

AMERICAN LITERATURE READINGS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



FREAK SHOWS AND THE MODERN AMERICAN MAGINATION

CONSTRUCTING THE DAMAGED BODY FROM
WILLA CATHER TO TRUMAN CAPOTE

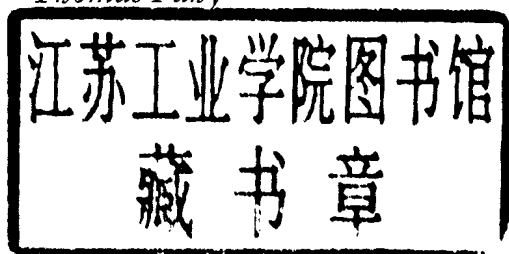
THOMAS FAHY



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Introduction

My great-uncle once told me a story that his father told him . . .

Men with the circus never bothered much with age. If you said you were old enough, you were old enough. And I suspect most of us clowns and stagehands were thirteen or fourteen when we joined. We all had places to run from.

Too many mouths to feed, my mother always said. But God just kept giving her children. He always seemed to give more children to the Irish than anybody else. Even when there was no food.

But I ate plenty when I ran away with the circus. With strong hands and a strong back, I could dig holes, pitch tents, and move the animal cages. I even helped the snake charmer catch extra mice. For each one I bagged, he taught me to use magic cards and to make coins disappear. I was good with tricks, he said.

Soon the manager took notice. He watched me sweet-talking rubes and playing card games with a smile. That's when I started to work as a clown. He had me dress up in bright colors and wild hair to keep the customers laughing. Anything to keep them on the fairgrounds as long as possible.

In the summer of 1889, we went to England. That was the first time I saw Barnum.

People whispered his name like they were in church. That's Barnum! They cheered as he moved around the arena—staring more at him than they did at the tallest man in the world or any of the other freaks.

To me he just looked old and chubby—not the kind of man who could dig holes and pitch tents. But we had sell-out crowds every night. Every single one.

After that I came back to America, got married, and left the circus for a job with the railroads. In a few years, I became a special agent for the Harrisburg Line.

"John," my wife Margaret said, "we're going places in the world."

Many years later, after we had moved ourselves and the kids to a nice place uptown, I woke up late one night and smelled smoke. My wife wasn't in bed, but when I got to the window, I saw her in the yard outside, standing in front of the incinerator.

Then I understood. A wig slipped from her hands, and colorful shirts were being tossed into the flames. She was burning my old clown costumes.

You see, we were going places in the world.

I didn't move or say anything. I just stood by the window long enough to feel my feet get cold, watching the orange-red flames and the smoke as it spiraled up toward the face of the moon, where it hung from its chin like hair off a bearded lady.

By burning a dusty pile of artifacts that evening, my great-grandmother was trying to erase any evidence of the circus from our family's history and to claim her place in a higher social class. She and her husband had moved from poverty and transience to success and stability. They were living the American Dream. Achieving such a dream meant hiding a shameful past, and for her, carnivals and freak shows represented what she and her husband no longer were as Irish immigrants—the lowly Other.

When I first heard this story, I knew very little about freak shows and their sordid history. The circus was a marginalized form of entertainment when I was a child. Perhaps growing up in Los Angeles—a city with little need for state fairs and traveling circuses—gave me enough to look at by way of spectacle. We could always count on seeing *Star Wars* fans and Michael Jackson look-alikes on Hollywood Boulevard. But as I began my research, I was surprised to learn that the freak show had been one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the United States for almost one hundred years.

First appearing in museums and then as part of carnivals and world's fairs, hundreds of shows traveled throughout the United States between the 1840s and 1940s. For the price of admission (which usually ranged from ten cents to a dollar), one could stare at alligator men, dog-faced boys, tattooed princesses, midgets, the severely disabled, nonwhites, and anyone whose body could be presented as strange and unusual. The freak represented what the audience was not—the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different. In this way, the freakish body revealed surprisingly insecure power structures and suggested underlying anxieties about the ways individuals defined and related to each other in modern America.

Novelty was essential to the appeal of freak shows. Many exhibits assumed new names and varied performances over time to keep audiences intrigued. These changes not only altered the meanings ascribed to freaks, but they also suggested that the grounds for normality were not a given but in continual negotiation with the freakish. Often surrounded by domestic furnishings, the freak enacted affection for middle- and upper-class trappings and behaviors. Bearded ladies wore

elegant gowns, and armless gentlemen spent the afternoon drinking tea, holding the cups with their feet. But like an oversized winter coat, nothing about these images fit (figure I.1). The freak was not part of this community but someone who reaffirmed the cultural superiority of the onlooker. This presentation of freakishness placed conformity at the center of middle-class values, equating the deviant body with



Figure I.1 Charles Tripp with Tea Cup (1870). Photograph by Charles Eisenmann. Every detail (from the Victorian furniture and tea set to Tripp's tuxedo and neatly parted hair) accentuates his extraordinary body. Even Tripp's off-centered position in the chair suggests that he doesn't quite belong in this setting. Courtesy of the Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

extreme individualism. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains, “the spectator enthusiastically invested his dime in the freak show not only to confirm his own superiority, but also to safely focus an identificatory longing upon these creatures who embodied freedom’s elusive and threatening promise of not being like everybody else” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 69). To some extent, this paradox between individuality and conformity in American society was mitigated by the freak, whose body made physical difference the clear basis for exclusion. Not surprisingly, the success of freak shows was contingent on their ability to maintain the distance between viewer and freak, to simultaneously challenge and reinforce binaries about gender (male and female), race (white and nonwhite), and bodies (able and disabled).¹ As soon as this distance collapsed, the freak show would be relegated to obscurity.

A LONG, CURIOUS HISTORY

Before freak shows became an organized institution with the opening of P. T. Barnum’s first museum in 1841, the extraordinary body had had a long history of scrutiny as well as interpretation. The meanings attributed to these bodies changed for different cultures, eras, and individuals, but the need to interpret them, to see them as something other than a marker of individuality, persisted and still persists.

In the ancient world, monstrous bodies were considered omens of political and civil chaos. Greeks and Romans interpreted natural phenomena as the result of cosmic or divine forces: fires, epidemics, the appearance of a comet or eclipse, and the extraordinary body were believed to presage the doom of an empire and the breakdown of social order. Greek mythology is populated with Sciapodes, Satyrs, and Sirens—monstrous races that resulted from divine intervention. In both Greek and Roman societies, these types of myths and legends constructed nonwhite and disabled bodies as something to loathe and fear. By 450 BC, for example, Roman law demanded the execution of disabled children to preserve the social structure, killing them on the grounds that they could perform no meaningful function in society.

Medieval Christian writers also struggled to interpret and understand the extraordinary body. In *The City of God*, Saint Augustine views the monstrous as part of God’s divine plan—evidence of both His active role in creation and His desire to rekindle man’s awe in the spiritual. But very few in the Middle Ages believed that disabled bodies were merely a testament to the variety of God’s creation. Instead, they were seen as divine warnings against the dangers of pride, disobedience,

and waning faith. Since thinkers in the Middle Ages believed Adam to be the human who had reached closest to God, one of the consequences of the Fall was the degeneration of the species. This idea eventually linked the birth of monsters to Cain. As John Friedman argues in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Christian treatments of Cain emphasize his “violent nature, his association with the devil, and his degradation from human status, often figured by his ugliness and physical deformity” (95). Not surprisingly, most medieval accounts of Cain during his exile accentuate his disfigurement, interpreting it as a sign of God’s displeasure.²

In sixteenth-century Europe, imperial exploration was inspiring new commercial enterprises based on acquiring the strange and unusual. Stories of monstrous races and remote lands accompanied these rare objects, giving evidence for their existence. Shakespeare’s Othello tells Desdemona about chilling lands with “Cannibals that each other eat,/ The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/ Grew beneath their shoulders” (Act I, Scene III). Global imperialism began moving monstrosity from the realm of the imagination to the observable spectacle. This emerging role troubled Michel de Montaigne, whose essay “Of a Monstrous Child” (1578–1580) describes a family that was “leading about to get a penny or so from showing [their conjoined child], because of his strangeness.” He not only questions the meanings historically imposed on these figures, but he also criticizes their exploitation:

What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it. . . . From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that [which] is good and ordinary and regular. . . . We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be. Let this universal and natural reason drive out of us the error and astonishment that novelty brings us. (539)

Unfortunately, his warnings went unheeded. For the next 350 years, audiences throughout Europe and the United States would clamor to stare at these novel bodies.

In the seventeenth century, human curiosities as well as wild animals were commonly exhibited in the public spaces of London. Itinerant showmen set up displays at busy intersections, fairs, lecture halls, and marketplaces. One of the most popular arenas for these acts was the tavern. Already a center for entertainment, taverns had regular patrons and numerous rooms that showmen could use for charging

inebriated onlookers a few shillings to see the extraordinary. Asylums participated in this pastime as well. By 1609, Bedlam charged a small fee to people who wanted to gawk at inmates. As Richard Altick explains in *The Shows of London*, “the cells were arranged in galleries, in the manner of cages in a menagerie or booths at a fair, and in each one was a chained lunatic, whose behavior, if it were not sufficiently entertaining to begin with, was made so by the spectators’ prodding him or her with their sticks or encouraging further wildness by ridicule, gestures, and imitations” (45). Here the hospital staff became ad hoc showmen—making the person on display as much of a spectacle as possible. The government did not start putting limits on these exhibitions until the 1770s.

In 1757, the first public museum opened in London. Designed not to pander to the vulgar tastes of the masses, its goal was to educate people by promoting sciences and the arts. In many ways, this stated goal was a rejection of the sensational exhibits that had been capturing the public’s imagination with renewed interest since the 1600s. But the rigid formalities of the British Museum did not change the popular tastes of the day. The Museum only alienated viewers, requiring those who wanted tickets to fill out formal applications that often took several months to process. Once inside, patrons could not peruse the collections freely but were required to see them in the context of a four-hour tour. Dime museums would transform this experience, incorporating live exhibits into the formalized structure of the museum.

Itinerant exhibits had been a pervasive part of early America’s entertainment culture before Barnum. Fortunetellers, dwarfs, and a wide array of curiosities could be seen at most taverns, and showmen traveled throughout the country with trained animals and human curiosities, using handbills and fast-talking to attract onlookers. As early as 1729, animal shows with horses and dogs were entertaining audiences, effectively laying the groundwork for the circus. The 1809 town records of Salem, Massachusetts, list a Miss Honeywell as one of the earliest human curiosities in America: “A young woman born without hands and with only three toes on one foot [who] embroidered flowers and cut watch papers and other fancy pieces” (qtd. in Wright, *Hawkers and Walkers*, 190). Less than forty years later, a performer of this kind would have been labeled a “freak.” The word itself was not used to describe the commercialization and construction of bodies for entertainment until the mid-nineteenth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it first appears in the sixteenth century, but before the 1800s, it means a capricious or whimsical notion,

a vagary. Not until the 1840s did *freak* refer to “a monstrosity, an abnormally developed individual of any species; in recent use (especially the United States) a living curiosity exhibited in a show.” This distinction is important because it suggests that something about these presentations changed significantly at this time—and that change was Phineas Taylor Barnum.

P. T. Barnum’s American Museum was a more dazzling version of nineteenth-century dime museums. Like their British and French forefathers, American museums were designed to educate and enlighten, allowing people to look at cabinets filled with books, paintings, and other objects of interest. Since many people earned a living in the eighteenth century by privately displaying such cabinets, public museums had to find more sensational exhibits to draw crowds. The dime museum responded by creating an environment that enabled families of diverse backgrounds to gaze at dioramas, pictures, freaks, menageries, stuffed animals, historical wax tableaux, and each other as they walked from room to room.³ It was this element of live performance—freak acts, jugglers, dancers, singers—that distinguished dime museums from history museums, and the former reached their heyday with Barnum’s American Museum. A consummate showman and entrepreneur, Barnum recognized the potential profitability of freak exhibits, advertising them through newspapers, photographs, “true life” pamphlets, transparencies, and brightly colored banners. He felt that “everything depended on getting people to think, and talk, and become curious and excited over and about the ‘rare spectacles’ ” (76).⁴ “Now and then,” he wrote in his autobiography, “some one would cry out ‘humbug’ and ‘charlatan,’ but so much the better for me. It helped advertise me, and I was willing to bear the reputation—and I engaged in queer curiosities, and even monstrosities, simply to add to the notoriety of the Museum” (142).

Freaks not only occupied a prominent place in his museum, but as Robert Bogdan explains, they also fit into several distinct categories of presentation. The first category included people who displayed their disabilities and physical anomalies, such as armless and legless wonders. The second consisted of performers who made themselves into freaks through “geek acts,” body piercing, and tattoos. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, for example, Captain Costentenus was the most popular and successful tattooed exhibit. He claimed that his entire body had been tattooed as a form of torture while he was imprisoned in Persia. The exotic dimensions of this story clearly borrowed from another category of freaks—the construction of non-whites as exotic savages from barbaric lands. As I will discuss later, this

highly successful mode of representation appealed to racist fears during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lastly, freaks who faked physical anomalies, pretending to have missing limbs or additional appendages, were known as “gaffs.” Together, this ensemble was integral to the displays, performances, and modes of representation that defined freak shows.⁵

In addition to these categories, the displays themselves relied on juxtaposition and context to exaggerate differences: placing dwarfs next to giants, fabricating marriages between fat ladies and skeleton men, dressing nonwhites as exotic cannibals and wild men from Fiji, Africa, and South America, and asking audiences to guess about (and in some cases pay extra to “discover”) the true sex of bearded ladies and hermaphrodites. Even contemporary novels, such as Elizabeth McCracken’s *The Giant’s House* (1996), Darin Strauss’s *Chang and Eng* (2000), Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex* (2003), and Andrew Sean Greer’s *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* (2004), tap into the sexual mystery and intrigue surrounding the anomalous body. Other components of these shows further reinforced the performer’s status as a freak. Dwarfs and midgets, like Charles Stratton (“General Tom Thumb”) and Leopold Kahn (“Admiral Dot”), assumed elevated titles. Giants wore hats to enhance their height. Bearded ladies appeared in domestic settings with their husbands and children. And exotic exhibits wore scanty clothing, carried spears, and appeared with primitive backdrops. Freaks also participated in stage performances, acting out poorly written parodies and giving renditions of popular plays. Tom Thumb,⁶ for example, sang, danced, and did numerous impersonations. Siamese twins Chang and Eng performed acrobatics, including flips and other feats of physical strength.⁷ All of these characteristics ritualized the encounter with the freak, establishing what audiences expected to see and the grounds for interpreting that vision.

Freak shows challenged audiences both to question and evaluate the validity of what they were seeing. As Neil Harris explains, “the opportunity to debate the *issue* of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of a fraud itself. . . . Therefore, when people paid to see frauds, thinking they were true, they paid again to hear how the frauds were committed” (77). This play between humbug and truth was further promoted by supplemental materials, such as biographical pamphlets. Filled with drawings, these pamphlets often began by describing the unusual origins, upbringing, and family life of the freak. They included physical descriptions of his or her body, eyewitness accounts, and perhaps most importantly, medical evidence. Doctors and scientists were regularly

cited to give credibility to an exhibit. Many such learned men gave lectures and signed documents supporting the most outlandish claims. Some even allowed public viewings of freaks' autopsies, as in the case of Joice Heth, the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington.⁸ In exchange for their services, these doctors had access to an array of remarkable specimens for study. From a showman's standpoint, this type of support was necessary for an audience invested in sniffing out a possible humbug. Consider the first sentence of Barnum's 1843 advertisement for the "Fejee Mermaid"—the half-monkey, half-fish supposedly captured in the South Pacific:

Engaged for a short time, the animal (regarding which there has been so much dispute in the *scientific* world) called the FEJEE MERMAID! positively asserted by its owner to have been taken alive in the Fejee Islands, and implicitly believed by many *scientific* persons, while it is pronounced by other *scientific* persons to be an *artificial* production, and its natural existence claimed by them to be an utter impossibility.⁹

Barnum uses the scientific debate both to entice people to judge for themselves and to suggest authenticity—if the Fejee Mermaid is a matter of such disagreement, there must be some truth to it. Right? In many respects, freak shows thrived on scientific discourse and, for a time, the medical community was happy to oblige.

The most popular artifacts from early freak shows, however, were *cartes de visite* ("visiting cards"). These photographic reproductions, which were available at exhibits and prominently featured in photographic albums of the Victorian era, sold millions of copies annually and were often taken by prominent photographers like Charles Eisenmann and Mathew Brady. These images increased profits for the performers and publicized exhibits on a national scale.

Most of these human curiosities had exhausting schedules, performing dozens of times in a day, and their living conditions were usually poor, especially when traveling museums were replaced by sideshows at the turn of the century. Though a few freaks like Charles Stratton and Chang and Eng became wealthy, most remained exploited commodities. As part of the circus, freak shows became known as "ten-in-ones" because patrons could see ten exhibits for the price of one (figure I.2). They were set apart from the featured acts of the big top, which usually included menageries, parades, music, and acrobats. This distinction began changing the atmosphere surrounding these exhibits. Within the context of a museum, freaks had more respectability; they were integrated into a whole and displayed under

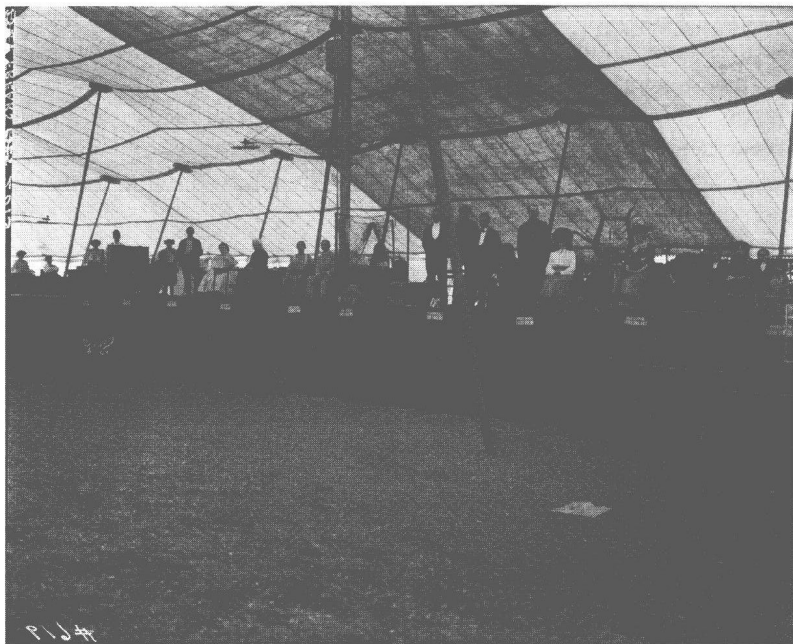


Figure I.2 Ten-in-One Sideshow (1904). Photograph by Frederick Whitman Glasier. The “ten-in-one” may have seemed like a bargain for many spectators, but this presentation clearly compromises the uniqueness of each exhibit. Some of the signs beneath the performers read: Lionel: Lion Faced Boy, James Morris: Elastic Skin Man, John Hayes: Tattooed Man, and Horvath: Troupe of Midgets. Courtesy of the collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Archives.

the guise of learning and scientific study. But on the fairgrounds, the freak show seemed dirtier. No intellectual pretexts could be given for staring. One even had to buy a separate ticket to see freaks. This is when the popularity of freak shows began to wane. By the mid-twentieth century, the ploys became less compelling, less able to mitigate the problems of viewing, and the sideshow grew increasingly distasteful—something that respectable people avoided and that parents kept from their children.

FROM CENTER STAGE TO SIDESHOW

Within the first few decades of the twentieth century, a number of changes in science and technology made it even more difficult for freak shows to entice audiences. Most notably, medical science began seeing