

THEATRE AND CIRCUS AS BACKGROUND FOR MAGICAL REALISM IN ANGELA CARTER'S NOVELS¹

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Abstract:

*The paper analyzes how Angela Carter uses the environments of theatre and circus as a pretext for magical realism manifestations in her novels *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. In the first instance, we established connections between circus and theatre and the illusion of magic for the audience, showing how Carter is inspired in creating her characters by the enchantment world and magic present in Shakespeare's world and later by the clown representation in Chaplin's acts in movies. The characters who populate the discussed novels either deal with illusory entertainment and magic of the theatre stage, to mask an ambiguous lineage, as in *Wise Children*, or assume a non-human feature allowing them an identity to be further speculated in the world of circus, as in *Nights at the Circus*. Both environments are a pretext and an instrument for Carter's introduction of magic acts in realistic environments, leaving readers questioning the thin line between the sensual and ordinary worlds.*

¹ Article History: Received: 15.09.2024. Revised: 14.10.2024. Accepted: 16.10.2024. Published: 15.11.2024. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Citation: VĂNOAGĂ, C.M. (2024). THEATRE AND CIRCUS AS BACKGROUND FOR MAGICAL REALISM IN ANGELA CARTER'S NOVELS. *Incursiuni în imaginar* 15. *Magical Realism in Literature*. Vol. 15. Nr. 1. pp. 162-176
<https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2024.15.1.6>

No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

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Keywords: magical realism; Angela Carter; theatre; circus; entertainment.

Introduction

Angela Carter creates a narrative space where the ordinary and the extraordinary coexist. Carter's approach to magical realism continues her connection to the world of fantastic and fairy tales through her translations and rewriting of consecrated narratives. Her magical, realistic creation is meant to challenge literary and societal norms by bringing to the readers unconventional depictions of gender, sexuality, and power. Angela Carter's use of magical realism is often more focused on the personal and psychological rather than the historical and political aspects.

In our paper, we chose to analyse two of Carter's novels that fall into the category of magical realism, *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus*, which are united by specific environments of spectacle and magic: theatre and circus. We intend to highlight how the environment creates support and the stage for realistic magic characters, giving them credibility in the spectators' eyes.

Theatre, Circus and Magic

Both theatre and circus manipulate reality, create illusions, and engage with the audience's imagination. Marina Warner writes that theatre and magic share an ability to generate the extraordinary from the ordinary through the power of performance and storytelling: "The artifice of the act is central, and the success of the illusion depends on the willingness of the audience to suspend disbelief" (Warner, 1994, p. 243). From another perspective, the theatre spectators expect a narrative that

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immerses them in daily life. The story is not just on the stage. Debord shows that

the spectacle cannot be understood merely as the misuse of a world of vision or as the product of techniques for mass dissemination of images. Rather, it is a *Weltanschauung* that has become tangible, materially translated. It is a vision of the world that has been objectified. (Debord, 1983, p.7).

Moreover, in his preface to *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach discusses a society that “prefers the sign to the things signified”. (Feuerbach, 2008, p.12). He also adds a sacred coordinate to illusion in modern society (Feuerbach, 2008, p.13). Therefore, theatre becomes a complete world, uniting profane with sacredness and reality with illusion.

This idea resonates with Angela Carter’s use of theatrical elements in her fiction, particularly in *Wise Children*, where the boundaries between performance and reality are illusory. Carter also uses the intersection of theatre and magic to transform her characters’ lives and their worlds. Corrieri (2018) establishes a connection between theatre and magic, which goes beyond similarity, showing that the secularisation of magic eventually leads to the theatre. However, the author asks himself if the perception of magic in a representation is “in the eyes of the beholder”.

Carter draws strong inspiration from Shakespeare’s plays, where magic appears as an instrument disrupting the ordinary. Shakespeare uses fantastic elements in realistic settings, generating a space where the impossible changes to possible. At its core, magic in Shakespeare’s plays often represents a force that disrupts the ordinary world. The combination between reality and magic is

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challenging not only for the characters but also for the spectators. Magic allows Shakespeare to manipulate time, space, the laws of nature, altogether the entire narrative of the play. Wonder and spectacle are united by magic, transforming the stage into a fluid, malleable story.

Discussing Shakespeare, Angela Carter stated:

One last thing. So there hasn't been a female Shakespeare. Three possible answers: (a) So what. (This is the simplest and best.) (b) There hasn't been a male Shakespeare since Shakespeare, dammit, (c) Somewhere, Franz Fanon opines that one cannot, in reason, ask a shoeless peasant in the Upper Volta to write songs like Schubert's; the opportunity to do so has never existed. The concept is meaningless. (Carter, 1997, p.30).

Therefore, she does not attempt to be a feminine Shakespeare or imitate Shakespearian theatre. Instead, she creates a world tribute to Big Will. In a back-and-forth perspective, the novel unfolds through Dora's recollections of her and her twin's life as she reflects on their journey from illegitimacy to becoming icons of the British entertainment industry. The entire novel is populated by characters from the entertainment world, veiled in magic features and events.

Both theatre and circus bring magic to the audience. In its evolution, the circus borrowed from the theatre's traditional elements of narrative, characters and dramatic structure. Clowns originally were present as comedic elements both in theatre and the circus. They evolved by assuming more complex roles, using physical comedy and mime for wordless storytelling. The connection between circus and theatre became more visible than before in the 19th century when circus

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performances used extraordinary acts presented theatrically, eluding the border between entertainment and drama. The circus performers are similar to actors in creating magic.

Angela Carter uses the world of circus as background for the narrative of the novel *Nights at the Circus*. The spectacle world in the round arena is evoked through the voice of the journalist Jack Walser, who, fascinated by the supposed half-woman half-bird character, suggestively called Fevvers, enters the world of circus as a clown in Colonel Kearney's circus in St. Petersburg. He witnesses the magic of the circus and Fevvers' life, which she and her assistant/protector recall in an interview for Walser. The story of a winged female character was not appealing only to Angela Carter. It seemed that previously, this type of character inspired Charly Chaplin. As Linda Simon shows,

Chaplin was considering a new movie project, *The Freak*, about a young girl who awakens to find that she is sprouting wings. He decided that his graceful daughter Victoria would star. The movie, which would have involved many actors flying through the air, seemed a logistical nightmare, and his wife, Oona, secretly quashed the project, fearing the strain would take a toll on her husband's health. (Simon, 2014, p. 267).

Ironically, while studying ballet, Chaplin's daughter secretly desired to be a clown in a circus. She eloped with the actor Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée, creating Le Cirque Bonjour together. (Simon, 2014, p.269) Carter's character, Fevvers, does not elope but is, throughout her life, on a constant escape from different environments that try to take advantage of the magic of her wings.

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The connection to Chaplin is also established in *Wise Children* as a symbol of performance connected to the birth of the main characters, Dora and Nora, in and for the world of theatre:

But all the little children in Bard Road were singing a hymn to Charlie Chaplin the day that we were born and Grandma took us to the window to look at the shirts and bloomers dancing on the washing-lines all over Lambeth. We were doomed to sing and dance (Carter, 1991, p. 193).

Chaplin often depicted a clown-like character mixing sad emotions and situations with a façade joyous representation of them, like the life of *Wise Children's* characters. They are presented at the end of the novel theatrically, "Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance)" (Carter, 1991, p. 232), but their life on and off stage is both like theatre and clown circus acts.

Striking in their appearance, the clowns in *Nights at the Circus* are the heart of the environment as characters and people. Built on a class system, the circus throws clowns among the commoners in the city where the representations are, while the stars, such as Fevvers, live in luxury hotels. The clowns' off-stage life is similar to the one in the arena when they must let off steamy emotions. The circus acts move to the private space but become grotesque, as the clowns are no longer humans. The feud in the arena brings laughter to the audience. However, outside, it generates a different reaction, like an epiphany, encouraging others, as a small Russian child, to join the circus. Buffo, a clown character, even gives a religious dimension to being a clown:

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‘And yet, too, you might say, might you not, that the clown is the very image of Christ.’ With a nod towards the mildly shining icon in the corner of the stinking kitchen, where night crawled in the form of cockroaches in the corners. ‘The despised and rejected, the scapegoat upon whose stooped shoulders is heaped the fury of the mob, the object and yet -- yet! also he is the subject of laughter’. (Carter, 1984, p. 69).

Nights at the Circus: The Cabinet of Human Curiosities

The novel *Nights at the Circus* is Angela Carter’s penultimate novel and shows her preoccupation with out-of-pattern individuals. The characters she creates, especially the winged woman Fevvers, the main character, act like a mirror for the inside of those meeting her, reflecting hidden desires or socially unaccepted behaviours. It is not Fevvers or similarly strange characters in the novel that are the monsters exposed in a cabinet of curiosities, but the people who interact with them and prove to be the real monsters showcased in a society that enjoys the spectacles when it does not directly involve its members.

The main magical realistic aspects in the novel are created around a character who is

partly based on the actress Mae West, Fevvers is a raucous, indecorous, magnificently physical creation. Lustrously blonde-haired and radiantly blue-eyed, standing more than six feet tall, she is renowned throughout Europe for her beauty; at close quarters, though, she looks ‘more like a dray mare than an angel’, with a face as ‘broad and oval as a meat dish’ and ‘a voice that clanged like dustbin lids’. A woman of massive appetites and meagre

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delicacy, she burps, farts, sweats, and eats 'with gargantuan enthusiasm'. Her dressing room has 'a highly personal aroma', and is littered with discarded undergarments: it is 'a mistress piece of exquisitely feminine squalor'. (Gordon, 2017, p. 359).

From Edmund Gordon's description to Fevvers in his biography of Angela Carter, we observe the contradictory perception vs reality, which is constant throughout the discussed novel. In terms of perception, there is always a magical aspect that is highlighted depending on who is the viewer. Right from the start, the character connects herself to the world of the extraordinary by stating that her birth was not according to human laws, but to the ones that govern the winged creatures:

though they could just as well 'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire', due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore -- for I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched. 'Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!'. (Carter, 1984, p. 1).

The process of flying is, in Fevvers' description, a process of learning similar to the birds and not a circus practice. Lizzie, her help, back up all the details of Fevvers' strangeness. As the story relates, Lizzie is the one that was always by Fevver's side just from the moment she came to light from her native egg. There are various reactions in terms of the woman's winged authenticity.

The first reaction is mistrust, especially coming from Walter Waser, the journalist interviewing Fevver. He later joins the circus as a clown, only to be close to the mesmerising flying woman. Waser permanently oscillates

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between magic and logic. For instance, during his first meeting with Fevvers, the time seems to be frozen at midnight for the entire night, only to discover later that the clock was broken. When he fully believes in Fevvers' winged reality, she is the one that shatters his conviction of the woman's uniqueness: "why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the 'only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world'?" (Carter, 1984, p. 174). Fevvers' response relates to one's willingness to believe: the magic exists as long as one is willing to believe in it.

The second reaction to Fevvers' specificity is conferring her mythologic or esoteric powers, as in the episode where Christian Rosencreutz tries to use the winged woman in a ritual according to his beliefs. However, the spectators believe her to be magic as long as she performs. For them, Fevvers is part of an act that carries them outside the ordinary life into the one of spectacle. Linda Simon describes the audience's reaction to a flying female acrobat:

The men who crowded the circus arena saw women flyers and rope dancers who also displayed a healthy physique, but they exuded as well a paradoxical combination of power, sensuality and vulnerability. A woman on a wire or trapeze seemed to some viewers to be transformed into a mythological being – floating, weightless and ethereal. (Simon, 2014, p, 132).

The central character of Angela Carter's novel is also a pretext to introduce other characters who fall into the category of magic realism depending on others' perceptions. They may be showpieces in a cabinet of human curiosities because of their abnormal physical

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nature, such as the people living in the house of Madame Schreck, who makes good money by exhibiting them. On the contrary, they may belong to the magic world of fantastic creatures. Similar to Fevvers' extraordinary birth, comes the story of a tiny woman reminding the readers of Thumbelina. The novel's character is called the Whiltshire Wonder, and she attributes her extreme dwarfism to her mother's conceiving her with the King of Fairies. Other exhibits in the cabinet of human curiosities are Toussaint, the man without a mouth, The Sleeping Beauty, a maid suffering from a disease keeping her in a perpetual state of sleep, Fanny Four-Eyes, and the bipartite Albert/Albertina.

Since a circus is not complete without animals, Colonel Kearney's circus is also a gathering of trained ferals, some of them with surprising human features, such as the monkeys in the "school of apes" or the tigers suffering from jealousy. The most exciting animal is an oinker, Sybil, who, as her name suggests, serves as an oracle for the Colonel by extracting cards with letters in a specific order to form words, who decide the future of various circus aspects.

Wise Children: "A Drama of Errors"

The world created in *Wise Children* is reality and fantasy, ordinary and extraordinary. From the start, the birth of the Chance twins, Dora and Nora, is surrounded by myth and wonder, an illustration of magical realism created by Angela Carter. They are connected to the theatre by their lineage and birth date, which they share with William Shakespeare: April 23. If, in Shakespeare's plays, the motif of twins serves in the comedy of errors, in Carter's novel, the twins are connected to a "drama of errors", where the identity is volatile for the sisters and their parents, too.

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Wise Children has three epigraphs, all connected as a prologue. Cole Porter's call "Brush up your Shakespeare" alerts the reader to pay attention to intertextuality and foresees the magic in Shakespeare's plays. An old saw shows that "It's a wise child that knows its own father", highlighting the paternity theme in Carter's novel. Shakespeare also used the same saw in Act 2, scene 2 of *The Merchant of Venice*. The third epigraph quotes Ellen Terry, warning that identity issues may also come from the mother-daughter relationship, which is a step Carter takes further compared to Shakespeare's plays, which inspired her: "How many times Shakespeare draws fathers and daughters, never mothers and daughters". (Carter, 1991, cover page).

The twins' mother is a foundling, Pretty Kitty, with no knowledge of her parents, bringing a half-mysterious ancestry to Dora and Nora. At their birth, Pretty Kitty was a dancer in the company where Melchior, the twins' father, played Shakespearean roles. The birth takes place just after the end of a representation as a symbol for the continuation of the stage in real life. Their birth details are fuzzy, filled with contradictions and surreal elements, continuing the magic and illusion of the stage outside it. Grandma Chance, herself suspected at some point to be the girls' birth mother, takes them from Pretty Kitty and raises them as her granddaughters.

The separation from the mother is a trauma for a young man and signifies a mystical birth in some cultures, as Mircea Eliade shows: "It is a rupture from the childhood world, very violent sometimes – at the same time maternal and feminine, as well as a state of irresponsibility and happiness, ignorance and asexuality". (Eliade, 1995, p.23) Giving birth is a form of initiation for the mother, but the daughters also pass through initiation by the act of an older woman caring for them. (Eliade, 1995, pp. 58-62).

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Dora and Nora pass at their birth through a double initiation, masculine and feminine, as a sign of their strange connection to both parents' identities.

Another aspect of magical realism involves the character of Peregrine Hazard, the twin brother of Dora's and Nora's father. Peregrine is a mysterious character who unpredictably comes and goes, disappearing for years and reappearing under miraculous circumstances. His name also signifies this aspect of wandering, but this does not stop him from being present in the girls' crucial moments of life. If Melchior denies their paternity, Peregrine assumes it, together with that of a mom, judging by the place he shelters the girls, the exact place where a woman grows babies: in the womb, where the growing foetus feels the mother's heartbeats as growing:

I have a memory, although I know it cannot be a true one, that Peregrine swept us up into his arms. That when our father denied us, Peregrine spread his arms as wide as wings and gathered up the orphan girls, pressed us so close we crushed against his waistcoat, bruising our cheeks on his braces' buttons. Or perhaps he slipped us one in each pocket of his jacket. Or crushed us far inside his shirt, against his soft, warm belly, to be sustained by the thumping comfort of his heart. And then, hup! he did a backflip out of the window with us, saving us. But I know I am imagining the backflip and the flight. (Carter, 1991, p.72).

Dora is aware of the intertwining of wishful magical thinking with reality, better said, the impossibility of magic unless one does not believe in magic. Mentioning Grandma Chance and her ability to sense flowers' pain when cut, Dora states: "Grandma read it in a book. I swear, to this day, she only did it to annoy us but, from this book,

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she took into her head the notion flowers suffered pain.” (Carter, 1991, p.91).

Still, Dora’s representation of Peregrine serves the need for familiar human territories. The same need is reflected in Carter’s creation of women in this novel. According to Edmund Gordon, Dora disguises the writer’s aunt, Kitty Farthing, and the entire novel is a tribute to what Gordon calls “a matriarchal clan” in Carter’s family history, who did not favour women at all: “Kitty fared much worse. Inspired by her childhood visits to the Old Vic, she wanted to go on the stage; but her ambitions were swiftly crushed, and until her mother’s death in 1966 she lived at home with her as a companion and effective factotum”. (Gordon, 2017, p. 10) In her journal, the novelist depicts the almost demented aunt’s death of a similar cause to Carter’s mother and, at the same time of the year, aspects that are coincidental circumstances induced by “magic means”. (Gordon, 2017, p.236).

Carter creates a game of mirrors in *Wise Children*, not only at a biographical level but also to a fictional one. The novel is populated by mirroring twins united in the uncertainty of their lineage: Melchior and Peregrine Hazard, Dora and Nora Chance, Saskia and Imogen Hazard, Tristram and Gareth Hazard, and, lastly, Gareth’s twin son and daughter. Deeply connected to the world of theatre and entertainment, they seem to expend in their life the act of playing, which, according to Shakespeare’s Hamlet (Act 3, Scene 2), “both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ‘twere a mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”. (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 389).

Coda

Fascinated with folk and fairy tales, with Japanese theatre, Shakespeare and entertainment, Angela Carter manages to unite all their elements to create a magical realistic landscape populated by characters who attract the readers in a pact similar to the one happening on stage or in the arena. The readers become the audience and witness the characters' actions, who project magic on a realistic screen. They may believe it or not, but for a while, they are drawn into a world where literally "all the world's a stage". (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 336)

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