

"whores of mirth":
examining sex work
in angela carter's
nights at the circus



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It takes a writer like Angela Carter to make connections between circus clowns and prostitutes. Her novel, *Nights at the Circus*, depicts both, and they are shown to be more similar than one might first imagine. In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter uses circuses and freak shows as symbols for the artifice necessary in sex work done out of desperation - a performance that is inherently degrading to the one who works for the pleasure of another. She writes of several characters - from a half-swan aerialist to a man with no mouth to a circus clown - who, with no better options, become living spectacles; through fantastic people like these she is able to depict grim truths about real-life sex work.

The book's first section gives the backstory of Sophie Fevvers, a supposedly half-swan trapeze artist who grew up in a brothel. From the very beginning Carter makes connections between the circus and the whorehouse, and the most obvious of these connections is the aspect of performance, or artifice. According to Fevvers' story, she was abandoned as a child and raised by the prostitutes who found her. From the age of seven her job was to be a spectacle. With roses in her hair and a toy bow and arrow, she was made to sit in the drawing room of the brothel and act as Cupid - an "apprenticeship in being looked at," in Fevvers' words (23). Though she does not condemn Ma Nelson, the owner of the brothel, for giving her this job at such a young age, and actually praises her for not "putting her to the trade" as other madames might have done to such a young child, it is still clearly not the healthiest upbringing for a girl. It instills in Fevvers the idea that she is an object to behold, and introduces her to the work of pleasure. She describes herself as both a "tableau vivant" (23) and a "living statue," (39) and thus

dehumanizes herself. Though she was not abused at Nelson's house and said she enjoyed her life there, these events in her early life would form the foundation for a more humiliating future, the idea already planted in her head that one could make a living from degrading oneself to an object through performance and costume.

Costumes play a substantial role in Carter's novel. Sophie Fevvers goes from wearing one costume to another throughout every stage in her life. She goes from wearing the Cupid costume of her childhood to portraying the "Winged Victory" after she sprouts wings, with a sword as a prop and her hair powdered white, with "wet white that clowns use in the circus" covering her face and torso (37). Here is the first mention of clowns in the story, and it is tied to Fevvers' costume while in the brothel, the first connection to the professions of clowning and prostitution. Though Fevvers is not a prostitute herself, according to her account of things, she is working in the business of a pleasure, just as a clown does. The costume is important for the customer of both the clown and the sex worker - it aids in objectification. It is a decoration, something that draws even more attention to a person's body so it is easier to forget about their mind. For clowns, it is the big shoes, the loud colors, and the white makeup - the same white makeup Fevvers wears as a "living statue." Like a clown, she is a spectacle in a place of pleasure, and her real self is not meant to be seen, but rather, a made-up, artificial self. Later, in Madame Schreck's "Abyss," her costume becomes that of the Angel of Death, and in this Abyss she and other girls are subjected to much degradation and humiliation. (70) Fevvers' work for Madame Schreck - and the work of the other residents there - is work done out of desperation, as a

last resort. The residents of the abyss engage in sex work, or something similar (whether they engage in sex acts or not it is nevertheless all for the pleasure of male customers), because they do not believe they have other options. Fevvers decides to work there out of desperation for money. For someone with an unconventional appearance or even a disability as Fevvers' wings can be likened to - after all, Walser described her as always looking like "the cripple" when her wings were hunched under her clothes outside of her performances (19) - opportunities to make money can be more difficult to find than for those who were born into more fortunate circumstances.

Fevvers, when she first grows wings, "fear[s] the proof of [her] own singularity" (34) because she knows she will become a spectacle if she can find success in the body she was born into. Using her uniqueness, her "freakishness," to make money in an underground sideshow is her last option to make money when her adopted family was in a time of need. As Lizzie, her adopted mother, said, "the dolorous litany of the misfortunes of the poor is a string of 'if onlys'" (55) - if only it weren't for the doctor's bills, the baby being sick, Lizzie's sister taking a tumble down the stairs, etc. then Fevvers would not have to resort to degrading herself for the sake of money. But as mentioned above, the idea had been planted in her head that she had the ability to work as an object, and so she does. In such a desperate situation as Fevvers is in, sometimes people are willing to do more than they feel comfortable with, or more than their morals and values allow for. For example, someone who originally gets into sex work might start with oral sex, not wanting to engage in other forms of sexual activity, but in an effort

to make more money and build a larger customer base, they might continue adding more and more on their list of things they are willing to do.

In the sex trade, and in the sideshow trade that Fevvers is a part of, there is a distinct difference between the worker and the customer, and that is that it is only pleasurable for the latter. As Fevvers puts it, prostitutes are, "Only poor girls earning a living, for, though some of the customers would swear that whores do it for pleasure, that is only to ease their own consciences, so that they will feel less foolish when they fork out hard cash for pleasure that has no real existence unless given freely - oh, indeed! we knew we only sold the simulacra. No woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity, sir." 39The women who work for Madame Schreck are all desperate in some way, and so they allow themselves to be humiliated. The Wiltshire Wonder, for example, is a dwarf who works there because she believes herself "to have tumbled so far from grace that she could never climb out of the Abyss, and she regard[s] [herself] with utmost detestation." (68) The Wiltshire Wonder, who has been sold by her mother, made to sit in cages despite her claustrophobia, and abandoned by men who treated her cruelly, helps Carter to illustrate the importance of self-esteem in a sex worker. A lack of self-confidence can cause someone to engage in acts they are unwilling to do. Because of her background, she believes herself unworthy of a happy life, and so degrades herself to perform oral sex for the customers of the Abyss, customers like one who just wanted "a weeping girl to spit at him." (61)

Clowns are the most potent symbol for sex workers in Carter's book. For them too, humiliation is a part of the job description when they run out of <https://assignbuster.com/whores-of-mirth-examining-sex-work-in-angela-carters-nights-at-the-circus/>

other options. Spectacle and artifice play a huge part in their work too, as they are subjected to not mere humiliations, but "extravagant humiliations." (117) In Buffo the Clown's sermon, much light is shed on the profession of pleasure. Though the clown is the source of laughter for many, Buffo points out that "Despair is the constant companion of the Clown." This is for the same reason that the sex workers in Madame Schreck's freakshow lived such a dreary life - the pleasure is one-sided - "the mirth the clown creates grows in proportion to the humiliation he is forced to endure." A clown embarrasses himself to the roaring laughter of the audience. He hurts himself, tripping on things all while a frown is painted on his face. It is similar for sex workers - the more vile a thing they are forced to do, the more pleasure a customer might get. There is a huge parallel between the quote from Fevvers about the artifice of pleasure above and something Buffo says: that "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..." Of course, this is not the case. While the audience is able to go home afterwards after a night of enjoyment, the clown is forced to perform the same embarrassing skits again and again. It is their life, not their escape like it is for the customer. Buffo even describes clowns as the "whores of mirth," further cementing the connections between clowning and sex work. Like sex workers, Buffo says that clowns partake in their work out of necessity as well, rather than voluntarily. They "take to clowning when all else fails." (119) Buffo himself was an acrobat before he became a clown, and it can be inferred that an accident might have been the cause for him to abandon the life of an acrobat for the miserable one of a clown. Another example of this is when Walser's arm is injured and his routine becomes <https://assignbuster.com/whores-of-mirth-examining-sex-work-in-angela-carters-nights-at-the-circus/>

increasingly degrading - instead of doing handstands he becomes the Human Chicken, having to crow out "Cock-a-doodle-doo." (152)

In *Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter makes connections between clowns and freaks to the sex trade, thereby showing the grisly side of all these professions - that the pleasure to be found in them is artificial for the worker involved. This is something easily forgotten by a consumer of pleasure, when those workers are dehumanized and objectified. As Fevvers reminds the reader, "the girls behind the curtains" have "hearts that beat, like yours, and souls that suffer." (69) While Carter is not saying that sex work is inherently shameful, she does show that it can become that way when done unwillingly. Perhaps the best way to combat the violence and humiliation a sex worker might endure is to humanize them, to remember that they are people, not just objects, and that beneath the spectacle are boundaries and feelings that need to be respected.