



EXPLOITATION AS ENTERTAINMENT: THE POLITICS OF SPECTACLE IN ALICE HOFFMAN'S *THE MUSEUM OF EXTRAORDINARY THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Alice Hoffman's *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* (2014) stages a vivid confrontation between spectacle and suffering, exposing how entertainment in early twentieth-century New York often relied on the commodification of human difference and vulnerability. At the center of the novel is Professor Sardie's museum, a space where 'extraordinary' bodies—those marked as abnormal, exotic or monstrous—are displayed to paying audiences. This paper argues that Hoffman transforms this microcosm of freak-show culture into a critique of the broader capitalist and patriarchal systems that turned laborers, immigrants, and women into spectacles for profit. Through the intertwined narratives of Coralie, a girl coerced into performing as a living mermaid, and Eddie, a Jewish immigrant photographer drawn to uncover hidden truths, the novel juxtaposes personal exploitation with collective tragedies such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Fire and water recur as elemental symbols of destruction and survival, dramatizing the tension between being consumed by spectacle and reclaiming one's own narrative. Reading Hoffman's text through theories of the 'politics of spectacle' and the commodification of the body, this paper also examines how entertainment becomes a vehicle for social control and how characters resist this process by forging solidarity, love, and self-representation. Ultimately, *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* functions not only as historical fiction but also as a meditation on the ethics of looking—inviting readers to question the costs of their own curiosity and to imagine forms of spectacle that acknowledge, rather than erase, the humanity of those on display.

KEY WORDS: *Commodity, Exploitation, Immigrant, Violence*

INTRODUCTION

Alice Hoffman's *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* (2014) immerses readers in the sensory overload of early-twentieth-century New York, a city where technological progress and industrial expansion coexisted with extreme social inequality. The city's electric lights, mass amusements, and new industries symbolize modern progress, yet behind this spectacle, a darker history of immigrant exploitation, gendered violence, and environmental destruction lies. Set largely on Coney Island, a site that epitomised the United

States' appetite for novelty and leisure, the novel explores how bodies marked as 'different'-disabled, foreign, female, or poor-were transformed into public entertainment. Against this backdrop, Hoffman traces the intersecting lives of two characters on opposite sides of the spectacle: Coralie Sardie, the daughter of a ruthless showman who forces her to perform as a 'living mermaid' in his museum, and Eddie Cohen, a Jewish immigrant photographer who earns his living documenting crime scenes and industrial tragedies. Through their stories Hoffman stages a critique of a society hungry for diversion but indifferent to the human costs of its amusements.

The novel's fictional world draws heavily on historical realities. Professor Sardie's museum echoes real Coney Island sideshows, which thrived on the display of so-called 'human curiosities' for profit. Eddie's photographs evoke the lurid crime photography of early tabloid journalism as well as the haunting images of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, in which over 140 immigrant women perished. By weaving these strands together, Hoffman underscores how entertainment and media spectacle are not neutral but are bound up with systems of power, capitalism, and patriarchal control. This paper argues that *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* uses the intertwined narratives of Coralie and Eddie to critique the politics of spectacle in early-twentieth-century America-a politics that turns human difference, immigrant labor, and even mass death into public performance-while also imagining forms of resistance through solidarity, self-representation and love.

STORY IN BRIEF

Set in New York in the first decades of the twentieth century, *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* intertwines the lives of two 'outsiders' who live on opposite ends of the city's spectacle culture. Coralie Sardie grows up inside her father's private 'museum' on Coney Island, a sideshow that displays 'extraordinary' creatures and human curiosities for paying audiences. Born with webbed fingers, she is forced by her domineering father to train as a swimmer and perform as a 'living mermaid,' wearing elaborate costumes and spending long hours in frigid water to perfect her act. While Professor Sardie markets the museum as a place of wonder, Coralie slowly realizes that the exhibits are based on coercion and fraud, and that her own body has been turned into a commodity.

Meanwhile, Eddie Cohen, a Jewish immigrant who escaped the garment trade, makes a living as a photographer documenting crime scenes, industrial disasters, and missing persons for New York's newspapers. Disillusioned by exploitation and haunted by his past, Eddie is drawn into the city's underworld, where he uncovers stories behind the headlines. His work brings him into contact with the victims of the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, which killed over 140 mostly immigrant women-a historical tragedy that Hoffman weaves into the novel as a turning point.

Coralie and Eddie's paths cross when Eddie searches for a missing young woman connected to the fire and uncovers Professor Sardie's role in hiding uncomfortable truths. Their encounter leads both characters to question the ethics of looking and the price of survival in a society built on 'spectacle'. Through their alliance they attempt to break free from their prescribed roles-she from the mermaid tank, he from the voyeuristic lens-and imagine a life shaped by choice rather than exploitation.

THE POLITICS OF SPECTACLE

The notion of 'spectacle' has a long critical history. Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), defines it as 'a social relation mediated by images'-an apparatus through which capitalism converts lived experience into representations. Michel Foucault's work on discipline likewise shows how visibility can be a form of power, making individuals docile by turning them into objects of observation. Hoffman's Coney Island embodies these ideas. Her fictional museum trades on 'extraordinary' bodies: those labeled abnormal, monstrous, or exotic. Audiences come to gawk at difference, but in doing so they reaffirm normative standards of beauty, ability, and gender. Spectacle is not merely a collection of sensational displays; it is a system that shapes perception, normalizes inequality, and maintains power by captivating attention. The concept of 'spectacle' has long served as a critical lens for understanding how societies turn people, events, and even tragedies into consumable images. Spectacle thus becomes not a harmless diversion but a mechanism of social control, naturalizing hierarchies of class, gender, and race under the guise of entertainment.

Alice Hoffman's *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* embodies both of these theoretical strands. Coney Island at the turn of the twentieth century was marketed as the epitome of democratic leisure—an escape from the drudgery of industrial work. Yet its amusement parks and sideshows also functioned as laboratories of social control, where 'extraordinary' bodies could be displayed, disciplined, and commodified. Professor Sardie's museum literalizes Debord's claim that under capitalism '*everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.*' The so-called 'wonders' are not spontaneous performances but carefully staged, often fabricated displays designed to gratify an audience's desire for the exotic and the grotesque. Coralie's own transformation into a 'living mermaid' dramatizes how spectacle extracts profit from the body by erasing the person within it.

Hoffman also shows how 'spectacle' operates beyond the sideshow stage. Eddie's photographs of crime scenes and industrial disasters exemplify a more modern, media-driven spectacle—what today might be called disaster porn. Newspapers and tabloids profit from his images, turning the suffering of immigrants and workers into front-page attractions. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire represents the ultimate convergence of labor exploitation and public entertainment: a horrific tragedy that became a mass-mediated event. Readers consumed the photographs and reports with a mix of outrage and fascination, illustrating Debord's insight that the spectacle thrives on even the most devastating realities.

Crucially, Hoffman's narrative disrupts the neutrality of looking. By placing readers inside Coralie's and Eddie's perspectives, she exposes the human cost behind the image and challenges the audience's own complicity. The 'politics of spectacle' in the novel is therefore twofold: it critiques the structures—capitalist, patriarchal, and media-driven—that turn difference and disaster into entertainment, and it invites a more ethical mode of witnessing that acknowledges, rather than erases, the humanity of those on display.

THE MUSEUM AS A MICROCOSM OF EXPLOITATION

Professor Sardie's Museum of Extraordinary Things is not just a backdrop for the plot; it is the novel's central metaphor. In miniature, the museum reproduces the very structures of exploitation that define the larger world of early-twentieth-century New York. On its surface the museum appears to be a harmless curiosity shop, a place where audiences can marvel at 'wonders' and escape the drudgery of everyday life. Yet as Hoffman reveals through Coralie's eyes, this supposedly magical space is built on coercion, fabrication, and the commodification of difference.

At the most literal level, the museum is a freak show, an institution with deep historical roots in which human beings with unusual bodies or abilities were exhibited for profit. Hoffman underscores the violent paradox of this culture: the same traits that stigmatize people in public make them valuable to the showman who displays them. Professor Sardie enforces strict contracts and conditions on his performers, controlling not only their work but also their private lives. Even Coralie, his own daughter, is treated as an investment. Her webbed fingers, hidden in public under gloves, become a marketable asset inside the tank; her identity is rewritten as a 'mermaid' to titillate paying customers. This dynamic mirror, what labor historians describe as the 'double bind' of difference—marginalized bodies made both invisible and hyper-visible in service of profit.

The museum also stages a moral economy of deception. Many of its exhibits are faux taxidermy creatures stitched together to resemble mythical beasts, or staged acts presented as authentic marvels. This blurring of reality and illusion foreshadows Eddie's world of tabloid photography, where images of real tragedy are packaged with sensational headlines. In both cases, spectacle thrives on manipulating perception, reducing complex lives and events to consumable fragments. Hoffman's choice to set much of the novel in this environment reinforces Debord's claim that under capitalism '*everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.*'

Finally, the museum's physical structure—its cages, tanks, and dimly lit rooms—symbolises the constraints of a society built on hierarchy. Coralie's confinement in the tank parallels the confinement of immigrant women in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Both are enclosed spaces where bodies are disciplined for profit, one under the guise of entertainment and the other under the guise of industrial production. By making these parallels explicit, Hoffman invites readers to see the museum not as an isolated oddity but as a microcosm of modern exploitation itself.

Thus, the Museum of Extraordinary Things functions as more than a sideshow. It is a concentrated image of the politics of spectacle and of the intertwined systems-capitalist, patriarchal, and media-driven-that define who is displayed, who profits, and who pays the price. In foregrounding Coralie's awakening within this space, Hoffman shows that to recognise the museum's exploitative nature is also to glimpse the possibility of escape from it.

THE MUSEUM AS A PANOPTICON FOR THE HUMAN MERMAID

Coralie Sardie's transformation into a 'human mermaid' is one of the most potent metaphors in *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*. On the surface, the act seems magical—a girl with webbed fingers gliding through a glass tank, embodying myth and fantasy for awestruck audiences. Yet Hoffman frames Coralie's performance not as liberation but as a form of incarceration. Her body is displayed, disciplined, and consumed under the unblinking eyes of spectators, echoing Michel Foucault's concept of the 'panoptic gaze' as a mechanism of modern power.

The museum itself functions as a panopticon. Professor Sardie enforces strict surveillance over his performers, controlling their movements, costumes, and contact with the outside world. Coralie lives under constant scrutiny, both from her father and from the paying public who view her through glass. The very design of her tank—transparent, illuminated, offering no privacy—mirrors Foucault's description of the panopticon as a structure where inmates internalize the gaze of authority. Coralie's training to hold her breath, maintain poses, and suppress discomfort reflects how bodies are disciplined into docility under regimes of visibility.

At the same time, Hoffman shows how the panoptic gaze extends beyond the museum into industrial and media culture. Eddie's camera captures workers' bodies in death as much as Coralie's tank captures her in life. The circulation of these images in newspapers reproduces a wider social panopticon in which immigrant laborers, women, and the poor are rendered objects of both surveillance and spectacle. This dynamic anticipates modern discussions of the 'male gaze' and the 'tourist gaze,' in which looking is not neutral but bound up with power, desire, and control.

Coralie's clandestine swims, in the Hudson function as a counterpoint to this surveillance. In the murky water, unseen by audiences, she experiences her body differently—no longer an exhibit but a living creature with agency. These moments suggest a temporary escape from the panoptic gaze and reclamation of her subjectivity. Yet even this freedom is precarious; the threat of discovery looms, and her eventual flight with Eddie underscores how difficult it is to break free from a system that profits from visibility.

By framing Coralie as a 'human mermaid' within a glass tank, Hoffman dramatizes the way spectacle, surveillance, and fantasy, intersects to produce both wonder and control. The novel thus turns the mermaid—a traditional symbol of mystery and freedom—into an image of modern captivity, making visible the hidden mechanisms of the gaze that shape bodies and identities under capitalism.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE PUBLIC SPECTACLE OF TRAGEDY

Eddie Cohen serves as a critical counterpoint to Coralie's experience, providing an external perspective on the politics of spectacle. As a photojournalist, his camera functions as an instrument of the 'gaze,' capable of capturing both beauty and tragedy. The novel's focus on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire is a deliberate and powerful choice, as the event becomes a public spectacle of immense tragedy. The fire was widely covered by newspapers, with reporters and photographers rushing to the scene to capture images and stories for a mass audience. The tragedy was, in effect, transformed into a public commodity, with the public consuming the suffering of the victims through news reports and photographs. Eddie's photos, while documenting the 'horrible reality,' inevitably contribute to this commodification of grief.

However, the novel traces Eddie's moral transformation, showing a move from a detached, voyeuristic gaze to one of profound empathy. Initially described as a 'disconnected and desensitized' character, the fire serves as a 'powerful engine' for his change. His subsequent quest to find the body of a fire victim, Hannah Weiss, is a deliberate rejection of the commodifying, sensationalist gaze of the media. By seeking justice and dignity for a single victim, Eddie's photography evolves from mere reportage to an act of moral witness.

This shift highlights the novel's central argument that individual action, driven by empathy, can stand in opposition to the passive consumption of the spectacle.

ELEMENTAL SYMBOLS: FIRE AND WATER

Hoffman reinforces her critique through elemental imagery. 'Water', associated with Coralie's mermaid identity, functions as concealment, survival, and transformation. It symbolizes the unconscious and the possibility of escape from patriarchal control; Coralie's secret swims in the Hudson and her ultimate rescue of Eddie occur in water rather than on land. 'Fire', by contrast, signifies destruction and collective trauma, culminating in the Triangle Shirtwaist disaster. The tension between these two elements mirrors the characters' struggle: to be consumed by spectacle or to emerge reborn from it. By weaving natural symbols into urban history, Hoffman critiques industrial modernity's severance from human and ecological well-being. Hoffman structures *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* around two recurring elements—fire and water—that function not only as atmospheric motifs but also as powerful symbols of the novel's central tensions. These elements do not merely decorate the narrative; they encode its moral and psychological stakes, linking personal trauma with historical catastrophe.

From the opening chapters, 'water' is tied to Coralie's identity as a 'human mermaid.' Her training in the tank initially represents subjugation: she is forced to endure frigid, chlorinated water for hours to perfect her act, turning her body into an instrument of spectacle. Yet water also offers her moments of freedom and metamorphosis. In her clandestine swims in the Hudson River at night, away from her father's gaze, she experiences her body as her own, not as an exhibit. Hoffman draws on traditional associations of water with birth, cleansing, and the unconscious; it becomes a space of potential rebirth where Coralie rehearses an identity outside the museum's control. This doubleness—water as both prison and sanctuary—reflects the ambivalence of spectacle itself, which can simultaneously oppress and mesmerize.

If 'water' frames Coralie's story, 'fire' frames Eddie's. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, which Eddie investigates, is the novel's central historical event and a literal manifestation of the dangers of industrial modernity. Fire also consumes Coney Island's Dreamland amusement park, obliterating the very landscape of spectacle. In Hoffman's narrative, fire is more than disaster; it is revelation. The Triangle fire exposes unsafe working conditions to public view, spurring labor reforms. The burning of Dreamland reveals the fragility and deceit behind Sardie's manufactured wonders. Where water symbolises concealment and fluid identity, fire symbolises exposure, truth, and the sudden visibility of hidden exploitation. It is at once destructive and clarifying.

The fire and water motif that runs throughout the narrative is another central symbol of this destruction and transformation. Fire, from the Triangle Fire to the conflagration that destroys Dreamland and the museum, symbolizes the destructive forces of exploitation and a society built on greed and disregard for human life. In contrast, water symbolizes Coralie's world, her escape from her father's confinement, and her eventual salvation. This motif provides a clear narrative structure for the destruction of the old, exploitative world and the rebirth of the protagonists in a new, more humane reality.

Hoffman repeatedly juxtaposes these elements to dramatize the conflict between containment and eruption, spectacle and witness. Coralie's immersion in water contrasts with the immigrant women's immolation in fire; one is forced performance, the other forced labor, but both involve bodies sacrificed to a larger system of profit. The meeting of fire and water also marks the turning point in the plot—Eddie's investigation into the fire leads him to Coralie, whose watery world mirrors but also challenges his fiery images. This elemental dialogue reinforces the novel's psychoanalytic undertones: water as repression, fire as the return of the repressed. By threading fire and water through her story, Hoffman literalizes the costs of spectacle and industrial modernity. Water shows how bodies can be disciplined and hidden; fire shows what happens when that discipline collapses into catastrophe. Together they give the novel an almost mythic texture, transforming historical events into archetypal struggles over visibility, power, and survival. These symbols also guide the reader's emotional response: empathy flows in water, outrage ignites in fire. In this way, Hoffman not only narrates but also stages an alternative spectacle—one that prompts reflection rather than passive consumption.

FROM EXPLOITATION TO EMPATHY

The novel's most significant critique of the spectacle lies in its narrative subversion of dehumanization through empathy and love. The romance between Coralie and Eddie, though perceived as a 'cliché' by some readers, is a deliberate narrative device that stands in direct opposition to the transactional, commodified relationships of the spectacle. Their love 'redeems them' and allows them to see each other as more than their public identities or their past traumas. Eddie sees Coralie not as the 'Human Mermaid' but as a person, and Coralie, in turn, is able to reconcile with her own self-loathing by accepting his gaze of compassion. This relationship dismantles the power dynamic of the 'gaze' by making it a space of mutual understanding rather than a tool of objectification.

The 'gaze' and the 'spectacle' are not independent concepts but are profoundly intertwined within the novel. The spectacle provides the arena—the physical stage of the museum, the public news media—and the motive (profit, public entertainment), while the gaze provides the psychological and social mechanism of control. Professor Sardie, as the 'sinister impresario,' is the embodiment of both the gazer and the spectacle-producer. He meticulously crafts the image of the 'Human Mermaid,' but it is the audience's collective gaze that solidifies Coralie's identity as a 'looked-at' object and reinforces her own self-perception of being an 'oddy no common man could ever understand'. This connection demonstrates how the public's consumption of the spectacle directly enables and reinforces the private, disciplinary gaze that confines Coralie and prevents her from developing an authentic sense of self.

CONCLUSION

Alice Hoffman's *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* is far more than a historical romance; it is a powerful and nuanced critique of exploitation as entertainment. Through the intertwined narratives of Coralie Sardie and Eddie Cohen, the novel uses the historical context of early twentieth-century New York to illustrate the dehumanizing effects of 'spectacle' and the 'gaze'. It demonstrates how a society that prizes appearance and profit can transform human bodies into commodities and individual tragedies into consumable media. The novel's strength lies in its argument that agency can be reclaimed and that genuine human connection and community are potent antidotes to the isolating effects of commodification. The protagonists' journey from being subjects of the 'spectacle' to reclaiming their own narratives proves that love and compassion can dismantle the power structures that seek to turn people into objects.

The enduring relevance of the novel's themes is striking. The historical setting of the dime museum and the Triangle fire provides a historical lens through which to examine our own 'spectacular society'. Today, the public still consumes human suffering and physical difference as entertainment, from reality television shows to social media platforms that turn personal tragedies into viral moments. Hoffman's work serves as a timeless reminder that while the forms of spectacle may change, the fundamental politics of who gazes, who is gazed upon, and who profits from that exchange remain central to understanding our world.

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