

Fantastic Journeys in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

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Abstract

Fantastic Historic Journeys in Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus sets out to explore women's sexuality in the postmodern novel. In the contemporary age, wherein, as in past ages, monstrous, grotesque, distorted bodies are rejected, denied and marginalized by society's norms, there is one female character in these novels that, at the end of a complicated and laborious search succeeds in finding her sexuality. In ***Nights at the Circus***, Fevvers is an aerialist; she travels with the circus from London to Petersburg and Siberia, crossing Europe and Asia in a great tour. She finds love and forms her identity in this continuous quest for self discovery. The present article aims to describe how journey, desire and love aid the character discover herself. My analysis will use Linden Peach's critique on the feminist usage of the carnivalesque and Helen Stoddard's references. My paper concludes that any boundaries, either mental, physical or continental can be crossed and fulfillment can be achieved by free full female sexuality.

Keywords

gender, grotesque body, body, carnival

In Great Britain, the changes occurring during the New Liberation Movement included social and class issues. In this period, writers such as Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Fay Weldon and Angela Carter have a profoundly new *écriture*.

Angela Carter's novels reflect magical realism as a trait of postmodernism. Her works include nine novels, including *Nights at the Circus* (1984), short stories, children's stories, radio plays, magazine reviews, newspaper articles and essays, both fiction and non-fiction writing.

The novel *Nights at the Circus* can be seen as a continuation of her non fictional writing. It is centered on the main character, Fevvers, an aerialist at a mobile circus. The whole novel revolves around Fevvers' life ever since her birth point in London to her development as a woman. The novel is divided into several sections: London, Petersburg and Siberia. The novel starts and finishes in London, a place of departure and final return, having the structure of a feminine *bildungsroman*, a search of identity and self acceptance.

Nights at the Circus has as starting point the year of 1899, just “before the cobwebs of the old century blow away” [7] and before the first glimpse of the twentieth century. Fevvers is an individualist; she emphasizes hard work and self-help. At the same time she is the symbol of the 19th century institutions (the circus, the brothel, prostitution). There is also strong reference to the Iron Lady of England, Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), her power and Thatcherism. Here, as Jeanette Baxter puts it: “Fevvers’s “Iron Maiden” corset is a reference made by Carter to Thatcher’s politics” [1]. The corset is also a way to constrain the female body, it dates back to the Victorian. Along the storyline, Fevvers finds out that the corset is twofold: it can be imprisoning unless wisely used.

Another connection to Thatcher might be the fact that Thatcher regarded her nation in relation to her own image. As Peter Clarke points out: “Thatcher worked her relatively modest start in life into an asset by projecting a populist appeal to the subaltern class of Conservative loyalists who recognized them as one of their own” [3]. There is a parallel here with Fevvers: in the Siberia section of the novel, she makes a narrow escape from the train crash caused by a group of outcasts. As a result of the crash, she loses her sword (the “Victory” sword taken from MaNelson’s brothel) and Lizzie’s “Father Time” clock). Also, here Lizzie, Fevvers’s friend and maid, loses her purse twice and when she finally finds it, she sees a pack of cards which could be considered a symbol of the game of chance and a “monetarist trust in the fortunes of the market place”. This may be considered again as a reference to Margaret Thatcher’s successful governing by using the masculine values and symbols.

Nevertheless, Fevvers, like Margaret Thatcher, looks both forward and backward but unlike Thatcher, she appeals to the decadent side of Victorianism, the circus, the brothel, pornography and prostitution. For this purpose, “the train wreck in Siberia can be seen as an allegory for twentieth century Europe, especially for the 1960s” [7]. It seems to destroy all the symbols of identity and represents a crisis of loss, dislocation.

Thus, the London section starts with Fevvers who was born in London, from an egg laid by unknown parents and ready to develop wings. At the beginning of the novel, she is already a famous and highly celebrated aerialist, interviewed by the young American journalist Jack Walser. The young journalist interviews her in her London dressing room, after a performance with the circus. She pretends to have been left on the footsteps of the brothel in a basket. By the time she reaches her adolescence, she develops full wings. We can notice Carter’s attraction to exaggeration and grotesque bodies. Here, Mikhail Bakhtin’s term “carnavalesque”

can be used in order to explain the character's appearance. The term originally refers to a medieval festival where humble cathedral heads would look burlesque.

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin links the carnivalesque in literature to the type of activity that often takes place in the carnivals of popular culture. For Bakhtin it is within literary forms like the novel to resist the authority and the place where cultural political changes can take place. In literature its grotesque realism is the lowering of what is abstract, spiritual, noble. Through the use of the grotesque body in his novels, Rabelais related political conflicts to human anatomy. In this way, Rabelais used the concept as "a figure of unruly biological and social exchange" [4]. Thus, the grotesque body is a comic figure of profound ambivalence: its positive meaning is linked to birth and renewal and its negative meaning is linked to death and decay [2]. Later on, the term is taken over by several critics and writers among whom there is Helen Stoddard in her *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* and other forms of entertainment, film and representation. According to Stoddard, Angela Carter is in close relationship with popular culture.

Moreover, Stoddard asserts that Carter's characters: clowns, convicts, prostitutes and trapeze artists are parts of this storyline as what she calls the "high" and "low" culture and subject regarded all levels of culture as a whole and not separated into distinct domains. As Carter herself notes that "the middle section is very elaborately plotted, like a huge circus". First of all, it concerns Fevvers who, like the history of the circus itself, begins life in London before her journey to Petersburg and Siberia.

In the three distinct chapters of the novel, Fevvers embodies some of the main characteristics of the popular entertainment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Britain while Jack Walser is the novel's main representative of the "new world". He is a "permanent bystander" as Carter notes in an interview. He experiences a whole array of sensations and feelings which help him move forward. In the last section of the novel, he turns from a spectator into an actor, as "he watched it but he did not live it" [5].

Fevvers travels with the "Imperial Circus", led by Colonel Kearney ("Carney") being an explicit indication of Carter's interest in the mixture of circus and carnival. Thus, Anne Fernihough says that Kearney's circus "functions as a debased version of carnival, using all the carnivalesque tropes but showing how, in practice, they can often serve very different ends from the radical utopian ones emphasized by Bakhtin" [6].

The Petersburg section begins with Walser who is offered a job by Colonel Kearney who, after listening to his pig Sybil, allows Walser to become a clown in the circus. Here, Walser meets new characters of the circus and ends up saving Mignon so that she is not eaten by the tigress. While waiting for him after being saved, Mignon is abandoned by her husband and lover. Fevvers believes that Walser is sleeping with Mignon and develops jealousy but still takes care of her. When hearing Mignon's voice, Fevvers presents her to the Princess who asks Mignon to join her. While rehearsing, the acrobatic Charivari family tries to kill Fevvers and the Colonel hails them from the circus. After her show, Fevvers goes to meet the Grand Duke. She almost becomes his victim and makes a narrow escape into a Fabergé egg, reaching the circus train as it leaves the station.

The Siberian section is set in Asia. While the Circus crosses the continent, the train is attacked by a band of outcasts who believe that Fevvers can help them contact the Tsar, who will then allow them to return home to their villages. The train is destroyed and the entire circus, excepting Walser, is taken to the outcasts' camp. Walser is rescued but he is suffering from amnesia. As small fragments of Walser's memory and language come back to him Walser becomes part of the village whose people have saved him. All this time, Fevvers and the rest of the party are held captive by the convicts. After she escapes, she finds Walser and the story ends with them together at the moment when the new century begins and Fevvers victoriously cries "to think I really fooled you". Fevvers' final laugh and sexual reunion with Walser are instances of pleasure exchanged in a free manner.

All along this journey, the clowns play important roles. As Linden Peach points out, "a similar effect is achieved through Carter's accounts of the clowns' actions and appearance with exaggerated and strange features. In turn, this strangeness forces a re-evaluation of any residual familiarity and cultural sentimentality that may have been attached to the tradition of clowning" [6].

We can say that both the clowns and Fevvers are representatives of grotesqueness. Also, the other feminine characters of the novel resemble the suffragettes while Fevvers seems to be opening the way for the "New Woman". They all find their own way at the end of the first part – the London section – after the devastating fire that destroys for good their brothel – the moment Fevvers has to make her own way in life – one could say she flies away to a new start. This moment we realize that the name Fevvers is not at all random. Thus, the self discovery journey helps young Fevvers become a woman who accepts herself as she finds love.

References

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