

Nights at the Circus Study Guide

Nights at the Circus by Angela Carter

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Plot Summary

Nights at the Circus is divided into three sections. The first section is set in London in 1899, just before the turn of the century. Jack Walser, a young but well-traveled journalist, is interviewing Sophie Fevvers, an aerialiste, originally for the Cirque d'Hiver, but now for Captain Kearney's Grand Imperial Tour. The performer, who goes only by the name Fevvers, is extraordinary in that she claims to have real wings. She is tall, blonde, curvy, and beautiful: "The Cockney Venus." Raised in a brothel, Fevvers has working-class beginnings, and she often speaks in an earthy manner, using ribald language. However, she is also an auto-diadact, having seemingly provided herself with a broad education. Her language, therefore, is also quite lofty at times, peppered liberally with sophisticated vocabulary and literary references.

Fevvers' act consists of "flying" up to the trapeze where she performs a high wire routine. She is over six feet tall, so her performance lacks the speed of other high wire acts; however, crowds gather to witness her hook: a six-foot wingspan. Although she claims to be a physical anomaly, she openly challenges others to decide whether her outlandish claims are true.

Walser, who is skeptical, decides to interview her and discover on his own if she is "fact or fiction." He plans to publish his findings in a newspaper series entitled "Great Humbugs of the World." Although he sets out to disprove her claims in his initial interview, he becomes enchanted as she spins her tale.

Fevvers tells Walser she was left on the steps of a brothel in the shells of the egg from which she hatched. At birth, she had little down buds on her shoulders, but, at the age of fourteen, she sprouted wings that continued to develop as she grew. She tells him farfetched tales of her past he is not sure he can believe; however, her presence is intoxicating and he finds himself wanting to believe everything she says. Walser falls in love with Fevvers and follows her as she joins the circus on the "Grand Imperial Tour," which is travelling to Tokyo via Russia; followed by yet another tour through the United States.

The second section of the story, set in St. Petersburg, finds Walser working as a clown in the circus to be near Fevvers, who has top billing and is the star of the show. The audiences love her and she receives many invitations to dine out with rich men. Prompted by greed, she flirts with them for attention and gifts. However, as she also claims to be a virgin, there is only so far she will take the flirtation.

The circus suffers many setbacks while in St. Petersburg. First, a tiger attacks Walser. Also, an affair within the circus ranks leads to tragedy, and Fevvers takes the woman, Mignon, who has been beaten and thrown out by her husband, under her proverbial wing. Fevvers not only finds Mignon a new place in the circus, but also a new, and unexpected, lover.



Fevvers, realizing that Walser has joined the circus to be near her, slowly realizes she has growing feelings for him; still, she has been raised to distrust love and abhor marriage, and her feelings for money are much stronger. On their last night in St. Petersburg, the circus loses the leader of the clown troupe to insanity. In addition, the tigress attacks Mignon and must be shot, and the ape act deserts the circus for something better. Fevvers is almost lost, for in pursuit of her greed she puts herself in a dangerous situation with a man who finds her wings fascinating and wants to keep her for his collection. She escapes, but her feeling of invulnerability is lost. Her love of money also loses its luster.

In the third section, the troupe is headed across Siberia on its way to Tokyo. The train on which they are traveling derails, killing many of the animals on board and leaving the troupe stranded in the wilderness. It is a cold and desolate landscape. Although Fevvers searches frantically for him, Walser cannot be found. Fevvers and the other circus survivors are soon taken hostage by outlaws, who, due to faulty intelligence, believe Fevvers can help them return to their families by pleading their case to the Queen of England: a relative to the Tsar of Russia. Unfortunately, Fevvers cannot help them and she and the survivors must plot their escape. During this time, Walser is found by escaped prisoners who are picking through the train wreckage. Hit on the head and suffering from amnesia, he wanders off into the woods and is taken in by the shaman of a tribal village.

Fevvers and the other survivors set out to return to the train wreckage, but instead find themselves at a house by a river in the middle of the wilderness. There they find the Maestro. He helps them survive, and Mignon and her lover, in return, help him to rediscover himself and his dreams. During this time, Fevvers is worried about Walser, even though she still writes of her feelings for him as purely physical in nature. She has heard rumors that he is alive and plans to find him. She and Lizzie, her foster mother and constant companion, set out into the wilderness to find Fevvers' lost love, as she has realized love is more important than money.

The women find Walser in the tribal village where he is slowly regaining his memory. Fevvers' presence speeds his recovery and the two finally get to be together. The question of whether her story is fact or fiction is left for the reader to decide.



Section 1, Chapter 1

Summary

Fevvers and Lizzie, Fevvers' foster mother, talk to Jack Walser in the dressing room after a show in London, her home city, which has welcomed her back with fervor and merchandising ideas.

Fevvers opens a bottle of champagne, a gift from a rich patron, and hands Walser a glass. Trying to keep his head on straight, he attempts to stow the glass discretely away, but ends up toppling a stack of papers and stockings. The scent of Fevvers' room is cloying: dirty clothes, perfume, sweat, gas heat, greasepaint, and a faint, fishy odor from the ice recycled from a local fishmonger. Corsets, underpants and discarded clothes lay randomly around in the room. The blatant femininity makes Walser uncomfortable, but Fevvers ignores his discomfort.

Walser is well traveled but far from worldly. Originally from San Francisco, California, as a young man he stowed away on a steamer ship headed for Shanghai. Gifted with words and good luck, he became a journalist for a New York paper, and as such learned to view life objectively.

Fevvers continues to enjoy glass after glass of champagne (while Walser attempts to deflect her refilling his glass) as she tells her story. Her parentage unknown, Fevvers was abandoned as an infant on the steps of a Whitechapel brothel. Lizzie opened the door to discover the baby nestled in a bed of straw amid broken eggshells. The kind woman, who became first her wet-nurse and later her constant companion, took in the infant. Upon inspection, it was noticed the newborn bore bits of yellow fluff on each of her shoulder blades, which caused the ladies of the house to exclaim it looked as if she were about to sprout "fevvers": hence, her name. Later, when the women took her to be christened, the vicar insisted on a "proper" name, and she was christened Sophie.

Lizzie is a London-born Italian, which makes it difficult for Walser to place her accent. She is small and "gnome-like," and of indeterminate age. She is olive-skinned, has a noticeable moustache, and frizzy hair that, at one point, was dyed but has since grown out in shades of grey. She is brusque and defensive, and takes a firm but loving hand with Fevvers. She begins to remove her foster-daughter's make up as they both encourage Walser to take more champagne.

Looking around, Walser sees very few personal touches in the dressing room: no clues as to who these two women truly are on a personal level. Noticing her discarded stockings peeking out of the tub, he recalls her performance, as observed from his plush box seat.

Fevvers begins her performance huddled under a cape in a cage. As music plays, her trapezes are lowered, and she bends the "bars" of her cage and emerges. The cage is



lifted away and she throws her mantle aside. In flesh-colored stockings, a tight corset over a leotard spangled in all the right places, and a huge purple and crimson-feathered headdress, Fevvers indeed looks like an exotic bird. She turns for the audience, and then spreads her arms, unfurling her wings into an impressive six-foot wingspan. Even at this point, Walser is pondering the physiological improbability, and thinks she is trying too hard. As the band begins to play “Ride of the Valkyries,” Fevvers jumps up 30 feet in the air to grab hold of the trapeze. At first, due to her size, she seems ungainly and slow, although she does have natural grace, and is able to perform a triple somersault, even at half the pace of a traditional aerialiste. Walser wonders why a natural bird-woman might not do something a false one could not, but then thinks perhaps (paradoxically) to be truly believed, she must leave the question of “fact or fiction.” unanswered. Walser also ponders whether or not, since she claims to have been hatched, not born, Fevvers would have a belly button. At that moment, Fevvers lands to thunderous applause. Fevvers is adored by her fans, including the Prince of Wales, who has come to see her perform twice every night, and, although he has given her elaborate gifts, he has “never got nowhere” with her. Despite growing up in a brothel and having a colorful past, Fevvers claims to be a virgin.

Turning his attention to his subject once more, Walser breaks his reverie to notice how wholesome she looks without her makeup. Lizzie brushes Fevvers’ hair, and Walser ponders the lumps of her wings beneath her dressing gown, a “conspicuous deformity,” which will draw the eye wherever she might go. He asks her who makes her gowns, and she admits she and Lizzie make them. As Lizzie pins up her six feet of blonde hair into a chignon, they sip champagne. Fevvers then continues with her tale.

Analysis

Chapter One introduces the main themes of the novel through the medium of Fevvers’ narrative. We get the feeling of magical realism as soon as she begins her unbelievable story. It could easily begin with “Once upon a time.”

Fevvers is a grand self-promoter. She has an intoxicating personality, a paradoxical blend of low class and highbrow, telling crass jokes and quoting literary classics in nearly the same breath. Fevvers speaks in a broad Cockney accent, beginning her tale as she removes her makeup. Her wings are hidden beneath her dressing gown, where they shudder gently from time to time. The room is messy, filled with posters of Fevvers bearing her slogan: “Is she fact or is she fiction?” Her favorite is one painted by Toulouse Lautrec, whom she refers to as “some Frog dwarf,” and who, she claims, demanded a perverse favor from her. Lautrec is not her only admirer. She receives attention from any number of men, both humble and famous. She is used to receiving expensive gifts, praise, and even offers of marriage. Loving money and the lavish life, she revels in the attention. Her popularity secures her role as star of the circus, gaining her a six-figure salary, nearly unheard of in 1899 (over 1 million British pounds sterling in today’s currency.) Outwardly, she is warm and generous, but her dreams revolve around material gain.



The tenor of the interview introduces the theme of class immediately, especially as her accent, her messy and apparently shabby (chaotic) dressing room and her questionable humor and manners (passing gas with a “better out than in, sir!”) is soon juxtaposed with her obviously broad exposure to literature and more refined culture, in which she quotes Shakespeare and drinks expensive champagne. She is beginning to expose herself as a liminal figure.

Walser’s travels have made him into a refined person, with smooth manners, handsome looks, and a mindset of both curiosity and skepticism. Still, he seems to have gained no depth from his experiences, and has little substance or personality. He is simply a conduit for the story. This simplicity sets him up as a Fool. He is intrigued by the mystery of Fevvers, a mystery she purposely cultivates in order to enhance her appeal. He lures her in with the promise of more publicity, but as a skeptic he secretly hopes to expose her as a fraud. Walser enters into the scene assuming he is being deceived; what he wants to know is how, and by whom?

Vocabulary

guffawed, uproarishly, indecorous, aerialiste, impetuous, preposterous, steatopygous, pinions, putative, notorious, desirous, gratification, ambiguity, surreptitiously, discomfiture, picaresque, avocation, propensity, cataclysmic, introspection, connoisseur, psychoanalysis, ostensibly, scrupulously, diphthongs, incipient, raucous, contralto, unguents, striating, ablutions, kitsch, meretricious, perfunctory, cantilevered, succinctly, finite, polychromatic, anomaly, hieratic, verisimilitude, Rubenesque, purport, aplomb, tumultuous, exigent, belabour



Section 1, Chapter 2

Summary

Fevvers claims never to have told her story to anyone before. She does not know who her parents are, but only that she was left on the steps of a brothel in a basket of broken shells and straw. Lizzie found her and took her in to be reared by the women of the brothel.

Fevvers asks Walser if his newspaper will print those facts, with the mention of prostitutes, and Walser insists that not only are American minds more expansive, but he also states many prostitutes are fine, marriageable women.

Lizzie reacts in disgust, as she believes marriage to be no different from prostitution. She wonders why a woman would want to whore herself out to one man rather than many. Fevvers smoothes her mood over and sends out for some food. Fevvers is a ravenous eater, with less than delicate manners. Walser waits while she devours her meal, complete with dribbles and belching.

Once her meal is completed, she returns to her tale. She is proud to have been raised in a brothel, where she says she was given tender care by the prostitutes, and put safely away to bed before the rowdy customers arrived each night. The Madame, Nelson, protects Fevvers while she is young, and never thinks to put her to work. However, when the girl turned seven, Nelson had the idea to dress her up as Cupid to decorate the alcove of the drawing room where the women met their customers. She played this role for seven years: an object to be looked at, but never touched.

At age fourteen, Fevvers begins to develop into a woman. Even more puzzling, she has an itching in her back around her shoulders, which grows in intensity and discomfort until, one morning, her wings burst forth. She confidentially admits to Walser she now dyes her feathers, naturally light brown, into exotic hues for her stage show. She insists this is the only deception she practices toward her public.

On seeing her charge's fully sprouted wings, Lizzie runs to fetch Ma Nelson. Seeing the girl as a symbol of the turning century, "the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground" (p.25) she is moved to tears and immediately changes the girl's position in the brothel. As of that night, she is posed as Winged Victory.

Fevvers describes the brothel lovingly, as a place where she was protected and kept happy and safe. She described the house as clean and modest, with an air of propriety. The drawing room has a large fireplace in which are burned aromatic woods and incenses. Ma Nelson has several paintings, including one of Leda and the Swan, which she refuses to have cleaned, as she believes Time himself was an artist, and his transfigurative work should be respected.



Lizzie claims she was never a very successful whore, as she was constantly praying and, hence, converting good customers to Catholicism. Therefore, she says, Ma Nelson gave her the position of housekeeper. It was her job to keep the house tidy and snug, and also to tend to Fevvers. After the emergence of the girl's wings, it was also up to Lizzie to alter her clothes.

With her new wings, Fevvers figured she should be able to fly. She claims she first attempted to fly by jumping off the marble mantle of the fireplace. To do so, she had to remove Ma Nelson's clock, a figure of Father Time holding a scythe. The clock is stopped so it always says either midnight or noon, which Ma Nelson deems necessary in this place. Fevvers then stands upon the mantel, spreads her wings, and jumps, falling to the floor and nearly breaking her nose. As Lizzie patches her up, Fevvers insisted she hovered just for the briefest moment. Determined to try again, Fevvers watches birds to learn the dynamics of flying.

Meanwhile, Ma Nelson provides for Fevvers, paying for new clothes, all the while insisting to customers her wings are only part of a costume. Many men are interested in Fevvers, offering huge prices, into the thousands of pounds, for her virginity, but Ma Nelson declines, protecting Fevvers from being discovered: not as a fake, but as a freak.

Nelson, herself, is an interesting character. Having only one eye, she dresses herself in the full dress of an Admiral of the British Fleet, and claims to run a very tight ship.

On Midsummer's night, Fevvers believes she is ready, and she attempts once more to fly. This time she gets Liz to shove her, naked, from the roof of the five story brothel. At first she begins to fall, but is lifted up on the wind current.

As Liz opens another bottle of champagne, and refills everyone's glass, Fevvers becomes excited, insisting Walser must know the truth. For a moment, he wonders if she is really a man. At that moment the night watchman appears, but is sent off after enjoying a quick drink. Both women regale Walser with the memories of that night, and how Fevvers wings finally gave out, but Lizzie was able to pull her back onto the roof from the eaves.

As that part of the tale ends, Lizzie sits on her giant handbag and Big Ben strikes midnight.

Soon after, Fevvers claims, Ma Nelson gifts her with the sword from her Admiral's uniform, as the original Greek statue (the Winged Victory of Samothrace circa 2nd century B.C.) has no arms. Ma Nelson imagines that, if the perfected statue (which also has no head, and which Fevvers represents) existed, Victory would bear a sword. Ma Nelson refers to her as "Victory with Wings," and considers her the protectress of the whores. Painted white with clown makeup, Fevvers holds the sword point down in her right hand, indicating she means no harm unless provoked. Still, it seems customers are intimidated, even emasculated, by her size and might, and business falls off slowly.



The women believe the writings of the French poet Baudelaire also influence the way younger clients view the whores, with a sort of horrified fascination, as if the women are sirens luring them to their doom. On the contrary, the women are suffragists, living in a wholly women's community (down to the cats and the dog who guard the door.) They believe in women's rights, and form a loving sisterhood, studying trades and arts in their free hours, and only prostituting themselves for the money they earn, providing only the illusion of pleasure and ecstasy to the men who buy them. Fevvers, however, is protected by her image as a statue, and although she feels as if she is waiting for something, it is not a man. She, like her foster mother, has come to believe marriage is a type of prison, and has no desire to enter that gilded cage. Even now, she waits for the turn of the century, and for her true destiny to be revealed.

In her leisure hours at the brothel, Fevvers studies aerodynamics and physiology, desiring to better understand her body. She, like all of the women in the brothel, is an auto-diadact: a self-taught scholar. Ma Nelson has an impressive library, left to her by a former lover.

While she is talking, Fevvers flirts subtly with Walser, fluttering her long eyelashes, and exposing her long slender legs, which, she points out, seem disproportionate to her ample bosom. However, she points out, she was heartened by the vision of storks, cranes, and flamingoes, which are capable of long flights. Thus, she practiced flying, and the vertical takeoff, which appears nightly in her act.

Discovering they have finished every bottle of champagne, Fevvers asks Lizzie to make tea. As she does so, Big Ben strikes midnight for the second time. Walser is non-plussed, and assumes he must have made a mistake in hearing it the first time. He finds himself drawn to Fevvers, especially to her voice, as she tells of Ma Nelson's demise: she slips in the street and is run over by a carriage. After her death, the prostitutes give her a lavish funeral, as her older brother, a harsh cleric, will not acknowledge her. However, as her next of kin, he inherits the house and, bursting in on their wake, turns the women out, giving them only until the next morning to pack and leave. He does, however, offer the prostitutes a job if they are willing to repent: he plans to turn the brothel into a home for wayward girls. However, not one woman consents.

The women pack and plan, share a last drink, and say goodbye, each taking with them a memento of their dear Ma Nelson. Lizzie takes the clock that forever reads midnight or noon, and Fevvers takes her sword. Before they leave for the last time, the women open the curtains in the house. None of them have ever seen them opened before, and are surprised at how decrepit the room is: dusty, tarnished, moth-eaten and moldy, the luxury and opulence of the room has been nothing but an illusion.

Having spent hours readying themselves for the outside world and carefully saving their wages, each former prostitute has a plan. Two retire together and opened a boarding house. Two others set up a business doing office work. Jenny, the prettiest, is proposed to by an old widowed aristocrat, who conveniently drops dead at the reception, choking to death on his dessert and leaving her a fortune. She soon marries a Chicago sewing machine magnate, though it is rumored he, too, is sickly. The last joins the theatrical



profession and marries a fellow performer. Fevvers and Lizzie, who have been sending money for years to Lizzie's sister Isotta, join her in running an ice cream shop in London, with recipes brought from the old country. When Lizzie slips and seems to reveal a bit too much regarding a certain dessert, Fevvers covers with an "accidental" spill of her powder. She quickly recovers and concludes her story.

At the last moment, the women decide to give the house a final farewell, and dousing the furnishings with kerosene, set it alight. They part with affection, each going their separate ways; each woman becoming successful regardless of her class and former profession.

Analysis

Here the reader begins to understand the close connection that Lizzie and Fevvers have with one another. Walser wonders if they could be, in fact, true mother and daughter. He is simultaneously attracted and repulsed by Fevvers, which puts him on her threshold, the place where she resides most comfortably.

The story becomes even more fantastic as it is expanded upon. Fevvers is a physical anomaly, but with the help of Ma Nelson and Lizzie, she is not only protected from harm and ridicule, she is strengthened with learning. Not only knowledge of how to fly, but also of how things work. She gathers a broad knowledge of literature, and becomes quite cultured. This helps her interact with others (men) as equals, and to protect and provide for others through her influence. Her mystery and liminal nature is enhanced by the seeming paradox of her intellect and her earthiness (e.g. the way she enjoys her food.)

The mythos of Fevvers as the Virgin Prostitute and the angel who protects and defends other women is developed as she grows into the Victory with Wings and is handed a sword. She does serve to protect the women of the brothel, the first in a long line of women she brings under her wing, as it were. Lizzie, however, exists only to protect Fevvers.

Fevvers' nascent feminism is born and nourished during her tenure at Ma Nelson's. Though quite genteel, the whores are determined to live independent lives, free from the domination, though not necessarily the influence, of men. Although Lizzie (and therefore, Fevvers) disdains marriage, not all of the women in their lives do.

The theme of time as a mystical element is put into play strongly in this chapter. The French clock that does not tell time is introduced: is it broken, or does it have the power to suspend time? Big Ben striking midnight for the second time seems to back up the idea that it might. The magical handbag is also seen for the first time. Lizzie sits on it, as it is the seat of her personal power(s.) Her personality begins to show a bit, as she slips in a political comment, which is quickly covered by Fevvers with a bit of fumbling.



Vocabulary

coquetry, mollified, glutinous, ripost, matutinal, ablutions, rectitude, redundant, caryatids, lugubrious, imperious, artifice, dissipation, pragmatism, precipitated, runnelled, abstraction, construe, lethargy, cynosure, soubriquet, vestigial, irreconcilable, contingency, passivity, pettishly, Brobdingnagian, perturbation, hubris, reverberation, vivacity, precipitously, timorous, imperturbability, suffragists, simulacra, lithic, virtuoso, aerodynamics, gleaned, convolutions, indefatigably, inexorably, aesthetics, protracted, emulate, beatitude, foetid, debauched, imbued, aspirates, intestate, interpolated, provincial, aptest



Section 1, Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

Chapter 3: Lizzie's sister, her husband, and kids make Lizzie and Fevvers feel welcome, and Fevvers enjoys the feeling of family life and helping out in the shop. Being around the sweet innocence of children and ice cream is purifying: a contrast to life in the dimly lit brothel.

Fevvers is hungry again, and Liz leaves the dressing room to go for food, refusing Walser's offer to pay and leaving the two alone. Oddly, they both fall silent. Fevvers seems tired, concerning herself with her mirror. When she yawns, her stale scent and large form seem to fill the air. Hoping for a moment outside her presence and a breath of fresh air, he tries to excuse himself. She insists he use the chamber pot behind the curtain. As he urinates, he feels grounded once again, and no longer overwhelmed by her presence.

Lizzie returns, and as she makes a fresh pot of tea to go with their sandwiches, Big Ben strikes midnight for the third time. Walser reseats himself, dislodging a pile of papers Lizzie hurriedly snatches away. He refuses food, but waits while Fevvers relishes her sandwich, wiping the grease from her lips with her sleeve. She then continues her story.

Living with Lizzie's sister in Battersea is pleasant, and the two often attend Shakespeare plays and opera. Their favorite, Lizzie claims, is Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, due to the statement it makes regarding social class. Fevvers laughs at this, but seems irritated at Liz's politics. She claims to prefer Bizet's *Carmen*.

A cold winter, however, causes Liz's brother-in-law, Gianni, to fall ill. The baby also falls ill, and everyone is worried. There are six children to feed, as well as the four adults. Fevvers is teaching the four-year-old her letters when Madame Schreck arrives at the ice cream shop. Bony and dressed all in black from head to toe including a thick veil and gloves, she knows who Fevvers is, and of her past as Ma Nelson's *Winged Victory*. She offers Fevvers a huge salary to appear in her museum of women monsters, a specialized brothel offering clientele an array of women with grotesque deformities. She assures Fevvers her reputation as London's *Virgin Whore* need not be changed unless Fevvers herself chooses. She then departs in her old fashioned carriage, drawn by a black pony and driven by a black man with no mouth.

Walser has heard of Madame Schreck, and knows the story is going to take a dark path from here. The family's misfortunes grow worse as Gianni and the baby grow sicker and Isotta falls down the stairs and cannot work. The medical bills mount, and one morning, shrouded in darkness, Fevvers leaves a note and heads out to join Madame Schreck's *Freak Show*.



Chapter 4: Walser has filled his notebook and has reversed it to write on the other side of each page. His hand hurts, and he and Fevvers accept fresh tea.

Madame Schreck's brothel is very different than Ma Nelson's. The clientele at Ma Nelson's are there to slake physical lust; those who visit Madame Schreck's are truly depraved. The house is dark and dismal, even from the outside, and the manservant seems to receive Fevvers with a sense of sorrow. Madame Schreck's manservant, Toussaint, has no mouth and therefore cannot speak. He communicates with gestures and with his expressive eyes. He, like the others within, is there because they have nowhere else to turn.

Fevvers is taken to see Madame Schreck, who is awake even at the early hour and is lying in her gloomy room taking sips from a cup of cocoa. She tells Fevvers, Toussaint will soon show her her quarters, after which she may rest until she is fitted for her costume. Fevvers' eyes are covered while Madame Schreck is dressed, once again all in black with veil and gloves, giving Fevvers an unsettling feeling. She tries to dismiss Fevvers, but, gathering her courage, Fevvers demands an advance to send to Gianni, threatening otherwise to get up and leave. Madame Schreck agrees reluctantly, and gives Fevvers five sovereigns (5£.) Touching the Madame's hand, Fevvers feels nothing but bone, and is not surprised to find out later the old woman herself had toured in sideshows as a Living Skeleton. Turning to look at the woman as she leaves her room, Fevvers witnesses Madame Schreck literally embracing her fortune.

After giving the money to Toussaint to deliver to Lizzie, Fevvers is led to her bare quarters: an unlit cell with an iron bed, washstand, and bars across the window. She realizes she has entered this prison of her own free will, and she might never leave.

The women who work for Madam Schreck all have extreme anomalies: Fanny has four eyes: two in her face and one on each breast. Sleeping Beauty sleeps all the time only waking to eat, Wiltshire Wonder is three feet tall, Albert/Albertina is half man, half woman, and Cobwebs is a melancholiac with cobwebs covering her face. At night, the women pose for and occasionally entertain the men who come to gape at them. Toussaint, although he has been encouraged to join in tableaux featuring the women, refuses, playing an organ throughout the evening instead.

Walser is curious as to how Toussaint can eat if he has no mouth. Fevvers explains he used to eat through a tube up his nose, but later she encouraged several men of science with whom she was acquainted to take on his case and surgically create a mouth for him. Since then, he has become an eloquent speaker. Walser considers Fevvers' ability to speak knowledgeably with scientists and scholars without having to use her feminine wiles a great achievement. Lizzie makes a political comment about Toussaint ironically being given a voice by the same white men who had "rendered him dumb," but again she is quickly silenced by an angry look from Fevvers. Her comment, however, is not unnoticed by Walser.



Toussaint serves as an encouraging and comforting presence in the depths of Madame Schreck's, maintaining it was the depraved clients who were "unnatural," not the women they paid to see.

The women are displayed in the basement, in an old wine cellar called "The Abyss." They are forced to stand or lie in stone niches with a curtain drawn over the front, and a little lamp burning before the "profane altar" as Mme. Schreck refers to them. Clients arrive and don a costume of their choice. Led down by the old woman bearing a candle in a skull, they choose from the women which they prefer to view or to purchase for sexual favors. Only Fevvers and the Sleeping Beauty are off-limits for sexual services. Instead, they pose only in tableaux. Occasionally, a man will choose to lie with Sleeping Beauty in a platonic manner, with Fevvers looming over her; the Angel of Death.

Afterwards, the ladies share tea, but they are never allowed out of their rooms, nor are they paid any wages. They are sexual slaves, and there is little chance of escaping their fate. One by one, Fevvers learns of the women's stories. Sleeping Beauty's odd malady came upon her suddenly when her menses first began. It is rumored that the King of the Fairies fathered the Wiltshire Wonder after her mother was dared to sleep in a fairy mound. Fanny dreams of marriage and children, but her breasts bear eyes instead of nipples, and how can she feed a child?

One of the clients becomes enamored of Fevvers. He dresses in velvet and wears a large, solid gold medallion of an erect winged phallus entwined with a rose around his neck. He is obsessed with Fevvers and calls her Azrael. He insists on seeing only her, and while he doesn't touch her, he pleasures himself in her presence.

One Sunday, Fevvers is called to Mme. Schreck's room and is informed that the gentleman, who calls himself Christian Rosencreutz, has purchased her. Fevvers is suspicious, and asks for how much. Mme. Schreck is cagey and tells her 50 guineas. Fevvers doesn't believe her, as a virgin with wings would be worth much, much more to any buyer, and Mme. Schreck is greedy. She tries to downplay the sum, but Fevvers takes hold of her and flies up to the rafters where she deposits her on a curtain rail. Madame Schreck finally admits the true price, but when Fevvers is faced with the open safe, she becomes greedy. Instead of escaping with the money, she is grabbed by two of Rosencreutz's men who drag her from the house, shove her in a carriage, and drive away.

Analysis

Hints to Lizzie's personality and politics continue to assert themselves in Chapter 3. Fevvers seems to get annoyed by it, but perhaps she is trying to protect Liz by brushing off her comments, keeping Walser in the dark regarding her foster-mother's subversive activities. Fevvers also refers to Lizzie as a "witch;" and not for the last time. We are slowly made aware there is more to Liz than meets the eye.



Reality steps in with the struggles of Gianni and his family; still, the family is anything but typical. Although they are married and have children, Isotta and Gianni have an egalitarian relationship. Isotta works in the ice cream parlor, and, in fact, the recipes are from her family. This realism is short lived, fading as Fevvers tells of life in Madame Schreck's house of horrors. The descriptions of the inhabitants of the house and those that frequent it seem surreal. The sense of magical realism is prevalent in this chapter, especially in the character of Fanny, who has functional eyes in her breasts. Although parasitic or vestigial twins (conjoined twins where one is not functioning as a discrete being) and fetus in fetu (where a second fetus is absorbed into the body and remains, like a tumor, inside the body of its twin) are known, Fanny's particular anomaly dives right into the realm of pure fantasy.

The idea of a brothel wherein women with physical anomalies are put on view for men as if they are freaks of nature may seem a bit much to believe; however, given the popularity of "freak shows" popular at the time, and the treatment of people with disabilities well into the 20th century, this does not seem that far-fetched. These unique individuals are taken advantage of and used to make a profit for a ruthless and greedy woman, herself a sideshow veteran.

In Madame Schreck (whose very name means "fright"), we see the oppressed becoming the oppressor, not necessarily out of hatred or contempt, but out of greed. Her role as an oppressor of women is a post-feminist thought, as earlier feminists often believed only men were the oppressors, with women forming an almost automatic sisterhood.

The women in Madame Schreck's freak show are lead to believe that what makes them unique also makes them freakish. That the women do not resist when Madame Schreck locks them away and does not pay them their wages attests to the fact they accept society's assessment of them. As long as they accept this, they are trapped in their cages. Their identities are defined by their disabilities. It is only when Fevvers, their Avenging Angel, frees them that they can take charge and become their own people.

Although Fevvers is a fierce protectress, we see in this portion of the story she is not always talented at taking care of herself. She enters Mme. Schreck's of her own free will, with her talisman (her sword) but without protection (Lizzie) in order to care for Isotta's family. In this way, Fevvers becomes the Fool, who lives solely by instinct, for she tumbles into trouble without thinking, and always seems to land on her feet in the end. Fevvers' foolishness is fueled by greed: her Achilles' heel.

In the character of Toussaint, we see one of the few references to race in the novel. The black servant has no mouth, and hence, he is silenced and given no voice. It is Fevvers who later advocates for him and allows him to literally speak his thoughts and opinions. Lizzie, in her outspoken manner, comments on the irony: that it is the White Man who has given the Black Man his voice, yet he is the one who has worked so hard to suppress it. It is interesting to note the only other major character in the novel who is silent is the Princess of Abyssinia.



The dark and twisted atmosphere of Mme. Schreck's Abyss foreshadows the occult leanings of its clients. The display of wares on the "profane altar" foreshadows sacrifice, and the dark, damp "Down Below" is a perverse symbolic vagina, as is clarified in the next chapter.

Vocabulary

gratuitously, dolorous, exuberant, treacly, ominously, eloquent, penumbra, lugubrious, precipitated, apocalyptic, bipartite, dialectic, whickering, grig, philanthropic, emaciated, infinitesimal, layette, detestation, denizens, enviously, sepulchre, intacta, procuress



Section 1, Chapter 5

Summary

Two hours later, the carriage pulls up in front of Rosencreutz's house. When his servant grabs her, she elbows him in the mouth, shrugs him off, and steps out of the carriage on her own. The house is a gothic-style mansion set in the woods, although it is new in construction. It is red brick, covered in young ivy, and bears a star and crescent above its turrets. Inside, as well, the house is built in an old-fashioned style, with stone floors, recessed lights, and a giant stone replica of the winged phallus. Fevvers points out that it seems as if she's been magically pulled into an earlier age.

In a large, paneled room, Rosencreutz sits, reading a large book, "like a Bible." He is bald, and is wearing a long white robe, tied at the waist with a rope. She greets him, thinking she may collect the second half of Madame Schreck's fee, as he only paid one-half up front. He greets her as Azrael, the dark angel, and indicates the white roses on the table are for her. She is put out that he does not offer her a seat or a cup of tea. She asks for the bathroom, and as she leaves, she sees the book he is reading is not the Bible, but *Mysterium Baphometis Revalatum*.

Fevvers finds the bathroom glorious, with marble walls, thick towels, and hot water coming out of the taps. She luxuriates in a scented bath, keeping her wings out and as dry as possible, until Rosencreutz comes to fetch her. She demands he bring her something to wear, and he offers her 100 pounds above and beyond what he owes Mme. Schreck if she can answer him a riddle. She accepts the offer, and he challenges her to leave the bathroom neither naked nor clothed. He will only let her out when she is thus. Undaunted, she drapes her hair over her naked body, braids one lock, and uses her sword to cut it. She uses the braid as a belt to fasten her hair about her, straps her sword beneath, and steps from the room.

Rosencreutz is pleased, and leads her downstairs where a delicious meal awaits. She eats heartily, despite the fact he has served fowl, and she usually refrains from birds, as she feels it cannibalistic.

As she washes her meal down with a glass of claret, Rosencreutz assures her there is nothing carnal about their meeting. He refers to the significance of the particular date, May Eve, and to the motto of the Royal Knights of the Garter, *Honi soit qui mal y pense* ("Shame upon him who thinks evil upon it"), and twisting it, referring to the yoni, or Hindi term for vulva, which he considers dark, terrifying: the Abyss.

As educated as she is, Fevvers realizes Rosencreutz is likely an occultist (more specifically a heretical neo-Platonic Rosicrucian), and decides she needs to tread carefully. She realizes now why he seems to revere the phallus, and fear the vagina. She recognizes he fed his fear by visiting her weekly in "the Abyss," reinforcing his twisted beliefs in the dark hole filled with hideous, monstrous, and sexualized women.



Pouring another glass of wine to strengthen herself, she also pours him a glass, which he drains before turning his attention back to her, addressing her now as Flora, a goddess of the spring. He points out it is May Eve, the door into summer, and traditionally a day of fertility ritual. The Maypole, a traditional British custom, represents the erect phallus and the coming fertility of the land. He begins to ramble, telling her this is why he brought her to his house this night, away from Schreck's "Down Under," which he considers "perpetual winter."

He refers to Mme Schreck as the "old gnome of hell," which warms Fevvers to him a bit, and he continues on.

Fevvers interrupts herself to look at Walser, and offers to tell him the gentleman's real name. By now her hair has fallen down around her, and she is flushed with excitement. He declines at first, and she insists. When she writes it down and hands it to him, he is duly shocked, as he is a member of the House of Lords.

Walser is exhausted. His hands don't even feel as if they belong to him any longer, but are writing on their own. Fevvers goes on to tell Walser how this same man gave an impressive speech on how women should not have the vote as they are too spiritually pure and rarified to form solid political opinions. Returning to her tale, she tells Walser how this gentleman spoke of his fear of growing old, and after beating around the bush for a while, he gets to the point. He tells her in the course of his magical studies, he read of a way to drain life from a young woman by way of a "cabalistic magnet" in order to rejuvenate the magus and stave off death. He tells her he has seen many men who have used magic to extend their lives, and he has always known she will release him from the "bonds of the material."

Fevvers knows he is keeping something from her, but is not sure what. He is rummaging through his book and finally, blushing, he tells her by uniting physically with the Angel of Death, he will become immortal, and free her, as well. He says he has been able to prove this through mathematics. Certain he wishes to have carnal knowledge of her, she asks for more wine, considering he bought her for so cheap a price. He is rambling on, so she knocks the book from the table. One of Rosencreutz's men arrives, and gladly fetches her another bottle of wine.

However, when it arrives, Rosencreutz becomes livid and dumps the wine into the vase of roses. Thinking she just wants to get the act over with, collect her money and leave, she sits in the hard wooden chair and daydreams about money while Rosencreutz rambles on in esoteric fantasy. When the clock chimes half past four, Rosencreutz orders Fevvers to ready herself by thinking pure thoughts. He refers to her by several goddess names, including her given name "Sophia," which unnerves her.

She plays along, humoring him, and he tells her she must answer a riddle at the appointed hour. At this juncture, Fevvers tells Walser the reason she didn't leave long before this, was threefold. One, she wasn't sure where she was. Secondly, she hates and fears the open country, feeling comfortable only in the city. Thirdly, she felt



Rosencreutz had paid money for her, and it wasn't fair to cheat him out of his due. Not to mention he still owed her money, and she wasn't planning on leaving without it.

All in all, she isn't worried about the act. Her virginity isn't all that precious to her, and she figures he won't last long. As dawn breaks, he jumps up and begins to sing. He throws open the windows and commands her to lie down on her back. Still thinking he plans to have sex with her; she suggests another position, as her wings will make intercourse difficult. Suddenly, she understands as he commands her onto her back once more. With his arm, he sweeps everything off the table, and by the mischievous look on his face, she can tell he plans to do her harm. He commands her again to lie down upon the altar. She lays down on her stomach, and as he approaches, his robe swishes open and she can see a knife in a scabbard on his thigh. Swiftly, she pulls out her own blade, and in his moment of confusion, runs. He manages to wound her foot by throwing a spear, and she shows Walser the scar. As she does so, she knocks his notebook off his knee.

After escaping Rosencreutz's mansion, she soars straight up in the sky, frightening the children who are arriving to dance around the Maypole Rosencreutz erected to celebrate his May Day sacrifice. She hides in a tree and travels by night until she stows away on a freight train that returns her home to Battersea, ducking carefully behind hedges to hide her nakedness.

Arriving home, she finds her place in bed filled by none other than the Sleeping Beauty. Tired, hungry, and overwhelmed, she begins to cry, waking Lizzie, who is overjoyed to see her. Upon feeding her and welcoming her home, Lizzie shares with her the story of the refugees from Madame Schreck's house, all of whom are resting peacefully at Isotta and Gianni's. Toussaint had written his version of the tale on three sheets of paper, which Lizzie draws from her handbag to share with Walser.

According to Toussaint, he wanted to follow after Fevvers (whom he refers to as Sophia) when she was kidnapped, but her abductors were too swiftly gone. When he returned to Madame Schreck's room, not only was she dead, but also seemed to have almost literally turned to bones and dust. He finds a bill of sale from Rosencreutz for 5,000£, half to be paid up front, and half "after." He knows that Mme. Schreck has influential friends on the police force, as he delivered a hefty payoff to them every Friday. Therefore, he did not want to go to police, and was not sure what to do, as his mistress was now dead.

Fanny took the lead. Removing the money owed to Fevvers and the other women from the safe, but no more, she suggested they leave immediately, lest they be accused of the Madame's demise. The only place Toussaint could think of to go was the address Fevvers gave him to deliver her first and only advance, so the party headed off immediately, before any clients could arrive. Once they arrived at Battersea, Isotta made them welcome and found them all beds. They worried about Fevvers all day and night until she finally arrived home.



Once again, all the strays find happy endings: the Wonder is returned to the loving family who once adopted her, and they accepted her back with tears of joy. Albert/Albertina becomes a ladies' maid to Jenny, the whore turned heiress. Fanny takes the money she earned from Mme Schreck's and opens an orphanage, where she can mother as many children as she likes. Cobwebs, with the aid of Fevvers (who introduces her to a notable academic), becomes a talented painter. The Sleeping Beauty, who is fading, and who weeps through her long, long dreams, is still with Lizzie's family. "We do believe..." Fevvers says, "Her dream will be the coming century." (p.86.)

Silence fills the room, which has grown cold, and Big Ben chimes six. Fevvers is exhausted, but Lizzie is revived. She finishes the tale. As the reunited friends enjoy breakfast, Esmeralda, another one of Ma Nelson's old girls, stops by. She suggests that Fevvers considers a career in the circus, and secures her a job with the Cirque d'Hiver. After travelling the world and landing again in London, Fevvers is approached by a big man in Stars and Stripes who says he will make her a fortune.

Fevvers yawns, and Walser shuts his notebook, which is completely filled. Although he offers to call a cab, Fevvers insists on walking home. He offers to wait while she dresses, and walk them both home. They agree he can walk them to the bridge. Fevvers refuses Walser's arm, and they walk silently through London to the north end of the Westminster Bridge, where they shake hands. Holding hands, Lizzie and Fevvers walk over the bridge together as Big Ben strikes seven.

Back in his lodgings, Walser cleans up and considers the long night that has passed. Pulling out his watch, he discovers it has stopped precisely at midnight. Stopping in later at the London bureau of his newspaper, he makes a suggestion to the bureau chief. He is tired of hard-hitting war correspondence. Why not take a break by following Fevvers on her Grand tour? He will fulfill every boy's childhood dream: to run away and join the circus.

Analysis

Chapter five is one of the most complex chapters in the novel, with lofty and arcane vocabulary, references, and occult symbolism. The text has been tested at a grade level of 21.7 (post-collegiate.)

Christian Rosencreutz is not the real name of the man who has purchased Fevvers. He has borrowed it from an occult figure from Medieval Germany who created a secret society of heretics and magicians which was later called the Rosicrucians (after his name: Rosenkreutz, which translates to "rosy cross.") Rosencreutz worships the phallus, as is obvious from his jewelry and his home décor, and fears the vagina, which he refers to as the "abominable hole." This sexism is not uncommon in the nineteenth century, especially in certain occult circles. As the Age of Reason has come to an end, there has been resurgence in occult theory and practice, and membership in secret societies such as the Rosicrucians has swelled.



The title of the book he reads, *Mysterium Baphometis Revalatum*, is a reference to an article written by Joseph Frieher (Baron) von Hammer-Purgstall, a German orientalist, in 1818. In that article, links are made between the Knights Templar and the worship of Baphomet, a goat-headed, androgynous deity (some say fictional) supposedly worshipped by the Templars and later by several secret societies, notably Aleister Crowley's *Ordo Templi Orientis*, which was openly dismissive towards and contemptuous of women. (However, many women are members in modern times.)

Baphomet itself is a magically liminal figure, and Rosencreutz envisions Fevvers as such, calling her

“goddess of in-between states,” “creature half of Earth and half of air”, “virgin and whore” “reconciler of opposing states.” The very success of his hidden agenda balances on the liminal moment when it is “neither dark nor light”.

Some also believe the Templars were somehow connected to ancient Islam, which may explain the star and crescent above Rosencreutz's house.

Rosencreutz in his wild and arcane ranting, refers to Fevvers by several goddess names. When he gets to Sophia, she is startled to hear her given name.

Once again Fevvers has walked into the tiger's cage, unthinking. She is lured by her avarice, fully willing to trade her virginity for gold, and is expected, instead, to surrender her life. Referring to her as “wisdom” (Sophia) unnerves her: perhaps it is then she instinctively realizes her folly.

As educated as she is, she is made stupid by greed, and does not pick up on any of the Magus's obvious references to May Day, life-draining cabalistic magnets, or the underworld. Nor does she try to reconcile the use of sex magic with his obvious distaste for and fear of women's genitalia. It is not that she is ignorant. She easily figures his riddles (a classic magical exercise), knows of esoteric sex-magic, and even surmises he is into “some kind of heretical possibly Manichean version of neo-Platonic Rosicrucianism.” (p.77.) But thinking only of money, she stifles her growing fears until she sees his knife and, at the very last moment, realizes he is bound and determined to kill her. Only her own magical talisman, her sword, saves her.

Fevvers' tale becomes ever more surreal with the telling. As noted above, the author weaves real-life characters and elements into the story to give it a sense of actual possibility.

Once she escapes (literally flying away), she returns to Battersea only to find her compatriots, like those from Ma Nelson's, are on their way to their own happy endings. Accepting who they are and what makes them different also can make them special, they can move on with their lives, and find their place in the world. Of course, this does not reflect nineteenth century reality, which did not easily accept either women or people with obvious differences. Fevver's magical powers of protection allow the women to find their feminist utopia: equality and purpose in an unfair world.



Toussaint's story, his "voice," if you will, is drawn from Lizzie's magical handbag. His story exposes the growth of the women, who are empowered by Fevvers' rebellion and their mistress's demise. It also exposes the Madame as a fantastical character who crumbles into dust upon her death.

By the conclusion of her interview with Walser, the reader is as exhausted as he is. Her story, while linear, has taken us on a train ride of epic proportions, through fantastic hills and valleys. The reader, through Walser's experience, knows Fevvers' past and is ready to see what the present holds for her.

Intrigued and under her fascination, Walser does not want to let her go. He insists on walking her part way home, and, still unsatisfied, he takes the Fool's leap, and decides to join the circus.

Vocabulary

ripostes, lustrations, conundrum, corporeal, post-diluvian, obfuscation, heretical, rosicrucianism, equanimity, baroque, eclecticism, fructifying, erberus, maenad, circumlocution, efflorescence, esoteric, cabalistic, ecstatic, hermetic, orizens, apotheosis, oracular, chiaroscuro, somnolent, vertiginous, temporal, inscrutable, dolorous, loquacity, tracery, prolegomena, ingratiating



Section 2, Chapter 1

Summary

Section two opens in St. Petersburg, where a grandmother is distractedly telling a story to her grandson. She's busy, however, and hurries the boy off to play. Walser is typing, describing his first impressions of the city's majestic splendor. The baboushka is tired, too tired to pray for her daughter, who we discover, is a murderess. The child, ordered by his grandmother to take Walser his tea, hesitates, afraid, for Walser is dressed as a clown. Little Ivan is both afraid of and fascinated by clowns.

As a clown, Walser is housed in the poorest accommodations. He is chilly, and there are no lemons for his tea.

In contrast, the circus' pig, which belongs personally to the ringmaster, Colonel Kearney, sleeps between silk sheets in first class accommodations. She is a prophetess, and tells fortunes with the aid of cards bearing the letters of the alphabet, which she uses to spell out the answers to the Colonel's queries. Sybil the pig decides who is hired or fired from the circus, and what roles they are to play.

When Walser approaches Colonel Kearney with his request to join the circus, the impresario consults his oracular pig. She is lean and wears a crisp white taffeta collar. She is sleek and cream-colored, shining with the olive oil her master rubs into her skin each night. Kearney considers Sybil his partner in what he calls "the Ludic Game," which has, as one of its mottos: "a fool and his money are soon parted."

Colonel Kearney is a short, fat American with grey hair and a sparse goatee. A Southerner, he drinks mint juleps and dresses in an outfit patterned after the American flag. He chews on big cigars as he smokes them, and his belt buckle is a dollar sign. He tells Walser how he gained Sybil, one in a long line of porcine assistants, beginning with the pig's great-grandmother. He feeds Sybil apples as he explains his start in show business, learning to pass gas in a tuneful manner (he could fart "My Old Kentucky Home!") while at school, and then training Sybil's great-grandma to stand on her hind legs and wave the flag. Unsure of what to do with Walser, the Colonel asks Sybil, who nods her assent. He then drops the cards in front of the pig who uses her snout to nudge out the letters C-L-O-W-N. Hence, Walser is hired to the Grand Imperial Tour.

The Colonel refers to Walser as a fool, a "first-of-May" a neophyte, a green beginner. It is obvious he knows nothing about clowning, although the Colonel is sure he will learn. The Colonel asks him straight out how well he can stand humiliation, for clowning is all about playing the fool. Kearney takes him on as an apprentice with a six-month contract, which will take the circus across Siberia. "Welcome," he says to Walser, "to the Ludic Game!"



In his makeup, Walser finds a new freedom. His language, his personality, and in fact, his Self, is open to discovery and expansion. Forced to remain in clown attire wherever he goes, a walking advertisement for the circus, he finishes up his report as the baboushka falls asleep atop the stove, and summons poor frightened Ivan to his side. Trying to keep his journalist role low-key, he sends the boy to take the envelope containing his story to the British Embassy. Trying to stay out of the public eye, Walser sees only the gloomy side of St. Petersburg. Conversely, Fevvers, star of the Imperial Circus, is lounging in the Hotel de l'Europe, amongst ice swans and diamonds, which sparkle and fill her heart with avarice.

Analysis

Walser, the consummate fool, has joined the circus. He has bought himself a life (or at least six months) of hardship and humiliation to follow a woman he is entranced by. He is a Fool in love. However, he is also an innocent. He does not have perverse designs on Fevvers, and never makes a move toward her. The Colonel refers to Walser as a "First of May" (a novice), and tells him he is certainly a fool, one he has made for himself. He tells him to prepare for humiliation, which he has chosen to heap upon himself. The irony in this, however, is that as a clown, Walser finds a new freedom for personal development of his unique identity.

Of course, in his own way, Colonel Kearney is a fool as well. He began his performing career in school where he entertained his friends with his tuneful flatulence (a skill often lauded in limericks featuring men from Sparta.) He grew into a master con artist. Only the fool can properly fool the foolish.

Kearney runs his con by way of the Ludic Game. The "Ludic Game" refers to the Ludic Fallacy, the idea that one can apply naïve and simplified statistical models to predict outcomes reliably. This exposes the Colonel's use of Sybil's predictive abilities as random, and not particularly based in reality. His investment in the game pivots on the fact that, in the words of the Greatest Showman on Earth, P.T. Barnum, "there's a sucker born every minute." Although he freely admits he deceives others, he goes to great lengths to preserve Fevvers' mystique as to whether or not her wings are real. Mystery brings in money.

Walser sends his stories in a sealed envelope through the British Embassy. This becomes important later in the novel.

Vocabulary

samovar, thwarted, circumscription, essence, hieratic, hubris, artifice, insurrection, precipitated, hyperbole, bandied, squalid, impresario, inimitable, decapitated, grandiose, amity, empyrean, peripatetic, bonhomie, caballero, squinnied, susurrating, cognomen, vertiginous, dissimulation, burlesque, peripatetic



Section 2, Chapter 2

Summary

This chapter introduces the reader to some of the members of the Imperial Circus: The Princess of Abyssinia, Lamarck and his Educated Apes (with their leader, The Professor), Lamarck's wife, Mignon, and Samson the Strong Man. The Colonel uses all his charm to have the Tsar's flag at the Imperial Circus replaced with Old Glory. The Imperial Circus is constructed as a permanent structure, with a cloakroom for the patrons' furs, a foyer serving champagne, and a marble staircase. The seats are plush and red, some even gilded with the Imperial Eagle.

Under the ring, the cellarge holds the circus animals. A tunnel leads to the courtyard out back, near the servants' entrance. Walser lets himself in by the gate and notices that the courtyard is empty. A thin brown-skinned woman with dreadlocks to her waist and a bloody apron over her chemise and petticoat comes out to gather her freeze-dried frocks. This is the Princess of Abyssinia, who plays the piano for her trained tigers. Walser watches Lizzie walk through the courtyard with a tray of fresh pancakes for Fevers' lunch. She does not acknowledge him. He enters the circus and heads to the ring. In the ring are a dozen chimpanzees, six males and six females, dressed in sailor suits and holding slates and pencils. Another chimp, dressed in black with a pocket watch and mortarboard, stands at a blackboard, holding a cue. These are Lamarck's Educated Apes. Lamarck, their supposed trainer, is a drunk who leaves the apes to their own devices. Lamarck's wife is left to tend them, but she is bored and pays them no attention.

With his journalist's trained eye, Walser watches as the ape Professor points to a diagram on the board, which the other apes then hurry to transcribe to their slates. The apes seem to communicate in gestures, responding to one another as they practice their routine. As he continues to observe, Walser thinks he sees something on the blackboard: writing. He maneuvers himself around the ring in order to see better, but hits a bottle with his foot. Immediately, the apes stop what they are doing and stare at him. Suddenly, they begin to act up. The diagram is hastily erased. The trainer's wife ignores them. The Professor grabs several dunce caps from behind the blackboard and places them on the heads of the apes that are goofing around. Grinning, he places one on Walser's head, as well. As he does this, their eyes meet, and they acknowledge one another with silent intelligence. The Professor ensures this silence by pressing his finger to Walser's lips.

The apes roll into the next part of their act, riding on monocycles around the ring and playing tricks on one another. There seems to be no joy in this, though, as it is simply mechanical routine. The Professor, taking hold of Walser's hand, pulls him into the ring. The other apes circle around him, gesturing to one another. In the meantime, Samson, the circus's Strong Man, arrives, and Lamarck's wife puts away her nail file.



In the ring, the Professor points to Walser's dunce cap, and the other chimps seem to find it humorous. A female chimp jumps into Walser's arms and deftly removes his shirtfront. In the bleachers, the Strong Man and Lamarck's wife engage in a sexual tryst. Heedless, Walser is encouraged by the apes to remove his jacket. Looking to the Professor, Walser undresses. Although both the Strong Man and his lover are naked as they continue to have sex, the apes pay them no attention. Instead, they seem focused on Walser's anatomy as he stands before them in nothing but a dunce cap. He wonders if perhaps, in his clown makeup, he resembles them more than in his natural state, and hence, they are curious about him as some sort of related species. As the Professor prods him gently with his pointer, the other apes gesticulate and take notes. They look at his backside and inside his mouth, making it clear that they wish him to speak. As the Strong Man grunts loudly in the background, Walser recites Shakespeare's Hamlet: "What a piece of work is man..." As he is reciting, the Strong Man shouts in the ecstasy of orgasm, and Sybil runs into the ring, shrieking, her collar ripped. The Colonel chases after her, frantic, and a voice rings out that a tiger is loose.

The apes scurry, the pig dives to safety, and Walser, determined not to die wearing a dunce cap, rips it off his head and runs. Halfway to safety, he turns for a backward glance. The tiger, hungry for pork, rushes into the ring. Samson pushes his lover away and runs towards the door, leaving the girl alone, knickers down. The exits close and the bolts are slid closed, leaving Walser, Lamarck's wife, and the tiger alone. The girl screams, and the tiger turns its attention to her. She turns to run, but her robe gets caught on a nail and she falls. Instinctively, Walser lets out a cry, and, like a fool, rushes towards the girl to save her.

Analysis

The circus environment seems chaotic, yet it has its own sense of order, a type of magical gravity that seems to hold it together. Through his eyes, Walser exposes the reader to the wonder that is the Imperial Circus. The ring, which seems at first to be just simple sawdust, takes on the magical quality of the Wheel of Fortune: making or breaking the performers' destiny. He compares it to the ouroboros, the ancient symbol depicting a snake devouring its own tail and representing the constant self-reinventing nature of performance.

Like a child, Walser is curious and entranced. The thirteen apes (thirteen being a very symbolic number), who continue to practice their act although they lack supervision, pique his curiosity. They seem to communicate through a language of gestures, and Walser, with his journalist's eye, notices that they actually seem to be copying a diagram from the blackboard, and is that writing? The apes take on human qualities. They seem to have evolved into a higher form of intelligent being. This is in sharp contrast to their "trainer" Lamarck, a drunken wife-beater referred to frequently as the Ape-Man. He is animalistic, and the apes, especially The Professor, seem far more human than he.

At first, noticing Walser's interest, they "play dumb," capering and acting silly. However, he doesn't dismiss them, and the Professor brings them into their "game," placing a



dunce cap on him (an indictment of the human race?) and using him as a model in a human anatomy lesson. The Professor focuses especially on the voice. The Educated Apes, it seems, wish to unveil the mystery of speech so they too can be heard.

Once again, Walser plays the Fool. He is crowned with a dunce cap, denoting lesser intelligence, although it is deceptive, as he has been brought into the Apes secret, and thus has “intelligence” the other humans don’t possess. He is stripped naked, yet it is innocent, rather than prurient, and stands in contrast to the Strong Man and Lamarck’s wife, who are fornicating openly in the stands. (It is obvious that it is not the first time, as the Apes show no interest.)

When the tiger, loosed from its cage, rushes into the ring, the Strong Man proves weak and cowardly, abandoning his lover to her death, and the Fool rushes in to save her, still naked, but devoid of lust. His impetuosity and foolishness make him a hero, even though they expose him (both literally and figuratively) to danger and humiliation.

Vocabulary

caryatids, caparisoned, disencumbered, sumptuous, titillating, cellarage, raucous, metaphoric, uroboric, polyvalent, thwart, arabesque, hirsute, inconspicuous, insurrection, recapitulating, desultory, gesticulating, confabulation, salient, surfeit, vestigial, eructation



Section 2, Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

In chapter three, Walser wakes up in Fevvers' dressing room. She is tending to the wounds he suffered while saving Lamarck's wife. She is not gentle, and he howls in pain. Lizzie offers him tea, and Fevvers looks down at him, unamused. She has realized who he is, and that he has joined the circus. They explain the Princess blasted the tiger with water to knock it off of Walser. Fevvers goes on to explain it was actually a tigress he charged, and he added, of course, the female of any species is deadlier than her male counterpart.

Fevvers and Lizzie assume Walser was trying to protect his lover, the Ape-Man's wife. As they are both found naked, it is an easy assumption to make. Also, it is well known within the circus folk the woman is promiscuous. Neither woman seems pleased at this turn of events, but they assure Walser no one else knows of the affair.

Walser tells the women he has joined the circus in order to write a story about Fevvers and the circus. She asks him tartly if his work involves having an affair. A doctor arrives to patch Walser up, and Fevvers pays him, telling Walser he can pay her back later. A female chimp arrives with fresh clothes, and she and Fevvers dress him and repair his makeup. He feels embarrassed, and can't wait to leave. As he departs, Lizzie wonders aloud to Fevvers how Walser gets his dispatches past the Russian censors.

Walking back to Clown Alley alone, Walser contemplates how his attempt to be heroic has played him out to be a fool. He passes the young tightrope walkers as he crosses the courtyard, from which you can hear the sounds of Lamarck beating his wife.

Chapter 4: Clown Alley is a generic name used in the circus for wherever the clowns reside. As the lowest on the circus totem pole, it is usually in very humble lodgings. In St. Petersburg, the clowns stay in a rotting wooden tenement building. Required to remain in their clown personas at all times, they are never fully themselves, nor do they get a break from their life of foolishness and humiliation.

Buffo the Great is the head clown. He does not wear a wig, but rather a bald-cap made from a bladder. He is a large man and specializes in violent slapstick. Things fall apart all around him, and he cannot seem to win over objects, instead he is subject to bigger and bigger humiliations. The angrier and crazier he gets, the more violently he reacts, and the more hilarious the audience finds him. The grand finale of his act consists of his mock death and funeral, during which he bursts through the coffin lid, exclaiming, "Did you think I was dead?"

The other clowns refer to Buffo as the Old Man, a term of respect. Although the audiences find him hilarious, Buffo is not a happy man. "Despair," he says, "is the constant companion of the Clown." (p.119.) He is a heavy drinker, who believes one



only becomes a clown as a last resort. He was once an acrobat. He reminds the other clowns the audience's laughter grows proportionally to the performers' humiliation. He compares clowns to whores, as a clown knows who he is, chooses to be a fool, but the purveyor will never see him as he truly is, but only as a person at play for their mutual pleasure. He ponders a humorless heaven, and compares the clowns to the martyrs, the scapegoat, and even to Christ. He relates a poetic tale in which a Great Clown endures a series of terrible misfortunes. However, he must still perform. In the ring, overcome with grief, he pours out his sorrows, at which the audiences laugh uproariously. Later, in civilian clothes, the clown drowns his sorrows in drink. The bartender approaches and says, "Why the long face, my friend? Go see the Great Clown. He'll cheer you up!" Who, Buffo asks, will make the clown laugh? (p.121)

The only advantage the clown truly has, Buffo states, is the ability to create himself. By choosing how to paint one's face (and each clown must be different), no matter how much of a prison it becomes, the clown is a person of his own invention. After more musings, the clowns begin to dance. The dance begins softly, but soon turns cruel, with the clowns hurling items at one another, pouring liquor on each other, and miming all sorts of violence. The dance disintegrates into rude and obscene gestures, mimes and tricks.

During all of this Little Ivan watches, horrified, and yet more and more fascinated. His grandmother is asleep on the stove. As Buffo calls him over, he is drawn into the act almost involuntarily. He is near hysteria. Walser, aching and disinterested in the clowns distasteful capers, steps outside for a breath of air. There, in the alley, he spies a poster for the circus; Fevvers spreads her wings, beneath which all the other performers seem to be protected. Feeling cynical, Walser stares at the poster as a shadow seems to cross the street and fall at his feet, kissing his hands and weeping.

Analysis

As mentioned above, Walser's selfless act has exposed him to gossip and humiliation. Because they are both naked and the Strong Man is nowhere in sight, everyone, including Fevvers (the true object of Walser's affections) believes he is having an affair with the girl, who is considered an easy mark. This of course, shows that first appearances can be deceptive.

Still, this is a turning point in his relationship with Fevvers, for, even though she treats him with disdain, it is not because she is judging his morals but because she is jealous. In his innocence (or perhaps just pain), he is not yet aware of this.

The life of the clowns is also a difficult one. They are the second-class citizens of the circus, and their hard work is rewarded with even more humiliation. Prisoners of their profession, they are expected to stay in character at all times. It is a paradoxical position, as it is easy to lose one's personal identity, yet a clown's identity is entirely self-created and individualistic. No two clowns can have the same face. The clowns live a lie, a con game of their own. They have to live in squalid conditions. They are often



unhappy, and even when they experience tragedy or deep personal pain; it all becomes a joke because no one takes a clown seriously.

Violence is a dramatic element used in classical fairy tales and the genre of magical realism, which are uniformly filled with darkness and gloom, even when there is a happy ending. The secret anger and despair of the clowns is channeled into the violence of their act. The more outrageous, the more people seem to love it. The clowns' act thrives on chaos. The violent dance of the clowns foreshadows both the final performance in St. Petersburg, and their final performance in the Siberian wilderness.

Ivan, who is scared of the clowns on the surface, is attracted to the violence of their act. He has witnessed the murder of his own father, and seems to be comforted by the simulated violence of the clowns, which does not end in blood and abandonment, but rebounds and refreshes to be played again on the next night. This is expounded upon further in chapter seven.

Vocabulary

redolent, ministrations, conciliatory, lugubrious, magisterial, constituents, centrifuge, acolytes, climacteric, prodigious, acquiescence, maladroit, spatulate, perpetuity, profundity, dialectic, bergomask, prismatic, resultant aperture, priapic, cerise, anality, prodigality, retinue, ministrations, initiation, fissures, opulence



Section 2, Chapter 5

Summary

The shadow at Walser's feet is Mignon, Lamarck's wife, who has sought out her foolish savior. Her husband has beaten her and thrown her out after discovering her affair, and she runs to the man who was kind enough to save her life before. Walser is not sure where to take her at first, but he quickly makes a decision. He leads her to the main streets of town where the glittering lights cause her to stare in wonder. He takes her to the Hotel de l'Europe, but the doorman will not let them in: a clown and a bedraggled, bruised girl, overwhelmed by the luxury of the grand hotel and the fine people within.

Just as Walser is attempting to reach for his money in an attempt to bribe the doorman, Fevvers arrives and, handing the doorman complimentary tickets to the circus, sweeps the two of them through the door and up to her hotel suite, which is filled with flowers. She is in a bad mood, but orders Lizzie to run a bath for the bedraggled Mignon who looks so young and pitiful that Fevvers begins to soften. She speaks to the girl in several languages until she hits on German, which turns out to be the girl's native tongue. She hands Mignon a large box of chocolates, which nearly sends Mignon into a swoon.

Mignon's past is an unhappy one. Her father murders her mother for sleeping with other men: soldiers from a nearby barracks. He then accidentally drowns himself in the pond where he has disposed of his wife's body. He is searching for the knife he used to slit her throat, because it is the breadknife he needs to fix his daughters' supper. The children are young and have not noticed anything strange. Their mother is often gone in the evenings, as she delivers clean shirts to the soldiers for whom she does laundry. Her father has blood on his shirt, but then, he works in a slaughterhouse. He often makes dinner for them when their mother was away. The only thing truly odd is the knife has been lost. When their father does not return, the children continue to play until it grows dark and they become hungry. Mignon finds the bread on the table and shares it with her sister, pinching off pieces with her fingers. Later Mignon identifies the knife found when authorities drag the lake, but the judge refuses to return it. She and her sister are taken to the city orphanage, and are eventually separated, never to see one another again.

Lizzie tells Mignon her bath is ready, but as she removes her robe, she does not want to let go of the chocolates, so it takes her some time. She is filthy and smells bad. Fevvers is aghast at the sight of Mignon's naked body. It is covered with layers upon layers of colorful bruises, some faded and some fresh. She is painfully thin and flat chested, almost childlike. She takes the chocolates into the bath with her, and Lizzie throws her discarded wrapper on the fire. Fevvers orders food for her to eat when she emerges.

After escaping the country house where she is first sent as a kitchen maid, Mignon makes a living on the streets selling flowers, and later, picking pockets. For a while she



has a sort of rag-tag family of other child-thieves with whom she can play, but a fire splits them apart, and she is left on her own. By the age of fourteen, she is prostituting herself in alleys.

A waiter arrives with food and champagne. His glance lingers on Fevvers, and Walser becomes incensed. Fevvers remains in a bad mood, too, casting angry looks at Walser. Her demeanor towards Mignon is kinder, though. She has ordered up bread and milk for her, a sort of maternal gesture, and adds sugar liberally to the dish.

From the bathroom, Mignon begins to sing. She has a lovely voice, and sings in English although she does not speak the language. She does not know the meaning of what she sings.

Starving on the wintry streets, Mignon wanders into an unfamiliar part of town, and puts herself in the path of a gentleman in a warm coat and hat. It is Herr M. At first he tries to brush her off, but when he finally sees her, he has an idea. He takes her to his apartment and feeds her. She has all she wants, yet, even over time, she stays as slight and waifish as ever.

Herr M. is a spiritualist medium who claims to speak to the dead. His previous assistant has just run off with a salesman from Brazil, and he is left without aid in his endeavors. He felt that Mignon's appearance is fate, especially since she closely resembles a ghost. She never leaves his apartment, but Herr M. takes care of her. He takes her to the doctor and dentist, buys her clothes, feeds her well, and is a regular, but undemanding, lover. His main use for Mignon, however, is as a photographic subject: Mignon impersonates the dead.

Each day during breakfast, Herr M. scans the obituaries, looking for families who have lost young women. He attends funerals, sends flowers, and eventually approaches the inconsolable families with an offer to contact their deceased loved one. Many of the bereaved come looking for him, as he is well known by those in the funerary professions, who pass on a recommendation.

In his elaborate scam, Herr M. convinces people he can summon their loved ones from the dead. He invites his marks up to his quarters for a séance. Holding hands, and with the aid of incense and lighting to craft the illusion, Mignon appears. Wearing a long white nightdress and posing in an alcove with the incense misting around her; the mourners held at bay, Herr M. takes a picture of the ghostly apparition, which, each client is convinced, is the ghost of their lost and beloved girl.

He delivers the finished photographs personally, reminding the clients they should show it to no one or the figure in the picture will disappear. Each gratefully complies, not wanting to lose their loved one yet again. However, one woman can not resist, and after a family squabble, the portrait is stolen and handed over to police. Herr M. is caught and convicted. After a short time in prison, he eventually becomes successful in the Motion Pictures industry. Several of his clients, however, are never convinced his photographs are not authentic.



Mignon is not charged. She gets her own place and works as a waitress in a respectable bar. She sings as she likes, and takes the occasional lover. One night, Lamarck and the Professor come into the bar. Lamarck orders a bottle of wine. The Professor gives Mignon a flower, and she, in turn, brings him a banana with the wine. Lamarck invites her to share his wine, and she runs away with him to the circus. She is fifteen at the time.

Lamarck beats her daily, and she comforts herself by sleeping around. She makes friends with a young stable boy who teaches her songs. He is gay, and she appreciates having a male friend who doesn't want anything from her. Her husband, jealous, beats them both. The stable boy is killed, and the Ape-Man drags him into the bushes and leaves him there. Mignon has a short memory, and does not become too attached. She is a survivor, and does what she needs to do to get by. She does not hold grudges, yet she does not do much to change her station, either.

His apes are another story. The more Lamarck drinks, the more independent they become.

Mignon emerges from the bath, clean and smiling. Her poignant song has brought both Fevvers and Walser to tears, and has softened Fevvers' mood towards Walser. Mignon has eaten half of the chocolates, but digs in to her meal and the champagne.

Walser soon realizes that Fevvers is not just in a bad mood; she is jealous because she believes Mignon and he are lovers. She cleans the clown makeup from his face and sends him and Mignon to the bridal suite, which she has booked for them. Walser resists an impulse to take advantage of the situation, and retreats. He is touched by Mignon's painful past and her childlike demeanor and leaves her alone.

Analysis

It is doubtful Mignon runs to Walser because of her having been beaten. It soon becomes evident her brutish husband beats her regularly, like a gong. It is more likely she comes to him because he treats her kindly and does not see her as a sexual object. This is rare in her life, and the last man who treated her so was beaten to death and left by the side of the road by her husband.

It seems inevitable since Walser, a gentleman to the core, can not take her in, he will take her to the succor of wandering women: Fevvers. The two mendicants are refused shelter by the doorman at first, but Fevvers' influence opens the door. Still wary of Walser, she bonds with him over their shared sympathy towards Mignon, who is layered in bruises and filth: evidence of her maltreatment by men.

Mignon, despite her rough past, is also an innocent. She has a short memory and does not hold grudges. She leaves others to wallow in their own remorse for their misdeeds. This helps her to survive, and to blossom once she finds true fellowship and love.



Mignon's story is narrated in chapter five, but outside the perception of the other characters. They know nothing but what they see: a young German girl who has been horribly abused and is in need of rescue.

Mignon's life, like many of those in the circus, is filled with grief and tragedy. Born into a deceptively normal home, her mother is in reality an adulteress, and her father a murderer. When the tragedy occurs, Mignon is further deceived by the seeming normalcy of the day: her mother is often late, her father's shirt often bloody. After the death of her parents she is thrown into a harsh world where she must do what she can to survive. She loses not only her parents, but also the company of her sister. After that, except for a brief stint in a childhood community of thieves, her world is dominated almost completely by men. She prostitutes herself in back alleys until she is found by Herr M.

Herr M. is a deceiver, but Mignon is well used to that. Although she is his virtual prisoner, receiving no compensation for her work (as muse or mistress) and not allowed to leave his house, she lives in comfort and relative safety. His con is an emotional one, and he uses the emotional manipulation of undemanding solicitude to keep her by his side. His financial con is a successful one, as he plays on the client's sense of longing and grief. Even Mignon is shocked to see her mother's face in the picture he shows her, although it is obviously her own. "Accidents can happen," he says. (p. 138.)

After Herr M.'s arrest, Mignon enjoys a small amount of self-determination, enjoying the ability to take and leave men as she pleases (another post-feminist ideal.) However, she is soon drawn into Lamarck's influence (although it seems it was the Professor who did the flirting.) Used to shoddy treatment, she accepts her husband's beatings without complaint. However, since the punishment is assured, she has no compunction about finding pleasure where she can.

Mignon's friend, the young gay stable hand, teaches her many songs, which she sings in a sweet, childlike soprano. She has a voice, but it is immature and undefined. The words of her songs are poignant, but though they might describe her life, she is ironically unaware of their meaning. She has a voice, but it is not yet uniquely hers.

Walser realizes for the first time Fevvers mood may be due to jealousy, in which case she is not immune to him. Still, she insults him and sends him off to the bridal suite with his supposed lover. He has a noticeable rush of emotion (one of his first in the novel): anger and lust, and momentarily thinks of taking advantage of the opportunity offered. However, he returns to his senses. Mignon is a child, and is not the one he wants. He will not use her for his own purpose. Walser is evolving. He is starting to feel masculine emotions, yet he tames them out of compassion. It is the first hint of the New Man he will eventually become.



Vocabulary

lirruped, equestrienne, docility, debouched, adenoidal, epaulettes, chalcedony, infantine, offal, scrupulosity, ecstatic, syncopated, magnanimous, senhor, vergor, asphodel, oleaginous, arcane, peripheral, assuage, reticulated, venal, irrefutable, febrile, taciturn, odorous, conurbation, aggrieved, peremptorily, tetchy, dithering



Section 2, Chapters 6 - 7

Summary

Chapter 6: Walser feels out of balance. He can no longer write or type his articles because his arm is injured from the tiger attack, and hence, he is no longer pretending to be a clown, but has become a clown in reality. He also finally concedes she is in love with Fevvers, although he does not understand why. He feels anxious and confused, as he has never been in love before, and she has humiliated him, something no woman has ever done before. He is not surprised she is out to fool him (he has believed her to be running a con all along), however, he cannot understand why he has been chosen to play her Fool. He wanders the streets trying to sort out his conflicting emotions.

Chapter 7: The courtyard of the Imperial Circus is bustling. The children are practicing tightrope, the tiger tamer is receiving food for her animals, and vendors are crowding the courtyard with their wares. Colonel Kearney considers an “anonymous letter” in the papers, suggesting Fevvers is not a woman but a constructed automaton made up of whalebone, India rubber, and springs. He is excited at the controversy this will raise, which is sure to bring even more of the public into the stands, trying to decipher for themselves, “Is she fact or is she fiction?” He plans to follow up with another news item in the morning, claiming she is not only fully human, but also back home in England, secretly engaged to the Prince of Wales.

The apes, with their “trainer” nowhere in sight, continue to care for themselves. They empty their own chamber pots, rinse them, make their beds, sweep up, and settle into their studies, heads bent over their books.

The Princess of Abyssinia feeds her tigers with armfuls of bloody meat. She does not come from Abyssinia and has never been there nor to any part of Africa. There are rumors (spread liberally by the Colonel) that she was abandoned in the jungle and fostered by a tigress, but in reality her mother is from the West Indies and her father is a Brazilian. She is born in Marseilles. Her parents start the tiger act, and when they die, the Princess takes it over. Like her mother, she plays the piano as the tigers dance. The Princess feels uneasy when she is in the ring with her back to the tigers, and keeps a gun on her piano in case a tiger should charge at her. She never speaks, mainly because it upsets the tigers when she uses sounds they cannot duplicate. Her body is scarred, covered with marks from her tigers’ claws. Still, she cares for them lovingly, cleaning them, feeding them, and sleeping near them.

The cookhouse opens up and the performers are glad to smell the scents of a good English breakfast. Samson arrives, and is teased by the others, who think his lover left him for a clown. Covering for his own cowardice, the Strong Man brags about what he’ll do to that clown when he gets a chance.



The Colonel notices Fevvers' arrival. He often imagines what it would be like to sleep with her, but Lizzie is always in the way, giving him black looks. Lizzie gives a gypsy fiddler a coin and receives a sheet of paper. This goes unnoticed by the hot jam pie vendor (really a member of the secret police), as he is busy selling the lot of his wares to Fevvers, who distributes them amongst the children in the courtyard. The women have Mignon with them, although no one recognizes her, as she is clean and well dressed.

The clowns enter with Little Ivan who has now become completely fascinated with them. Ivan has watched how, in their act, they are destructive and violent, yet the chaos is impermanent. He believes becoming a clown will allow him to act out and cause chaos, but unsure any catastrophe is at best temporary, and all will return to normal. Buffo makes him a little cap with bells. He also gives Ivan a thrashing when the child gets in his way, but it does not curb Ivan's fascination.

The Strong Man's buddies urge him to beat up Walser as he arrives, but seeing Walser in the company of Buffo and the others, he refuses, saying he'll wait to get him alone. Since Walser's arm is hurt, Buffo thinks up a routine for him: the Human Chicken, in which he runs around flapping his arms and crowing, "Cock-a-doodle-doski!" They pelt him with eggs, and the angrier he gets, the funnier he seems. The clowns decide Walser will wear a cockscomb on his head and be served up at the Clowns' Christmas Dinner.

In the meantime, Fevvers strikes a deal with the Princess to take Mignon on as part of her act. She convinces the Princess that singing is not the same as speaking, and will not upset the tigers. After hearing Mignon sing, the Princess agrees. Mignon is scared at first to be in the cage with the tigers, but they are sleepy, and both Fevvers and the Princess (and the Princess' gun) calm her fears. The Princess hesitates over the keys, unsure what to play. Lizzie mumbles something odd while sitting on her handbag, and the Princess begins. Mignon sings a song which bears her own name: a poem by Goethe taught to her by the English boy her husband killed. As she sings, the Circus hushes. The tigers rouse, but they draw nearer to her, purring. They are weeping. The apes lift their heads from their studies, the elephants quit rattling their chains. As the song ends, the two girls, seeming mirror images of one another, are raptly kissing.

Fevvers and Lizzie are happy with this, and kiss one another in congratulations. The Princess and Mignon exit the cage hand in hand, and the Princess kisses Fevvers' cheeks in thanks. The courtyard is now empty. The children of the Charivaris' high-wire act are in bed with tummy-aches from jam pies. Their mother blames Fevvers.

Fevvers sneaks up on Walser as he is washing his face at the pump. She asks after him and lets him know she knows he is not having an affair with Mignon. She is flirtatious and admits she finds it flattering he has followed her on her travels. Lizzie asks him if he will send letters home for her since he is not sending out his articles. She hopes he will use his British Embassy connections to send her letters home.



Analysis

In the bustling chaos of the circus, a thousand deceptions are thriving.

The apes are studying furiously, although they pretend it is all an act. The Colonel is pondering an “anonymous” letter, and planning another one. Chances are he planted the first himself, to inflate Fevvers’ mystique and bring in more audience. He is pushing the envelope, not only questioning her authenticity, but her humanity. This foreshadows (and likely feeds) the Grand Duke’s plot, as he sees her, too, as a toy rather than a woman.

Sampson has to assert his machismo around the others when he is teased for losing his girlfriend to a clown. He knows he lost her because he is a moral weakling and a coward, but he covers it by threatening to beat Walser up once he can get him alone. He is too much of a coward to try it while Walser is surrounded by Buffo and the other clowns. He is the opposite of the New Man, just another brute, the sort of which will never again be a part of Mignon’s life. She is under the wing of Victory, and no one can stop her. The girl who was turned away by the doorman now wears his uniform, only in a re-envisioned, more feminine form.

Each person in the circus carries his own tale. The Princess of Abyssinia is neither. However no one knows her true origin, as she has no voice. (This frees the Colonel up to invent one for her.) She is silent, in deference to her tigers. Their stripes seem to form her cage. She speaks only through her music, but like Mignon’s songs, it seems incomplete.

The Cockney Venus, however, is poised to intervene. With her new charge at her side, she introduces the two. At first song, first music, it is true love. By the end of the song, the two are kissing. Mirror images melded into one complete being. Mignon gives the Princess a voice, and in turn, the Princess gives her meaning. Mignon will never again be an object to be abused by men, and the Princess will always have someone at her back. Together they form their own feminist utopia, allowing them both to heal and develop, both as a pair and as individuals.

It is part of their own dance of mutual affection that Fevvers covers Lizzie as she makes one of her political forays. Fevvers “just happens” to make a big purchase of jam pies at the right moment, distracting the undercover Secret Policeman, and allowing Liz her slight-of-hand. Ivan follows the clowns. He has convinced himself that “chaos invoke[s] stasis” (p. 152.) However, this is not so. Walser’s introduction as the “Human Chicken” (another blurring of the line between animals and humans), allows him to experience what Buffo expounded on before: the greater his anguish, the bigger the reaction. This will come to a head on the final night in St. Petersburg.

Fevvers, now in the know that Mignon and Walser were never involved, is relieved. She begins to flirt with him. The jig is up. Lizzie asks Walser if she can take advantage of his Embassy envelopes, as he is currently out of commission due to his wounded arm.



Vocabulary

equilibrium, impregnable, tumult, plinth, effigy, restive, peripatetic, lugubrious, paunch, affable, gesticulate, impetus, provincial, conservatoire, amity, disseminated, inamorata, piqued, veritable, brusquest, emancipated, ululations, replete, postprandial, bravura, abnegates, coquettishness

Section 2, Chapters 8 - 9

Summary

Chapter 8: The Charivaris, a family of trapeze artists, were the stars of the show before Colonel Kearney signed Fevvers. Their family has performed before kings and emperors, and they resent Fevvers, believing she is not only a fake (and hence, a cheat), but that her size and lack of speed is a disgrace to their profession. They also believe Fevvers poisoned their children with the jam pies, which does nothing to gain their sympathies.

Many gather to watch Fevvers rehearse including Walser and the extended Charivari family (sans children.) During her rehearsal, the rope of the trapeze breaks and drops Fevvers a dozen feet. The orchestra stops as Fevvers swings back and forth like a pendulum. After a bit of time, she swings to the other trapeze and sits high above the ground with spectators below: she sulks angrily.

Lizzie points her finger at the Charivaris, as Fevvers demands to know who sabotaged her rope. When they discover it has been sawed through, the Charivaris are accused of the sabotage. They argue, but the Colonel knows he must choose between The Charivaris and Fevvers, and the family is fired. Somehow, over time, the family continues to suffer misfortune and decline until they are forced to emigrate and are reduced to running a pizza stand in New York. It seems as though they have been cursed.

Fevvers comes down from the trapeze, not by jumping, but by rope ladder. Walser, who has nearly convinced himself her wings are real, sees that she is pale, suggesting she was truly scared. Walser ponders the paradox Fevvers' existence poses: if she is "fiction," she is a con artist, however, if she is "fact," then she is a freak. Without the mystery that surrounds her, she is just a person with an abnormality. Her identity as an extraordinary woman, a "wonder" and a great aerialiste lies in the not knowing.

Fevvers promises the Colonel she will dine with him alone if he will audition Mignon for the Princess' act. The Colonel is unconvinced Mignon's singing should be part of the act, as he feels it is too "high class." Sybil, silent, seems to agree. The Colonel asks Mignon what else she can do, and she begins to waltz with one of the tigers. The tigress is jealous, but the dance comes to an end before anyone notices. The Educated Apes are happy to see their former mistress in this new role. Sybil also enjoys this act and the Colonel decides there will be no song, but Mignon will dance with the tiger. Mignon happily gives the tiger a kiss, and the tigress, feeling left out, begins to cry. This time, the Princess notices and looks about. Sybil prods Walser with her snout, and the Colonel encourages the clown to go down to the cage. Trepidatiously, after all this is the same tigress that attempted to eat him before, Walser joins the dance. The tigress treats him gently, and everyone sees the act as a great success.



Later that afternoon, the Strong Man waits until he sees Walser alone. He jumps him from behind and beats him for stealing Mignon. Unable to defend himself with his hurt arm, Walser is helpless. Fevvers stops the beating by spraying the two men with a water hose. The Strong Man is crying. Mignon, who sees him from the window above, feels sorry for him. Fevvers directs the men towards the Princess's quarters, but the Strong Man is afraid of the tigers. The Princess has Fevvers remove Samson's tiger skin loincloth as it upsets the animals. Walser removes his own clothes quickly, as he is afraid of his reaction should Fevvers touch him. The men sit, wrapped in towels, as Mignon fetches tea.

Through the medium of Fevvers, who translates, Samson professes his love for Mignon and admits he is a coward. Walser and Mignon both deny they ever had an affair. Walser is jealous as the Strong Man is weeping copiously into Fevvers' bosom, and she is comforting him. Mignon brings Walser a raw steak to soothe his blackening eye, but it's not the kind of comfort he wants.

The Strong Man is physically fit, but naïve and a spiritual weakling. He is sentimental, and discovers his love for Mignon only when he realizes he can no longer have a sexual relationship with her. As the group sits there, the Professor comes by, dragging a drunken Lamarck back to his room. Fevvers sends Samson to help. She speaks briefly to the girls, and then tells Walser to grab his things and leave the lovebirds be. Walser realizes the Princess and Mignon are a couple. The Strong Man returns to find them together, and himself shut out.

The Professor retrieved M. Lamarck's contract with the Colonel and tears it up. Dressed in the Ape-Man's coat, he then gets Walser to hail a cab for him. He heads off to see the Colonel and, writing on paper in perfect English, suggests a new deal. With Sybil's help, he convinces the Colonel to agree to a new contract wherein the Professor is in charge of the ape act.

Chapter 9: The Colonel enjoys his one-on-one dinner with Fevvers. She appreciates fine food and drink, and takes her time. While she enjoys wine, the Colonel prefers bourbon, which he drinks at a steady pace throughout the evening. When the time for seduction finally arrives, the Colonel has passed out.

Fevvers returns to her room, where Lizzie waits. Fevvers admits she likes Walser. Lizzie laments he is not intellectually mature enough for Fevvers, but Fevvers denies her feelings are anything other than physical attraction. The bellboy delivers flowers and a box to Fevvers. The box contains a diamond bracelet. Fevvers forgets Walser for the moment and concentrates on the diamonds, thinking she might want to cultivate a relationship of sorts with the giver.



Analysis

As the characters begin to evolve, discovering their unique identities, the circus slowly begins to devolve into chaos. Chaos is the natural fallout of change, the trip over the threshold, until one makes themselves at home again in the new order.

The firing of the Charivaris for the alleged sabotage of Fevvers' trapeze is the first sign of decline. There is no real proof they did it, although Lizzie already has her beady eye on them, knowing they wish Fevvers ill. The incident is as good an excuse as any to curse them. ("If ever Lizzie so much as thinks of the Charivaris, one or other of the clan will suffer an undiagnosable twinge." p. 161.)

This, among many things (including Fevvers' own words) is good evidence of Lizzie's magical powers. Like any good Sicilian strega, she knows the power of a good curse.

Fevvers does not resort to her wings to save her, which casts some doubt on her authenticity. This is confusing to Walser, as he has grown more ambivalent in his theory that she is a fake. He knows it is to her advantage not to unravel her own mystery, as it will destroy her allure, turning her into no more than a sideshow exhibit. Still, she seems to have real fear in her eyes, and why would she have that if she knew she had her wings as backup?

The animals once again take on the role of humans, and vice versa, as they play their parts in the ring. Mignon, dancing with the tiger in the ring, incites his mate's jealousy, and Walser is called in to be her partner. Even though she recently tried to eat him, Walser does as he is told. He comes to the realization that, even as he views the tiger as a beast dancing with a beautiful girl, the tiger, in his perception, must see him as the same. The mirror image again brings things into balance. The balance, however, is tenuous, and any disruption can become deadly.

The Apes have become more and more human. Lamarck has degenerated into a hopeless nothing, and the Apes are finally ready to take over. The re-negotiation of their contract with the Colonel is the beginning of the end of their life of servitude. They have become fairy tale animals, independent and intelligent, able to exist outside the cage and in the world of men. Sybil is sympathetic, and for the first time, the Colonel doubts her complete loyalty.

Sampson attacks Walser in an alleyway. The fact that he beats the smaller (and injured) clown where he believes no one can come to the rescue is yet another cowardly act. Fevvers, of course, does come to the rescue, and the dripping Strong Man looks so pathetic that Mignon actually feels sorry for him. Sampson feels a sentimental sense of loss and remorse, but only since he has lost her. He is forced to remove his loincloth, and stands bare, both physically and emotionally. He cries, and Walser is incensed when Fevvers comforts him. Samson confesses his love to Mignon, but she has found her soul mate and is lost to the Strong Man forever.



After dining with the Colonel and drinking him under the table to avoid seduction, Fevers returns to her room. She admits to herself she likes Walser, although, as he is so young and foolish, she relegates him to the role of possible plaything, rather than a suitable mate. In any case, as she disdains marriage, that is not an option. Even though she likes Walser, she takes a step back when she receives the Grand Duke's diamonds. Ever the fool of greed, she is determined to play this con to the hilt. Her descent into chaos is about to begin.

Vocabulary

marmoreal, augmented, expostulate, anomaly, ambiguously, vertiginous, acumen, discommoded, ensorcellating, sulphurous, tumultuous, succumbed, succubus, tetchy, contrition, peremptorily, ruminatively, codicil, equanimity, aperture



Section 2, Chapter 10

Summary

Chapter 10: Fewvers receives so many flowers from her admirers she begins to redirect them to the hospital ward. Even though she is inundated with offers and invitations, she accepts only one: from the Grand Duke, who sent her the diamond bracelet. Along with his invitation he sends diamond earrings, promising a diamond necklace to match when she dines with him after the final performance.

On the last night of performance, Buffo the Great goes drinking with Lamarck. Little Ivan tracks him down in one of the bars and finds him seriously drunk and barely able to walk. He takes him back to Clown Alley where Grik and Grok try to repair his make-up, as his natural face is showing through the white grease paint. Buffo is a mean drunk and the clowns are worried what will happen during their act. Buffo, however, is ready to go. Even though he is covered in vomit and has fouled himself, he continues to drink.

Walser informs the Colonel of Buffo's condition, but thinking only of money, the Colonel insists the clown will be fine: the drunker, the funnier. An extremely drunk Buffo takes part in the clown's antics; his uncoordinated movements are seen as part of the act as the other clowns behave more outlandishly to cover for him. As Buffo stumbles about the arena, the clowns improvise skits to keep the act flowing without interruption. The crowd is entertained by Buffo's rage and his yelling curses at the world and everyone in it. Buffo keeps sending Little Ivan for more vodka, and by the time the final skit, the Christmas dinner, is performed he is out of his mind with intoxication.

Walser is scared of what will happen during the skit. He is to be the main dish at the Christmas dinner, dressed as the Human Chicken, the back of his pants stuffed with sausages, and covered on a silver platter. Buffo is to lift the lid and Walser will run around the table; he is worried because Buffo has a carving knife in front of him. Grik and Grok caution him to get the knife away from Buffo as quickly as he can. They carry the platter containing Walser to the table and set it in front of Buffo.

Buffo is so far gone that he is confused about what is happening around him. He sits staring, not opening the lid of the platter. The time stretches on and the audiences' laughter begins to die away. Walser is under the lid not realizing what is happening; he only knows the show must go on and he will suffocate if he does not get out from under the lid. He jumps up, sending the lid crashing down the table as he crows like a rooster and flaps his arms. Buffo screams and brings the carving knife down. Walser is able to avoid the blow and sees in Buffo's eyes the clown is no longer sane. Although the Colonel is suddenly aware of impending crisis, the audience, not knowing what is truly occurring, howls with laughter. The Colonel slips out and summons a doctor.

Buffo chases Walser around the ring. To cover Buffo's insanity, the other clowns run around creating bedlam so the people will not realize the mad clown does intend to



actually kill the Human Chicken. Buffo then begins to convulse. Walser cannot escape, as the Princess's cats have already blocked the entrance. The Princess finally steps forward, spraying Buffo with the intense pressure of the water hose. Buffo does a somersault and lands on his back in the ring. As the crowd roars, the Strong Man picks up Buffo and carries him out of the ring and to a waiting straitjacket.

Walser ducks out of his dance with the tigress; pale, badly shaken, and wet, Walser retreats to Fevvers' dressing room, where she is dressing and Lizzie is working on a letter home. Fevvers seems only half interested in Walser's tale, as her mind is elsewhere. She is wearing her diamond bracelet and earrings, and admiring herself in the mirror. She turns to Walser for approval, but is interrupted by a roar of dismay from the audience, followed by a shot.

The tigress, left without a dance partner, has become jealous, and attacks Mignon for dancing with her mate. To save her own mate, the Princess must shoot the tigress. Despondent, the Princess and Mignon leave the ring after Samson, who drags the carcass of the tigress from the ring, leaving a bloody trail.

It is now up to Fevvers to save the show.

Both Lizzie and Fevvers are in terrible moods, as Fevvers plans to have dinner with the Grand Duke on her own after the show. Lizzie does not trust him, or any aristocrat, and is thus worried for her foster daughter. Fevvers refuses to take any of Lizzie's advice. The Grand Duke has demanded Fevvers come alone and unaccompanied to dinner, and wooed by the promise of the diamond necklace, Fevvers insists upon going.

Walser, with his keen eye, observes that Fevvers has evening plans that include a rendezvous. He is jealous, and ignores the letters that Lizzie thrusts before him to dispatch to London. If he had been curious, he could have discovered something that might have transformed him back into a journalist. Instead, lost in foolish emotion, he remains a clown.

Her performance successfully completed, Fevvers returns in full flight mode. She and Lizzie continue their argument. Fevvers refuses to let Lizzie accompany her. The train leaves at midnight, and Fevvers expects to be on it, diamonds in hand. Not that she could miss it if she tried, she quips, indicating Ma Nelson's clock. Lizzie says Fevvers is being greedy, and should not expect any help from her. Fevvers convinces her that she is simply going to flirt with the Duke to get her prize, and Liz softens enough to pin up the girl's hair. Fevvers takes her sword with her for protection, and confidently steps into the carriage. In the next carriage, the Strong Man dumps the tigress' carcass.

A tussle breaks out between The Educated Apes and the Colonel. The Professor has written a clause into the apes' contract saying they would be released if their applause lasted over five minutes. The Colonel signed the contract, and must now follow through. The Professor tricks the Colonel at his own game, and the apes, dressed warmly and bearing luggage, leave the circus.



Analysis

Things fall apart. The center cannot hold and chaos reigns.

The final performance in St. Petersburg is the beginning of the end. Buffo the Great descends fully into madness, upsetting the balance of the tiger act, which leads to the tigress attacking Mignon and being killed by the Princess.

The Colonel is no longer in control of his show. He allowed Buffo to go on, which led to multiple tragedies. On top of that, he has been conned at his own game by the Educated Apes who abandon the circus as well as several of the stable-lads. Unnerved and overwhelmed, the Colonel starts to cry, and is upbraided by Fevvers who once again comes to the rescue. Still, Buffo is lost to insanity, the tigress's bloody carcass lies on a dray, and the circus will never be the same as it was.

Fevvers is beginning to assert her independence with her foster-mother. Despite Lizzie's admonitions and arguments, Fevvers is intoxicated by greed. She accepts the Grand Duke's invitation without a second thought except for the promised diamond necklace. She laughs and reminds Liz the clock will assure she gets to the train on time. She has her sword with her so she feels invincible; however, in the Ludic Game, sometimes you lose.

Vocabulary

saturnine, peripatetic, revenant, cerements, gesticulations, disarticulated, imprecations, colossus, tatterdemalion, obeisance, acolytes, querulous, paraphernalia, febrile, scintillating, eyrie, catastrophe, opulence, plangent, procuress, resplendent, droshky, conciliatory, precipitated, disconsolate, inexorable



Section 2, Chapter 11

Summary

Fevvers rides through St. Petersburg in a luxurious carriage. The night is beautiful, and the sparkle of the new-fallen snow reminds her of diamonds. The Grand Duke meets her at the door, as he has dismissed his servants for the night. She does not worry for her safety, and tells the carriage to return precisely at 11:30.

The Duke's house is hard and cold: marble and crystal, mirrors and gold. Fevvers feels that money is wasted on the rich, as she would prefer an abode that is warm and inviting, and her wealth would engender generosity of spirit. She also believes, in her philosophical meanderings, that poverty is wasted on the poor, as they cannot seem to make the best of things, and when money does come their way they waste it as frivolously as the wealthy. She occasionally wishes people could just abandon money and exchange goods freely, out of good will. Lizzie, however, reminds her it is impractical to believe such things. Now, thinking of the Grand Duke, she marvels at how he wastes his money on her, not because of her intrinsic value, but only because she is a novelty, a *rara avis*: a rare bird. Still, she is happy to take his diamonds, which she is fully prepared to do.

Swelled with greed, she estimates the price of each bauble she spies, oblivious to the Grand Duke's eyes fixed on her hidden wings. She wonders what he will ask of her, and exactly how much she can get in return. In the Grand Duke's study, she is surprised to see a life-sized ice sculpture of herself, with the brilliant diamond necklace draped around its neck. She is tempted to sulk at not being able to possess it right away, but she tries to remember her manners. She sits and draws off her gloves, and he kisses her hand. It is unpleasant, and she feels a little uneasy when the Grand Duke begins his attempt to woo her. She avoids his eye, and he puts it down to awe over his riches earned in oil. He offers her a drink and she takes it happily, but notices several glasses. He takes them and spells out her given name: SOPHIA. This too unnerves her: how does he know her name? She does not like to be called that name by strangers. The Grand Duke proceeds to throw back each glass, thirty-five in all, and yet, he is still standing, and not noticeably drunk. Her unease grows, and she wishes she had let Lizzie come with her after all.

He offers her caviar, and she digs in heartily, as always. The Grand Duke tells her that he is a collector of unusual objets d'art, especially toys. He shows her his "musicians" which are all clockwork and made of metal, precious stones, and feathers. This last disturbs Fevvers most of all. She tries to calm herself as the "band" begins to play, but the Grand Duke smiles at her, and it seems he is enjoying her discomfort. Even more unnerving, the ice-sculpture Fevvers begins to melt, and she can hear it dripping. In a move entirely unlike her, she refuses an offer of champagne.



The Grand Duke leads her to his gallery, lined with lit glass cases. Each case contains a beautiful egg, which he claims are “full of surprises.” He tells her he will give her any egg she wants if she will show him her wings. She insists on receiving the egg first, but he says no. She insists, but he turns away and shuts off the lights. As she hears the ice Fevvers dripping away, she becomes nervous and gives in. She does, however, insist he not touch, and he complies.

Once her wings are revealed, he shows her his bejeweled eggs. With each one, the Grand Duke and she become more physically intimate, yet with each one she also becomes more frightened, as they each seem to revolve somehow around her. As he caresses her intimately, he finds her sword, and to her horror, breaks it in half. Bereft of her weapon, she feels vulnerable and defenseless. In the last egg is a cage with nothing inside, and terrified, she knows she has been fooled, and must abandon her diamonds in order to save herself. As the Grand Duke reaches climax at her hands, she runs to catch the train.

Fevvers, her dress torn and stained, falls into Lizzie’s arms. Fevvers sits up and removes her bracelet and earrings. At that moment, Walser bursts into the stateroom. He holds a wriggling Little Ivan, dressed in a clown’s costume, in his arms. As the train pulls slowly past the platform, Walser tosses Ivan out into the snow, and Fevvers tosses the diamonds out after him, telling him to give them to his grandmother. After watching to make sure they had left the child behind, Walser turns to see Fevvers in her wretched state, a crying mess, and is struck dumb.

Analysis

Pride is only one step before a fall, and finally, Fevvers is pushed off her perch and over her own threshold. Her confidence is shaken by the ominous drip of the giant ice Fevvers, which has an intense psychological effect on her. She can feel herself diminishing, growing smaller. As she has always been larger than life, this is very disconcerting.

The Grand Duke knows her true name, and by means of several glasses of vodka, drinks it in. In fairy stories (such as “Rumplestiltskin” or “Tom Tit Tot”) knowing someone’s true name gives the knower magical power over the one named. Again, she brushes away her discomfort.

She is also disturbed by the Grand Duke’s collection of mechanical toys, especially the ones resembling birds. Perhaps he believed the rumors that she was nothing but rubber and mechanical parts? She gets an ominous feeling, and the diamonds seem far away. She is losing her upper hand.

Still, she foolishly subverts her own instincts, which is a common act of the oppressed woman. Instead she depends upon her sword (which some feminists would consider a phallic symbol) to protect her, as it always has before. The Grand duke lures her even further into his lair with the promise of more baubles. Like a fairy tale innocent being led



into the woods, she follows him. She tries to keep control in negotiations, but he won't budge. Her desire for the pretty things is greater than her sense of self-preservation, and she allows herself to become more and more vulnerable.

As he shows her his jeweled eggs, she winds further and further down the primrose path. She is bedazzled, but the spell is broken when she realizes she has allowed him to get too close to her. He discovers her talisman and destroys it. This collapses her confidence; now she is at risk of losing all control. Each egg he has shown her takes her further into his fantasy. Each drip makes her feel smaller and smaller. She lunges desperately for the toy train, and he becomes angry, insisting he has made the final egg especially for her. Seeing what is within, she feels a real fear that she may actually shrink small enough to fit into the cage of the final egg and become part of his collection forever.

The only grip Fevvers still has on reality is the Grand Duke's member in her hand. Her sexuality is the only weapon she still has. For centuries, sex was the only power women had to wield against men, and she uses it now. She drops the toy train on the ground, and is grateful it lands right side up. Why? Is there some magic at work? It seems so, as, within the few seconds the Grand Duke is lost in orgasm, she manages, somehow, to run down the platform and climb aboard. Her world has become small and safe once again.

Fevvers is devastated by the experience. Her dress is torn and covered in the Grand Duke's semen. It is reminiscent of the night she took in Mignon, but her bruises are mental and emotional. More aware than Mignon ever was, she feels used and demeaned by her experience; made even more vulnerable by the loss of her weapon. She has been disempowered and disarmed. She's sold herself out to greed, and used up the last of her luck. Crying, she seeks comfort from Lizzie. She's learned her lesson, and throws her jewels away.

Walser has never seen Fevvers vulnerable before. It is his first real glimpse into her authentic self.

Vocabulary

vitrification, palpable, censoriously, ruminative, parure, balked, supplicatory, tritonic, carapace, tumescence



Section 3, Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Fevvers is watching the landscape as the train travels through Siberia. Although the performers are warm and cozy inside the train, it is bitter cold outside and the landscape is barren. Fevvers lacks confidence outside her element. The encounter with the Grand Duke has left her shaken and questioning herself.

An old convict with the word carved into his cheek is selling carved bears at one of the stations, and Fevvers, filled with sympathy, buys them all to send to Isotta and Gianni's children. Lizzie accuses her of buying them for Walser's benefit. She also accuses Fevvers of buying into her own publicity, a "golden hearted Cockney" who doesn't play by the rules. Fevvers isn't sure who she really is, and Lizzie insists that Fevvers has no identity, that she is only what she makes herself to be in the moment. However, Lizzie tells her, when she fails ("come a cropper") she fails big. Bringing up the recent debacle with the Grand Duke, including the loss of her sword, her protective talisman, hurts Fevvers deeply. She feels a void within, appalled at her own shallow avarice.

Silent, the sounds of the circus animals are heard through the train's cars. The train often makes unscheduled stops, where children will run up to the cars hoping to sell a bite to eat or a drink of milk to the passengers. However, tonight the company is far into the wilds of the taiga. Fevvers ask Lizzie if she can possibly "hurry things up a bit," as Liz can mysteriously make things happen when she wants to. Fevvers calls it "household" magic, but explains it away as a simple mystery, rather than outright witchcraft. Fevvers is feeling trapped. She hates the train. It feels wrong riding in the artificial luxury of the train, which is in bitter contrast to the sterile and frozen terrain. She feels as if she is in limbo, and has no sense of how long they have been this way.

Lizzie prods her to think of money to cheer her up. However, this is not the same Fevvers of London or St. Petersburg. Her hair has grown out brown at the roots, and is tangled. Her plumage is dusty and bedraggled. The train stops, and Fevvers begins to cry. She begins to cry even harder, not knowing exactly why, and Lizzie encourages her. She seems to be seeing the future when she tells Fevvers, "We don't know if you'll get enough time to cry later on."(p.200.)

The whole circus seems suspended in time. The clowns, still reeling from the loss of Buffo, put off rehearsing a new act to play cards. The only one who is truly animated is the Colonel, fueled by his stock of bourbon and the company of his animals. Still, all is not well for him, either. He tries to care for the elephants, but they are fading. The tigers and the Princess are no longer able to trust one another, and the Princess sorrows over her shooting of the tigress. When she plays the organ, the Colonel is reminded of his grand failures in St. Petersburg: the loss of Buffo, the Apes, and the tigress all in one night. The trouble with the Ludic Game, he realizes, is that sometimes you lose. At least, he thinks to himself, he has his Cockney Venus.



The Strong Man's unrequited love for Mignon is transforming him. He has appointed himself her and the Princess's protector. His lust has turned to a sort of reverence, and he has become tender and sensible. He trades in his loincloth for clothes, and keeps a constant vigilance over the women he has sworn to protect. Fevvers' looking proper but matronly without her corset, dines with Lizzie, the Colonel and Sybil. The colonel feeds the pig human food, and comments that, since humans and pigs are both omnivores, they tend to taste the same, at least according to cannibals. The food is pre-cooked and unappetizing, and Fevvers offers her portion to the pig. Sybil, well cared for by the Colonel, looks as healthy as ever: the travel has not been too hard on her.

Walser joins them, and Fevvers considers his face. She is growing fond of him, although she is still convincing herself that she is only interested in him physically. She recognizes a growing attraction, and as he feels her eyes upon him, he knows what she desires. Dinner proceeds as normal, and soon the Princess, Mignon, and Samson enter the car on their way to feed the tigers.

Suddenly, everything seems to levitate. The train has derailed, and is decimated. All who can, scramble from the wreckage. Fevvers has broken her right wing. Mignon has a black eye, and the Princess has various cuts and scratches, and is passed out with a concussion. Lizzie seems unhurt, and the Colonel and Sybil seem perfectly fit. There is no sign of Walser.

The tigers are dead, crashed into walls of mirrors. The clowns emerge from the rubble, but still no Walser. She begins to dig in the rubble, but is disturbed by the sudden touch of an elephant. The elephants, unused to the bitter cold are removing the rubble with their trunks. Suddenly, the survivors are abducted by a group of rough-looking figures dressed in sheepskin. They have guns and lead their prisoners away from the wreckage. Fevvers has no recollection of this, as she is so distraught over not being able to find Walser. Needless to say, he is left behind as the rest of the circus follows their captors into the wilderness.

Chapter 2: Walser is buried in the rubble asleep. He has been knocked unconscious by a cupboard door and lies beneath the wreckage of the train, even as the elephants are lifting away the rubble. He remains there until, after some time, he is found by a murderer.

Analysis

Having fallen off her perch, Fevvers is subdued. The cold and desolate country through which the train travels deeply affects her spirit. She longs for the simplicity and joy of Battersea. She receives grief from Lizzie, who thinks she's slipping, and trying to catch Walser's eye. She rubs salt in Fevvers' wounds by pointing out her foolishness. Fevvers is feeling humiliated and unsure of herself. She's appalled at her own actions, and Lizzie's admonishments do nothing to cheer her up. Even when Lizzie tells her to "think of money." Fevvers has changed, and the old tricks no longer work. Her foster-mother



tells her to go ahead and cry, as she may not have time later. This is, of course, foreshadowing.

Growth still occurs, even during winter, only much more slowly. The Colonel, realizing that the nature of the game means the occasional loss, tries his best to stay positive. The Strong Man's unrequited love and desire for Mignon has changed him, humanized him. She is also working her gentle magic on the Princess, becoming her voice.

The long journey is claustrophobic and static. People seem to be stagnating, procrastinating. Fevvers begins to fade, abandoning her corsets for frumpy, more comfortable gowns. Her roots are showing. She begs Lizzie to use her skills to hurry time a bit, but Lizzie refuses. We cannot hurry healing; there's no way out but through the pain. Although time cannot be sped up, the train makes unexpected halts. This herky-jerky movement is part of a larger transformation. Progress is not always smooth, but a series of stops and starts. Time, in fact, seems to be lost in the vast void of the Siberian winter. Fevvers has no idea how long they have been travelling.

What one thinks is rock bottom is sometimes only halfway down. The explosion and derailment of the train throws everything into chaos once again. The world is now in complete disarray. The tigers have been killed, and most of the other animals soon follow. Fevvers searches frantically for Walser, but cannot find him, and assumes he must be dead. She is frantic, and in the midst of the chaos she and the other survivors of the circus are kidnapped and carried away. She is at the mercy, not of luck, but of fate.

Vocabulary

cyclorama, samovar, hubris, inimical, fugue, grizzle, prescient, somnolence, acquiescence, papirosse, optimistic, repertoire, febrile, unrequited, alchemy, propinquity, veneration, stripling, enfilades, expostulated, eloquently, cataclysm, incendiary, pettishly



Section 3, Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

Chapter 3: The train has crashed in the vicinity of the settlement of R., near which the Countess P., having gotten away with the murder of her husband some years earlier, has set up a private asylum in which to house other murderers. Ironically, Countess P. has little sympathy for these women, seeing herself as the instrument of their redemption.

With the help of a French amateur phrenologist, she selects several women from varied Russian prisons whose cranial bumps seem to indicate the possibility of redemption. She had these women build their own prison, a panopticon: a circular series of cells, with a glass-walled room in the center. In this room sat the wardenness, with whom the prisoners exchanged stares day and night. Olga Alexandrovna, who happens to be Little Ivan's mother, is an inmate of Countess P.'s asylum, having killed her abusive husband with a hatchet. She is chosen for the asylum, and told she is lucky to avoid hard labor and the lash, although the turnkey in the Russian jail does not let her leave for Siberia without a final rape and chaining.

The countess keeps watch over the inmates from a chair, which she swivels around so as to keep an eye on everyone. Every day they are fed and given clean water. Their toilets are emptied. There is no mail nor are visitors allowed, had they been able to make it across the frozen wasteland. The asylum is not inhumane, but it is sterile. Books are forbidden, as is anything that will help time pass. The purpose of this penance is for the women to take responsibility for their crime, repent, and thus be redeemed. However, while the women freely admit to their crimes, none show any remorse. Neither the guards nor the inmates can speak to one another, and there are other methods in place to prevent communication by knocking. Life goes by in almost complete silence. It is a dreary existence without privacy or any human contact. Even the wardresses become trapped by the silent isolation.

The more Olga contemplates her crime, the more she feels it is justified. Eventually, she exonerates herself. Realizing that the guards are also victims and tired of this nonexistence, takes the opportunity to touch the gloved hand of the woman who serves her food. The hooded woman (the guards are forced to cover everything but their eyes,) looks into her face for a brief moment. This single touch leads to a series of clandestine communications, and a passionate revolt of the prisoners and guards, each paired now as lovers and compatriots, against the Countess. She fires at the insurgents with her pistol, but the only hit she scores takes out the clock, freezing forever in time the hour of their escape. The women disarm her and leave her locked up in her own asylum, throwing away the key as they depart. Free, empowered, and in love, the women venture off to find new lives. They head towards the train tracks, singing.

Section 3, Chapter 4,



Olga Alexandrovna and her lover, Vera Andreyevna, come across the wreckage of the circus train. Lying among the debris are the elephants, all dead save one, who continues to move the debris. The women move back, unseen, as they spy the outlaws leading the survivors away. They are amazed at the unexpected sight of the circus party, especially the clowns and their ragged dogs. Once the outlaws have gone, Olga and Vera return to the other women, and they decide as a group that they cannot take on the outlaws, but they can go to the train and tend to the injured and dying. As they approach, they see that most of those left behind are already dead. After the last elephant dies, Olga finds Walser among the carnage. They also find the rest of the train crew, alive and unharmed, but unconscious. The women let them lie. Practically, the women scavenge for useful items. They find Fevvers' quilt and the statue of Father Time. They throw the statue away, as they do not need or want men in their lives. In this spirit, they drop their last (fathers') names, and retain only their own. While part of Olga longs to return to her mother and son, she also wants to look towards the future. The women gather kitchen items, food and other useful utensils.

Olga then hears Walser moan, and goes to him. He has suffered a head injury that affects his memory as well as his senses. They teach him to walk and feed him like a baby. When Olga asks him if he wants an egg, he replies with "Cock-a-doodle-dooski!"

The women hear the approach of a train and see the lights of a search party. They hustle away to avoid detection. Olga leaves Walser somewhat reluctantly, but Vera reminds her as he is a man, they do not need him. Kissing him goodbye, she leaves behind her son and her past. Walser, witless, cries at the abandonment of the women. He wanders off into the woods to find them, but is distracted by the sparkling snow.

Analysis

The perspective of the novel radically shifts here, offering order amidst chaos: the eye of the storm if you will. The eye is a suitable metaphor here, as Olga Alexandrovna is a prisoner in the panopticon of Countess P., whose eye keeps watch day and night. No woman in this prison has a voice. They are kept quiet, still, safe, and all for their own good. After all, women are the gentler sex, and need to be protected. However, these women are in no way the gentler sex. Like the tigress, they have proven that the female, when provoked, is more deadly than the male.

All of these women are murderesses. They have risen up and rebelled against their masters, most of whom were abusive. They refused to be victims, and became victims, not of another man, but of a woman. The Countess P. is an example of a woman who gains her sense of self by wielding power over others. The "power over" vs. "power with" paradigm is a very popular theme in modern feminism.

By wielding power over the women in her care, Countess P. simply reinvents the wheel with herself as the oppressor. She does nothing to redeem or rehabilitate these women. The more control she exerts only convinces them further of the correctness of their actions. When the women finally rebel, they develop a new paradigm as a communal



“power with” sisterhood. There is no single leader. Each woman is an equal. Perhaps it is in this spirit of sisterhood that they do not kill Countess P., but only lock her away in her own prison where she can ponder her own rehabilitation for the rest of her life.

Olga, Vera, and their fellow lesbian separatist rebels form the most idealistic type of feminist utopia: a world without men. They toss away the statue of Father Time, as, where they are going, they will “need no more Fathers.” The women agree to toss away their patronymics (last names, which in Russia are feminized versions of their fathers’ names) and claim their own identities. Still, Olga is a mother, and part of her still mourns for her son. Finding Walser in the rubble, he is foolish and infantile due to his injury. She feels maternal towards him, and nurtures him until they are faced with the threat of discovery and she must abandon him.

Walser is reduced to the most vulnerable form of fool: the simpleton. Ironically, it is this part of his journey that will eventually bring him to wisdom.

Vocabulary

dolorous, assuaged, conduit, phrenology, panopticon, avarice, timorous, autocratic, extenuating, lenient, exonerated, surreptitious, bivouac, disarticulated, augmented, askance, patronymic



Section 3, Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

Chapter 5: Led away by a group of unknown men, the survivors of the train wreck seem deeper in limbo than ever. Fevvers is lost in the primeval forest. Surrounded by men who seemed comfortable in the dark, in silence, and in lack of hygiene, makes Fevvers even more apprehensive. As soon as she can, she insists on walking under her own power, and finds Liz, embracing her as she is able. Fevvers lets the reader know that, although Lizzie seems to have the uncanny ability to make things happen, she is from a family of Anarchist bomb-makers (and also confirms it was Liz who was responsible for making Jenny a rich widow.)

Fevvers is upset, missing the family in Battersea and her lucky violets, plus her broken wing is hurting. Lizzie points out she has lost even more: Ma Nelson's clock ("we'll soon lose all track of time." p. 226.) and her handbag. This, Fevvers agrees, is the worst disaster.

The woods make Fevvers afraid, not only because the trees are so close in, but also because it is so vast. (Both claustrophobic and agoraphobic) Eventually, the group arrives at a clearing with several haphazard dwellings, and it is obvious there are no women in this group of vagabonds. This and the fact that the men seem to take interest only in Fevvers make her nervous.

The group, however, is treated well. They are given hot tea and meat. At the sight, Fevvers can eat nothing, and is again reduced to weeping. The fact that she won't eat causes Lizzie great concern, as usually nothing tempers Fevvers' appetite. They lead the performers to a large shed and give them piles of furs to sleep on; then they lock them in. A small boy is left with them to tend the fire, but when one of the clowns' dogs tries to play with him, he breaks its neck. This does not reassure Fevvers. The boy also gazes at Sybil longingly. When Liz splints Fevvers' wing, the boy's eyes go wide, and he crosses himself.

Waking from her temporary coma, The Princess is devastated over losing her tigers and her piano. Not only does she weep copiously, but breaks her long silence, babbling incoherently. The noise so upsets the clowns they wanted to throw her out into the snow, but Lizzie finds a pack of cards, and they begin to entertain themselves. Finally, the Princess exhausts herself and falls asleep in Mignon's arms. Liz hugs and kisses her foster-daughter to calm her, but she soon falls asleep, leaving Fevvers wide awake in the night. As she lies there trying to sleep, the fire-boy creeps up and gently plucks one of her feathers. She doesn't have the heart to admonish him for it. She is thinking of her loneliness and of Walser.

Somehow, Fevvers manages to sleep, and in the morning, she is taken to see the leader of the outlaws, who call themselves the Brotherhood of Free Men. They give her



breakfast, and the leader watches her, although he is unfailingly polite. The Brotherhood consists of men who have been outlawed for taking vengeance against those who raped their wives and sisters. Fevvers takes umbrage, stating women should learn to defend themselves. The leader of the Brotherhood admits they blew up the railway track to kidnap Fevvers, who they wish plead their case to the Queen of England so that the Queen will have a word with her cousin, the Tsar of Russia. They believe the Tsar would not permit them to be treated so poorly, simply for defending their womenfolk. The leader is in tears, begging her, and kissing the hem of her gown. Fevvers, angry now at the Colonel and what must have been one of his publicity stunts, has to admit to the leader of the Brotherhood that not only is she not engaged to the Prince of Wales, but has never even met him. Outraged and disappointed, he goes into a fury, breaking everything in his tent, and can only be calmed by Samson, who temporarily knocks him out.

Back in the shed, Fevvers tells the others about the bandits' plight. Lizzie is sympathetic, while the Colonel has the grace to look abashed, although he denies responsibility with a "caveat emptor." The others all despondent or distracted, Lizzie, Fevvers and Samson sit down to make a plan. Fevvers observes the changes that have come over the Strong Man. He has become more introspective, and while he does not contribute much to conversations, it is clear he follows and comprehends them. Lizzie and Fevvers try to get advice from Sybil, but all she will spell out is "WAIT AND SEE." Liz seems most upset that she is not sure whether her last missives have arrived in London. This seems so irrelevant to Fevvers under the circumstances, that she and Liz have a severe falling out, exchanging harsh words and turning their backs on one another.

Most of the men are in their cups and singing. The clowns are playing inappropriate pranks, clowning with the fire-boy. The women are sulking or weeping, and Fevvers feels the loss of her protective talismans: her sword and the clock, even more sharply. The pain in her wing is ever-present, but she thinks now that her young man has disappeared, perhaps her heart is broken, too.

As Lizzie gets a knife from the fire boy and begins to cut the bearskins up into what might be clothes, a knock comes on the door. They invite the stranger in, and meet the escaped convict.

Chapter 6: Walser is wandering the woods half naked, having lost his pants, suspenders, and wig. He is bearded and has a variety of natural objects: feathers and burrs, stuck in his hair. He makes odd noises and occasionally, still crows like a cock. Still senseless, he nonetheless follows the sound of a drum, sniffing the air until he reaches the edge of a fragrant fire. A Shaman sits there, beating on his drum. He believes Walser to be a spiritual manifestation: one of many in his ecstatic journey. Walser enjoys the warmth of the Shaman's fire. When the Shaman falls fully into his trance, he drops his drum and Walser picks it up, although he cannot make sense of it. When the Shaman finally awakens, he finds Walser still there. He figures the vision will eventually disappear, but instead it rubs its stomach. The Shaman questions the vision, but it simply giggled and again rubs its belly. The Shaman offers the vision a glass of



urine, which, due to the Shaman's previous spirit journey, is laced heavily with fly agaric: a hallucinogenic toadstool. Walser takes the proffered drink, and immediately after ingesting it goes immediately into a series of intense hallucinations. He begins to babble incoherently in a language the Shaman cannot understand. This excites the Shaman, convincing him whatever the man may be, he is not himself a hallucination. Perhaps, he thinks, he is an apprentice Shaman from another tribe who has lost his way. The Shaman picks Walser up, slings him over his shoulder, and carries him back to his village.

Analysis

The captured survivors are being taken further and further into the void. The endless forest is, paradoxically, both endless and close.

Fewers's life is out of control. Her broken wing pains her. She isn't hungry. The only authority she has is the decision to walk under her own power, which she takes. What's more, her deceptions (or those spun around her) are turning back on her. The false story that she was engaged to the Prince of Wales was the impetus for the bombing of the train. The outlaws believe it is the truth, and this particular Truth will set them free. They are deceived.

Fewers argues with the Outlaws regarding their need to avenge their women's honor. She argues rape and other abuses by men have not deprived them of their honor, for honor resides not in a woman's sexual organs, but in her spirit. Women who are liberated are not dishonored by those who have no honor themselves, and are also fully capable of shooting "their own rapists" (p.231.) Her argument seems to revive her spirit, at least for a short time.

The Princess, devastated by the loss of her piano, and free from the oppressive silence imposed on her by the tigers, begins to find her literal voice. It is incoherent at first, an infant's cry. Still, it is yet another step towards a complete identity. Fewers refers to Lizzie again as a witch, and again she qualifies it, but we know better. Still she's lost her handbag (although it seems to reappear for a second when she needs a pack of cards) and hence, her magic. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, and seemingly for no greater purpose, everyone on edge and irritable, it seems there's nowhere to go but up.

As Walser stumbles into the Shaman's clearing, the Shaman takes him to be just another spirit manifestation. The job of the Shaman is to enter the Spirit world and bring back messages, retrieve parts of people's souls that have been lost, work healing magic and curses, and tend to the general well being of the tribe. His only real way of knowing if something is "real" is if it sticks around. Of course, Shamans don't really differentiate that much between the "real" and the "unreal" as even a vision can be real in a spiritual or symbolic sense. In Walser's current state, it is not certain that he can be sure himself that he is not an apparition or spiritual manifestation. He cannot remember his past, so how can he be sure of his reality?



The Shaman's belief that Walser may be an otherworldly or magical being, vaguely mirrors Rosencreutz's view of Fevvers, although the Shaman wishes Walser no harm, and in fact wants to nurture his power. The Fool's babbling and wild, drug infused visions after drinking the Shaman's urine only inflame the Shaman's curiosity. He wants to understand the messages Walser brings, and takes him back to the village, to teach and to learn.

Vocabulary

pummeled, anarchist, disputation, melancholy, victuals, peroration, proprietorial, ululations, volatile, impervious, invocation, transcendental, emanation, agaric



Section 3, Chapter 7

Summary

The escapee, an anarchist on the run from a search party, finds his way into the outlaws' camp and is delighted to happen upon the circus' survivors. He is a well-educated young man who looks to the future with glee. At first Liz takes a liking to him due to his anarchistic tendencies, but is disappointed to find he could not even successfully build or detonate a bomb. She argues with him about the existence of the soul, and about whether or not it is practical to think of tomorrow, or instead simply live in the immediate now.

The outlaws are continually drinking, despondent over the fact their plans to plead their case have been dashed. The escapee brings news, saying he met the escaped women on their way to build a female utopia, and asked him to donate sperm, which they kept in an ice bucket to ensure their future survival. They told him of finding the train wreck. The escapee relates the news of the dead elephants, and that they found Walser alive in the wreckage. This comforts Fevvers, who hopes he will come to save them. The escapee is hoping to avoid the railroad rescue party, and suggests that the Brotherhood attempt to avoid them as well.

The Colonel is already making plans for how he will profit from this adventure, while Lizzie comes up with a plan to have the clowns cheer up the outlaws, after which the survivors will reason with the men to let them go. The clowns dance and play music, a final tribute to Buffo the Great, and soon have the men laughing and dancing. Suddenly, a blizzard approaches. Sampson picks the performers up, one by one, and takes them to the shed, barricading them inside. After the storm is over, they find no one outside. The clowns and the outlaws are all gone. The only survivor of the violent storm left outside is a little dog that belonged to the clowns.

Lizzie is unsympathetic, and immediately begins to put on the clothes she has fashioned from the bearskins. The others follow suit, and the Escapee, lured by the promise of an American passport by the Colonel, leads the party towards what he thinks is the railroad tracks. Liz and Fevvers believe that, in some way, the clowns' fervor invoked the violent storm. Troubled by the thought, the Escapee tries to argue the point, but Fevvers blows him off, saying she's not one to argue what's real and what isn't, in light of her own nature.

The Colonel is in good spirits, no doubt thinking of his future press, but the Princess is disconsolate without her piano. Samson eventually just wraps her in furs and carries her with Mignon following close at hand. The group walks and walks, but does not seem to make any progress. (Place that is not a place; time that is not a time.) Finally, the little troupe arrives at the bank of a frozen river, upon the other side of which stands an unusual house. It seems out of place, and the Escapee assumes its owner must be an exile, and will welcome them. After crossing the treacherous water, they knock on the



door of the house. Next to the door is a shingle on which is written, in Cyrillic, Conservatoire of Transbaikalia.

Receiving no response to their knocking, the company walks inside. The house seems empty, and the floor is littered with fish bones. The furnishings are meager, but seem to have once been plush. There is also a picture of Mozart. A lamp is lit and a fire is laid, and upon further exploration, a third door is opened to reveal a grand piano. The lid is open, and a metronome rests upon it. The Princess is exultant and prepares to rush to the keyboard when a gaunt figure rises up from the bench, surprising them all. It is the Maestro. He is tall and thin, with long hair, a matching beard, and uncut nails. Although it is obvious he has not played the piano himself in quite a while, he refuses to let the Princess touch it, either. He wails and climbs up on the piano waving his arms. The metronome falls to the floor. The Princess, aching to play, reaches longingly towards the piano, and Mignon, stomping upon the metronome, begins to sing. As she sings, the Maestro begins to calm down and regain his senses. Fevvers feels wistful, but admonishes herself to get it together. Eventually, the Maestro begins to pick out the tune to Mignon's song on the horribly discordant piano. Then, to everyone's surprise, the Princess speaks. Soon she, Mignon and the Maestro are engaged in a genial argument about piano tuning.

As the Maestro converses with Mignon and the Princess, the other survivors search for food, but find nothing. They contemplate eating Sybil (at which point the Colonel exhorts them to eat him, instead), but finally settle on the dog left behind by the storm. The next morning the Maestro takes some of the group to the river to catch fish to eat. He takes a knife and cuts the ice, revealing fish trapped in the chunk of ice. As they carry their catch to the house, the sound of the newly-tuned piano and Mignon's lovely singing reaches them. As they approach the house, Sybil becomes nervous, and the party soon sees the cause. A group of Siberian tigers are resting on the roof of the house, and a small group of native people and animals have gathered at the edge of the woods, drawn by the music. Fevvers catches sight of a large man on the back of a reindeer. At first she doesn't recognize him, but soon realizes it is Walser. Her heart begins to race, and she runs toward him calling his name. It breaks the spell the music has cast, and the animals and men seem disgruntled. Desperate to capture Jack's attention, she spreads her wings. Those who have just recently met her gape in surprise, and the Shaman begins to beat his drum. She attempts to fly towards Walser, but her broken wing impedes her and she falls on her face in the snow, and the startled people and animals run away.

Analysis

The Escapee proves interesting and entertaining, but he is no match for the intellect and political savvy of Lizzie, who dismisses him as a compatriot when she discovers he can't even successfully detonate a bomb. She does, however, engage him in an argument simply for her own amusement. In the course of discussion, the Escapee mentions his chance meeting with the Women's Collective, who convinced him to donate a sample of sperm to their cause. This, while ensuring the continuation of their



group, does pose the risk of creating boy children. This raises the question of whether the women will choose infanticide, or rise to the challenge of attempting to raise a different breed of man. He happens to mention also, that he wasn't the first man they had run across. Ecstatic at the thought that Walser is alive, she entertains the fantasy that he will come and save her (a decidedly passive thought for the woman who was always the savior, herself), but Lizzie points out, according to the rumors, he is the one who needs saving.

For fear that violence may ensue, Lizzie commands the clowns to entertain the Outlaws. It seems, if her magic is indeed lost, she knows where to find an alternative. The clowns, through their wild dance, invoke chaos, which comes in the form of a blizzard. Sampson quickly pulls most of the survivors back into the safety of the shed, but the clowns and the outlaws, caught up in the frenzy, dance on. When the storm clears, they are gone: so much dross swept away by the wind. Order is beginning to manifest.

To survive in the wilderness, one must act as if they belong there. Lizzie fashions clothes out of skins that make the party look like marching bears. This is a form of sympathetic magic that will help them to survive.

Lost in the wilderness, Fevvers begins to wonder if her whole life is just a fantasy, and if she'll ever really find her place in it. They seem to be wandering about in circles when they run across the Conservatoire. And what do these lost travelers find there, but another lost and abandoned soul. However, destiny seems to have drawn them there, as the Princess finds a piano, and her voice, and the Maestro finds his pupils, and Mignon finds a family, and soon a hidden talent for composing. Her voice is sure and strong now: a woman's voice, and her song is so magical and powerful and poignant that it calls all the creatures of the forest, and their roof is draped with tigers. However, this relationship, between the musicians and the tigers, is another example of power-with, as it is egalitarian and based on free will.

Not only the creatures of the forest, but the humans too, fall prey to the song's allure. Fevvers, spying the man she loves (however much in denial she may be), calls out his name, leaps towards him and, though her wings carry her briefly, the spell breaks and she falls (Oh! The humanity!) Fevvers is becoming human. She is vulnerable to love, and to loss, and to failure.

Vocabulary

efficaciously, truculent, lethargy, denouement, immanent, dolorous, exiguously, daguerreotype, perruque



Section 3, Chapter 8

Summary

Walser slowly begins to remember things, but they mean nothing to him, having no context in his present world. Instead, they seem to be mere delusions. The villagers, however, treat him kindly as he babbles away in foreign languages, as they assume him to be a hallucination.

The Shaman and his tribe are illiterate, but not unintelligent. Theirs is the knowledge of the land, and how to navigate it and use it to their purposes. The Shaman is the most knowledgeable of them all. His knowledge is both concrete and abstract, and in his tribal system, these were often one and the same. It is the Shaman's job to explain unexplainable phenomena, to put the mysteries of nature in their rightful place, and to use his necromantic powers for practical purposes. His visions are the tribe's reality, a shared gnosis.

The tribe is leery of outsiders. They consider strangers to be "devils" who bring evil to the tribe. They fear the questions that come with the presence of outsiders, and therefore are content to ignore the outside world's existence. They have been able to keep their distance from the reality around them even as the train makes its way across the frozen tundra. The people see Walser as a visitor from the spirit world, rather than an intruder, due to his ecstatic dreams and visions. As Walser regains his memories, therefore, he finds himself trapped in the limbo between "sanctified delirium" and insanity. Either he's a visionary, or he's simply crazy.

Walser lives with the Shaman, who is only one of generations of holy men in his family. Childhood illnesses had prepared him to walk between the worlds. The Shaman treats Walser as his apprentice, and induces visions and dreams with herbs and hallucinogenic toadstools. Walser is inundated with words and images from his other life, which the Shaman observes, but does not understand. Taking him to the woods, he finds a tree in order to make Walser a drum. He grows to love Walser dearly. The two live together in the Shaman's hut with a small bear, which the Shaman is raising as a sacrifice. The bear is both a beloved pet and a transcendental symbol of god and ancestor. All three sleep in the same bed. The Shaman hopes the bear and Walser will begin to converse, but instead, Walser teaches the bear to dance. While dancing, he remembers his name, which pleases the Shaman, encouraging him to work further on Walser's drum in preparation for the day he would become a full Shaman.

As Walser develops his skills in the Shaman's native language, he begins to feel conflicted. The Shaman pays more attention to his babble than his communicative speech. Walser begins to question his memories, wondering if perhaps they do have some sort of contextual meaning outside his visions. He wonders what is real, and what is not. To the Shaman, however, there is no real or unreal: no difference between fact and fiction. As time goes on, Walser develops an "inner life," a philosophical internal



dialogue he shares with no one. Unlike his former self, this Walser is confused, but no longer empty.

As Walser's vocabulary grows, he tries to interpret some of his "visions" to the Shaman in his own language. After describing his memories, the Shaman reinterprets them in his own way. He decides that Walser is destined to be the bear's executioner. He interprets Walser's memories of Colonel Kearney as spiritual request for Walser's shamanistic clothing: an elk-hide tunic appliquéd with tin stars on top, and stripes across the skirt.

The Shaman teaches Walser slight-of-hand, how to throw his voice, and how to look very serious, as a giggling Shaman will not be taken seriously. These "tricks" are not used to fool people, only to reinforce their belief in what the Shaman already knows, as people often feel the need for "proof" before belief. Seeing, or hearing, is believing. If the tribe did not believe the Shaman, they might revile him, or worse, stop providing for him, wherein he would have to resort to performing his own labor.

(The village is a-historic; they inhabit a temporal dimension that did not take history into account. Time means nothing to them. p.265.)

When Walser sees his finalized costume, he becomes emotional. The Shaman has sewn tufts of feathers on the shoulders, which bring tears to Walser's eyes. The winged figure painted on his drum also brings mixed emotions.

The Shaman puts Walser on the back of a reindeer on the day of the Winter Solstice, in hopes that the reindeer will lead him to an inspiration for a cap to go with his new outfit. The Shaman goes with him, and many people from the village tag along, for it is an unseasonably pleasant day and they all want to enjoy it. The Shaman is secretly perturbed when the reindeer seems to head towards the railroad. He has a feeling something may go wrong.

Although he is pleased when the reindeer veers away from the railroad and towards the river, something happens that the Shaman does not expect: the sudden sound of a human voice, singing. The voice is beautiful, and seems to promise springtime and renewal. The birds and small animals of the forest seem to come out of hiding, and the reindeer is also drawn to the sound. The piano accompanying the voice is a foreign sound to the villagers, and they find neither to their taste. However, they are curious, and draw closer as well.

Walser finds the sound familiar and finds himself trembling. Seeing the tigers draping the roof of the house, he stays back a bit, as if trying to place a dream in context. The Shaman does not like this development for he is not used to being one of many to see a vision. He wonders if Walser is somehow responsible for it and therefore very powerful: he feels out of his depth.

Suddenly, Walser sees the other people, and urges his reindeer forward. Fevers rushes out, calling Walser's name. It seems to be a sign. The Shaman is unhappy, as this vision seems clumsy and dysfunctional. He beats wildly on his drum and the



villagers scatter, while Walser clings to his reindeer, which runs headlong back to the village, out of its rider's control. Walser is ecstatic: his memory of Fevvers is returning.

Analysis

Having maintained the same lifestyle and traditions for centuries, the tribal people fear change. The circus train, which travels towards them across the taiga, brings on the inevitable change, and all the shiny wonders of the modern world. The Shaman tries his best to stop time, as once the young people start to ask questions about the outside world, the tribe will be forever changed: their traditions, suspended in time for thousands of years, will be lost.

The tribe accepts Walser, as he is seen as an otherworldly apparition rather than a worldly outsider, but the Shaman watches him closely for signs. He knows the messages he brings from his world could bring about the end of their society. The wilderness is a liminal place: a time outside time. Walser's presence disrupts that. The wreckage of the train has brought change to the Siberian landscape by the very fact of its occurrence. Each survivor is evolving, changing, because of this experience. With Walser's appearance in the tribe, stasis is shattered, and change has become inevitable.

The Shaman treats the bear cub like a child, although he is also being prepared for sacrifice. (Once again it is for the good of the tribe, in contrast to Rosencreutz's selfish purpose.) Although Walser does not communicate with the bear in the way the Shaman hopes, he teaches him to dance, and in doing so, remembers his name. Of course, names have power, so Walser is growing in strength. He knows his name; hence he can come to know his true self. He is becoming introspective, which means he is becoming, developing a complete, fleshed out identity.

He shares his returning memories/visions with the Shaman who brings them into the world, thus changing it. (The tribe will forever be marked by Walser's memories, or at least the Shaman's interpretation of them.)

As they head out to find Walser's ceremonial headpiece, it is an unusually bright Midwinter's day: a time of year when the Siberian wilderness would be almost entirely engulfed in darkness: a liminal time between the longest night and the turn to the light half of the year. Though very unlike their own music of drum and chant, they are drawn towards the sound of the foreign music. Music itself is magical, and draws the listener towards its source. Walser is shocked when the bird-woman calls his name. The kind of shock that is like a blow, and he begins to remember.

Vocabulary

necromantic, cosmogony, procreational, rococo, glottal, prestidigitation, preternaturally, immolate, plebiscite, anthropomorphic, supplicatory, perturbation, evanescence, revivification, cacophony, somnolent, anomalous, inimical, ostentatious



Section 3, Chapters 9 - 10, Envoi

Summary

Chapter 9: The passing days are affecting Fevvers' appearance. Her hair has grown out, and she is molting, her feathers returning to their ordinary brown. The peroxide and dyes she could have used to freshen her look have been lost with Lizzie's handbag. It makes her feel gloomy to return to such an ordinary state.

As Lizzie gives the Maestro a haircut, he explains how was duped into starting a conservatory in the Siberian wilderness by the Mayor of R. The Mayor assured him he would be teaching the daughters of fur-traders, but instead pocketed the money the government gave for the school, conveniently forgetting about the Maestro, leaving him destitute and stranded: left to forge his own way in the house miles from the town. He considers the arrival of the Princess and Mignon to be a miracle, his happy ending, as they form a family based around their love of music.

Fevvers is disgruntled, as Lizzie insists she rest and heal her wing. She wants to go in search of Walser. Lizzie remarks that he seems to have gone native, and Fevvers flips back that she doubts he could do so in just a week. Lizzie wonders aloud if it really has been only a week, considering the length of Walser's beard, plus the fact that their clock has been lost, and time seems to be passing strangely. "Perhaps," she muses regarding the villagers, "Their time is running out."

Fevvers contemplates the reasons for her mood. It is not only that Walser is near, and yet so far. It is not only that she feels she is losing her looks, but something else. She feels that with the loss of her sword (and hence, her feeling of invulnerability) she has lost part of herself. Now here she is, drab, her wing broken, so signs of the Cockney Venus in sight. She feels diminished, like the Ice Fevvers melting in the Grand Duke's mansion. She longs for Walser; for him to tell her she is not fiction.

The Colonel becomes restless. He is out of liquor and running low on cigars. With the help of the Escapee, he decides to find his own way to civilization. He is determined to overcome his failure and ride it to even greater success. Asking Sybil's advice, she suggests the Colonel offer the Escapee a position as business manager of his new and improved circus. The Princess of Abyssinia and Mignon, transformed by music and love, want to say with the Maestro, where they have found a home. Although the Colonel attempts to lure Samson with fame and money, he chooses to stay at the conservatoire, as well, for he is a changed man. He truly loves the two women and wants to protect them, hoping that they will come to look upon him as a brother. He has grown strong in spirit. Fevvers, angry, wants to find Walser and Lizzie stays with her. The Colonel does not argue, as the Fevvers who was once his star has faded. She looks frumpy and shabby. The Colonel tells her that, since she is breaking her contract, he owes her nothing, and leaves. Lizzie thinks bad thoughts at him, but her ability to wreak havoc on



others, sadly, was lost with her handbag. Sybil the pig, to her credit, looks embarrassed by her master's behavior.

Chapter 10: Lizzie and Fevvers are at odds with one another as they set out across the barren landscape. Lizzie ponders the changes this experience has worked in their group of travelers, but warns Fevvers that her search for Walser is a fool's errand. She believes Walser is lost, and that there is nothing of him to find. She is upset at Fevvers' attachment to Walser, and even more upset that she continues to follow Fevvers, out of loyalty. She claims that she is enslaved to Fevvers' whims. Fevvers reacts angrily, saying that Lizzie made Fevvers her slave by adopting her, something she never asked for. Once again engulfed by the void around her, as well as the one within, Fevvers falls silent. Noting her distress, Lizzie softens, and comforts her, saying one must take scraps of love where one can find them. Fevvers, however, wants more.

Lizzie points out that Fevvers has changed drastically since meeting Walser, and not for the better. Distance has grown between the women, and their misfortune can't be a coincidence. Fevvers is becoming less and less of a mystery, less unique and special: fading away. She asks Fevvers what she plans to do when she finds Walser, as these stories always end in marriage, in which the woman surrenders her identity.

Fevvers insists that such a thing is not possible for her, and that she only wants Walser as a lover, not a husband. Besides, if she gave herself to any man, what would be left of her? Lizzie tries to convince her that pressures would lead her into such an institution, despite her resistance, and Fevvers accuses her of being jealous. She is quickly ashamed of doing so, however, and turns away, Lizzie's words ringing in her mind. An thought comes to her as she ponders the idea of marriage: perhaps Walser is malleable enough that, with her help, he could be molded into a new sort of man, a man fit for a modern woman like herself. Lizzie cautions her not to get ahead of herself. She tries to push Fevvers into a financial discussion, but Fevvers deflects it. They are just about to argue again when they come upon a crude hut, from which they hear muffled sounds.

Inside the hut is a woman, the daughter of the Shaman's cousin, and her newborn baby. The woman does not seem distressed by their presence, even dressed head to toe in bearskins. She is burning with fever, and has no milk to feed the infant, who is starving. As the baby begins to cry, so does the mother. Feeling pity, Lizzie tucks the baby inside her furs, and directs Fevvers to wrap the mother up and carry her. As Fevvers picks up the young mother she wakes and smiles, thinking a bear has come to carry her to the land of the dead. Walking through the snow, Fevvers glimpses her lucky flower, violets, peeking through the snow. Lizzie mentions it must be a good omen, to see such a sight on New Year's Eve. They carry the woman and child through the woods and discover the village. Fevvers, sensing that Walser is near, feels hopeful. She begs Lizzie to think of Walser as a scribe who will tell the stories of women like Lizzie and herself, opening the world into a new era, of which today is the cusp. Lizzie interrupts her, saying it will not be as easy as that.

Entering the village, the women find it deserted, as everyone is indoors for the night. They head to the most festive looking building and knock. Hearing sounds within, they



enter to find the room seemingly empty. It is ill lit, but Lizzie identifies it as a church. Fevvers lays the sick woman down on the central table. She wakes and is surprised to find herself in her village's god-hut. She feels a little less ill, and wonders where her baby is. She is sure she is dead and that the preparations of her funeral are underway.

Lizzie and Fevvers are startled to see a shape in the corner. At first they think it's a man, but then realize it's a wooden statue, wearing various clothes. It is hard to see in the light, and the women are startled even more when the idol seems to speak, and in American English. Frightened, the baby begins to scream, and its mother leaps up from the table to grab the baby from Lizzie. All goes crazy, with the young bear emerging from beneath the altar table and wrestling with Lizzie, items toppling and falling, and bear skulls rolling about the floor. The lamp spills and is extinguished, and the melee intensifies. Fevvers finds herself wrestling with an unidentified male, and bites his hand ferociously. A light rises from a corner, and she finds that it is Walser. He begins to sing "only a bird in a gilded cage" in an ominous tone which sounds like a curse. The Shaman is convinced the women are bear spirits and begins to drum in order to send them back whence they came. As Walser continues his chant, Fevvers sees him look at her as if she is perfectly ordinary. She sees herself in Walser's eyes and has a crisis. She no longer knows herself if she is fact or fiction. At Lizzie's exhortation, she spreads her wings the best she can: only one, and a pale and drab one at that. However, at that moment, the villagers open the door, and see her, and she can feel their amazement. At that moment, she knows she will soon be herself again. She rises and Walser looks at her in wonderment, addresses her. She responds to him with renewed confidence, inviting him to begin anew.

Envoi:

Fevvers tells Walser the truth about Lizzie, who had lost a child before Fevvers was abandoned on the brothel doorstep, and became her wet nurse. Lizzie became a housekeeper not because of religious proselytizing, but because she was an activist who would lecture clients on the rights of women, colonialism, abolition of the House of Lords, and other political issues. Ma Nelson, while in full sympathy, knew it would not be good business for a whore, and transferred her position.

As part of their political agenda, they admit, they used Walser's embassy connections to send letters home to London from Siberia regarding the struggle of Russian comrades in exile, using invisible ink so Liz will not be caught by the secret police.

Fevvers admits that they played a trick on Walser in her dressing room with the aid of Ma Nelson's clock, but swears she told him no other falsehoods during the interview. He must decide for himself if she is fact or fiction.

Naked, Fevvers seems larger than life to Walser, who is back, as much as is possible, to his normal self. As she washes, he notices that she, in fact, appears to have no belly button; however, he does not assume anything from it. Fevvers too, seems back to her old self, which pleases Lizzie and causes her to look more kindly upon Walser, to whom



she gives credit. Noting the magical midwife's amulet bag, Lizzie wonders if she can, perhaps, regain her magic in this village.

As Fevvers washes, Walser reconstructs his identity with the memories that have returned to him. He builds a new identity, with Fevvers at his side as his wife. As they prepare to make love (she on top as her physiology dictates), the century turns over, unnoticed. As she caresses him with flesh and feathers, he asks her why she went to such trouble to convince him she was the only "fully feathered intacta" in existence. She laughs and laughs, and her laughter seems to roll out and infect the entire world. "'To think I really fooled you!' she marveled. 'It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence.'" (p.295.)

Analysis

Fevvers has lost her glamour. She is molting and her roots have grown out and she's dressed in bearskins, not silk. Her mystique has faded, she continues to feel as if she's growing smaller, and it is affecting her self-esteem. She has become nothing more exotic than a woman with wings. Time has gone missing. No one seems to know how long it's been, although it must be longer than Fevvers assumes, as Walser has grown a full beard. Time seems to be running fast for the natives, and Lizzie muses as to whether, perhaps, their time is running out. Can she see the changes coming down the line towards the taiga? It seems she knows the change has already begun.

The Colonel, out of booze, cigars, and patience, takes his pig and his new business manager (the Escapee) and heads out to start over. With his departure, the world around Fevvers is becoming more and more utopian as it becomes more and more gynocentric. The only men who remain are nurturing and protective in a way that is supportive and encouraging, rather than patronizing.

The Maestro (the formerly isolated victim of deception), Mignon, the Princess, and Samson have formed a stable family, built on love and respect. They support and balance one another, while challenging each other to grow. When offered the chance to leave, they refuse. They have found their happy ending. In refusing to return to the Circus with the Colonel, Fevvers turns the corner in her own development. She abandons her lucrative contract to follow and find the man she loves. This is the final push towards the development of her own identity.

As Fevvers becomes emotionally attached to Walser, her relationship with Lizzie, which was strong-- almost symbiotic-- at the beginning of the novel, begins to loosen. They have more differences of opinion, and she begins to rely less and less on her foster-mother's guidance and advice. Rebelling against the parent is part of becoming an individual and developing independence. Lizzie herself is a rebel, an Anarchist and a liberated woman. It is time for Fevvers to follow her example by becoming her own, freethinking adult. The love of a mother for her child, however, is a vow that can never be broken, and Lizzie, the mama bear who must protect her child no matter what, will follow her to the ends of the earth.



As Fevvers gets closer to Walser, her feelings for him become clearer. She is forced to face the fact that an equal relationship between a man and a woman cannot just be about the physical. She begins to see marriage in a new way (a post-feminist way, if you will), not as subjugation of the female, but a partnership which benefits man and woman equally. She sees in herself new potential, the possibility that, as a woman of the new century, she can build a modern sort of marriage with a man of a different stripe, one she and Walser can create in him together.

Lizzie tells her not to get her hopes up. The old woman fears that the girl will lose herself in marriage, and considering Fevvers' weakness of character in recent times, it's understandable. However, she may be underestimating her foster-daughter's mettle.

Fevvers' power is returning. She and Lizzie find the young mother and child in the shack, and, inadvertently defying tradition, save them by returning them to their village. As they leave the shack, they see a spray of snow violets. They are Fevvers' lucky flower, and a sign of good fortune, new growth, and coming spring.

As they approach the village, Fevvers is filled with anticipation, and she imagines Walser in a whole new light. As a writer, she encourages Lizzie, and as the New Man, he can be the scribe of every woman who was ever denied a voice. Hadn't he already been that for her? She imagines soaring into the new century, but Lizzie, prescient as always, predicts that there will be stumbling blocks in the way. Of course, there are always impediments on the path to progress. Both are right, and there will be those who help the cause of women, and those who attempt to block it. However, as we know by now, once the ball of change gets rolling, it is difficult to stop.

The women's disruption of tradition, both with the new mother and by the interruption of the bear sacrifice, reflects the inevitable change that is coming to the village and, in fact, to everyone in time. No matter how hard one tries to stop it, it will happen: time cannot stand still forever. As she reunites with her beloved, Fevvers comes immediately and fully into herself, a swan from an ugly duckling (who once tried to disguise herself as a parrot.) She is fully herself, and is free to define that as she wishes.

Within the tribe, Lizzie regains her magic. She is given a title that connects her with the bear, which is fitting for the "mama bear" has always been her role. Fevvers and Walser are now restored, reunited, and married. Rather than diminishing her, marriage seems only to have restored her to her full glory, only "new and improved." Walser too, has found his wisdom, and has discovered the truth. He asks Fevvers why her mythos was so important to her, and she laughs with pleasure, a laugh that infects the world (Laughter, of course, is the most powerful music.) She laughs because she fooled him. As to which part of her mystery was a con: her wings or her virginity, it is up to the reader to decide.



Vocabulary

prodigiously, ascetic, microcosm, emblematic, syllogism, contingent, malleable, amanuensis, desecration, vatic, syndicalism, pederast



Characters

Fevvers (Sophia)

Fevvers is an aerialist who joins Colonel Kearney's circus. She claims to have hatched from an egg and have real wings, which span six feet. She is a little over six feet tall and her personality seems larger than life. She was supposedly left on the doorstep of a brothel when she was a baby and taken in by the inhabitants. She was given her name because of her fuzzy shoulders: it looked as if she were "sprouting fevvers." When Lizzie took her to be christened, she was told "Fevvers" was not a proper name, so she was given the name Sophia (wisdom) or Sophie. Fevvers does not like to be called by that name by anyone but her closest intimates. Money motivates her and she uses her unique appearance to become the center of attention.

Lizzie

Lizzie is Fevvers' foster-mother. She worked in the brothel as housekeeper because as a prostitute she would discuss women's rights with the clients, which did not make her popular. She had just lost a baby when Fevvers arrived so became her wet nurse, forming a bond between them. They are always together. The name Elizabeth means, "My God is an oath." She has vowed to protect Fevvers, and does so like a Mama Bear. Lizzie carries a mysterious handbag. She is an Anarchist and may also be a witch.

Jack Walser

Jack Walser is a journalist who is assigned to write an article about Fevvers. During his interview with her he becomes intrigued by her and convinces his editor that he should join the circus to write about his experiences. Colonel Kearney takes him on as a clown in his circus. Jack is the name given to the simpleton or Fool in Fairy tales. Jack goes on a Fool's journey to gain Fevvers' love, and finds himself in the bargain.

Ma Nelson

Ma Nelson is the owner of the brothel where Fevvers is left as a child. Ma Nelson has one eye and dresses like a Brigadier general, mimicking England's most famous naval officer, Lord Horatio Nelson (whose statue rises high over Trafalgar Square in London.) Lord Nelson was also blinded in one eye, and lost use of one arm. Ma Nelson is the captain of her domain, and runs a tight ship. She is respected.

She takes her in and Fevvers stays there until Ma Nelson's death. The sword she gives Fevvers is from her Lord Nelson costume.



Madame Schreck

Madame Schreck runs a type of freak show brothel. She puts women with abnormalities on display in her basement where men pay money to see and touch them. She convinces Fevvers to join her collection. She is a woman ruled by greed and only concerned with money. The name "Schreck" is German for "Fright." She is a former sideshow performer herself: a Human Skeleton. When she dies they find that she is only bones and dust.

Toussaint

Toussaint is Madame Schreck's manservant. He cannot speak so must write down whatever he wishes to say. After he leaves Mme. Schreck's, Fevvers uses her influence to find a surgeon who crafts him a mouth, after which he is known for his eloquent speech. It is Lizzie who points out that it was white men who gave him the ability to speak (literally), despite the fact that it was also white men who squelched it in the first place (figuratively.) His name may be in reference to Francois-Dominique Toussaint L'Overture, a famous slave who led several rebellions, including the Revolution that established the independent black state of Haiti (1798-1804.)

Christian Rosencreutz

Christian Rosencreutz is the name given by a client of Madam Schreck's when he offers to purchase Fevvers. In reality he is a member of the British House of Lords. He purchases her because he believes Fevvers to be Azrael, the angel of death. He attempts to sacrifice her on May Eve in a ritual attempt to gain eternal life. In actuality, "Christian Rosenkreuz" is the man who allegedly founded the Rosicrucians, an esoteric fraternal order (secret society) in the 1700s. The name "Rosenkreuz" means "Rosy Cross." He was an occultist whom some believe actually achieved eternal life.

Colonel Kearney

Colonel Kearney is an American who owns a circus he is taking across Russia into Japan: a feat that has never been attempted. He offers Fevvers top billing on his Imperial Tour. He is always thinking of ways to get publicity for his circus to increase attendance and his bank account, and often creates it himself. He is ruled by his love of money, and tries to turn everything to his advantage. He prides himself on the mastery of "the Ludic Game," which allows him to use people's gullibility to his advantage.

The character of Colonel Kearney is based heavily on P.T. Barnum (1810-1891), the greatest American showman and deceiver of all time, who began his career running a lottery: a Ludic Game if there ever was one. Often referred to as the "Prince of Humbugs," in later life he wrote an expose of spiritualist mediums called "The Humbugs of the World." (Interestingly close to the title of Walser's article.)



The real Colonel Kearney was a famous military officer of the early 19th century. He was especially known for his contributions to the Mexican-American war and the annexation of California. He never ran a circus.

Sybil

Sybil is the pig Colonel Kearney consults on all his business matters. The word sybil comes from the Greek word for “prophetess.” The Colonel believes the pig to be clairvoyant and allows her to make many decisions for him.

Ivan

Ivan is the Russian form of the name John, which is the origin of the name Jack. Ivan, therefore, is a little “Jack,” or an innocent. At least the clowns believe him so, although the truth is he witnessed the hatchet murder of his father at his mother’s hands. He is simultaneously frightened of and intrigued by the clowns, who stay with his grandmother in St. Petersburg (where he lives, too, as his mother is in prison for murder.) When the clowns leave St. Petersburg, Ivan attempts to run away with the circus, but Walser stops him.

Princess of Abyssinia

The Princess of Abyssinia is the tiger tamer in the circus. She plays the piano while the tigers dance. She does not talk. She was born in France of West Indian /Brazilian parents, and is not from Ethiopia as her name suggests. She falls in love with Mignon.

Monsieur Lamarck

Monsieur Lamarck is in charge of the ape act in the circus. He is a drunk who beats his wife and leaves the apes to rehearse their act on their own. Eventually, his bestial behavior is his downfall, as he loses both his wife and his livelihood. He may have been named for Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, a famous scientist who advanced evolutionary theory with his idea that an animal’s environment effects its evolutionary development.

Mignon

Mignon is Monsieur Lamarck’s wife. She has an affair with Samson who abandons her to a tiger attack, and leaves her husband after being severely beaten for the affair. She is saved from the tiger by Walser and taken under the wing of Fevvers. Due to Fevvers’ intervention, she becomes a companion to the Princess of Abyssinia. She becomes part of her act and dances with the tigers. She has a beautiful singing voice, and sings many songs even though they are in languages she does not understand.



Mignon is a diminutive French name meaning “cute.” However, Mignon herself is German, and Mignon is also the name of a poem by the German poet Goethe. It was put to music by both Liszt and Schubert, and has very poignant lyrics. A young male friend (who her husband later murdered out of jealousy) taught it to her. She sang it for the Princess at her initial audition.

Samson

Samson is the strong man in the circus. He is strong, but also a coward. When a tiger becomes loose and enters the circus tent after a sexual encounter with Mignon, he races away, leaving her naked and vulnerable.

Samson, of course, is the name of the strong man in the Bible, who is seduced by Delilah, who then cuts his hair and robs him of all his strength. Samson’s “strength” is undermined by his own cowardice, which leads to the loss of Mignon’s affections.

The Professor

The Professor is the lead ape in the ape act. Rather than simply being an act, he leads the Apes in their rebellious movement to educate and liberate themselves. He is aptly named. He convinces Colonel Kearney to allow him to take charge of the act because of Monsieur Lamarck’s incompetence. A clause he puts in their new contract allows him and his fellow apes to leave the circus after the show in St. Petersburg.

Buffo the Great

Buffo the Great is the lead clown who goes insane during the last show in St. Petersburg and is sent to an asylum. Close to his given name, “George Buffins.” “Buffo” is a form of the word “Buffoon” or “clown.” Buffo sets himself up as a Christ figure, and his final act as a “Last Supper” of sorts.

Herr M.

Herr M. is the spiritualist photographer who takes in Mignon and has her help with his scheme to photograph the dead. This character may be loosely based on William H. Mumler, an American spiritualist photographer who was convicted of fraud on similar charges in 1869. Oddly enough, P.T. Barnum was one of the people who testified against him in court.

The Charivaris

The Charivaris are a family of acrobats who are jealous of Fewvers. They used to have top billing at the circus until Colonel Kearney hired her. Their family has a long history,



performing for tsars, kings, and emperors. They suspect that Fevvers has undermined them in the circus and that she is a fraud. They also believe she poisoned their children with jam pies and wish her ill. When one of her ropes is cut and she nearly falls, they are accused of sabotage and are fired by Colonel Kearney. They are also cursed by Lizzie, after which their success dwindles.

“Charivari” is a French folk custom in which people would gather and make loud noises with pots and pans to show disapproval towards newlyweds in their community, of whom they did not approve, i.e. May-December relationships or widow/ers who married again too soon. Charivari was also used against adulterers, those who had children out of wedlock, and men who abused their wives. Women would usually lead the group, gathering as many people as possible in a central place then marching in cacophony to the victim’s home.

The Grand Duke

The Grand Duke gains Fevvers’ attention by sending her expensive gifts. She accepts his invitation of dinner on her last night in St. Petersburg although Lizzie tries to convince her that it is not a good idea. Once at his mansion, she becomes overwhelmed and loses her confidence, even more when he discovers and destroys her sword. He seems to have some sort of magical hold on her, but at the last moment, she is able to break free and catch the train through Siberia.

“The Grand Duke” was the name of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta of 1896 that mocked the upper classes.

“The Brotherhood”

The Brotherhood are a group of outlaws, men in the wilderness who have been exiled for crimes against the bourgeoisie. They kidnap Fevvers and the circus survivors of the train wreck, which they deliberately cause because they believe Fevvers is engaged to the Prince of Wales and can use her influence to help them return to their families.

Countess P.

Countess P. murdered her husband and was not caught, so as a form of personal penance she sets up and runs a panopticon, a correctional facility in Siberia for murderesses. She chooses the inmates of her asylum with the help of a phrenologist who scans their cranial bumps for signs of a redeemable nature. However, she does not allow the women to do anything to pass time, including reading or communicating with is exacting in her view of what “redemption” entails and is cruel in her treatment of the women, not allowing them any human contact or ways to pass the time. The unrepentant women revolt along with the guards and leave Countess P. locked up alone in her facility.



Olga Alexandrovna

Olga Alexandrovna is the mother of Little Ivan. She escapes from her prison in Siberia and finds Walser in the wreckage of the train. She feels sorry for him, but leaves him behind when they hear an approaching search party, as he is a man. She, her lover Vera and the other escaped convicts and guards form a free woman's republic in the Siberian wilderness.

The Shaman

The Shaman is a Siberian healer, priest, and magic-worker. He and his tribe live in the Siberian wilderness not far from the train tracks. He takes Walser in after he finds him wondering the woods after the train wreck. He trains him to become the next shaman of the tribe for he believes him to have great powers.

The Maestro

The Maestro, a well-known girls' music teacher, was duped into starting a conservatory in the middle of Siberia. The wondering survivors of the circus happen upon his conservatory and he, the Princess of Abyssinia and Mignon form a special bond through their love of music.



Objects/Places

Abyss

The Abyss is one of the names Mme Schreck gives her sideshow brothel, where men can purchase sex acts with women with physical deformities.

Amulet

The Shaman's amulet is a bag that holds stones and other talismans related to his magical work. His cousin, the midwife, also has one.

Bombe-Surprise

"Bombe-Surprise" is a Victorian dessert made of coffee ice cream covered in toasted meringue and served with peach puree. The "surprise" part is a maraschino-soaked sponge cake hidden in the center. When Jenny's husband is served one of these at his wedding reception, he dies.

Books

Books represent knowledge, both earthly and arcane. The women at Ma Nelson's brothel teach themselves with books from the vast library left her by a satisfied client.

Mr. Rosencreutz reads from an arcane tome of magic, which tells him how to gain eternal life.

The women held prisoner in Countess P.'s asylum are not allowed books, as it might help them pass time and prevent them from ruminating on their crimes.

Bridge

Walser walks Lizzie and Fevvers to the Westminster Bridge after the interview. He then watches them walk away from him, independently, toward their home. This is also where the Houses of Parliament are, which house Big Ben, the chime of the tower clock that has struck midnight thrice.

Brothel

Where Fevvers was found as an infant, and where she grew up. Her home, in which she was among prostitutes, yet remained innocent, and where she first spread her wings and learned to fly.



The brothel is a liminal place, where it is always kept dark. It seems luxurious and sensual, but when finally exposed to the light of day, it is proven otherwise. The women burn it down when they leave.

Circus Tent

The Circus tent is where ordered chaos reigns. Much of the real chaos occurs there as well.

Clocks

Clocks in this novel never work quite right. During Walser's interview with Fevvers, Big Ben strikes midnight three times. The mantel clock in Ma Nelson's brothel is stuck on 12 o'clock, reading either midnight or noon at all times. However, when she leaves Ma Nelson's, Lizzie takes the broken clock with her. When it is lost in the wreckage of the train, Lizzie despairs that they will soon "lose time."

Diamonds

Diamonds represent money and luxuries, a false freedom. Her lust for the Grand Duke's diamonds is nearly Fevvers' downfall. After her narrow escape, she abandons her diamonds, giving them to Little Ivan for his grandmother to sell.

Dressing Room

The dressing room in which Walser conducts his initial interview with Fevvers is close, hot, messy and odoriferous. In it, she seems larger than life, and her presence is overwhelming. The dressing room is full of clothes and other frippery, but does not tell him much about who Fevvers really is. It only serves to add to the mystique, which both repels him and draws him in.

Dunce Cap

The dunce cap is a symbol of idiocy or foolishness, used to humiliate students who performed poorly in school. The "Educated Apes" put them on when they are trying to fool Walser into thinking they are just ordinary chimpanzees. They also put one on his head and begin to conduct their anatomy lesson, expressing just which primate they truly feel is intellectually inferior. Walser is still wearing it (and only that) when the tigress attacks. He tears it off, and heedlessly rushes to save Mignon.



Eggs

Fewvers believes herself to be half bird, and claims to have been found along with broken eggshells on the steps of Ma Nelson's.

When The Grand Duke tries to capture her, he shows her a series of jeweled cases shaped like eggs, each one exquisitely crafted, and depicting something related to her. She wants the one with the train in it, but he denies her, offering her instead one with a tiny, gilded cage. She feels as if she is going to shrink small enough to fit inside, and experiences a real sense of desperation and fear.

Envelope

Walser sends his news stories in a sealed envelope through the British Embassy, where they escape Russian censorship. Later, Lizzie utilizes this envelope to transmit her secret letters to London.

Handbag

Lizzie has a large handbag that she carries with her everywhere. Inside she has a variety of practical items, but it is also suggested that inside is something which allows her the ability to do "household magic" things like manipulating time, cursing evildoers, finding the exact thing needed at the moment, or nudging things into working to her advantage. When the handbag is lost, so is Lizzie's "magic." It is her version of the Shaman's amulet.

Ice Sculpture

The melting ice sculpture of Fewvers in the Grand Duke's home has two main purposes. First, it symbolizes Fewvers' slow change. Her old life is slipping away and a new one is taking shape. It also acts as a sort of sympathetic magic in that as it grows smaller, she can feel herself diminish. It is what suggests that the Grand Duke may have some way of actually making her so small that she could fit into his last egg, and become part of his collection forever.

Names

Names carry significance in this novel. Almost every character's name either describes or defines him or her. This may just be a creative impulse of the author's, or a leap to conclusion of this writer, but it is an interesting theory. These meanings and their possible significance are laid out in the Characters section. [Note: It is common in Victorian novels and other texts to identify people and places using only initials. One interesting theory is that it added to the "realism" of the work, as if intimating that there



was a real person by that name, but the author, for some reason, chose to allow him to remain anonymous.]

Panopticon

The asylum run by Countess P. is in the shape of a panopticon, a type of building designed by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The panopticon is a building consisting of several cells built in a circular form around a singular central "inspection house" from which the institutional staff can observe the occupants at all times. This ensures that the inmates will know that they could be observed at any time.

Countess P. uses this design just as Bentham intended: as "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example."

Piano/Organ

The piano/organ represents communication and the voice of the Princess of Abyssinia. Sworn to silence, it is the only way she can communicate. It is how she "speaks to" and soothes her tigers, and how she expresses her love to Mignon. After the train wreck, she is rendered mute. The Maestro's piano is in bad shape and out of tune, but the Princess of Abyssinia fixes it, making it a symbol of renewal and rebirth, even more so now that she has found her literal voice. The Maestro and the Princess had lost their music and their sense of direction, but by fixing the piano, she makes their lives have meaning and brings them pleasure once again.

Siberia

Siberia is an extensive region encompassing most of Northern Asia. The troupe travels through Siberia on the Trans-Siberian Railway. The train derails, leaving the survivors adrift in the wilderness. The landscape is one of vast evergreen forests (taiga) and it is the middle of winter. Survival is a matter of luck, will, and perseverance.

Stars and Stripes

Stars and stripes, of course, decorate Old Glory, the American flag. Colonel Kearney dressed in an outfit based entirely on the American flag, and insists on flying Old Glory over the circus tent in St. Petersburg. He also likes to pull strips of American flags from odd places, such as Sybil's ear, to entertain or distract crowds. When Fevvers manages to get him too drunk to try to seduce her, she pulls a strip of flags from his fly before she leaves him.

In his shamanic dream-journeys (or returning memories) Walser describes a man with stars on top and stripes on bottom. The Shaman interprets that as a message which



helps design Walser's ritual clothing, which is decorated with tin stars and strips of skins.

St. Petersburg

In 1899, St. Petersburg was the Imperial Capital of Russia. Captain Kearney's circus began their Grand Imperial Tour here, under the permanent tents of the Imperial Circus. It is here that Walser begins his career as a clown. Fevvers receives accolades here, and the circus is extremely successful, but it also has its share of disasters: two tigress attacks (the last one fatal to the tigress), the loss of Buffo the Great, the abandonment of the circus by the Educated Apes, and the attempted abduction of Fevvers by the Grand Duke.

Sword

The sword Fevvers carries was given to her by Ma Nelson, and was originally part of the madam's Admiral uniform. Fevvers would hold it in her hand while portraying "Winged Victory" at Ma Nelson's brothel. After Ma Nelson dies, Fevvers carries it with her as her totem, and it seems to offer protection: when she has it nothing seems to be able to harm her. After it is broken by the Grand Duke, the air of indestructibility that surrounds Fevvers is shattered, leaving her vulnerable.

Tigers

The tigers in the circus are majestic beasts under the care of the Princess of Abyssinia. She cares for them lovingly, but knows that they are dangerous animals, and does not like to turn her back on them. She is wary of making the tigress jealous, as she knows that "the female of the species is more deadly than the male." (It's stated by Rudyard Kipling in his poem of 1911.)

After she is forced to kill the tigress (who is made jealous when Walser, traumatized by his final scene with Buffo, can't dance with her during the act, and she is forced to watch her mate dance with Mignon) The Princess feels distanced from the others. There is a lack of trust. When she loses her tigers in the train wreck (they are killed when they are thrown into the mirrors lining the train car) she mourns them, but even more, she mourns her piano, and her voice, which she has suppressed for so long as it upset her tigers, is freed.

Oddly enough, when she and Mignon make music together on Midwinter's Day, who comes closest but the Siberian tigers, who lie directly on the roof of the house, as if protecting those who once nearly gave their lives to the tigers of the circus.



Train

The tiny train in the Grand Duke's collection of eggs is attractive to Fevers. She spies it when she is already scared and in the middle of something she cannot stop. (Her being pulled into a dangerous situation, and her attempt to sexually distract the Grand Duke.) She wants it, but he vehemently denies her. This gives that train significance. It is further significant that, in a "few seconds" she goes from the Grand Duke's mansion to clambering aboard the train.

The train makes its way across the Siberian wilderness; however, it derails before it can reach its destination. On one level, The train is a symbol of progress and by coming to a stop in the wilderness it shows that there are still parts of the world that are untouched by progress and unwilling to cross the threshold of change. On another level, it represents personal derailment, points at which we need to make do or die choices that will affect our personal development and our future.



Themes

Time

Time is an essential theme of the novel. Time here is both malleable and outside of human control. During Walser's interview of Fevvers, time seems to stand still through the night: Big Ben strikes midnight three times. Lizzie's possession of Ma Nelson's clock seems to give her the same control over time that it had lent to the brothel, which remained always in a liminal state.

The Liminal

This state of the liminal, a sense of transition or being on threshold between two states, is ever present in the novel. The story, itself, is set at the threshold between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which will prove to be a time of intense changes in the world. This theme is closely related to the one previously discussed, in that liminal spaces seem to be outside time. Time seems to stop at several points in the novel, and many events occur at seasonal thresholds. Mr. Rosencreutz plans his ritual for the exact moment between night and day on May First, which is considered in the British and Celtic cultures to be the transition between winter and summer. The Shaman and his tribe set out with Walser on the Winter Solstice: the liminal moment when the short dark days begin to lighten into the longer days of summer. This would be especially pertinent in Siberia where the extremes of light and dark would be quite extreme. The emphasis on midnight and noon cannot be ignored, especially in Ma Nelson's brothel, which is kept eternally in that liminal state in order to preserve its sense of mysterious timelessness. Once the threshold is crossed and the curtains are opened, the mystique is destroyed.

Fevvers herself is a liminal character, living an existence of both/and. She is simultaneously bird and human, wonder and freak, mystery and flesh, virgin and whore, earthy and erudite, warrior and victim, fact and fiction. These are not only threshold states, but also paradoxes, which run rampant throughout the story.

This sense of being and not being, time out of time, place out of place, is magical and feeds into the intense magical realism of the novel.

Magical Realism

In the aesthetic of Magical Realism, the author blends magical elements with the real world. Carter does this brilliantly, with several allusions (as opposed to illusions?) to well-known occult figures and themes. She also liberally borrows literary structure from myths and fairy tales, including the Fool's Journey. The circus itself is a magical place where nothing is as it seems, and in the tale, even the oddest things are commonplace, and in many ways "normalized."



The nineteenth century, in which this novel is set, was the peak of an occult revival, which grew out of the Age of Reason, and whose undercurrents continue well into present day. Spiritualism (mediumship and interacting with spirits), studies into alchemy and witchcraft as well as religious heresy were all areas of interest to groups of arcane scholars. Groups such as the Rosicrucians, The Freemasons, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Theosophical Society were popular, and spiritual philosophy and practice occurred, often within secret societies. This is personified in the character of Christian Rosencreutz, who takes on the name of the founder of the Rosicrucians: a secret society formed in late medieval Germany. He uses ancient texts and magical studies in his attempt to discover the secret of eternal life.

Lizzie herself is a magical being, by the nature of her ability to do “household” magic. She is referred to as a “witch” several times in the book, and she does have some preternatural skills. She can manipulate time, curse others, and make things work out to her own satisfaction. The fact that she is Sicilian points to the idea that she may be a strega (Italian for witch.) The folklorist Charles Leland’s book *Aradia*, was published in 1899, claiming that there was an extant strain of pagan witches in Italy. Regardless, Lizzie and her remarkable handbag, hold secrets. Once the handbag is lost, though, Liz seems disempowered until she spies the Shaman Midwife’s amulet, and wonders how she herself might gain one.

It might be of interest to note that there are 13 apes (12 plus the Professor) and 13 clowns (including Walser, and with Buffo at the head) in the novel. Thirteen is a number found commonly in Myth and magic, being the number of Christ and the disciples, the number of members in a supposed witches’ coven, as well as having a series of mathematical, astrological, and symbolic significances across many cultures.

Order vs. Chaos

An important theme in the novel, as well as in magic, is that of order vs. chaos. The circus itself is a place that seems chaotic with its dancing tigers, high-flying acrobats and tumbling, buffoonish clowns. However, it is vital that everything work in an orderly fashion, lest it fall apart. When the circus disintegrates into actual chaos on the last night in St. Petersburg, the results are devastating. The text itself is both orderly and chaotic. Although it proceeds in a linear fashion, within the tale there are multiple perspectives, almost random shifts in voice, and several forays into the past to explain the background stories of the diverse and complex characters in Fevvers’ story. Walser’s seemingly dull and ordered life, in addition to the steady loyalty of Lizzie, seem to counterbalance Fevvers’ flighty nature and the chaos of the circus life. Chaos, which comes naturally once one trips over the threshold, feeds creativity. Balance, the reconciliation of opposites and paradoxes is important to create order. Both are necessary in the universe. Too much chaos leads to destruction; too much order, to stagnation.



Fairy Tale Elements

The Journey of the Fool, one of the most common thematic elements in fairy tales, is obviously taken up in this novel by the journalist and secondary protagonist, Jack Walser. Even the name “Jack” has become nearly synonymous with the Fool. (Jack and the Beanstalk being the most obvious example.) The Fool, however, is a complex character. He is not stupid, but simple, an innocent who becomes successful simply by accident. However, the Fool may also be incredibly crafty, a trickster who only pretends to be simple, or even mad, in order to gain license to tell the truth without consequence (the Mad Fool or the Wise Fool.) The Fool, in his innocence, lives by instinct, takes wild leaps of faith, and ends up on top, a magician (in that he seems to be able to gain that which he seeks, and often much more) and a wise man.

Jack Walser is the consummate Fool. His travels and his profession have left him empty rather than refined. He is described as “unfinished,” and as a “boy.” The author even refers to the Grimm Fairy Tale “The Young Man Who Went Out in Search of Fear” in describing him, as he seems not to think before he acts. Walser certainly takes risks, such as when saves Mignon from the tigress (although he later abandons her to it, although not callously). When he saves her, he is completely naked, but in an innocent fashion. He has no designs on her. Even his love for Fevvers seems innocent: he does not make a move on her, but waits for her to fall for him. His most drastic leap, of course, is joining the circus, where he is employed as a clown. The Fool. He is required to wear this disguise at all times. Later, after the train wreck, he has amnesia and can only burble and babble. However, he is taken in and trained in indigenous magic by the tribal Shaman. He becomes another archetype: The Holy Fool. At the end, Walser comes to his senses and is a new man. Not only has he been changed and refined by his experiences, but he is also partnered (balanced) by the New Woman, and ready to move into the New Century.

The happy ending is another fairy tale element present in the novel. Throughout Fevvers’ journey she is put into many difficult and precarious situations, often with other women. Obviously, as will be discussed below) nineteenth century women do not enjoy the rights and freedoms enjoyed by men. Even more marginalized are women considered “outsiders.” This includes nearly every woman in the novel (excluding a few, such as Isotta, but even she is an exceptional woman as she has a happy, egalitarian marriage.) Circus performers, prostitutes, sideshow freaks, and murderesses all live outside the bounds of polite society (although some are more easily accepted than others.) Still, in the novel, all of these women (once freed from their respective prisons) live free, independent, and fulfilling lives. Fevvers and Walser, too, seem on the road to their own happy ending.

Animal Nature

Yet another element found often in fairy tales is the anthropomorphism of animals, or the lending of human characteristics. Sybil the pig can tell fortunes by spelling out words



in English. She is not told what to spell, but can understand and answer questions. She also nods yes and no. The Colonel, her owner, considers her his partner, and cares for her as he would a loved one, with daily massages. She also wears clothing. The Colonel refers to the fact that pig and human are rumored to taste alike due to the fact that they are both omnivorous, and when the others threaten to eat Sybil, he offers himself in her stead. Sybil is wise, occasionally even wiser than the man who owns her.

The Educated Apes are the prime example of the anthropomorphized animal. They stand in stark contrast to their trainer, Lamarck, who is a bestial drunk and beats his wife mercilessly whether or not he has reason. He is even referred to as the Ape-Man, blurring the lines between the two types of primate, and leaving the reader to decide which is more definitive. Left to themselves, the Apes are curious and observant. They communicate through an intricate language of gestures, and when observed, revert to the expected “ape-like” behavior. Led by the Professor, they teach themselves on many subjects, including how to read and write perfect English. They use their intelligence to win their own independence over the Colonel, beating him at his own game.

The Shaman’s bear, too, is described as being loved as his child, and when Lizzie is wearing the skins, she is also mistaken for a bear. She is the proverbial “mama bear,” looking after and protecting her foster daughter. Again, the human and animal stand in juxtaposition.

As mentioned above, some of the people in the novel behave in ways that are more animalistic in nature. Not only Lamarck. Samson the Strong Man is bestial at the beginning of the novel. Wearing only a tiger-skin loincloth and living by his instincts, it is only by losing Mignon that he learns to care for her, and in caring for her and the Princess that he becomes humanized.

Of course, in the liminal space between animal (bird) and human stands Fevvers.

Deception

Deception, for both good and ill, is a major theme in *Nights at the Circus*. The entire novel balances on the fulcrum of Fevvers’ motto: “Is She Fact or is She Fiction?” At the end, she even admits deception, but to what exactly, the reader is left to decide. Is it her wings or her much lauded virginity to which she alludes?

Even on the surface, Fevvers’ image is one of deception: she dyes her brown hair and feathers in order to look more glamorous. She wears corsets to tighten and accentuate her figure. She wears bold makeup and glamorous gowns in public, but in private she wears a stained dressing gown and sits in a messy, malodorous dressing room. She poses as a statue. She leads men along for adoration and jewels, yet plans all the while to retain her title as the Virgin Whore.

Colonel Kearney is a master of deception. With his partner Sybil, he lives by the motto: “A fool and his money are soon parted” (An aphorism coined by the great ringmaster P.T. Barnum, on whom Kearney is obviously modeled.) He plays what he calls “The



Ludic Game,” which is a reference to “the Ludic Fallacy,” a term created by the Lebanese-American epistemologist Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his work on randomness and probability. It relates to people’s tendency to misuse games to predict real-life situations. “The Ludic Game,” therefore, refers to the ability to persuade people into thinking things are better risks (or more likely) than they actually are. The Ludic Game is, itself, the game of the con. Kearney is a master of manipulation, using a big personality and a wily mind to reap the greatest profits possible.

Many manipulative characters try to deceive Fevvers. Mr. Rosencreutz and The Grand Duke let her think they want to seduce her. Mme. Schreck offers her a job, only to make her a prisoner. Ma Nelson’s prostitutes seem to live for pleasure, but they do not enjoy their work, they only do it for the money. Instead, they study and work hard to prepare themselves for a life beyond the brothel.

The clowns, too, live a life of deception. On the outside they seem silly and jovial, but they live desperate lives filled with poverty, drunkenness and humiliation. They are the bottom of the rung at the circus, and live in squalid conditions while stars like Fevvers enjoy champagne and caviar. This masquerade is enforced 24 hours a day, so no one is able to see the true face of the clown. This drives some, like Buffo the Great, to madness. Even at that point, the audience is completely unaware.

Many of the other characters have secrets and deceptions of their own. Walser isn’t telling the whole truth to anyone when he joins the circus. He even fibs to Fevvers regarding the purpose of the original interview. Liz pretends to be a harmless, if gruff, companion, however she is an anarchist, sending secret missives to her compatriots abroad and being watched by the Secret Police. The Apes act like dumb animals, though they are anything but. Countess P. seems like a moral lady, setting up an asylum to redeem young murderesses, yet she herself is a murderess. Most of the characters in the novel have assumed names and identities. Everything about the circus seems illusory; around Fevvers, all realities seem to become distorted.

Identity

With the amount of deception and illusion going on in the novel, it’s a wonder that anyone has any sense of identity. Identity is formed by many elements: gender, class, age, cultural background, upbringing and other social factors. It is either defined or confused (or both) by one’s experiences in life.

Most of the characters in the novel are on a life journey that molds and develops their identity.

The women of the brothel, the freak show and the prison become fulfilled human beings and productive members (and even creatrixes) of their own societies.

Mignon and The Princess move beyond their half-lives (Mignon as an object of men’s pleasure, and the Princess as the mysteriously silent caretaker of beasts) to be whole beings joined by the power of music. Walser, who seems “unfinished” at the beginning



of the novel, grows into more than a simple observer and scribe of facts. He becomes a clown, a hero, a holy man, and a lover: a full participant in life.

Fewvers, of course, has the most complex identity crisis. She sets this up herself in the conundrum of her own sales pitch. Is she fact or fiction? If she defines herself, then she has no mystery, and her mystery (i.e. inaccessibility) is her livelihood. After the train wrecks and they are lost in Siberia, the identity that Fewvers has so carefully crafted begins to fall apart. Only her determination to find Walser strengthens her and allows her to come fully into her self.

Class

Class is an important theme in the novel, and one that ties in strongly to the identity of the characters, especially the women. Lizzie is an anarchist who believes the rich oppress the poor and that something should be done about it. She secretly gathers information from people she meets about their treatment and sends it to her contacts in London in missives written in invisible ink. The class divide within the circus is vast. The Colonel and his stars, the bourgeoisie of the Big Top, reside in comfortable luxury enjoying the finest food and drink, while the clowns, the proletariat, are forced to live in squalid conditions and display their humiliation and pain to make the Colonel a fat profit.

The Brotherhood is also a good example of an oppressed class. Because of their lack of social status, their wives, mothers, and sisters become “acceptable” targets of sexual violence. When the men fight back they are proclaimed outlaws and sent to Siberia.

The women in Fewvers’ life are all second-class citizens: not only for their gender, but also because of their place in the world. They are degraded by their positions as whores, freaks, and convicts. However, all of them break out of these places to, in one way or another, become successful. Some, like the beautiful Jenny, even transcend class barriers, inserting herself into the upper echelons of society.

Fewvers, once again, is the paradox: the girl of unknown parentage who flies high into the lap of luxury. The “Cockney Venus” holds salons with men of science. She was left on the steps of a brothel and is as bawdy as any there, yet she swills champagne with Lords and Dukes, draped in diamonds and silk. Has she transcended her class, or is she just faking it?

Feminism

Although feminism is one of the most persistent underlying themes in this novel, Carter’s brand of feminism is sometimes branded “post-feminism,” as she sometimes uses crude terms to refer to women, and women and men are not placed in strict victim-oppressor roles.

The major (and many of the minor) women characters in this novel are all (almost magically) extraordinary. The turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century was a dynamic



time for women, to be sure, but the majority, by far, were still held to strict Victorian gender roles. The word “feminism” appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary for the first time in 1895. At the time, the British media labeled the idea “dangerous.” The misery women faced due to their social status had been well documented in novels by women writers, some of which wrote under male pseudonyms so they could be published. While some progress towards women’s suffrage (right to vote) and education were being made, it was nowhere near as universal as the women in Fevvers’ circles make it out to be.

Ma Nelson’s girls, as mentioned elsewhere, are all proponents of women’s rights. Even as whores (a textbook role for victims of the patriarchy) they strive to build a life separate from men. They do not revile their clients, but use them to build capital to fund their own ventures as independent women. Even Jenny, who does resort to marriage to gain her freedom quickly gains autonomy (with a little help from an anarchist friend’s bombe surprise. (Bombe surprise is actually a popular Victorian ice cream dessert: the ‘surprise’ is a bit of cake in the center. In the Anarchist’s version, however, one can’t be so sure.)

The women of Mme. Schreck’s house of horrors are even more extraordinary. Physically malformed, they still manage to eke out successful existences after they are freed from their oppressor’s basement hell. A few of them, whose deformities are not immediately apparent, are able to survive on their own, while others are taken in by other caring souls. Fevvers uses her widespread influence to make sure all of them find comfort in life.

The most extreme are the inmates of Countess P.’s asylum. The women, both inmates and guards, are all prisoners in the Countess’s panopticon. After years devoid of contact, and with only one touch, Olga ignites the spark of revolution. The women use the most base means of communicating, when necessary, their own bodily excretions, because to be silent any longer is unthinkable. At the right moment, every inmate and every guard, now paired perfectly as lovers, rises up as one against the oppressor, and locking the door on her, leave to form a separatist utopia.

Countess P. represents the woman who rebelled and got away with it, yet feels guilty and expects other women to repent in her stead. She punishes them to punish herself. Instead of encouraging their resistance against their oppressors (i.e. husbands), she squashes it. The fact that the heads of each of these houses (technically in the position of oppressor) are women would be a sign of the author’s so-called “post-feminism.” Men are not the only oppressors: women can oppress each other just as handily. Ma Nelson is a sympathizer, and she certainly encourages the women in her care. She has affection for them and pays them good wages; however, they still do not leave the brothel (birds in a gilded cage.) Her motivation is protection of her girls.

Mme. Schreck is more controlling. She retains the women’s wages, keeps them locked in the basement on display for men’s perverse pleasure. However, at least the women are able to provide one another with some small comfort. Her motivation is greed.



Countess P. is the coldest of them all: the ultimate dictator. She watches the women every minute and dictates their every move. Her motivation is power and control, under the guise of “betterment” and “salvation” of their souls.

Every one of these positions, from least to most extreme, is a place of oppression to the feminist, and the rebellion, from mild to intense, is the only way to overturn the tables and escape. The women of Angela Carter’s novel do just that, and by turning the tables on their oppressors, they find their individual selves and their communal happiness.

Transformation/Individualism

In order to become one’s true self, one must transform. A protagonist will change over the course of the story. In this novel, several characters develop and transform, each becoming a more complete and realized version of him or her self.

The liminal comes into play here, as a step through or over a threshold is an integral part of the transformation. This can be as deliberate as joining the circus, or it can be forced upon us with the suddenness of a train derailment. On a personal level, the idea of order vs. chaos comes into play. Each rebellion, each choice, each act, each change fosters further change.

Walser begins the tale as a cipher. Even though he is urbane and traveled, he is empty and “unfinished.” It takes a leap of faith to land him on the road to manhood. By the end of the novel, he has transformed from the Fool into the New Man, a man worthy of a strong individual like Fevvers.

Fevvers starts the story as a conundrum. Although she ends the story that way, too, she is changed and matured along the way. She begins with a “look at me” attitude to match her bright plumage, but her persona is completely fictionalized. Even she doesn’t know who she truly is. As marriage holds no value in her mind, she sees men only as a means of ego-stroking and gaining baubles. As she falls for Walser, her sense of self becomes clouded, and her image begins to fall apart. Once she discovers what she wants, rebels and goes for it, her sense of confidence returns. As she comes to value people over money, she finds her Self: a brighter and better version of who she was before.

Lizzie embodies individualism, and is not a typical woman of the late 1800’s. She believes in a woman’s rights and not just knowing, but being active in politics, even to extremes. A rebel from the beginning, Lizzie is a standout character. Too independent and rebellious to be a whore, she is held in bondage only by her love of Fevvers, and perhaps, by Ma Nelson’s clock. She is the consummate feminist, eschewing marriage and seeing it as a trap to keep women under the thumb of men. She even manages to convince her foster-daughter this is true for a time. She carries her own power in her handbag, and, yet, when it is lost, even she has to change. She has to find her power within herself to free the party from the Brotherhood and later to help save the baby and mother near the Siberian village. She is given a new identity as the “little mother of all



the bears.” The role of mother is one that Lizzie seems to take to naturally, even though it seems at odds with her rebellious anarchism. Perhaps her greatest transformation already occurred the night she found a baby on the brothel doorstep.

Mignon and the Princess find their identity together. Mignon goes from being the plaything of manipulative and abusive men to being an independent woman. Of course, lesbian relationships can be one of the ultimate forms of feminist rebellion (although with the Princess Mignon seems to find true and abiding love, regardless of politics.) Her voice, which at first is childlike and tremulous, matures over time into such a glorious sound that it causes wild animals to gather by the power of its attraction. The Princess, born to her role as the tiger-tamer, is also imprisoned by it. She loves and tends to her animals, but also fears them. She remains silent so as not to provoke them. Her music soothes them, but also it soothes her. It is her only voice. When the train derails and her music and tigers are both destroyed, she has no choice but to let her voice emerge. At first it is rusty, nothing but pure grief and rage. However, when she is again in the presence of an instrument (but denied the chance to play) she finds she must discover her true voice to get her needs met. Able to speak their truth, Mignon and the Priestess find a family with The Maestro and Samson in the Siberian wilderness.



Style

Point of View

The point of view is largely third person omniscient, but changes dramatically and without warning throughout each section. In the first section, the narrative is in third person omniscient from Walser's point of view. This lets the reader know what he is thinking and feeling, while keeping them in the dark about Fevvers' (or Lizzie's) true thoughts. This helps retain the mystery that surrounds the two. In telling her story, Fevvers takes center stage, thus becoming the center of attention. This allows the reader to learn Fevvers' life history without taking away any of the mystery.

In Section Two, the narrative remains in the third person omniscient, however Walser is not privy this time to all of the information being revealed to the reader. As several other tales are told in this section, Fevvers is pushed into the background and the life of the circus takes center stage.

Section Three has a mixture of points of view. The section starts in first person wherein the reader finally becomes privy to Fevvers' thoughts. She becomes more tangible to the reader and less mysterious: a real human being with whom the reader can connect. It is the only time a first person narrative is used and is important in establishing the individualism of Fevvers. This section also utilizes third person omniscient narrative, both in a general sense and, at one point, from Olga Alexandrovna's point of view.

Setting

The year is 1899 and a new century is about to begin. The novel takes place across three settings and each section of the tale is set in a different part of the world. Section one is set in London, where most of the story takes place in Fevvers' dressing room after one of her shows. Section two is set in St. Petersburg. Fevvers and Walser are both a part of the circus: the main setting of section two. The final section starts off on a train traveling through Siberia. Once the train crashes, the characters spend the rest of the novel in the Siberian wilderness.

Language and Meaning

The vocabulary used in *Nights in the Circus* is extremely sophisticated, which makes it difficult reading at times. (Random selections tested anywhere from a 9th grade to a post-collegiate reading level.) Some of the characters, such as Mr. Rosencreutz, use lofty and arcane language, while others, such as Lizzie and the Colonel, use easily understood plain vernacular. Language is used to denote social class and education level, but of course, Fevvers swings along the whole range, telling her story in a mixture of philosophical observations and crude innuendos.



Her language expresses both her liminal state and her lack of identity. She speaks intelligently at times, talking of Greek myths and making Biblical allusions, and then switches to crude language as if she is trying to shock Walser (and hence, the reader) with what she says. This makes her seem mysterious and alluring to outsiders, yet leaves her in limbo between two worlds, neither of which she seems to fully occupy.

As Walser enters into his fugue state after the crash, his language disintegrates into seemingly senseless babble. However, the Shaman considers this babble superior to his own, everyday language, which Walser learns in an attempt to get his needs met.

Olga Alexandrovna's loneliness is apparent in her narrative. The words she uses show the bitterness of her surroundings until she finds love.

It must be noted that much of the communication in the novel occurs outside the realm of standard language. Gestures, music, secret messages and third-party translators all play a role. This seems to suggest that, despite the efforts of any one to suppress it, the human (or animal) heart will find its voice, and be heard.

Structure

The story is divided into three sections. Each section tells the story in the context of a different landscape. The story is told through both exposition and dialogue.

The main plot of the story is the journey of the lovers, Jack Walser and Sophie Fevers, as they find themselves and one another. Their journey both begins and ends with a mystery: is the world's only fully feathered intacta fact or fiction?

Several subplots involve members of the circus and those they come into contact with. In one, Mignon escapes a life of pain and oppression and develops a loving family with the Princess, the Maestro and Samson, all of whom are changed as well. Another focuses on the apes, who develop their intellect sufficiently to gain their freedom from the circus. Yet another subplot is the story of Olga Alexandrovna's incarceration for the murder of her husband and her subsequent escape to found a utopian feminist collective in the wilds of Siberia. Finally, Lizzie's secret fight to save the world from tyranny through her anarchist politics, all the while acting the mother bear to her foster daughter serves also as a storyline. All the plots connect as the characters find the freedom to become who they are meant to be. They face great odds, but overcome them, finding independence, identity, and love.



Quotes

He would have called himself a 'man of action' He subjected his life to a series of cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle. That's how he knew he was alive.

I learnt, first, as the birds do, from the birds.

But odder still—Big Ben had once again struck midnight. The time outside still corresponded to that registered by the stopped gilt clock, inside. Inside and outside matched exactly, but both were badly wrong.

You must understand this: Nelson's Academy accommodated those who were perturbed in their bodies and wished to verify that, however equivocal, however much they cost, the pleasures of the flesh were, at bottom, splendid. But, as for Madame Schreck, she catered for those who were troubled in their...souls.

During the less-than-blink of time it took the last chime to die there came a vertiginous sensation, as if Walser and his companions and the very dressing-room itself were all at once precipitated down a vast chute.

Some was born fools, some was made fools, and some make fools of themselves. Go right ahead. Make a fool of yourself.

What a cheap, convenient, expressionist device, this sawdust ring, this little O! Round like an eye, with a still vortex in the centre; but give it a little rub as if it were Aladdin's wishing lamp and, instantly, the circus ring turns into that durably metaphoric, uroboric snake with its tail in its mouth, wheel that turns full circle, the wheel whose end is the beginning, the wheel of fortune, the potter's wheel on which our clay is formed, the wheel of life on which we are all broken. O! of wonder; O! of grief.

In some pain, and painfully aware that, by the very 'heroicness' of his extravagant gesture, he had 'made a fool of himself' just as the Colonel predicted he would, Walser made his shaky way through the courtyard, where the mitted and muffled children of the wire-walking Charivaris were now playfully teetering along the Princess's empty washing line. It was already dark. From the monkey house, echoing on the night air, came a rhythmic thud as the Ape-Man beat his woman as though she were a carpet.

'...Some child like Little Ivan,' said Buffo, who did not know Little Ivan had watched from the top of the stove as his mother chopped up his father, and assumed the child was both innocent and naïve.

From beggar to thief is one step, but a step in two directions at the same time, for what a beggar loses in morality when he becomes a thief, he regains in self-respect.

From beggar to thief is one step, but a step in two directions at the same time, for what a beggar loses in morality when he becomes a thief, he regains in self-respect.



She looked towards him, her night-dark eyes brimming, and for once there was no irony, malice, or suspicion within them. His molten heart spilled out of his bosom and flowed towards her, just as one drop of mercury flows towards another drop of mercury.

His motto is: 'The bigger the humbug, the better the public likes it!' That's the way to play the Ludic Game! With no holds barred! Another motto, in one word: 'Bamboozlem.' Play the game to win!

She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none.

He is too young for you, my girl. He's living proof that travel doesn't broaden the mind; instead it renders a man banal.

Up Walser rose out of his garnish like Venus from the foam, spraying parsley and roast potatoes around him, spewing sausages from his trouser vent, and, flapping his arms he sang out again: 'Cock-a-doodle-dooski!

In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment and clambered aboard.

All she had done was to define the necessary innocence of the adventurer and to take advantage of it.

Her firing scored one bull; she stopped the clock, shot the time out of it, broke the face and stilled the tick forever, so, henceforth, when she looked at it, it would remind her only of the time that her time ended, the hour of their deliverance.

'He is a man, even if he has lost his wits,' replied Vera. 'We can do without him.'

Prepare yourself for the worst, gel; we've lost the bloody clock, haven't we. Burnt to a crisp in the wreck, most likely. First your sword, now my clock. We'll soon lose all track of time, and then what will become of us. Nelson's clock. Gone. And that's not all. My handbag. That's gone too.

Upside down Walser continued to upbraid the embroidered back of the Shaman's ceremonial frock. The hallucinogenic urine put the sluggish motor in his skull into overdrive. "Oh!" he declaimed to the oncoming Siberian dawn. 'What a piece of work is man!

The others are amazed at what has come to pass but all that Liz and I know is, the clowns made an invocation to chaos, and chaos, always immanent in human affairs, came in on cue.

You could not even say they were exiles from history; rather, they inhabited a temporal dimension which did not take history into account. They were a-historic. Time meant nothing to them.



This music, proclaimed Mignon, they had been born to make. Had been brought together, here, as women and as lovers, solely to make— music that was at the same time a taming and a not-taming; music that sealed the pact of tranquility between humankind and their wild brethren, their wild sistren, yet left them free.

Fewers felt that shivering sensation that which always visited her whenever mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea.

We told you no other lies nor in any way strayed from the honest truth. Believe it or not, all that I told you as real happenings were so, in fact; and as to questions of whether I am fact or fiction, you must answer that for yourself!

To think I really fooled you!' she marveled. 'It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Is Fevvers fact or fiction? What evidence is there that she is a hoax? What hints that she is truly, physiologically unique?

Topic 2

Explore the role of time in the novel. What is the meaning of Ma Nelson's clock? Does it truly suspend time? Why does Lizzie say, after the loss of the clock, that she and Fevvers will never know what time it really is?

Topic 3

All of the characters in Fevvers' stories have happy endings. Do you think this is realistic? Why do you think the author chose to make this so? What message or attitude is she trying to convey?

Topic 4

The women in the novel are not typical of women in the late 1800's. Name some examples of how these women push the boundaries of typical behavior during this time period.

Topic 5

Why do you think Walser feels such an attraction to Fevvers? Is it only physical? If so, why does he not approach her? What sparks his Fool's journey? To what extent is his journey a conscious undertaking? What do you think is the final result?

Topic 6

The animals take on many human characteristics in the novel, in both grand and subtle ways. In what way do they stand in contrast to their human counterparts? In what ways do they take on one another's roles?

Topic 7

Why does Little Ivan's attitude toward the clowns change? When? Why does Ivan want to run away with the circus?



Topic 8

What happens to Fevvers when the Grand Duke breaks her sword that she always carries for her protection? What changes does this loss bring forth in her? How does she compensate for her lack of totem?

Topic 9

The characters in the book seem to be divided between those who con people and those who are conned. Which characters do you think are the best con artists and which are the most gullible? Is the distinction really that clear?

Topic 10

The Shaman has seen bad times ahead. Do you think this refers to the changing era and the progress that will be made? How will these changes envelope the tribe and sweep them into the future that they have thus far been able to remain removed from? Will the tribe be able to retain its unique identity?

Topic 11

What will the new century bring for women? What changes for the class struggle? Are Fevvers and Walser truly representative of a New Woman and Man? In what way? What do they bring into the new century to move it forward?

Topic 12

What is the meaning of Fevvers' final confession to Walser? In what way did she fool him? Does this ending conclusively provide to the reader the answer to Walser's original doubts?