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‘Cat Person’: Essayism, Virality and the Digital Future of Short Fiction

ABSTRACT

The digital revolution has brought back to the fore questions about the health of the short story. Short fiction scholars have for some time now been considering the possibilities that post-book and online spaces might open for the short story form and its popularity among readers. Despite this, when Kristen Roupenian's New Yorker short story ‘Cat Person’ went viral late in 2017, critics of the genre paid virtually no attention to it. This article sets out to correct this on the premise that studying the ‘Cat Person’ phenomenon can help us refine our understanding of the behaviour and potential of short stories in digital spheres. It focuses, to explore this, on the fact that Roupenian's text was received as an essay, rather than a short story, by many of its first readers, and accounts for this miscategorisation in two different yet interlinked ways. First, it situates the piece in a tradition of women’s storytelling that has long been blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction. And second, it examines the reception of ‘Cat Person’ in the context of social media platforms that promote personal and reality-based modes of expression and communication. The article concludes by conceptualising a connection between nonfictional interpretations of the story and its virality. Such link complicates accounts about the amenability of short fiction to online environments, suggesting that a story’s capacity to relinquish its

identity as such and take on functions of the essay genre might play a key role in determining its performance online.

KEYWORDS

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Diagnosing the health of the short story is one of the most entrenched routines in the scholarship of the genre. Since its establishment as a modern literary form, critics and commentators have insisted on either hailing short fiction as the literature of the present and future or proclaiming it a precarious and unmarketable form of literary creation in perpetual decline.¹ In recent years, these questions have been brought back to the fore due to the digital revolution. Scholars have for some time now been commenting on the possibilities that post-book and online spaces can afford short fiction and its markets with a degree of optimism. Recent articles on the short story and digital media have appeared in a 2018 special issue of *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, and in the major critical anthologies *The Cambridge History of The*

¹ See Bowen (1937), Bates (1941; 1972), or Bell (1993) for a sample of pieces exemplifying both of these positions over time. Also, see Power (2014) for a discussion of how narratives of decline and renaissance have long dominated discussions of the short story.

English Short Story (2016) and *The Edinburgh Companion to the Short Story in English* (2019). In this context, it is surprising that when Kristen Roupenian's 'Cat Person' went viral late in 2017, critics paid virtually no attention to it. The story famously prompted a hoard of responses in the form of op-eds and think-pieces that flooded the Internet and motivated scholarly articles from the fields of stylistics and psychoanalysis.² Yet, it has received no such sustained consideration from the ranks of short fiction scholarship. In this article, I set out to correct this on the premise that studying the 'Cat Person' phenomenon can help us refine our understanding of the behaviour and potential of the short story in digital spheres. My main hypothesis is that examining the success of Roupenian's piece helps nuance generally held assumptions about short fiction's special capacity to adapt to, and thrive in, online environments.

To test this, I concentrate on an aspect of the reception of 'Cat Person' which commentators often remark on but do not fully investigate. Namely, the fact that the text was taken to be an essay by many of its first readers. The first two sections of this article discuss the features and circumstances which enabled this reading. On the one hand, I insert 'Cat Person' within a tradition of women's storytelling which has long been blurring the border between fictional and nonfictional modes of writing and reading. It is possible to see that 'Cat Person' engages with this tradition, and also note that the #MeToo movement, which contextualises the story's production and reception, is based on similar dynamics. On the other hand, I argue that the essayification of the piece is also the product of its inhabiting and being primarily circulated via social media. The conclusion of the article proposes a link between

² See Walsh and Murphy (2019), and Johnson (2020).

nonfictional interpretations of the story and its virality. Such a link complicates existing accounts of the amenability of short fiction to online environments, as it suggests the form's wellbeing in the digital world might not depend wholly on its intrinsic characteristics. Instead, it suggests a story's capacity to relinquish its identity as such and take on functions of another genre might play an important role in determining its performance online.

'Cat Person' and Women's Storytelling

'Cat Person' was first published online in the *New Yorker* website on the 9th December 2017, becoming, in a matter of hours, a viral phenomenon which drew 'a 'record-breaking' number of online views' (Wood 2017: para. 2). The piece tells the story of a bad date between the twenty-year-old protagonist, Margot, and Robert, a man fourteen years her senior. It is related through an omniscient narrator closely focalized on Margot, confining the readers to her perspective of the events, and granting access to her thoughts as they develop. Yet, despite this and other recognisable devices of narrative fiction, like the use of free-indirect discourse, dialogue, and a well-structured plot (Walsh and Murphy 2019: 90), many of the story's first readers saw the piece as an essay. As Molly Roberts wrote for the *Washington Post*: 'Many have mistakenly called 'Cat Person' an 'essay' or 'article' [...] conflat[ing] the writer with the protagonist' (Roberts 2017: para. 8). Confusion about the generic status of Roupenian's piece has drawn considerable attention, becoming a prominent point of discussion in responses to the piece. Nearly every commentary on 'Cat Person' remarks on this mistake, and a variety of explanations have emerged. For Megan Garber, for example, the categorisation error is underlain

by the misogynistic assumption that women writers lack ‘moral imagination to create characters who are fully fictionalized’ (Garber 2017: para. 6). Larissa Pham ascribed it, on the other hand, to contemporary reading habits which prioritise engagement with literature ‘on a sociocritical level, as a kind of fable with a moral that pops off the page and into our personal lives’ (Pham 2017: para. 6). And Laura Miller has seen the fact that the story was primarily circulated through phones, where the ‘*New Yorker*’s ‘Fiction’ heading’ could be easily ‘overlooked,’ as the main responsible for the generic misinterpretation (Miller 2017: para. 5). I propose that a more complete and adequate explanation for the story’s reception as an essay emerges if ‘Cat Person’ is inserted in a tradition of women’s forms of expression which has long seen in narratives, fictional or not, a tool to codify and communicate oppressive experiences.

Whatever else it is about, ‘Cat Person’ is a story pre-eminently concerned with labels and labelling. This is obvious from the piece’s title, a stand-in phrase for Robert which initially serves to classify him as a pet owner. As the plot progresses, though, the existence of Robert’s cats is put into question, rendering the role of this descriptor more ambiguous: after their date, Margot ‘remembered he’d talked a lot about his cats and yet she hadn’t seen any cats in the house, and wondered if he’d made them up’ (Roupenian 2017: para. 111) This opens the door to seeing ‘cat person’ as a cunning self-branding strategy; a device Robert employs to appear more attractive to Margot or incite her interest.³ The story also finishes with a label produced by Robert, although on this occasion it is applied to Margot. “Whore,” the story’s final word, is

³ Recent studies suggest that most women value pet ownership when considering a potential partner and that men’s use of pets in courtship is an increasingly widespread strategy in 21st century dating. See Guéguen and Ciccotti (2008), and Gray et al. (2015).

Robert's last message in a string of increasingly accusational texts he sends to his love interest after she decides to ghost him. Despite its patently different character, the function of 'whore' resembles that of 'cat person' to the extent that it attempts to class and fix a character within a predetermined identity. As Luke Johnson explains (Johnson 2020: 252), the tag activates Robert's dualistic view of women as either Madonnas or prostitutes.

By contrast, the rest of the text systematically dramatises the protagonist's struggle to neatly identify and classify the different situations she lives through with Robert. Margot is shown to have difficulty, for example, pinning down her partner's mood early in their date, thinking by turns that he is uninterested, hurt and nervous. She is also disconcerted by the ambiguities of his first kiss, which she finds 'terrible [...] shockingly bad,' but also recognizes that 'somehow it also gave her that tender feeling toward him' (Roupenian 2017: para. 43) And when she tries to describe Robert to her friend Tamara after their encounter, she tells her: ' "He's a nice guy, sort of" [...] and wondered how true that was' (Roupenian 2017: para. 117). But the apotheosis of Margot's trouble with labelling takes place during her sexual intercourse with Robert. The story's central scene dramatises Margot's arrival at an emotional crossroads marked by the sudden revulsion she develops towards her date, her incapacity to withdraw consent due to feelings of guilt, and her fight to enjoy sex under these circumstances. Even as we get a clear and precise picture of the coitus and the protagonist's thoughts and feelings throughout it, none of these emotions can be accurately named, and the encounter defies easy categorisation. Once Robert ejaculates and 'collapse[s] on her like a tree falling,' Margot is said to 'marve[l] at herself for a while, at the mystery of this person who'd just done this bizarre, inexplicable thing' (Roupenian 2017: para. 86). The way in which Margot's

experiences resist being tagged is something which is seldom remarked in considerations of the story, but not something which has gone totally unnoticed. Writing for the *Financial Times*, the novelist Elif Shafak rejected the idea that ‘Cat Person’ was ‘about gender violence [...] date rape or sexual harassment exactly. It is about something more subtle, diffused and internalised’ instead, she suggests: ‘the complexity and the confusion that many women feel when they enter a romantic relationship —or wish to exit one’ (Shafak 2017: para. 4). In this sense, Shafak’s article ultimately articulates an apology of the story and of fiction more generally for somehow managing to communicate ‘things [that] are too complex or too difficult to express’ (Shafak 2017: para. 12).

A degree of oversimplification might be involved in schematising ‘Cat Person’ as being made from masculine and feminine texts set against each other according to their relationship with labels. However, the possibility of doing so highlights the relationship between Roupenian’s text and some of the key uses of storytelling for women. Multiple feminist critics have remarked on the way in which women have traditionally been starved of power to name and order the world. ‘[M]en have the power of naming,’ writes Andrea Dworkin, ‘[t]he world is his because he has named everything in it, including her’ (Dworkin 1989: 17-8). A consequence of this is that women have lacked a conceptual repository with which to fix and express aspects of their own existence, especially those which concern some form of male abuse. This is nicely illustrated by Cheris Kramarae in her 1981 qualitative study of communicative differences between men and women, *Women and Men Speaking*. There, she observes that women in her seminars often discussed ‘shared experiences for which there are no labels,’ and exemplifies this by reproducing the complaint voiced by one of the

participants in her sessions about her husband's systematically evading dinner-making duties by praising her cooking:

[H]e was using a verbal strategy for which [the woman] had no word and thus had more difficulty identifying and bringing it to his awareness. She told people at the seminar, 'I had to tell you the whole story to explain how he was using flattery to keep me in my female place.

(Kramarae 1981: 7-8)

As some critics have noticed (Moi 1985: 159-60), implicit in Kramarae's account is a view of narrative as a valuable resource for women in the face of terminological restraints. Narratives — 'whole stories,' anecdotes, reminiscences, etc. — may be and have been employed by women to communicate and share otherwise nameless experiences. In this sense, Sara Ahmed has contended that storytelling underlies the formation not just of the female subject but also of the feminist movement. We can think of '[f]eminism's collective project,' she writes, as the 'formation of a 'we' [...] made up of different stories of pain' (Ahmed 2004: 174).

Ahmed and others are thinking in nonfictional terms here. The narrative alluded above is akin to personal and factual accounts, more than novels or short stories. Yet, fiction has participated and continues to participate in this endeavour. In her recent survey of contemporary women's reading habits, *Why Women Read Fiction* (2019), Helen Taylor finds that for many female readers literary works constitute an opportunity to learn about themselves and their real-life gendered circumstances. Many of her interviewees see fiction as a form of 'empower[ment] and liber[ation ...] giving [them] greater self-knowledge and confidence to define and change their lives'

(Taylor 2019: 231). Similarly, Emma Young has made a case for understanding contemporary women's short stories as an 'intentionally feminist literary vehicle' (Young 2018: 1). She argues that due to short fiction's focus 'on the moment,' female writers from the 1980s onwards have used the genre to explore 'the everyday lived experiences of gender, sexuality and feminist theories' (Young 2018: 4). Young's claims are built on analyses of stories by British authors like A. S. Byatt, Michèle Roberts, or Ali Smith. However, the fiction-nonfiction porosity she ascribes to women's short fiction is something that can perhaps be more readily observed in the way the form has been employed by feminist magazines, anthologies and, more recently, blogs. Many of these publications routinely intermingle short stories with reviews, news articles, or life-writing, and see both fictional and non-fictional components as part of the same project. Kathleen Kerr-Koch explains in relation to the Women's Liberation Movement magazine *Spare Rib*, for instance, that the publication presented short fiction side-by-side real accounts of 'everyday' women's lives, both of which equally served as 'formidable tools for exposing real and complex experiences and shattering stereotyped images of virgins, shrews, or seductresses' (Kerr-Koch 2017: 229). Cynthia G. Franklin has made a comparable argument regarding anthologies which combine multiple kinds of writing. Generically hybrid texts like *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) or *Home Girls* (1983) are set to 'blur 'real' and textual voices,' she writes, 'and 'real' and textual communities' to make space for the full variety of women's experience and forms of expression (Franklin 1997: 11). And Kaitlynn Mendes sees this same narratological model as one that is carried forward in digital feminist cultures. She shows that feminist blogs and e-magazines, both of which have flourished in the last twenty or so years, deploy 'a

range of discursive strategies,' including short stories, as 'key tools of critique' (Mendes 2020: 302), as we can see in well-known sites like *Room Magazine* or *Scum*.

We can rethink this history of women's expressive and reading practices by seeing it as the emergence of an interpretative community for whom the distinction between fiction and nonfiction has been weakened. Confronted with the difficulty of voicing their experiences, many women see narrative fiction as yet another tool with which to articulate aspects of their lived realities. In turn, they are liable to read these texts as not wholly separate or different from factual accounts and testimonies. With its focus on, and particular engagement with, the intricacies of modern dating, sex, and female consent, 'Cat Person' speaks directly to this cultural circumstance, and its reception as an essay may be at least partly explained by it. In fact, these mechanics might be seen to permeate the #MeToo movement as a whole. Roupenian's text was published at the height of #MeToo and is in clear dialogue with some of its central concerns.⁴ Like other projects before it, such as *Everyday Sexism* or #BeenRapedNeverReported, #MeToo emerged as an online platform where women could foster 'empowerment through empathy' via the exchange of personal experiences of abuse (Page and Arcy 2020: 333). Yet, its development has seen the broadening of these parameters, and it now incorporates a growing cultural industry whose products include films, TV programmes or novels.⁵ As with the array of hybrid

⁴ Many responses to 'Cat Person' comment on and explore its relationship with #MeToo, some of which I have already mentioned (Roberts 2017, Shafak 2017). Additionally, see Khazan (2017).

⁵ See Cosslett (2019) and '#MeToo in Film and TV' (2020).

feminist publications mentioned above, then, the movement currently puts fictional and nonfictional forms at the service of its projects of examination, denouncement and solidarity-building. In doing so, it legitimizes a fluidity between the two which, as ‘Cat Person’ demonstrates, may result in confusion.

‘Cat Person’ and Social Media

We can further explain the miscategorisation of ‘Cat Person’ from a different yet complementary angle. Connecting Roupenian’s text with stories in multi-genre anthologies, magazines and blogs raises pertinent questions regarding the inference that contexts and co-texts can have on the fictional status of a piece. As explained earlier, some commentators attributed the reception of ‘Cat Person’ as an essay to the material contexts in which it appeared. Besides Miller’s hypothesis that encountering the story on their phones misled many readers, Pham recounts how some saw the piece as nonfiction due to their association of the *New Yorker* with “‘newsy’ stuff.” This last point resonates with some of the latest research carried out in relation to short fiction’s history in periodicals and magazines. One argument that runs through several pieces of the 2021 collection of essays *The Modern Short Story and Magazine Culture, 1880-1950* is that, in contexts where short fiction is set to dialogue with other literary forms, a transference of features and subsequent generic instability can sometimes ensue. In his study of Hubert Crackanthrope’s *The Albemarle*, for instance, David Malcom points to the storyness with which many essays in the publication appear to be imbued (Malcom 2021: 82). Similarly, Louise Edensor detects essayistic features and functions in the short fiction published in *Rhythm* which contribute to

articulating the ‘Bergsonian philosoph[y]’ of the magazine (Edensor 2021: 114).⁶ And Saskia McCracken’s discussion of experimental writing in *Good Housekeeping* suggests that the appearance of pieces that straddled generic boundaries was made possible by the magazine’s being a ‘complex cultural platform for high and middlebrow writers and topics’ (McCracken 2021: 201). It is possible to perform an equivalent analysis of the reception of ‘Cat Person’ in the light of its publication context. However, I suggest that the online channels through which the story principally circulated, especially social networks, constituted a greater hybridising force than the *New Yorker*.

As Laura Dietz explains, a common misconception of early appraisals of short fiction’s fate in the digital world was the idea that the Internet afforded unprecedented possibilities for the publication of stand-alone short stories. ‘After a century and more of the dominance of the periodical and bound collection,’ she writes, online platforms promised that ‘short stories can go out into the world on its own, unfettered’ (Dietz 2019: 125). In practice, though, digital stories and other texts rarely, if ever, stand alone; they exist in rich polytextual environments with which they are in relation via a variety of elements such as tags, algorithms, comment sections, or hyperlinks. The relationship between stories and other elements of these online ecosystems appears to be an especially significant one. This is because the success rate of an online text can

⁶ Henri-Louis Bergson was a French philosopher best known for his conceptualisation of ‘the continuous nature of experience, and the artificial nature of the divisions we impose on the intellect’ (Blackburn 2016). Edensor explains how *Rhythm* embraced, particularly ‘Bergson’s concept of a ‘heterogeneous multiplicity’ in human perception’ (Edensor 2020: 110), the idea that several conscious states can co-exist at the same time and permeate one another.

be seen to be in direct proportion to its capacity for integration and affiliation. Given the associative nature of web navigation, Dietz suggests, ‘an unaffiliated story is a failed story’ (Dietz 2019: 135), whereas the more closely connected a digital story is, and the closer those connections, the greater its chances are to be broadcasted and read. To exemplify this, the critic highlights the way in which some online fictions have been partnered with or merged into other forms of digital media, such as video, audio and, particularly, games. Besides showing how these partnerships enable narratives to reach wider audiences online, another key point raised is the observation that short stories ‘perhaps de-emphasise their identity as ‘short stories’’ when successfully made ‘part of an integrated multimedia whole’ (Dietz 2019: 135). Such hypothesis proves equally if not more pertinent to the behaviour of fictions in social media, which is of particular relevance in the case of ‘Cat Person.’

Social media in general, and Facebook and Twitter specifically, are platforms promoting reality-based modes of expression. To start with, they are the principal means of dissemination of texts produced or published online, whose nature is overwhelmingly nonfictional. Not only do news and informative texts constitute the majority of the Internet,⁷ but the digital revolution has also brought about a boom in confessional modes of writing. In a much-discussed think-piece analysing the rise of the online personal essay, *Slate*’s senior editor Laura Bennett writes a propos of this that ‘[f]irst-person writing has long been the Internet’s native voice. As long as there

⁷ M. L. Kamil and D. M. Lane’s (1998) early study of types of text in the Internet found 96% of the information online to be nonfiction. More recently, L. T. Kasperova et al. (2016) have claimed that ‘news, press release, and comment’ are the ‘[m]ost actively developing Internet genres’ (4).

have been bloggers, there have been young people scraping their interior lives to convert the rawest bits into copy' (Bennett 2015: para. 4). This last point is important for two main reasons. First because the personal essay is precisely the genre with which many first identified 'Cat Person'. And second, because social media platforms are designed to equally foster the disclosure of the subjective and the private through a variety of mechanisms. Norm Friesen, who has studied this phenomenon in relation to Facebook, notices how the site prompts the generation of life-stories by requiring users to complete a profile and encouraging them to post on their timeline by asking: 'what's on your mind?' (Friesen 2017: Digital technologies, para. 1). Likewise, he argues that the main function of the different interactions the platform affords—befriending, following, liking, commenting, reposting—is to provide users 'with myriad ways of positioning themselves as subjects' (Friesen 2017: Digital technologies, para. 5), much of which applies also to the underlying dynamics platforms like Instagram or, more pertinently here, Twitter. In this sense, we can think of a story that enters social media as inhabiting a context dominated by nonfiction on multiple levels. We can also see that due to the way in which texts depend on likes, comments, tags, or shares to circulate these networks, a story's survival in and spread through them depends on its ability to associate with nonfiction elements.

A conclusion that can be drawn from these observations is that the fictional status of a literary text circulating social media may be destabilised by the hegemonic code of the platforms. This might happen in two interconnected ways. Like the magazines I referred to above, we can first think of social networks as heterogeneous textual spaces with the potential to transfer generic features between the different types of writing included in them. However, the dominance of factual and confessional modes of expression in them is sure to determine users' expectations and

make this conveyance more unidirectional. At the same time, a story's survival and visibility in these spaces depends on it being incorporated in one way or another to the life-narratives and subject positionings users are encouraged to produce. From this, it follows that the successful integration of short fiction in sites like Facebook or Twitter is, to use Dietz's expression, correlative with its capacity to deemphasise its identity, especially in relation to its fictional qualities. In other words, the more a story can be instrumentalised to produce some sort of statement about oneself, the likelier it is to become part of the network's fabric. 'Cat Person' illustrates both these points, albeit with unequal force. Whilst a likely influence, it is impossible to objectively quantify the extent to which simply encountering the piece in social media predisposed readers to read the text as an essay. Yet, it is clear that the spread of the story online depended on its potential to be employed by users to fulfil self-fashioning projects in these sites. The online transmission of 'Cat Person' was facilitated by a corpus of responses to the text, the uses of which included defining users's personalities via (dis)identification with the characters, stating views on issues of consent and abuse, and sharing related personal experiences.⁸

Virality and the Digital Future of Short Fiction

Implicit in this last point is a correspondence between 'Cat Person' going viral and the story's essayism described in the first part of the article. The social media dynamics I have just characterised suggest these platforms exert a de-fictionalizing force on the

⁸ See the collection of posts, comments and reactions compiled in the Twitter account Men React to Cat Person (@MenCatPerson) for a sample of these.

literary pieces circulating them. But their workings also indicate a direct proportion between possibilities of reading a story as real-life experience, or as making a case, and prospects of it being incorporated in and disseminated through these spaces. The potential to view characters as thinly veiled real people or social types, for example, or of identifying argumentative threads relevant to one's views and experiences, provide important opportunities for these texts to be variously interacted with and integrated into users' profiles. In this sense, the feminist thematic and narratological concerns I saw underlying much of the meaning of 'Cat Person' may be thought to underlie, also, its online success. As I have shown, the story is significantly interested in the use of narrative to express the unnamed or unnameable in heterosexual relationships, seeing in fiction a tool to expose and examine uncoded aspects of sexual politics and women's lived realities. Whilst this attribute of the piece inserts it within a tradition of women's writing and reading that blurs the fiction/nonfiction divide, I would argue that it too determined the story's digital booming. It offered online users clear avenues to meaningfully connect the fictional world of the story to their world in ways that made the text usable for a range of self-expression operations and subsequently boosted its circulation.

This resonates with, and can be further conceptualised through, David Shields' idea of 'reality hunger' (Shields 2011: 86). Developed in a book-length manifesto of the same name, the phrase 'reality hunger' attempts to describe a tendency in contemporary culture to crave literary products devoid of artifice which address or prove immediately relevant to the facts of one's existence. The reason for this desire, Shields intimates, is that as we live in an increasingly 'manufactured and artificial world, we yearn for the 'real,' semblances of the real. We want to pose something nonfictional against all the fabrication [... and find it] more and more difficult to want

to read or write novels' (Shields 2011: 81). Shields is not alone in producing this kind of diagnostic claims. Brian Dillon, in a book whose title I have adopted for my analysis here, *Essayism*, has recently remarked that many now wonder 'whether non-fiction is the new fiction,' himself included (Dillon 2017: 14). Both Shields and Dillon accordingly privilege nonfictional genres such as the biography, the memoir and, especially, the essay, in this new cultural paradigm. Yet, what is interesting about Shields' particular view of this issue is that he sees short stories in general, and short-short stories in particular, as a fictional genre which is not badly suited to satisfy this craving he identifies. In their shortness forms like the prose poem or microfiction, he proposes, strip the text from unnecessary elaboration, delivering 'the moral, psychological, philosophical news [...] now' (Shields 2011: 127). It is difficult to defend Shields' sweeping claims for culture at large. However, they capture the logic dominating social networks' embrace of 'Cat Person' and its subsequent skyrocketing.

Such an account has wider implications for our understanding of short fiction's behaviour and fate online. As I suggested early in this article, the idea that short stories are especially amenable to digital environments is generally upheld in short fiction studies. Critics have variously pointed to the genre's brevity (Murphet 2016), its portability (Dietz 2019), and experimental capacities (Murphet 2016; D'hoker 2018) as features which allow short fiction to enter and thrive on the internet. Indeed, from the early 2000s on there has been a more or less constant inflow of journalistic pieces announcing the rising currency of the form in connection to the digital revolution.⁹ However, as others have noticed such claims often tend to exaggerate (Miller 2013; Power 2018). And while short fiction surely has a space and

⁹ See Langley (1998), Scott (2008), or Kaufman (2013), for instance.

is developing interestingly online (via interactive storytelling or Twitterfiction, for example), it is also evident that the digital age has not yet 'ushered in a dramatic resurgence for the popularity of the short story' that some predicted and are eager to report (Dietz 2019: 125). The 'Cat Person' phenomenon sheds light on this discrepancy between short fiction's adequacy to the online medium and its success rate within it. Particularly, it suggests the potential to be read as something other than a short story actually plays an important part in the performance of a story digitally. Due to social media being the principal means of textual transmission online, and to the mechanics that govern these sites, a story's ability to undertake essayistic duties is key to its survival and outreach. Even as social networks themselves can work as contexts infusing the genre with nonfiction characteristics, as I discussed, not all short stories are equally responsive to this task. But the contextualisation of 'Cat Person' I offered in the first part of this article shows that short stories have a history of working essayistically in certain cultural spheres, and of fostering communities of readers that interpret them in this way. Here, I have highlighted this through the tradition of feminism and women's writing, but there may well be equivalent cases in different cultural communities. These histories hold special relevance in the digital future of the form. It is the continuation of precisely these modes of short story writing and reading which holds the most promise for increasing the health and the status of short fiction online. By extension, social groups and movements which employ or have traditionally employed short fiction in this way are likely to be the key beneficiaries of such an increase.

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