

Abstract:

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* presents a freakish world in which the female protagonist, Fevvers, is empowered in various ways to represent the author's feminism and introduce the concept of utopia for the New Century. As aerialist and as the unique bird-woman in the story, it is difficult for Fevvers to avoid being objectified. Stereotypes of women are shown through the appearances and adventures of Fevvers and the other female characters.

Carnival scenes and the adaptations of the fairy tales and folk tales in the novel provide paths for character transformation and ways to reverse the inferior roles of women. Although Fevvers' wings are sometimes suggestive of the abject, they also allow her to achieve mobility and dominance. The winged female body is grotesque and unique; it makes its bearer an object of desire, both for men and for women. While the wings serve to challenge phallic symbolism of the Freudian/Lacanian kind, the question of their authenticity is left a mystery throughout the novel. In this way, the wings can be seen as a fictional power (a symbolic power which currently does not exist) for establishing a feminist utopia.

The male characters in the novel act as auxiliaries and are ordinary in various ways. Fevvers' language ability appears to be superior to the males'. Fevvers' wings are able to capture and control the men's gaze and give their bearer the image of an escapee. The openness of this image suggests a possibility of flight (in both senses). The power of the wings suggests the possibility of relations between genders on an equal footing. However, the story does not end by presenting a feminist utopia; rather, the two open endings of the work give us glimpses of a better world.

In this thesis, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Carter's critical work *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* are utilised to examine the author's feminism and methods of dealing with the gender aspects of her works. Bakhtin's carnival and some related

parts from the works of Rabelais (especially *Gargantua and Pantagruel*) is the basis for investigating the feminist carnivalesque and the grotesque images in *Nights at the Circus*. Feminism and utopian literature are two of the key theoretical concepts/constructs used to explore Carter's works in this thesis. Other stories by Carter and works by precursors like Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen are employed in order to consider the relationships between gender and carnival in *Nights at the Circus*.