

The transformation



Bonnie Jo Campbell's "Gorilla Girl" tells the twisted coming-of-age story of a budding sociopath in southern Michigan. The narrator, whose name is not revealed in the text, takes the reader through some of the more notable life events in her adolescence, describing actions and emotions that would make any "nice" girl recoil in disgust. However, this disgust is vital to the story, as the narrator would undoubtedly feel an equal level of disdain were she to have to behave herself in a more orthodox manner. This is the story of a girl who is desperately trying to free herself of her own skin. She is bursting with raw animal energy, lashing out in violence against others — and sometimes against herself, if no one else is available — in an attempt to quell her frantic urges. The text is teeming with language of a negative connotation in order to elicit a primal gut reaction in the reader. The author chose such incredibly charged words that, were one to go through the story reading only the adjectives, it would create feelings nearly as powerful as actually reading the story as a whole. The narrator describes herself as a "poisoned brew" inside of her mother in the first paragraph (15). This early description sets the tone for the story, yet it barely begins to scratch the surface. From birth, the narrator feels crazed, angry, and uncomfortable in her own body. As a baby, she howled constantly and refused the soft comfort of blankets and toys. In her early childhood, she was violent toward her siblings and, once old enough to attend school, spread that violence to her classmates. She not only killed bugs, but ate them, savoring their misfortune. Her violence extends well beyond the normal realm of typical childhood egoism or the somewhat morbid but not unnatural fondness children have for playing God with insect lives; the narrator actually finds these outbursts therapeutic. After pummeling Tommy Pederson at school, she describes the lingering

feelings of calmness and clear headedness as an “ afterglow,” a word commonly used to describe the period directly after an orgasm, not a fight (17). Yet an orgasm is nothing if not a massive release, which is precisely what the violence was for her. Similarly, she feels the same clarity squeezing rose thorns into her skin until she bleeds or stabbing herself with house keys; we see this tendency toward self-injury recur throughout the text. She also says, “ If my parents would have beaten me, or even spanked me, there have been some relief,” and she is instantly calmed when Dr. Radcliffe slaps her across the face (19). In taking solace in these violent actions, the narrator is expressing her relief for having found a physical outlet for her inner anguish. Her tendency toward self-injury is based on a common root cause: she is trying to purge herself of emotions that are too frustrating or dense to deal with outright. The physical pain is something that is easier dealt with. Her propensity toward hurting others and the way she feels when someone hurts her are not entirely uncommon, as seen in certain sexual subcultures. When a wealthy CEO-type pays a woman or another man to beat and emasculate him, for example, he is looking for that same sense of clarity and release. Our narrator is not necessarily seeking out violence for sexual gratification, but the underlying motivation is similar. Over time, the narrator begins to seek any type of physical exhaustion as an outlet for her explosive energy. Joining the track team initially appears as though it has begun to tame some of her wilder tendencies. However, once she begins to take notice of her status as a sexual being, the floodgates open. This is an area where her lustful animal instincts take control of her: she masturbates frantically and sleeps around compulsively. She is desperate to find her match, someone with her wild strength, yet she is constantly disappointed.

The men she sleeps with are weak compared to her, becoming “ passive” and “ limp” (25). None of them are suited to provide her with a proper outlet for her passions. However, when she witnesses “ Samba of the Jungle” for the first time, she has finally found something that feels like home. She is intrinsically mesmerized by the act, though she knows that the woman is faking. She feels a kinship with this woman, as they both “ need to transform” (27). Although she is left disappointed by the blonde woman’s response to her, she is nonetheless determined to have the show become a part of her. The catharsis the narrator experiences during her initial viewing of the act leaves her sobbing. She is broken down by the act and then built back up, stronger and more confident. She has finally found an adequate display of her emotions, one that can fully drain and satisfy her in a way that no man or exercise ever could. She can condense all of her rage into this one act and then release it completely. She describes the physical transformation that she feels happening while the audience is privy only to her staged one. She can only hold her gorilla shape for a short time, however, before she collapses under the weight of her true self. Upon finding this release for her true strength, the narrator finds peace. Her inner turmoil is no longer eating her alive, pushing her to curse herself to sleep. Rather, she has found a way to harness her full potential, utilizing her entire being and purging herself of the feverish compulsions that she was once plagued with.