

The Construction of Female Identity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

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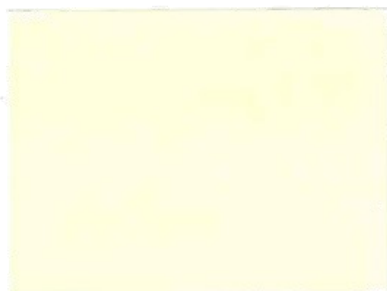
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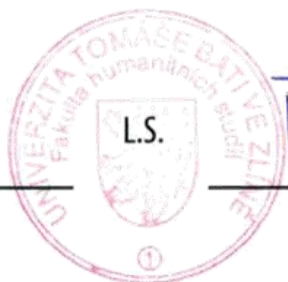
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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje ženské identity v díle *Noci v Cirkuse* Angely Carterové. Podstatou této práce je porozumět termínu identity a dále tyto vědomosti uplatnit při samotném rozboru. Práce není zaměřena pouze na hlavní protagonistku Peříčko, ale také na ostatní ženy a jejich neméně poutavé příběhy, které je nutné pochopit k odhalení konstrukce jejich identity. Dále se tato práce zabývá způsoby, které Peříčko používá, aby předešla objevení její pravé identity. A také jsou zde rozebrány vlastnosti, kterými Peříčko disponuje a které znázorňují spíše mužské vlastnosti nežli ženské.

Klíčová slova: Angela Carter, *Noci v Cirkuse*, identita, feminismus, fakt, fikce, Peříčko, Walser, pohlaví, ženy

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis analyzes women's identities in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. The aim of this work is to understand the term of identity and afterwards apply this knowledge to the analysis. This work is not only focused on the main protagonist Fevvers, but also on other women and their no less engaging stories, which must be understood to reveal the structure of their identity. Furthermore, this thesis deals with the ways that Fevvers uses to prevent the discovery of her true identity. And there are also analyzed the qualities that Fevvers has got and which represent more masculine rather than feminine.

Keywords: Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, identity, feminism, fact, fiction, Fevvers, Walser, gender, women

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's/Master's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis aims to focus on the construction of female identity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. This is a feminist postmodern novel that was and still is analyzed really frequently. The novel is divided into three sections: London, Petersburg and Siberia. Throughout these sections is set a love story between the two protagonists Fevvers and Walser. Fevvers is an artist who is endowed with wings and claims that she was hatched from an egg. She is not a typical female character, because of her vulgar behaviour, way of thinking, turn of phrase and even her looks. Walser is an American journalist who is interviewing and writing an article about the young artist Fevvers. And he is absolutely curious about one question – “Is she fact or is she fiction?” – actually, his aim is to prove that she is fiction. Fevvers does everything she can to prevent Walser from discovering her true identity. And while Walser tries to gather up all information about her life, these two characters fall in love. As Walser starts to be more and more interested in Fevvers' story, he joins the circus and becomes a clown. Apart from Fevvers there are a lot of female characters with their own stories which are as interesting as Fevvers' tale.

The first chapter of this bachelor thesis discusses the meaning of the term “identity,” its essential parts and development, which is afterwards applied to the analysis of female characters, especially Fevvers, in the third chapter. Fevvers is shown as a woman who starves for money and power. As Carter was writing the novel, the creation of Fevvers' identity was influenced by the political situation in Great Britain during the period of Margaret Thatcher's – also known as the “Iron Lady” – prime ministership. The relation between Fevvers and the Prime Minister Thatcher is obvious in their desire for power, hard work, self-help, and also self-promotion.

Carter was a great feminist but she was also able to make fun of some feminist ideas. In this novel there is an idea of a utopian world in which women do not need men. And when the men are needed, then it is only for reproduction. Throughout the novel it is obvious that female characters try hard to be independent, with no need for men, and it is almost like they are scared to trust men.

What is also very interesting is the ideology of marriage in this novel. We can see that female characters view marriage in a similar way as prostitution and sometimes the prostitution seems to be more advantageous to them. Carter shows prostitutes as positive characters because they have got reasons to do so. On the other hand, men who come to prostitutes are viewed as negative characters.

The reason why this theme is so interesting is that it is a very current topic. Females in this novel are really brave and their thirst for their independence is truly astonishing. Just as nowadays, when women fight for equality and want the same rights and conditions as men have. Carter uses the human body as a tool how to describe that our identity does not rely on what type of body we are given when we are born, but Carter wants to show us that our identity depends on our character. The first wave of the feminist movement was in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century and that is exactly the time when the novel is set.

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 The Term of Identity

The term of identity intersects with several scientific fields and is widely discussed mainly in sociology and psychology. But do ordinary people know the proper definition of the term? Or should we ask the question if any exact definition for the term “identity” as a whole exists? The term “identity” is connected with the term “identification” however; we cannot misinterpret these terms and consider them synonyms. As Hall argues, “Identification turns out to be one of the least well-understood concepts – almost as tricky as, though preferable to, ‘identity’ itself.”¹

As it is mentioned by Katherine Zappone in *Re-Thinking Identity: The Challenge of Diversity*, the issue of determining identities becomes more and more popular and the knowledge about complex identities is broadening. However, as we are getting deeper knowledge about complex identities we are also getting to the awareness that it is not so easy to understand them because an individual identity is composed of lots of factors, for instance, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation.² So, when we use the term and we ask someone a question about their identity, are we able to explain precisely what we mean by this expression? Do we mean, for example, their personal, cultural, social, or gender identity?

There are three main different ways how to use the term. Firstly, someone can use the term identity to refer to their culture. Secondly, it can be used as a reference to a common identification with a social category. And the third one relates to the parts of oneself composed of the meanings that people tack on to the various roles they usually play in differentiated societies.³

The discussions about identities have been abundant since time immemorial. As is mentioned by Daniel Sollberger, identity with the meaning which is known for us today, which means the sense of individuality, is only a secondary perception of the term. The first meaning brings us back through etymology to the Greek, where it stands for the

¹ Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity,’” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 2.

² Katherin E. Zappone, *Re-thinking Identity: The Challenge of Diversity* (Dublin: Joint Equality & Human Rights Forum, 2003), 2.

³ Sheldon Styrker and Peter J. Burke, “The Past, Present, and the Future of an Identity Theory,” *The Psychological Quaterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2000): 284.

appellation of “atomon” which signifies “indivisible.”⁴ However, since 1960s the term of identity, with the meaning of individuality has become a big topic for humanity studies which could have been caused by the social, cultural, and political changes and movements that had a massive impact on modifications of self-realization and social status. Some of the movements were, for example, the second wave of feminism, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, or we can also include the emergence of a new intellectual orientation in French philosophy.⁵

The interesting fact is that throughout the time this term has been examined, there have been lots of disagreements about several theories of identities, and thus the definition is not completely uniform in all scientific fields. One of the critics was Emmanuel Levinas, who gained the reputation of a radical thinker whose theories brought ethics to the centre of identity.⁶

1.1.1 Feminism and Identity

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings.”

— Cheri Kramarae

Since ancient times there have been different roles for men and women, which include, for example, their rights to vote, to own property, social roles, work opportunities. In the 19th century, one of the biggest movements for women’s rights started. This movement has changed the world, especially in the way men behave towards women. This fight for equality is constantly in process, and Angela Carter was one of the famous British writers who oriented her works also in a feminist direction. As it is mentioned in the book *The Invention of Angela Carter*, her feminist spirit stemmed from the belief that men and women are fundamentally alike.⁷

An important element of feminist thinking is the idea that every woman has “something” that makes her a “woman.” This means that on this basis - a group is created in which the participants have something in common, and there is some belief or attitude to stand on. However, the idea that every woman possesses the characteristic feature and

⁴ Daniel Sollberger, “On Identity: from a philosophical point of view,” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 7, no. 29 (July 2013): 2, accessed March 6, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1753-2000-7-29>.

⁵ Rafael Winkler, *Identity and Difference: Contemporary Debates on the Self* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), V.

⁶ Louis Blond, “Identity, Alterity and Racial Difference in Levinas,” in *Identity and Difference: Contemporary Debates on the Self*, ed. Rafael Winkler (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 259-60.

⁷ Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 77.

therefore they become “women” is under great criticism.⁸ Another similar idea comes from a political perception that feminism is built on a universal basis which is founded in an identity that is assumed to exist across cultures. With this feminist theorization, we also get to its critique, which argues that because of this theory, one could disregard the context of the culture in which the identity is located. Thus we could talk about it as a tool that could be used for usurping non-Western cultures and attempting to build some kind of a “Third World.”⁹

As it is mentioned by Butler, it is presumed by some feminist theorists that there is an identity which does not follow only the feminist interests, but also establishes the subject that takes part in politics.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is not enough to only examine how to create greater possibilities for women in language and politics, it is also necessary to get the knowledge about how this group of women is created but at the same time limited by the structures of power that are used for their emancipation as well.¹¹

We cannot start a debate on identity until we become clear about one of its essential parts, and it is gender identity.¹² Feminism differentiates between sex and gender and argues that sex is something that was given to us when we were born, from a biological point of view. Hence, sex seems like a hard-to-change matter, although it is possible these days but still a little bit complicated. On the other hand, this does not apply to gender identity which is something that we acquire through the time, and it is gradually culturally shaped, which means that there is some possibility of change and it is never completely closed.¹³

One of the primary motivations for women to launch the feminist movement was the rising number of sexual assaults and violent behaviour against women. When a violent crime occurs, it is necessary to take into account the extent to which the crime has a sexual form.¹⁴ For Bergoffen, for instance, there is a very important element of generosity from a

⁸ Kathy Butterworth, “The Decentred Autonomous Subject,” in *Identity and Difference: Contemporary Debates on the Self*, ed. Rafael Winkler (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 156.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York, London: Routledge, 1999), 6.

¹⁰ Butler, *Gender trouble*, 3.

¹¹ Butler, *Gender trouble*, 5.

¹² Butler, *Gender trouble*, 22.

¹³ Butler, *Gender trouble*, 9-11.

¹⁴ Louise du Toit, “Exploring Rape as an attack on Erotic Goods,” in *Identity and Difference: Contemporary Debates on the Self*, ed. Rafael Winkler (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 177-9.

feminist point of view for a happy erotic encounter. This means that in the erotic moment, there should be a process where both receive and give.¹⁵

1.1.2 Identity Development

One of the best-known psychologists, who came up with theories that deal with the process of identity development, is undoubtedly Erik Erikson, whose ideas have crucially influenced identity research. He proposed a model for the development of human identity that is based on a lifelong process, which was projected into eight psychosocial phases following each other in the chronological order. To move from one phase to another, you have to get successfully over a social crisis that, in this context refers to a turning point. This crisis is not specifically given because there is a great influence on what social environment and culture we are exposed to. Therefore, Erikson argues that a separate identity cannot be understood without the knowledge of its social context.¹⁶

According to Erikson's theory, identity begins to form when the child realizes himself without parents as a separate unit. From this moment on, one begins to form an identity that takes on the behaviour and characteristics of the people the child looks up to. As the time flows, the identity is automatically created and reshaped. However, Erikson held the view that the identity comes to the centre of interest at the age of adolescence, which is an age between 12 – 24 years, when important decisions about the next life stages are assumed and when there is a large increase in gaining cognitive skills and physical abilities. There is a curious fact that identity problems also occur during middle adulthood, which is between the ages of 40 and 65. In this stage of life, the characteristics of the opposite sex are acquired. Although there are some attempts made by Erikson to determine when identity is finally established as a steady one, he is widely criticized for making even contradictory claims about identity development in adulthood. In the end, he comes to the conclusion that due to the gradual gathering of new experiences, opinions, or reassessment of life priorities and goals, the development of identity is still in a process even at a later age.¹⁷

What is also very important in the process of identity creation is the ability to know oneself - where it is essential for the individual to try to create this knowledge by distinguishing oneself from everything that is not actually formed by himself/herself and

¹⁵ Toit, "Exploring Rape as an attack on Erotic Goods," 195.

¹⁶ Justin T. Sokol, "Identity Development Throughout the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory," *Graduate Journal of Psychology* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 139-40.

¹⁷ Sokol, "Identity," 141-44.

what does not concern him/her in principle. By the application of this process, someone tries to prevent hasty identification with another content that could affect his/her thinking or behaviour, and thus he/she tries to be authentic.¹⁸

1.2 Narrative Identity

Stories are as old as humanity itself, and almost every one of us has told someone a story about himself, since it is an essential part of human culture. Whether these stories are handed down in spoken or written form, or even through television and other forms, we are in touch with them on an everyday basis. Narrative identity is an internalized and evolving life story of a person who integrates the reconstructed past and the idea of the future to ensure life with a degree of unity and purpose. People are likely to create stories about themselves through this narrative identity and tell others who they are and how it happened.¹⁹

Narrative identity begins to form especially when children move to the stage of adolescence, and from that point onward the identity undergoes a constant development, which is guaranteed by creating and relating more and more stories full of experiences. When creating this identity, it is necessary to know how to share your stories in different social contexts, for example, in your family, or even in a formal context.²⁰

There is a theory proposed by Paul Ricoeur that a narrative is based on a threefold process. The first one is based on the pre-understanding of the narrative. The second one could be perceived as a synthesis of individual events and incidents with the narrative. This means that during the narrative, all these events and coincidences come together in one meaningful whole, and all of a sudden, it starts to make sense. The third point can be referred to as reconfiguration, which reflects our perception of the narrative and how we apply it to the real world. Depending on how we are able to handle these three processes, this is also reflected in the understanding of our own self-identity.²¹

A literary figure is the best-known example of an entity constructed by the stories of the lives of people. As we observe these figures, there is often a comparison of the literary figure with oneself - which means that one identifies with the literary figure. However, there is a great criticism of this practice, so that we do not fully understand ourselves in a

¹⁸ Vincent Caudron, "Being My-Self? Montaigne on Difference and Identity," in *Identity and Difference: Contemporary Debates on the Self*, ed. Rafael Winkler (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 102.

¹⁹ Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (June 2013): 233.

²⁰ McAdams, and McLean, "Narrative Identity," 235.

²¹ Butterworth, "The Decentred Autonomous Subject," 161-3.

narrative form. And despite the fact that, we are so lucky and able to read ourselves so well that we perfectly understand also our narrative form, then our identity is constructed differently anyway. Another criticism is that if you try to compare yourself with a literary character, there is a high probability of a poor self-understanding, and it is also misleading with respect to the literary characters as such. Because there were and still are contradictions about this topic, and there may be misunderstandings. Even though there are several great advocates of narrative theories, such as Marya Schechtman, there is also the idea that it would be better not to use these practices. Instead, we should describe the structural unity of a person's life.²²

²² Alfonso Muñoz-Corcuera, "Persons, Characters and the Meaning of 'Narrative,'" in *Identity and Difference: Contemporary Debates on the Self*, ed. Rafael Winkler (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 38-9.

2 LITERARY CONTEXT

2.1 Postmodernism

Postmodernism develops along with feminism²³ and is marked by a major shift in many artistic practices, such as film and literature. For instance, in the literature that is written in the postmodern style, we can see many intertextual references to other literary works or even completely different media.²⁴ As Mary Russo points out: “The displacement of depth models of epistemology, architecture, and the body by the play of surfaces offers interesting possibilities for reconfiguring cultural identity and, for some postmodernist feminists a way out of essentialist models of woman-as-body or woman-as-space.”²⁵ We could likewise say that works written in this style are characterized by the fact that they are very subjective, there is the use of playful styles of storytelling, and forms of parody or irony often appear here.²⁶

All literary works are intertextual to some extent. For example, a pastiche and bricolage commonly used in the postmodern style are tools of textual references that point to other literary or visual contexts.²⁷ Another term that is closely related to postmodernism is metafiction that is a genre of writing that arose in the 1970s. And when we read a book where this genre is applied, we are constantly reminded that the text is fictional, which is achieved by the usage of “different language registers, exaggerated style and distinctions explicitly drawn between fact and fiction.”²⁸

2.2 Magical Realism

Magical realism is a genre applied in literature and art that combines fantastic and realistic elements which are presented as equally realistic. The German art critic Franz Roh was the first one who used this term. Although the usage of the term “magical realism” was in connection with painting, there is also transferred meaning to the literary context. When this genre is used in literature, we often encounter characters or events from the everyday or historical reality that are easily recognizable. It also happens that ordinary events are

²³ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 27.

²⁴ Helen Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 31.

²⁵ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 27.

²⁶ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 31.

²⁷ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 32.

²⁸ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 33.

treated as if they were fantastic and extraordinary events, as if they were just completely ordinary.²⁹

The use of magical realism is evident in the novel *Nights at the Circus* written by Angela Carter. She uses fantastic elements to subvert patriarchal society, and this literal genre also allows her to observe society, gender, and the power of the myth. She is also very doubtful about anything that could be naturalized and accepted without questions.³⁰ A great example of how Carter uses magical realism to doubt what has already been naturalized is, for example, her games with time. As Stoddart claims: “she underlines the fact that even time, which seems so tied up with natural laws, is not universally understood in the same way and is therefore seen as being subject to ideological variations of conception and use.”³¹

²⁹ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 35.

³⁰ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 36.

³¹ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 36-7.

3 ANGELA CARTER: *NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*

Nights at the Circus was first published in 1984, and after that recognized by several literary prizes such as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.³² The writer Angela Carter responded to the gender theories and feminist criticism. In this novel, Carter used the intersection between the 1890s and 1980s, where there is an increase in interest in women, a proliferation of writings about them, which women themselves often write.³³ Themes of feminism and gender are hot topics here. As we can find out during the novel, women in the circus are treated as completely stupid and almost inhuman beings, but, for instance, the piglet Sybil is considered a human being.³⁴ The wings of Fevvers can be seen as a tool helping her to escape from patriarchal culture into the refuge of feminism in the 20th century. Furthermore, Carter demonstrates in this novel how great the power of narrative identity is that we create by ourselves.³⁵

In this novel, we are drawn into a story that forces us to search for the origin of Fevvers' identity, which is metonymically represented by her wings.³⁶ In *Nights at the Circus* can be found many themes, both literary and cultural, but one of the most important is Leda and the swan's theme from Greek mythology.³⁷ Fevvers is cast in the role of the swan and takes on the female power that disrupts male domination.³⁸

3.1 Fevvers: Is she fact or is she fiction?

The main protagonist Fevvers, also known as a "Cockney Venus," can be viewed as a playful mutation of a myth through which is suggested a satirical interest in imploding cultural norms.³⁹ In this novel, we are supposed to deal with several dilemmas about the identity of Fevvers. As Margaret E. Toye suggests: - is she a "virgin/whore, bird/human, aerolit/baws, as well as the invention of herself?"⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the main idea set right at

³² Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter*, 353.

³³ Anne Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?": Angela Carter and the enigma of woman," *Textual practice* 11, no. 1 (1997): 90.

³⁴ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 104.

³⁵ Brian H. Finney, "Tall Tales and Brief Lives: Angela Carter's 'Nights at the Circus,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 161.

³⁶ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 96.

³⁷ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 97.

³⁸ Kannan Subapriya, "Fevvers: A Fact or Fiction?" *Juni Khyat (UGC Care Group I Listed Journal)* 10, no. 1 (May 2020): 219.

³⁹ Anna Hunt, "'The Margins of the Imaginative Life': The Abject and the Grotesque in Angela Carter and Jonathan Swift," in *Re-visiting Angela Carter: text, context, intertext*, ed. Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 135.

⁴⁰ Margaret E. Toye, "Eating Their Way Out of Patriarchy: Consuming the Female Panopticon in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*," *Women's Studies* 36, no. 7 (October 2007): 483.

the beginning of the novel, which then accompanies us through the whole story, is the question, and at the same time her slogan: “Is she fact or is she fiction?”⁴¹ Fevvers is a well-known artist who performs in a circus and is proud of her wings, which she claims to be real and natural wings. This novel also features a young journalist, Jack Walser, who made a resolution to prove that Fevvers is a compulsive liar, which he also plans to prove on the grounds of biological criteria.

Now, the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, as we should say, the arms, and the skeleton of a wing does indeed show elbows, wrists and fingers, all complete. So, if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all, for it's her arms that ought to be her wings!⁴²

The first part of the novel focuses on the interview that Fevvers provides to Walser. Fevvers, the artist, is presented to the audience almost like an angel with blond hair and big blue eyes. It is no wonder that Walser is caught out by her indiscriminate vocabulary, behaviour, and the style of satisfying her appetite, which is truly remarkable. As a matter of fact, her appearance is also astounding because her “angelic appearance” is refuted at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, there we come across a comparison to the “dray mare,” based on her visage and the reality that she is taller than Walser. During this interview, Fevvers, together with Lizzie, colourfully tells stories about her life journey, and of course, she is a very unusual narrator. She has got a half-human and half-mythical state, just like the state of the narrative itself. As Carter herself confirmed, Fevvers appears to be a classic blonde with a large chest. Nevertheless, her wings refer to a goddess, angel or bird. As Fevvers starts telling stories about her life, she becomes a narrator, and at the same time, a narrative subject of her own story. Thus, this is where her narrative identity starts to construct.⁴³

She begins the storytelling with the information about her birth, or to be more accurate, about her hatching “just like Helen of Troy,”⁴⁴ at the end of the last century. “Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!”⁴⁵ In addition, she hatched as an orphan, and there is no idea about who exactly could be her biological parents. It was Lizzie, who became her stepmother after she was found in the laundry basket in front of the brothel of Ma Nelson. When the wings of Fevvers grew, it is something through which she can escape from male domination, and it is also a symbol of

⁴¹ Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2006), 3.

⁴² Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 13.

⁴³ Finney, “Tall Tales,” 163.

⁴⁴ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 3.

⁴⁵ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 3.

liberation from society and equality with the male sex.⁴⁶ When Ma Nelson looks at Fevvers and her wings, she sees her as a child of “the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground.”⁴⁷ In this brothel, Fevvers was never allowed to do a job of a whore, “I was Ma Nelson’s flagship but always kept out of the battle, that Nelson never brought me to the block,”⁴⁸ this is why she was also known as the “Virgin Whore,” but the role that Ma Nelson created for her was an innocent role of a Cupid with a toy bow and arrow. After she is raised there and the brothel is burnt down, she must face the traps that the world arranged for her.⁴⁹

As Munford claims, one of these traps is, for example, the meeting with the Russian Grand Duke, where Fevvers goes through a process of miniaturization. The Grand Duke is fascinated by Fevvers’ body so much that he is willing to pay a considerable amount of money to Madame Schreck to buy her. He is the lavish gothic residence owner with many remarkable souvenirs, including a life-size ice sculpture of Fevvers. During this evening, the Grand Duke does not intend to just stay watching fascinating Fevvers, as he used to when he visited the museum of women monsters where Fevvers was exhibited, but he also plans to touch her. Until now, Fevvers had not experienced such a threat, even in the sexual context. She was distracted by the Grand Duke’s collection of bejewelled and enamelled eggs, which is understandable according to her origins. Fevvers is captivated by an egg, which has got layers made in the style of a Russian doll. She is fascinated by how something so small can be shrunk to an even smaller size as she examines these layers. Fevvers did not shrink, but she realizes that it could actually happen.⁵⁰ She is very close to the extinction when the Grand Duke almost manages to fix her forever as an art object to be looked at. Because when he would be able to finish his intention, he would take away from Fevvers the opportunity to tell her own stories and thus the ability to determine her own destiny.⁵¹

During the narration of Fevvers’ life stories, she and her stepmother Lizzie play a little trick on Walser in order to confuse him, using a clock from Ma Nelson. They throw him into a “narrative spell,” which causes Walser to be put in the belief that the passage of time

⁴⁶ Subapriya, “Fevvers: A Fact or Fiction?,” 215.

⁴⁷ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 25.

⁴⁸ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 61.

⁴⁹ Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 176.

⁵⁰ Hunt, “The Margins,” 142.

⁵¹ Finney, “Tall Tales,” 173.

was suspended, when in fact it was not true at all.⁵² As both ladies continue telling their stories, Walser becomes to feel like “a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night.”⁵³ We can see a similar trick in the third part of the book, when Walser grows a long beard in less than a week: “I don’t know if it is only a week since we lost him,” said Lizzie. “Did you see the long beard he had?”⁵⁴ These games with time and discrepancies between short and long time are supposed to cause the audience to escape attention. Because the time presented in the novel exists in our consciousness on the same level as the measured time, and both are equally real.⁵⁵

In these situations, when the time is arrested, we can observe the connection between Scheherazade and Fevvers because they both apply the illusion of time to use it to their advantage; Fevvers, like Scheherazade, knows that she will have to face her death after her storytelling ends. Death, which for Fevvers, marks the end of her narrative personality.⁵⁶ Just as for Scheherazade, when the emperor intends to kill her when she falls asleep, so she instead decides to arrest the time in her tales. Therefore, Fevvers uses that spell in order to prevent Walser’s discovery of her true identity – that she is fictional, and all she tells him are only her fanciful ideas. Fevvers does whatever she can to show him, that she is the one, who has got the power and control. As Finney argues, we can assume that *Nights at the Circus* is “a miniature condensed version of *A Thousand and One Nights*.”⁵⁷ Both, Scheherazade and Fevvers, try to do everything possible for the purpose of preventing men from possessing them and taking control of their fate.

Fevvers has got a body, thanks to which she is always in the centre of attention, but at the same time, it also makes her an elusive and mysterious being. She is an exaggerated representation of the “woman,” from the end of the nineteenth century, who is described by experts from various fields, such as sexologists or psychoanalysis. Here, Carter shows her dual perspective, where the concept of “the enigma of woman” is brought to the forefront but constantly undetermined as well.⁵⁸

As Carter confirmed herself, the character of Fevvers was largely inspired by Mae West, a very controversial American actor and sex symbol, who reached her most

⁵² Finney, “Tall Tales,” 164.

⁵³ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 43.

⁵⁴ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 322.

⁵⁵ Finney, “Tall Tales,” 165.

⁵⁶ Finney, “Tall Tales,” 166.

⁵⁷ Finney, “Tall Tales,” 166.

⁵⁸ Fernihough, “Is she fact or is she fiction?,” 90.

tremendous popularity in the first half of the 1930s. One of the main attributes of their similarity is that they were both able to evoke in their audience the feeling at the show that they played no theatrical role but that they were actually playing themselves.⁵⁹ The carnivalesque is for women dangerous just as reinforcing.⁶⁰ And as we can observe in Fevvers' case, she is fully determined to use the carnivalesque to her advantage. According to Sara Martin; "By creating grotesque female monsters they deny men the privilege of being the sole producers of monstrous portraits of women."⁶¹ So we can say that when Fevvers stands out with her wings, she is protecting herself, her identity, and tries to prevent men from possessing her.

Based on Fevvers' behaviour, the way she is made-up, how she removes her false eyelashes, and according to her attitude to be a woman who does not wait for a man to save her, she instead acquires masculine courage and strength.⁶² Or, is it just another of her tactics to confuse Walser and keep him away from the truth? As Walser perceives her character, appearance and how she presents herself, he is even considering the possibility that she is actually a man.

Her face, in its Brobdingnagian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships. It flickered through his mind: is she really a man?⁶³

The concept of dragging has always been found to be very interesting for gender theorists, as it is able to strengthen and at the same time disturb gender paradigms. Because here we can observe how, on the one hand, authenticity and sex are hidden, and on the other hand, we are hinted at how solid sex can be a "parody."⁶⁴ From the very beginning of the novel, we are exposed to the expectation of revealing Fevvers' hidden self, only to understand how her identity is formed in and through the performance. In this novel, identity seems to be based on a time-based or repetition-based model. This can be seen, for example, by means of Fevvers' daily performance of the same circus act.⁶⁵

In the second chapter, we meet Walser as a member of the circus where he becomes a clown. He goes through all of this for the purpose of following Fevvers, the Cockney

⁵⁹ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 92.

⁶⁰ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 58.

⁶¹ Sara Martin, "The Power of Monstrous Women: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Love of a She-Devil* (1938), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)," *Journal of Gender Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 195.

⁶² Subapriya, "Fevvers," 216.

⁶³ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 37.

⁶⁴ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 92-3.

⁶⁵ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 94.

Venus, and to keep a close eye on her. However, his attempts to refute the claim that Fevvers has got true wings are constantly being thwarted, as Fevvers always takes control.⁶⁶ According to Finney, Fevvers has not got the greatest advantage in flying, but in the ability to portray her fantasy flights that are already outside the real world, and Walser is bound to them through his scepticism.⁶⁷

What attracts our attention to Fevvers' narrative is the material voice that enchanted Walser so much that he felt like a "prisoner," but at the end of the novel, Walser's approach to this voice changes. As Anne Fernihough describes, "By the end of the novel, it is as though Walser learned to take this voice for what it is, content simply to reiterate it, rather than attempting to penetrate it."⁶⁸

The most significant similarity in Greek mythology with this novel can be seen especially at the end of the story, where Fevvers, in the position of the swan, forms Walser into a feminized character, placing him in the position of Leda as she suffocates him in feathers.⁶⁹ The end of the novel is so optimistic that it seems almost ironic. Throughout the novel, we can see that Fevvers bodily manifestations confirm cultural norms. Fevvers is from the so-called working class and grew up in a brothel, which reflects the stereotype that these women from the low class are vulgar and gross. In addition, the bodies of working-class women are portrayed like no women from other classes. This novel also represents two views on body perception. On the one hand, we can perceive the body by means of self-assertion, and on the other hand, we can observe it as easily vulnerable and risky.⁷⁰

In the third chapter, where the train collides, and the separation of Fevvers and Walser takes place, we can observe Fevvers' material disintegration, which is closely related to her self-confidence crisis that is connected with her love for Walser.⁷¹ "Although, from a distance, she could still pass for a blonde, there was a good inch of brown at the roots of Fevvers' hair and brown was showing in her feathers, too, because she was moulting."⁷² Furthermore, she reunites only after they see each other again. After their reunion, there is also a consideration of marriage, and finally, it is clear that men will no longer determine

⁶⁶ Toye, "Eating," 482.

⁶⁷ Finney, "Tall Tales," 167.

⁶⁸ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 96.

⁶⁹ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 98.

⁷⁰ Fernihough, "Is she fact or is she fiction?," 101.

⁷¹ Jeannette Baxter, 'Postmodernism' in *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, ed. Helen Stoddart (London: Routledge, 2007): 105-6.

⁷² Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 321.

the future of women.⁷³ Her love for Walser is also related to her feminism, or rather her lack of feminism. It is this shortcoming that allows her to fall in love with him. Fevvers is depicted here as a vision of the “New Women” who will turn Walser into a “New Man.”⁷⁴

So, what is the answer to the question: “Is she fact or is she fiction?” As Fevvers admits with her last sentence in the novel, “It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence.”⁷⁵ According to Fernihough’s suggestion, “Fever’s great triumph is that she is both.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, when Fevvers cheers and shouts joyfully, “I really fooled you,”⁷⁷ Finney argues that she is not the only one who enjoys her triumph. Because on the other side, there is also Carter, who delights in her performance as she managed to deceive the readers.⁷⁸

Carter emphasizes that the novel is a written account. The novel refers to its plot structure and the conventions of fiction, which is reflected in the discussion led by the characters about the possible endings before the reader reaches the final chapter. As Fevvers and Walser are reunited at the end of the novel, and since then, they are more equal, Fevvers hosts us into a new interview with a massive change in their equality. Thus, we are sent right back at the beginning.⁷⁹

3.1.1 Herstoricism

In this novel, Carter also wants to align her female characters with political and historical leaders.⁸⁰ There is a usage of herstoricism, which is used for feminist postmodern transcription of historical events where women are to some extent protected. The principle of this herstoricism is a close connection between history and fantasy. Carter also intends, mainly through Fevvers, to dramatize the view that history does not need to be entirely truthful because females were often absolutely omitted, and thus Carter intends to regain the female historical voice that they had previously lost.⁸¹

Fevvers can be seen as a woman of modern confidence, a woman who is hungry for money, and through time we could see her as an economically involved woman of the

⁷³ Subapriya, “Fevvers,” 216.

⁷⁴ Baxter, ‘Postmodernism,’ 105-6.

⁷⁵ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 350.

⁷⁶ Fernihough, “Is she fact or is she fiction?,” 105.

⁷⁷ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 350.

⁷⁸ Finney, “Tall Tales,” 161-2.

⁷⁹ Heather Johnson, ‘Metafiction, Magical Realism and Myth’ in *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, ed. Helen Stoddart (London: Routledge, 2007): 73.

⁸⁰ Wiem Krifa, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*: a Historiographical Perspective.” *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (March 2015): 342.

⁸¹ Krifa, “Angela,” 338-9.

twentieth century.⁸² Like Margaret Thatcher, where we do not have to try hard to see a resemblance, through Fevvers, we can observe obvious cues that refer us to aspects of British culture and society when Thatcher was in power. Both, Thatcher just as Fevvers, created credibility in part from the constant emphasis on their origins, as Thatcher was not the daughter of wealthy and influential parents. However, her father was a merchant, and Fevvers is an orphan who hatched from an egg. Both used emphasis on this fact to bring them closer to higher status and wealth with powerful populism.⁸³ These two women are self-propagating individualists who want to succeed through their hard work and self-help. We can observe how Fevvers tries to escape from the “wreck” when it gets to the collision of trains in Siberia, and just as Thatcher tried to get out of the “wreck” when she took over the aristocratic political party, which she started to transform immediately after her takeover.⁸⁴

Fevvers’ “Iron Corset” does not only refer us to the resemblance to Thatcher, who was nicknamed the “Iron Lady,” but it takes us further into history until the reign of Elizabeth I, where she points to a harsh form of restraint in the female body. Elizabeth I, also known as the “Virgin Queen”, is another powerful and respected woman by whom Fevvers is undoubtedly inspired, as both women stubbornly claimed to be intact.⁸⁵

Likewise, Thatcher built her success in government by appropriating what had previously been considered purely masculine values and symbols. Like Fevvers, Thatcher used the male mythologization of women to draw power from the public sphere. At the beginning of the novel, Fevvers is portrayed as a woman who possesses these fictions and male symbols, thus strengthening confidence in her imaginary and commercially successful public image of a strong woman who defies established norms about women.⁸⁶

The 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher was the British Prime Minister, was known for its aggressive capitalism, which was characteristic of men rather than women. Nevertheless, when Fevvers is compared to the “Iron Lady” in the *Nights at the Circus*, it is Carter’s attempt to empower a new twentieth-century liberal woman. At the beginning of the novel, we can see the similarity in the “mania” that took place in Britain when Thatcher was in power and all possible commercial products referred to her person, so Fevvers experiences

⁸² Krifa, “Angela,” 339.

⁸³ Stoddart, *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, 8.

⁸⁴ Stoddart, *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, 8-9.

⁸⁵ Stoddart, *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, 8-9.

⁸⁶ Stoddart, *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, 9-10.

similar popularity, which referred to in the novel as “Fevvermania.”⁸⁷ And as Fevvers is able to penetrate the business culture and at the same time is able to use it to her advantage, she is a woman that Thatcher would be absolutely thrilled with.⁸⁸ And according to Krifa, “the economic success of Fevvers is paralleled to the British development of Margaret Thatcher.”⁸⁹

Everywhere you saw her picture; the shops were crammed with Fevvers’ garters, stockings, fans, cigars, shaving soap...She even lent it to a brand of baking power; if you added a spoonful of the stuff, up in the air went your sponge cake, just as she did. Heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise, this Helen launched a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side.⁹⁰

In conjunction with Fevvers, Carter also writes about the political figure of Rosencreutz, who openly opposed the expansion of women’s rights. Rosencreutz is portrayed there as The Grand Duke, who bought Fevvers from Madame Schreck’s museum and plans to kill her. Through this intention, we can observe his disagreement with the idea that women should have their rights just like men. However, Fevvers’ successful escape from his gothic residence represents the liberation of women in the twentieth century and their successful enforcement of the right to vote for women.⁹¹

3.1.2 The Power of the Sword

To all this, there is an important meaning of a sword that Fevvers always carries with her, as she confirmed herself: “My sword. I carry it about all the time, for reasons both of sentiment and self-protection.”⁹² For a woman, it is very unusual to be armed at the time. The sword she got from Ma Nelson - “Victory’s sword, the sword that started out its life on Nelson’s thigh.”⁹³ We cannot forget to mention the portrayal of pornography, which refers us to a critique of male domination and, as Michael claims: “sexual relations are for the most part pornographic in a culture that objectifies women.”⁹⁴ A good example is the already mentioned part where The Grand Duke wants to rape and kill Fevvers to make himself an immortal subject.⁹⁵ “Lie down upon the altar!”⁹⁶ This situation, in which the Grand Duke thinks that he is the one who has got the control, but reverses when Fevvers

⁸⁷ Krifa, “Angela,” 339.

⁸⁸ Baxter, ‘Postmodernism,’ 104-5.

⁸⁹ Krifa, “Angela,” 339.

⁹⁰ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 5.

⁹¹ Krifa, “Angela,” 340.

⁹² Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 53.

⁹³ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 53.

⁹⁴ Magnali Cornier Michael, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies,” *Contemporary Literature* 35, no. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 512.

⁹⁵ Michael, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*,” 512.

⁹⁶ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 95.

decides to defend herself with her sword: “Quick as a flash, out with my own! How I blessed my little gilded sword! He fell back, babbling, unfair, unfair . . . he’d not thought the angel would come armed.”⁹⁷ Until then, the Grand Duke thought he had the situation under control because he owns his phallic sword, but it did not occur to him that Fevvers has got her own sword, in which we could also see a symbol of phallic power, which Fevvers appropriates.⁹⁸

Fevvers describes the Duke’s penis as a “poor thing,” which can be interpreted as Fevvers’ way to ridicule his power and the idea that men’s dominance is based on natural aggression, which is signified by the sword – phallus. But in this case, it is shown that men dominate mainly by violence. When the Grand Duke breaks Fevvers’ sword to rid her of the phallic symbol, Fevvers uses another kind of power, a non-phallic nature, to break free.⁹⁹ The instinct for self-preservation makes her use a woman’s weapon, and the moment the Grand Duke evacuates, she flies out the window.¹⁰⁰ By this kind of escape, Carter emphasizes that women are able to use their non-phallic power in the upshot more effectively than men who violently apply the phallic power.¹⁰¹

3.2 Lizzie and Other Female Characters

In addition to Fevvers, many other women in this novel have got their own compelling life stories. As Fevvers begins to tell her story, we are introduced to a brothel where she grew up alongside many women who worked here. Fevvers never let prostitutes appear in an evil light. On the contrary, Lizzie and the other brothel workers are portrayed to Walser almost in a romantic way full of female solidarity and like her loving mothers. The latter took care of her almost as soon as she was born.¹⁰²

And, as I told you, who was it but Lizzie over there who stumbled over the mewling scrap of life that then I was whilst she’s assisting some customer off the premises and she brings me indoors and there I was reared by these kind women as if I was the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers.¹⁰³

Lizzie is a very important character in this story because as Fevvers’ adoptive mother, she goes through the whole story with her daughter. She is a woman who features the

⁹⁷ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 95.

⁹⁸ Michael, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*,” 512.

⁹⁹ Michael, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*,” 512.

¹⁰⁰ Michael, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*,” 502.

¹⁰¹ Michael, “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*,” 512-13.

¹⁰² Sarah Sceats, “Performance, Identity and the Body” in *Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus*, ed. Helen Stoddart (London: Routledge, 2007): 87-8.

¹⁰³ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 20.

hallmarks of an English radical activist with whom Carter associates authentic political leaders. Her radicalism stems from a movement that took place in England in the 1790s and is associated, for instance, with the name Mary Wollstonecraft.¹⁰⁴

Lizzie is very radical, and there is no doubt that she is very inclined to Marxism.¹⁰⁵ As she claims, she is very religious, and according to her, she never worked as a whore in Ma Nelson's brothel. And in the role of an adoptive mother, she tries to protect Fevvers and influences her opinions, for example, on marriage and her harsh attitude toward men.

'Marriage? Pah!' snapped Lizzie in a pet. 'Out of the frying pan into the fire! What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many? No different! D'you think a decent whore'd be proud to marry you, young man? Eh?'¹⁰⁶

As mentioned by Helen Stoddart: "Lizzie is the alternative heroine because she is maternal and menopausal without ever having been sexually active."¹⁰⁷ She is so eager to become a mother, and that is the reason why she clings to Fevvers so much, and like her, at the end of the novel, Lizzie gets a happy ending because she decides to open an improvised maternity hospital where she could realize herself and continue to take care of mothers and children.

One of the biggest initial influences on Fevvers was, of course, Ma Nelson, in whose brothel Fevvers was allowed to grow up and received upbringing and care there. Carter was also inspired by the historical figure here when she constructed Ma Nelson. She was inspired to construct this character on the model of Lord Horatio Nelson and probably the most striking resemblance is the eye Ma Nelson lost and therefore wore a ribbon.¹⁰⁸ And even her dress gave the impression that she was from the Navy: "she always dressed in the full dress uniform of an admiral of the Fleet."¹⁰⁹

Likewise, Lord Nelson was wounded and lost his eye, and historically is portrayed in a very heroic light. Just like Ma Nelson, who is portrayed in this novel as a very strong woman who, despite the fact that she is the manager of her own brothel, has got clear values, which can be seen in the case of Fevvers, when she is never allowed to work as a whore, but Ma Nelson finds for her the completely innocent job of a little cupid. It is no

¹⁰⁴ Krifa, "Angela," 341.

¹⁰⁵ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 21.

¹⁰⁷ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Krifa, "Angela," 341-42.

¹⁰⁹ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 34.

wonder that this powerful woman, Ma Nelson, is the one from whom Fevvers has got the sword that symbolizes the already mentioned phallic power.¹¹⁰

Ma Nelson thus played a significant role in the first chapter of Fevvers' life. Like Ma Nelson, her employees are endowed with the courage and strength she sought to impart to them. And after her death, they rebelled against the brother of Ma Nelson and burned down the brothel to the base. At the same time, these women said goodbye to the current stage of their lives and proudly approached the next ones, where they are determined to fight for their rights.¹¹¹

The stories of women who are embedded in the main story are no less significant, and as Sceats argues: "The embedded narratives of the women here, each of whom has a symbolic deformity or peculiarity, emphasize and enact a variety of constructions and abuses foisted on young women."¹¹²

We can mention the case of Sleeping Beauty, which is an excellent case of passivity.¹¹³ Sleeping Beauty fell asleep on the day of her first menstruation and since then has rarely woken up. After a year of almost continuous sleep, Madame Schreck took Sleeping Beauty into her museum of monstrous women, where Fevvers meets Sleeping Beauty, and they both work in the same place. Sleeping Beauty is there in her usual position and sleeps peacefully. Fevvers, on the other hand, stands above her with her sword and takes care of Sleeping Beauty in case some visitor would like to attempt something more than what was originally agreed and paid for. Fevvers describes Sleeping Beauty's schedule to Walser as follows: "She always woke at sunset, like night-scented stock; she ate, she filled a bedpan, and then she slept again."¹¹⁴ Sleeping Beauty's falling asleep can be explained as her reluctance to participate in the daily life of a limited adult womanhood, which is signified by the day of her first menstruation.¹¹⁵ But it is not like that Sleeping Beauty has got no life. She just instead decided to live her own life in her dreams.

For do not think she was a dreamless sleeper. Under those soft, veined webs, her eyeball moved continually this way and that, as if she were watching shapes of antic ballets playing themselves out upon the insides of her eyelids. And sometimes her toes and fingers would convulse and

¹¹⁰ Krifa, "Angela," 342.

¹¹¹ Krifa, "Angela," 342.

¹¹² Sceats, "Performance," 87.

¹¹³ Sceats, "Performance," 87.

¹¹⁴ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 71.

¹¹⁵ Sceats, "Performance," 87-8.

twitch, as a dog's paws do when it dreams of rabbits. Or she might softly moan or cry out, and sometimes, very softly, laugh, which was most strange.¹¹⁶

No wonder that these "workers" are very beneficial and lucrative attractions for Madame Schreck. Because she is a woman who does not like to share success, as well as her money, which she earns for the performance of her employees, or to be more accurate, of her slaves, as Fevvers describes to Walser: "For, the moment that her front door shut behind you, you were her prisoner; indeed, you were her slave."¹¹⁷

At the circus we meet other remarkable women, such as Mignon, where Carter testifies that she was shaped as an allegory of Europe, - orphan - like Europe after the war, which carries a heavy burden on her shoulders.¹¹⁸

As Mignon has got a very violent and traumatic history committed by men, she is served only by her short-term memory, which is also to protect her from the despair that could ensue from her trauma. Mignon is numb and communicates through songs that appeal to another circus performer, and that is the Princess who performs with her tigers here. These two women first combine their performances and start performing together, but later they move on to a lesbian love affair. As their relationship develops and there is a mutual rise, we can observe the distance between the women and men, as it is clear that the male body may be more muscular. Still, the spirit is undeveloped compared to the females.¹¹⁹ "The Strong Man, too, moves away from performance, through recognition that his overdeveloped body conceals an underdeveloped spirit, and dedication to loving service of the two women."¹²⁰

There is also a very important role of women's issue, set up by the Countess, who killed her husband and then set up a women's prison for those who had committed or attempted to commit the same crime. "There are many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband."¹²¹ Like the Countess, who had been abused by her husband for years, until she decided to overthrow and kill the "king" of the household.¹²² The Countess establishes a place for repentance of other women who are sentenced to the same crime and certainly has got no solidarity motives for this act, but according to her words she became "a kind of conduit for the means of the repentance of

¹¹⁶ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 72.

¹¹⁷ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 70.

¹¹⁸ Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*, 4-5.

¹¹⁹ Sceats, "Performance," 90-1.

¹²⁰ Sceats, "Performance," 91.

¹²¹ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 247.

¹²² Toye, "Eating," 486.

the other murderesses.”¹²³ This prison is placed in Siberia and every time under her strict supervision, which forms an impenetrable structure designed for their reformation. This panopticon is discussed quite briefly in the novel, but we can feel how dominant it is.¹²⁴

It was a panopticon she forced them to build, a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central countryard, there was a round room surrounded by windows. In that room she'd sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stare at her.¹²⁵

Here, by this panopticon, Carter creates a metaphor for the state of women imprisoned in a patriarchal society. The Countess places women in individual cells, where they are cut off from others and tries to get them against each other.¹²⁶ But the complete opposite happens, and women use any means to establish some contact with each other. Just as Olga Alexandrovna and one of the guards:

Contact was effected, first, by illicit touch and glance, and then by illicit notes, or, if either guard or inmate turned out to be illiterate, by drawings made in and on all manner of substances, on rags of clothing if paper was not available, in blood, both menstrual and venous, even in excrement.¹²⁷

Under the leadership of Olga Alexandrovna, prisoners and the guards overthrow this panopticon which also signifies their escape from the patriarchal structure.¹²⁸ Thereafter these women create a utopian community where they establish their own rules and men are needed only as a tool for reproduction.

3.2.1 Walser

Walser, who enters the life story of Fevvers at the beginning of the novel, is listed as a young journalist who would like to find out the true identity of Fevvers. When Walser joins the circus for the purpose of following Fevvers, he has got no idea how important a character will become of him in association with her, and how much this relation will be shaping his own identity.

When Walser takes on a clown make-up and costume for the first time, his own unspoiled childhood innocence awakens in him, which is now overshadowed by the culturally created identity of the clown, and he becomes even someone whom the children fear, as we can observe in the case of little Ivan.¹²⁹

¹²³ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 246.

¹²⁴ Toye, “Eating,” 484.

¹²⁵ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 247.

¹²⁶ Toye, “Eating,” 485.

¹²⁷ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 254.

¹²⁸ Toye, “Eating,” 485.

¹²⁹ Sceats, “Performance,” 89.

Walser's flying fingers halted and offered the boy one of his few words of Russian as if it were a gift. Little Ivan sneaked a single terrified look at Walser's face all covered with red and white make-up, gave a faint moan and was gone. In all his former life, Walser never frightened children; this child was very much afraid of the clowns, a nervous dread with the seeds of fascination in it.¹³⁰

In this novel, the question about the essence of clown identity is very important, because as it is mentioned here in the novel, the clown creates himself. The clown creates his own face, which he then shows to others. But there is a catch. As they once chose the form of their identity, there is no way to change it, and thus they are doomed to show off their chosen and formed selves forever. This is the reason why it happens so often that clowns, who have to put a smile and a good mood on others' faces, are usually captive to their despair. When Buffo, who is also a clown in the circus, explains to Walser what and who clowns are, on the basis that they are paid for the pleasure of others, he even claims that they are resembling whores.¹³¹

Yes, young lad, young Jack, young First-of-May, we subject ourselves to laughter from choice. We are the whores of mirth, for, like a whore, we know what we are; we know we are mere hirelings hard at work and yet those who hire us see us as beings perpetually at play. Our work is their pleasure and so they think our work must be our pleasure, too, so there is always an abyss between their notion of our work as play, and ours, of their leisure as our labour.¹³²

According to Lizzie and Fevvers, Walser is still underdeveloped. And by having such freedom to dress up as a clown and form his second identity, the whole situation becomes quite dizzying as he develops his second identity without his first, original, being completed. While working in the circus, Walser gains new experiences that shape him, but according to Carter, complete deconstruction is needed to begin the formation of the desired identity again. In the third chapter, after the train accident, Walser completely loses his memory. So he can start his new formation here, and thanks to the shaman, Walser expands his perception, thus getting closer to Fevvers.¹³³

Although Walser is constantly expanding his perception, achieving possession of his mind is unattainable for him, even with the help of a shaman. Only when Fevvers finds him, and they are together again, is Walser recovered. The act also puts Fevvers in the role of "prince on a white horse" because we could say that she saved Walser. So, Carter puts Fevvers in the position of a male hero, who usually saves his princess in other stories, and

¹³⁰ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 112.

¹³¹ Sceats, "Performance," 89-90.

¹³² Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 138.

¹³³ Sceats, "Performance," 91.

this case feminizes Walser pretty much. As it is already mentioned in the first chapter, Carter was a really big feminist, but her central belief was that men and women are equal. In respect to Carter's feminist view, we should not forget to mention that we must admit Fevvers as a great woman, and while we must recognize her act, when she saves Walser, as heroic - we should not forget that she needs Walser to complete herself, just as he needs her because Fevvers is also suffering from her identity crisis. So, we can say that they are saved by each other.

CONCLUSION

From the sociological and psychological point of view, the term of identity is very tricky because sometimes we do not know what we mean precisely by the term. And yet, there is no precise definition for the term as a whole. Therefore we must pay attention to all aspects that are associated with the persons whose identity we want to analyze, such as their gender, sex, culture, and narrative identity. Fevvers intentionally creates the narrative identity that she uses to confuse us and to prevent the discovery of her true identity. Carter uses several tricks to fool the readers and the main male protagonist Walser. One of the most remarkable is the tactic of completely confusing both Walser and the reader through time-playing games. Thanks to which this book has earned a comparison with *A Thousand and One Night*, where Scheherazade, just as Fevvers, uses this tactic to save her life. In the case of Fevvers, it means to save the life of her narrative identity, to prevent Walser from finding out that she is a fraud.

Carter is a very sophisticated feminist, and that is precisely how the female characters in this novel are constructed. All of them are very strong women, even though mainly with a very abusive and terrible history. These women are determined to fight for themselves and obtain their rights and equality with men. It is shown there that women, for example, may not be endowed with such brute strength as men, but women have got other weapons that, in the end, allow them to be equal to men and often even exceeding them. But on the other hand, Carter was a great feminist. There is no doubt about it, but she was also able to make fun of some of the harsh feminist beliefs, such as men are not really needed. We can see this in the community of women, who establish their own society and seek men only for the sake of procreation. It even seems like a parody of orthodox feminists.

In this novel, Carter gives her female characters the same chances of male ownership to show her attitude to gender equality. This is beautifully shown in the case of Walser and Fevvers, where there is not only one who needs the other as his saviour. But they need each other to put together their identities. Although Walser is often feminized and Fevvers is placed in the role of a heroine when she saves him, there is still the critical fact that Fevvers needs Walser as much as he needs her. So, there is no gender that takes precedence over the other, but according to Carter, we are equal, and the point is to find balance and not suppress each other.

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