of narcissism does not make us wait. If we think of narcissism as a way of being that is not *just* determined by our circumstances, then we can start to see a way out of it without having to have a perfectly egalitarian social world. We can draw a wedge between us and our patriarchal context that is politically productive. We can say that, “although oppressed, women are not completely powerless in the face of social forces. And it is this agency that women

⁴⁶ Bartky evocatively calls this the “fashion-beauty complex” (1982: 135). Widdows argues that the beauty ideal for women has recently become “an ethical ideal”, insulating the pursuit of this ideal from charges of narcissism and self-indulgence (2018: 123). Wolf has also described the shedding of the feminine “beauty myth” as “the pleasure of shedding self-consciousness and narcissism”; “a woman-loving definition of beauty supplants [. . .], narcissism with self-love, [. . .] absence with presence, stillness with animation” (2002: 285, 291). For another helpful analysis of “beauty work” see Tolentino (2019: 61–94). For similar comments on the wedding industry and on reality TV see Tolentino (2019: 271, 38–45).

⁴⁷ “Instagram encourages people to treat life [. . .] like a production engineered to be witnessed and admired by an audience. It has become common for people, especially women, to interact with themselves as if they were famous all the time” (Tolentino 2019: 274, see also 14, 44, 89–91).

⁴⁸ Kardashian’s 2015 book of selfies, *Selfish*, was called “an insane project, a document of mind-blowing vanity and deranged perseverance”—all this by a reviewer who “can’t recommend it enough” (Bennett 2015). See also Garber (2015).

continue to possess that renders feminist social transformation possible” (Arp 1995: 170). Yes, women are burdened by this account of narcissism, subject to the responsibility of abjuring the “temptations of thinghood and self-idolization” (Zakin 2017: 107). But that means they can also be much freer than they are now. With responsibility comes the possibility of resistance. Our lives do not have to be an inevitable series of ‘toxic dates’. What women stand to gain from self-transformation is not just some abstract victory against the patriarchy. Unlearning narcissism means unlearning habits that put us in harm’s way, that preclude professional, artistic and intellectual excellence, and that make genuine loving relationships with others impossible.

In re-centering self-transformation alongside socio-cultural transformation, Beauvoirian narcissism serves as a corrective to certain assumptions of the pop feminist political agenda. As I have argued, relegating self-transformation to a future far away is unacceptable. It dooms us all to the patriarchal wasteland that Kristen Roupenian so chillingly evokes. The insistence on the need to relinquish the pleasures of self-worship allows us then to regain hope of a better life for women today.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the feminist reception of *Cat Person* as a relatable tale of victimization does not do justice to its rich phenomenological description and to its ‘skin-crawling’ effect. I have offered an alternative Beauvoirian reading that casts Margot as a contemporary incarnation of the narcissist existential type of *The Second Sex*. Thinking of Margot in this way allows us to make better sense of the story, but also of our lives. Beauvoir’s notion of narcissism is an important tool of analysis for feminists today, well beyond this viral literary tale. It allows us to move beyond simplistic models of responsibility and presses us to see systematic subordination as not just something that is *done* to women, but also something women *do* to themselves. By adopting

this more nuanced view, we can foreground the neglected idea of self-transformation as part of feminist political resistance. Self-transformation, in turn, allows us to break away from a despairing, dire picture of heterosexual relations and to envision better ways to live together.

Understanding *Cat Person* as a study in the phenomenology of narcissism renders it a powerful wake up call. It becomes not just a site for lamentation, but a tool to interrogate just how far young, relatively privileged women like Margot have come. Faced with unprecedented independence and opportunities, have they really made that much progress? Are they pursuing their life projects in a primarily narcissistic mode? These are uncomfortable thoughts to entertain, particularly when Margot seems so relatable to so many of us. Indeed, narcissism, as a feminist critical notion, uncomfortably points to how oppression does not make women great. It shapes us in twisted and pathological ways that fit in perfectly with predatorial modes of masculine sexual conduct. Margot is then an insightful character because she is an illustration of that famous epigraph in *The Second Sex*: “half victim, half accomplice, like everyone” (Beauvoir 2011: 277).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mercedes Corredor, Alice Kelley, Sydney Keough, Eli I. Lichtenstein and Ishani Maitra for extensive comments and discussion. Thanks to two anonymous referees for their challenging and helpful comments and to the audience at the Diverse Lineages of Existentialism II Conference for their feedback. An initial version of this paper was presented at Michigan’s Race, Gender and Feminist Philosophy Interdisciplinary Working Group panel on *Cat Person*, in 2018. Thank you to Elise Woodard and Eduardo Martinez for co-organizing this session, and a special thanks to Kristen Roupenian for her participation.

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