



Thematic Analysis of Angela Carter's "Nights at the Circus"

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Abstract: The article investigate feministic features of the work by Angela Carter "Nights At The Circus". Furthermore, the analysis of novel show that feministic features are carried out with a specific artistic and aesthetic goal in the literary work.

Keywords: male, female, feministic feature, novel, dominant, equal, identity.

I. Introduction

Throughout her writings Carter undertakes a feminist critique of the Western tradition and culture. She deconstructs the myths, in which women are pictured in a totalizing manner. She considers the sense of female sexual identity as enforced by the patriarchy deeply upsetting, inconvenient and unacceptable. She articulates her central feministic proposition postulating that femininity does not exist as such. Carter believes that it is a learned pattern which is socially and personally restraining and thus needs to be questioned and then perhaps re-constructed. This need, as Carter believes, "is not purely an area of women's interest, because men live in myths about women as well and they are influenced by them even more since women, at least deep inside their souls, know that these myths are not based on truth". Carter also claims here that she does not write cheap feminist agitprops. On the contrary, she wants to open and encourage a public dispute, using her conviction that "women are human, too, and everything is relative". She turns from the universal to the particular, from the specified to the specific, from the mythically bound to the down-to-earthly free. She does not wish to command her readers how to live; she wishes them to think independently and to pursue the order of things themselves.

II. Literature review

It would be appealing to read *Nights at the Circus* as a novel of clearly positive development in feminist issues, from the estranged and incarcerated femininity symbolized by the motif of a "puppet" to the vision of women's liberation in the form of "winged victory". However, it is not that straightforward or easy. Carter's feminism is very mature: she does not celebrate a thorough triumph or make definite conclusions. She is aware of the obstacles women will still need to overcome. Carter employs her two main female characters, Fevvers and Lizzie, as antagonistic tendencies as far as the prospect of feminist issues is concerned. Whereas Fevvers is looking towards the future with hope and optimism, Lizzie is the regulating critical and pragmatic voice. This distribution of forces is typical for Carter who always seems to seek balance between opposed strains. Fevvers as the younger, more famous, attractive and enthusiastic one represents the brighter, careless and more appealing view on feminism. Lizzie, on the other hand, as the older, cynical, unspectacular and calculative one presents the down-to-earth recognition of feminist ideas. Russo understands the function of their disparateness as an "ongoing dialogue". In their philosophical dispute towards the end of the novel, Fevvers preconceives a promising fancy as follows: "*the dolls' house will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth the inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed". Nevertheless, Lizzie does not leave this enthusiastic positivism unchallenged: "it's going to be more complicated than that. This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see

through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and then we'll discuss it". These two divergent utterances can be read as an on-going dialogue, repeatedly marked by conflict. However, under the given circumstances, their conversation "is about losses and making do". As Russo observes, for these two women it is important to get over their disparities to preserve their friendship and crucial for maintaining their agreement about politics. Russo notices that towards the end of the novel, both Fevvers and Lizzie have lost a lot from their former power and splendour - Lizzie, who lost her magical objects and with them her magical-anarchic power, and no longer commercially feasible Fevvers, who is about to exchange her career for marriage with Walser. Weakened by their extensive losses, they must keep together. Nevertheless, there is no consoling closure reader could draw from this final exchange of the two main characters.. On the contrary, it is, like many other things in the novel, inconclusive. Put in Suleiman's words, the tactics of Carter's "multiplies the possibilities of linear narrative and of 'story', producing a dizzying accumulation that undermines the narrative logic by its very excessiveness". It means there is always something unfinished, unresolved, something that is left to particular subjective readings only. The reader's question of whose attitude to feminism (Fevvers' or Lizzie's) will prevail is suspended and left for everyone's interpretation. It is as if Carter wanted to "put a damper on things" like Lizzie does when she replies to Fevvers enthusiastic prospects about Walser: "perhaps so, perhaps not". This uncertainty of these two women is understandable - from their point of view the future of feminism was still unsure and all its important achievements were yet to come. Carter, in her endeavour to instruct by her novel, may also use the device of this uncertainty in another way: her perspective is about ninety years "older" and therefore she knows that several goals of feminism were accomplished; however, many other are still left for future generations.

III. Analysis

Another important theme of *Nights at the Circus* is Carter's notion of feminism. The main attention is paid to a female character of Fevvers who strains to find and define her Self only to subsequently shape it into the ideal of the New Woman; the notion of feminism in this novel is tightly connected with the personal liberation of this woman. The traditional dichotomy of men's and women's roles is presented in their inverted, or, better put, remarkably disrupted form. Fevvers openly reveals her adherence to the ideal of the New Woman, as mentioned above. She also links most of the positive values with femininity. For example, as Mikolajek notices, she refers to London, as a one-breasted queen of Amazons, or she describes the Madame Nelson's brothel as a "perfect, loving Utopia, where the priestesses of love spent their entire free time with self-education and developing their virtues". On the other hand, as Mikolajek identifies, *Nights at the Circus* can hardly be labelled as a tacky feminist agitprop. He observes that Carter is able to keep a balanced, non-black-and-white view on feminist issues; she assumes a positive attitude to sexually fulfilled love and declines the idea of women as innocent victims of the misogynist world. She does not refrain from depicting negative female characters and presents the dark side of femininity. Madame Shreck or Countess P., for instance, are thoroughly negative: corrupted, vindictive, monstrous. As Mikolajek observes, these elderly women who openly support the patriarchal system by oppressing and exploiting other women are "perceived as a potentially bigger threat to the New Women than men themselves" and thus they are punished by Carter for their vices – the former turns into dust, the latter becomes the only prisoner of her pervert sanatorium. Fevvers is far from the traditional patriarchal image of a woman (or a lady) as someone dutiful, obedient, modest, shy, mannered, neat and decent, interesting just for her beauty and at the very most by some domestic skills. In fact, she is endowed by qualities traditionally attributed to men: unlike, for example, the female characters of Jane Austen or Brontë sisters (who are, however, still quite exceptional for their time – brave and morally integrated), Fevvers is dominating, outrageous, very messy and bold. She is gluttonous: she eats and drinks with an enormous appetite: "she gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety". Such a picture may shock or offend the traditional view on ladies' table manners. Fevvers is a muscular, six feet two inches tall giantess who rules her own life. She is (as much as possible) independent on men, making her own living in a circus as a trapeze artist. She is almost fearless, both in performing her trapeze act and in her interpersonal relationships. She is often the one who saves Walser when he gets into trouble during

his stay with circus, employed as a clown. In these acts she executes the conventionally male's role. Throughout the novel she also overcomes three adversities – a task which is traditionally (in fairy tales etc.) submitted to men. As far as her relationship to Walser is concerned, at first she is indifferent towards him, and only later on she develops feelings for him. Untypically for female characters, she boldly observes him as a sexually attractive object. She does not pretend to like him for his chivalrous character or brilliant mind; she just fancies his good looks. By endowing a female character by this superficial way of perceiving an individual of the opposite sex Carter provokes reader's common assumption about the divide of female and male roles. At the end of the novel Fevvers takes over the active role entirely and sets off to search for Walser to reunite with him. For Fevvers, Carter actually gathers all the traditionally appreciated men's characteristic features, amplifies them and bestows them on her broad-shouldered heroine. Carter assigns her the traits typical for men, still preserving those typical for women - both in their most intense appearance - and thus she creates an overwhelmingly strong and dizzying mixture. Fevvers is strong and outstanding in all her features which influence her behaviour – some of the features stay with her all the time, other come and go, allowing her to become such a slippery personality. Perhaps Carter wants to show that an individual can show any set of characteristics, no matter what gender this individual belongs to.

IV. Discussion

Through the character of Fevvers, Carter encourages women not to refrain from their real selves only because it might frighten or disgust someone. On the contrary, the main male character Jack Walser seems to lack any outstanding or interesting characteristic features, at least at the beginning. He is a young American journalist, who, since the moment he sits down into the chair in Fevvers' dressing room, "sets off to a picaresque journey which ends by his rebirth in Fevvers' arms". Despite being much-travelled and quite experienced, Jack does not have a developed inner life. He records the reality around him as an eye of a camera, not judging it, not letting it in. He is handsome, manly and straightforward, which is enough for Fevvers to start liking him. Perhaps, what she truly likes about him is his incompleteness. Since the very start she probably knows that he could become her project; that it will be easy to knead the shapeless quality of his misty character into a solid, definite figure, according to her liking. In their relationship he is quite passive, following Fevvers or waiting for her; he is enchanted and awed by her and he also represents the object of her sexual desire. His personality is at first described as "a little unfinished; a handsome house that has been left, furnished". As Palmer states, Walser is the one who deconstructs himself to assimilate with the requirements of becoming the New Man, a suitable counterpart for Fevvers, the New Woman. In Carter's words, "Walser took himself apart and put himself together again". More importantly, he is willing to adapt himself to her conditions – he follows her on her tour across Europe and Siberia. This is a very unusual tendency for a man: in the traditional patriarchy society women accommodated to their fathers, brothers and husbands. They accompanied them, supported them silently, and created a comfortable background for them. Walser does not bear the attributes that were traditionally ascribed to men: he is not significantly richer or stronger than Fevvers; neither is he more worldly-wise or experienced. Nevertheless, the inversion is not entire; he does not exactly show the characteristics traditionally assigned to female characters. This is because the dichotomy is not purely overturned; the counterparts are made equals instead. This concept reflects Carter's notion of feminism in which she does not desire a vindictive war against males and females but a balanced, congruous co-existence of the genders. In other words, as Day puts it, "the relationship between Walser and Fevvers is based not on the principle of dominator and dominated but on the idea of love between equals". Day suggests that Carter "is indicating that a new his/herstory is possible because of this new kind of relationship between a woman and a man".

V. Conclusion

The traditional patriarchal icon of male dominance is abandoned to give way to the new kind of relationship between the genders. This new kind is supposed to be a consensus, established on the balanced middle, not upon the other dire position of the range that ardent feminists may suggest. The

reader might find this tendency of Carter's feminism really appealing since her proposal is even-handed and moderate, and thus sustainable.

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