# *NIGHTWOOD* OUTSIDE OF THE BINARY: INVESTIGATING AN ABNORMAL AND QUEER TEXT

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CHAPTER I: Definitional Queerness, A Fragmented Novel, and The Queer Djuna Barnes

**What Does "Queerness" Mean? Why *Nightwood*?**

> The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much of her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll. The needle that had made one the property of the child made the other the property of no man. (*N* 16)

In an early passage from Djuna Barnes's 1936 novel *Nightwood*, we read this description of the circus performer Frau Mann and her outward appearance. In this single instance, it becomes abundantly clear that the reader will be regularly encountering different presentations of queerness. During this poignant moment, we see examples of gender fluidity, as well as a rejection of typical male/female power dynamics – insofar as Frau Mann becomes "the property of no man."

The defining moment in this passage, which sets up what will occur in the rest of the novel, is the usage of the word "unsexed." In this instance, Frau Mann completely disrupts gender identity with a subversion of traditional gender markers, and refuses to be categorized as either male or female, and instead situates herself as neither – which, is even farther removed from gender identity than positioning oneself as existing between the dichotomous male and female genders. She exists as "unsexed" and therefore, becomes incapable of categorization – an extension of the working definition of queerness that I use to direct my essay and analyses.

Frau Mann stands as a single, but monumental, example of the queerness found later in *Nightwood*, and which I will discuss throughout the entirety of my essay. In it, I attempt to chart the other, various forms of queerness in Barnes's life and in her novel using biographical

criticism, close readings of the text, and engagement with critics and theorists who have previously considered *Nightwood's* status as a queer text.

In *After Queer Studies: Literature, Theory and Sexuality in the 21st Century*, Tyler Bradway and E.L. McCallum posit that "[the term] queer undoes subjects and objects – their limits, relations, formations, and modes of operation" (6). In other words, queerness as a category provides a fracturing and disassembling that its opposite, "straight" – in terms of sexuality, narrativity, stylistics and other categories – cannot accomplish. Queerness disrupts what most know as the normative, and instead exists in its own category all together. It undoes traditional structures of being, especially normative gender roles and "straight" narratives in literature, dismantling or changing them in the process.

To simultaneously broaden, and also narrow, the working definition of queer, Dana Setiler suggests that queer sex and sexuality redirect "historical, formalist, and political interest to the social energies of a text that unfold[s] in different directions" (37). This is what Arthur Rimbaud rephrases as "*dans tous les sens*" or "calling upon all senses, hinting at all meanings, going in all directions" (38). This means that not only does queerness fracture and fragment traditional narratives; it cultivates a limitlessness that its "straight" counterpart is unable to achieve. It is as if queerness provides a slipperiness and a porousness of boundaries for narratives and literary expression, troubling those "straight" narratives that exist in conforming to more traditional, normative thinking.

For the purposes of this essay and, with the help of those critics and my own knowledge, I have formulated a working definition of queerness as a starting point for the origins of all the arguments I make throughout this essay. This definition, concisely, is as follows: queerness, as it stands in relation to *Nightwood*, is the non-normative, unplaceable, fractured and fracturing. My

working definition extends out to social relations and sexuality within the narrative, the text itself, and the individual makeup of each character. With this definition in mind, I will work to chart all of *Nightwood's* nearly immeasurable examples of queerness, from its first page to its last.

While borrowing certain definitions and uses of the term queerness from these critics, I also aim to put my ideas in conversation with critic Jane Marcus more generally. Marcus presents a compelling claim that, in short, *Nightwood* seeks to make the abnormal, normal. As she states it: "*Nightwood* asserts that the outcast is normal and truly human" (164). Though this claim is provocative, she does little to give further explanation of it. She examines *Nightwood* through a Freudian lens, rather than through critical close readings, as I do. Although Marcus and I have similar starting points, we both read *Nightwood* through different, yet important, critical lenses. In my essay, I hope to extrapolate from Marcus's claim, providing evidence that, if not proves, then strengthens, the original sentiment that *Nightwood* does in fact make the outcast truly human.

In the beginning of my essay, I suggest a queer reading of Barnes's life, ranging from childhood to adulthood. I attempt to examine the ways in which queerness permeated the fabric of her life, and why, in the end, she chose to reject the label of "lesbian writer." Later, I offer critical close readings of passages in *Nightwood*. These close readings are focused on three characters in particular: Doctor Matthew O'Connor, Robin Vote, and Nora Flood. In these close readings, I hope to show how these particular characters refuse categorization, dismantle traditional societal norms, and more generally queer the novel itself because of their presences. Lastly, in my final section, I use different critical and theoretical lenses to read both *Nightwood* and Barnes's volume of poetry, *The Book of Repulsive Women*, to show how far queerness

extends in Barnes's work and the idea that this queerness presented in *Nightwood* is in fact normalized within the context of the narrative. That is to say, I hope to assert that queerness has its place in the novel, and *Nightwood* is meant to be understood as a queer novel with everything that connotes.

**Early Life with the Barnes Family**

Djuna Barnes, formally known as Djuna Chappell Barnes, with middle name in homage to her mother, was born to Elizabeth Chappell and "Wald" Barnes on June 12, 1892. There remains no record of her birth; however, this date lines up with the timeline of Djuna's life. She was born in Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY, and grew up in what, at the time, and perhaps still today, was considered quite the queer and unusual household. The move to Cornwall-on-Hudson in 1890, which involved Djuna's father, Djuna's mother, and her paternal grandmother, Zadel, might have taken place because of Wald's love of nature, or because Zadel was familiar with a poet who lived in the area with whom she had much in common.

As explained by Phillip Herring, Barnes's biographer, "Wald's cabin was, in effect, the ark 'Bohemian'" (31), which was a two-story structure, having two rooms on top of each other with a connected ladder from a trapdoor. Wald believed in sexual freedom and autonomy, which lead him down the path of what is described by Herring as "polygamy" (31). He justified his promiscuity through natural, as well as moral, grounds, and often enjoyed sexual escapades while married to Djuna's mother. Wald also believed that if people were less rigid about sex, including sexual and marital institutions, there would be no prostitution. These beliefs were enforced by Zadel, and her own beliefs, which closely resembled Wald's. Although Djuna grew up to actively complain about her childhood and the relations of the members of her household, she herself indulged in sexual freedom as an adult, having numerous affairs with both men and women, some of which had a lasting impact on her. The exposure to what could be considered

such a “Bohemian” lifestyle at such a young age was the very beginning of the queerness that seemed to constantly permeate her life.

Wald’s second “wife,” Fanny, was eventually brought into the house by Zadel and caused quite a stir among the family. Born Elizabeth Frances Faulkner Clark, Djuna’s mother felt that “Two Elizabeths were too many” (29), according to Herring. Fanny arrived at the Barnes household when Djuna was five years old in 1897. Djuna came to resent Fanny, as she saw what a strain having another woman in the house had put on her mother. At this point in her life, Djuna suddenly was presented with three, if Fanny is counted, maternal figures. Although Wald ruled over both Fanny and Elizabeth, he was more so controlled by Zadel, who was the true matriarch of the family. Wald may have made most of the decisions for his two wives and their combined children; however, it was all through the direction of Zadel. Thus, although Djuna grew up in a somewhat “conventional,” to use the word loosely, patriarchal household, her life was layered with submission to both a patriarchy and a matriarchy, though she was closer to Zadel than any other family member, perhaps excluding Wald.

Eventually, siblings and half siblings, began to arrive in “short intervals” (32). Djuna later began to resent her mother Elizabeth, believing that she had only wanted boys, and instead was stuck with Djuna as well as four boys. According to Herring, “Things did not go smoothly in this strange household with two mothers” (33). While Wald was off doing solitary work, still unemployed, both women were left to care for the house and their combined sum of eight children. Witnessing this hardship on her mother and being around for the difficult birth of her brother, Zendon, Djuna became very averse to the notion of children and childbearing. Much later on, at age 46, she wrote to her friend, Emily Coleman, and expressed these sentiments: “father and his bastard children and mistresses had thrown me off marriage and babies” (33).

Neither her mother, nor Fanny, were administered any anesthetics during childbirth, and later Djuna felt that childbirth must be awful, and that no author to date had successfully portrayed the horrors of childbirth. Djuna herself depicted the atrocities and difficulties of motherhood and childbirth in her novel, *Nightwood*, through her character Robin. Robin, much to her husband's dismay, resents motherhood and nearly kills their child. She rejects the stereotype of the loving, protecting, pillar of safety for her child and instead becomes an enemy to her both her husband and her son. Robin may be a reflection of Djuna's own reaction to maternity and matriarchal figures.

Finally, the two-room log cabin ended up being too small to accommodate the two-family household with twelve inhabitants, and thus everyone left, moving to the Bronx and residing there between 1900-1. It was in this residence that Djuna, and her brother, Thurn, were encouraged to write about their daily experiences in lesson books. This exercise presumably took place before the children were formally educated, or even really knew how to spell. The daily writing exercises were Djuna's very first introduction to writing herself, which most likely built the foundation for the rest of her writing career.

During the summer of 1912, at twenty years old, Djuna experienced what Herring calls a "catastrophe," from which she "never completely recovered" (40). This catastrophe was the divorce of Wald and Elizabeth. Because of the divorce, much of the financial responsibility in the family landed on Djuna. The fiscal burden was placed mainly on her, because her mother didn't work, and finances were previously taken care of by Wald, and his mother, Zadel. It was in July of 1912 that her mother took Djuna and three of her brothers to New York City, at the direction of Zadel, who then allocated some of the financial burden of the family to her brother, Reon, who was a widower.

As is true for many people, Barnes's early life shaped the path for her transition into adulthood, and her rise as a prominent literary figure throughout her lifetime and beyond. Although molded emotionally and mentally through her connection to her unusual familial situation, it wasn't until later years at age 20, in 1912 when she moved to New York, that she flourished, both as an author and as a person. The figurative break from her biological family into a family of her literary peers is what propelled her forward into Paris in the 1920s, Thelma between 1921-1922, Hayford Hall in 1932, and her future publications.

**The Greatest Love Affair and its Influence on *Nightwood* (1936)**

In Paris in 1921 or 1922, Barnes met who Herring describes as "The great love of Djuna Barnes's life" (156), Thelma Wood, or the "real-life" Robin Vote. If Barnes hadn't made it through her eight-year "marriage" to Wood, she most likely would never have written *Nightwood,* according to Herring. The intensity of Barnes's love for Wood stemmed from a familial recognition of sorts. That is to say, Barnes fell so deeply in love with Wood, because she claimed that Wood resembled her grandmother, Zadel, whom Barnes had apparently fallen in love with as a child. The overlap of familial and romantic love is reflected in *Nightwood*, as Nora feels a similar incestuous pull and memory in her love for Robin: "For Robin is incest too; that is one of her powers" (N 156). It was later in the winter of 1922 that Wood eventually moved into the same flat as Barnes to intensify their love affair.

Barnes begged for monogamy during her relationship with Wood, but that was something that she could not have. Presumably, Barnes's negative reaction to her father's polygamy, and her mother's suffering, during her childhood are what held her firm in her desire for monogamy. In a Djuna-Thelma and Nora-Robin relationship parallel, Wood stated that she wanted Barnes along with the rest of the world, and in this way reflected Robin's reactions towards Nora when

Nora pleaded for monogamy and was rejected in *Nightwood*. Because of Wood's rejection of monogamy, and thus the pain she ended up inflicting on Barnes, *Nightwood* emerged, in Wood's eyes, as revenge against her. In the realm of *Nightwood,* the main love interest, Robin, who again is based on Wood, is so loved – then so hated – within the novel that Wood found the creation of the character, and the novel, to be a direct attack against her from Barnes.

In examining Barnes's relationship with Wood, Herring goes on to state that, "If there is a key to the Djuna-Thelma relationship, it probably lies at least as much in domesticity as in sexuality" (161). The furnishings in their home together were mirrored in some of the imaginary furnishings in the apartment that Robin and Nora shared together as well. In *Nightwood*, Nora fears that if she rearranges anything within the apartment then "Robin might become confused – might lose the scent of home" (N 56). Just as Djuna feared the disappearance of her great love if she were to retract the safety net of home that she provided Thelma with, so too did Nora fear that a similar disruption might produce the same effect in Robin. Also paralleled in the Djuna-Thelma and Nora-Robin relationships, is the significance of dolls: Djuna gave Thelma a doll every year for Christmas, which was meant to be a symbol of their union together, and Nora too gave Robin a doll as a symbol of theirs. When the Djuna-Thelma love affair began to dwindle, later, in 1928, Thelma met Henriette McCrea Metcalf, whom she began a relationship with. This relationship emotionally ruined Djuna, and thus out of spite when writing *Nightwood* she created the character Jenny Petherbridge out of Metcalf's likeness. Jenny vies for Robin's attention and eventually "steals" her away from Nora, just as Barnes felt that Metcalf had stolen Wood from her. In reality though, Metcalf was a much more formidable opponent than the fictional Jenny.

**From Paris to Hayford Hall: The Defining Journey**

In the summer of 1932 Barnes left Paris for Hayford Hall, which was rented out by Peggy Guggenheim, one of Barnes's most generous benefactors. It was at Hayford Hall where most of *Nightwood* was either written or revised. At Hayford Hall, Barnes's bedroom was in rococo style, which suited her personality well, and it was in that room from 1932 to 1933 that she wrote most of *Nightwood*, in the company of her close friends and benefactors. This all took place as she recovered from her great loss of Wood, the pain of which was translated into the narrative of *Nightwood* and Nora's loss of Robin. Her close friend, Emily Coleman, also stayed with her at the Hall, and Herring asserts that Coleman was "arguably the most fiercely loyal friend Barnes ever had" (190), next to T.S. Eliot, and it was Coleman who implored Peggy Guggenheim to continue paying Barnes's stipend.

In Chapter Ten of his biography, entitled "Creating the Misshapen Images of *Nightwood*" Herring delves into detail about the production and emergence of Barnes's greatest triumph. He asserts that it is "craft that gives agony a shape, a purpose, a resolution" (203). Because of her immeasurable sense of loss surrounding Wood, Barnes, according to Herring, "infused into her novel a style so brilliant that it often overpowers sense" (203). Here, Herring seems to make a plausible and interesting claim about Barnes's capabilities when it comes to overpowering the senses: that she can do this easily given her queer style – developed through queer loss – which shows prominently in her writing in *Nightwood*.

During the stay at Hayford Hall, Coleman recorded several of her conversations with Barnes down in diary entries. In one entry, Coleman writes "[Djuna and I] talked of the sizes of men's penises in an embarrassed sort of way. Djuna spoke of her father in a very vulgar way that terrified me" (Diaries 113). In another entry, Barnes is recorded as having said: "I think only two

women have written books worth reading, Emily Bronte and myself" (Diaries 86). Coleman later disagreed with the emphasis Barnes was putting on Dan Mahoney, the real-life Dr. O'Connor, who actually gave Barnes an unauthorized abortion, and insisted that more emphasis be put on Robin, the stand-in for Wood, whom Coleman felt was the real subject of the novel. Coleman recalled Barnes weeping while writing about Robin-Thelma in *Nightwood*, and also while reading passages aloud from the novel. The tears were deemed by her friend John Holms as a "pathetic" (204) act. Both Coleman and Holms didn't see Barnes as equipped enough critically and editorially to be able to judge her own novel, although she was thought of as having artistic genius regardless. The two understood Barnes to have a "sensitivity to negative criticism" (204), and thought this in turn would make it difficult for her to differentiate between the "good" parts of her novel and the "bad" (204). Also, Coleman had a degree from Wellesley, and Barnes had barely any formal education beyond art school, which Coleman and Holms believed to also be markers of an inability to edit her literary works.

Eventually, though, Coleman lost some of her critical prowess when she began interpreting *Nightwood* through a Christian lens, which was not what Barnes had intended. The complexities were meant to extend farther than just a battle between good and evil, and *Nightwood* was written as more of a caricature of human nature than anything else. Herring posits that really "[*Nightwood's*] real interest lies in love entanglements" and the absurdity that the other characters, namely Dr. O'Connor, brought into the text.

**A Rejection of Lesbianism in Favor of Queerness**

It is clear that Barnes experienced queerness in various forms from early childhood all the way up until the publication of *Nightwood*, and beyond to her later life. The "how," is not as significant as the "why," because the answer to the former is clear: queerness impacted her

enough to put her ideas to paper and write. The reason why her personal queerness so influenced her writing might have many answers, and can be up for debate; however, one reason that could be suggested is that her queerness gave her context and a framework of knowledge with which she could interpret the world around her and translate into her writing. That is to say that because she had such intimate experience with queerness since childhood, both in relation to sexuality, and in relation to lifestyles, she had background from which to draw her ideas and bring them to fruition. Her queerness provided a starting ground for her work – a foundation that might have been missing had she not experienced queerness so often and so pervasively throughout her life. Barnes's closeness to queerness – her upbringing, her adult and sexual life – put her in the perfect position to write *Nightwood* and experiment with implementing queerness, in all forms, in writing. If it weren't for the ways in which she grew up, then how she chose to lead her adult life, she might not have been properly prepared to write such an experimental novel, especially with this particular subject matter. This is all to say, if Barnes hadn't grown up in a polygamous household, while having a speculated incestuous relationship with her maternal grandmother, Zadel, and then later went on to be extremely open sexually and experimenting with queerness in relation to sexuality, she may not have been as equipped as she was to write *Nightwood*.

Also, what is so crucial to understand about Barnes's rejection of lesbianism, is that she is not rejecting a love for women, and in its place putting a love for Thelma and an umbrella around herself like queerness, but she is rejecting a label that would tie her into something concrete. Without the rejection of lesbianism and welcoming of queerness, all of what Barnes attempted to do throughout her life and throughout her literary work would be for nothing. She would be implicating herself as an entity that is to be understood easily, and nothing about her work or her own person is meant to be grasped quickly or without effort. Barnes worked to inject

abnormality into every work that she had ever written, as well as every facet of her life, and to lump herself into an identifiable category would force her to give in to society and let go of her personal morals and stances. Thus, Barnes could never identify as a lesbian, because that would be too simple, and nothing about what she had ever done was simple.

*Nightwood* was eventually published in 1936, with support from T.S. Eliot and Emily Coleman, among others. At the end of Chapter Ten, Herring posits that “Barnes’s main interest in *Nightwood* was coming to terms with the loss of Thelma Wood” (217), which rings true for the novel. Among other characters, and not just Nora and Dr. O’Connor, there is a sense of coping with loss and an attempt to regain footing in reality. Herring believes that the reactions from all of the characters in response to their great losses added voice, depth, and design to “what came to be one of the great novels of the 1930s” (217), *Nightwood*. In other words, Herring suggests that Barnes’s queer loss influenced her queer writing style which led to writing indirectly and with complicated syntax, among other things

# CHAPTER II. Unraveling Queerness, Otherness, and Disruptions Within the Text

## **Queerness Understood Through Character Analysis**

The biggest markers of *Nightwood* as a queer piece of literature are woven into the fabric of the narrative, regardless of other factors involving queerness, such as Barnes's personal life and theoretical work done by critics. That is to say that the most definitive evidence of queerness, and abnormality, in *Nightwood* can be found directly in the text and in the narrative. Through textual analysis of several characters in particular, Doctor Matthew O'Connor, Robin Vote, and Nora Flood, the proof of queerness in Barnes's overall writing style, as well as the novel itself, becomes overwhelming and impossible to ignore. O'Connor subverts traditional gender norms by engaging in gender fluidity and having a queer social status; Vote refuses to be categorized, and cannot be pinned down either in the text or among the other characters; and Flood has sexual and romantic relations with women. This is all to say that each character that I will examine is an example of a unique form of queerness, specific to them as characters, and under Barnes's working definition of queerness more generally. In this section of my project I will be analyzing and discussing three separate passages within the novel focused on the three characters to strengthen the argument I've made throughout. To summarize, my assertion is that *Nightwood* remains an example of explicitly queer literature and can be read as such.

## **Doctor Matthew O'Connor, Imaginative Gender Fluidity, and Transition**

The Doctor embodies an essence of the abnormal in *Nightwood*, meaning, he exemplifies one aspect of queerness that Barnes sought to present in the text. This queerness is manifested through the Doctor's gender fluidity and disruption of traditional gender norms. The Doctor mainly spends his time healing, analyzing, and interrogating many of the other characters, most notably Nora and Felix. While digging into the lives of those around him, although he may often

appear mysterious and like a tightly locked safe complete with secrets, he drops hints about himself and Barnes's desired queerness in the narrative that are worth investigating:

> In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it's that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowspirit of a fishing schooner? And what do I get but a face on me like an old child's bottom – is that a happiness, do you think? (*N* 97)

In this passage, like the other few in which he speaks about himself, he addresses his desire to be a woman, or at least specifically in this passage alludes to a past, unfinished period of time when he dreamed some hint of girlishness. He calls this period of time the "old days," and prefaces the rest of his small speech by saying that this life that he envisioned "possibly" occurred, although the readers know that it didn't, and he is expanding upon unfulfilled wishes. The dynamic between the words "old days" and "possibly" suggest that a blurriness pervades the Doctor's memory and ability to manifest these thoughts into a concrete picture that he can hold on to as he lives his current life. This blurriness, in conjunction with the fact that the Doctor currently lives his life as a cisgender man, accounts for part of the reason that this particular memory of perceived and imagined girlhood, the dock, the sailor, and the old days "haunt" him.

Marseilles is a port city in France, which would explain why the Doctor would picture himself "thumping" on a dock with a "sailor." It's important to note, however, that Marseilles is not just known for being a port city, but also for being a crossroads of both trade and immigration since its beginning and founding. In simpler terms, this means that Marseilles is

known for transition and movement. This evidence makes a case for why the Doctor fantasizes about himself as a "girl" while being in this city. Even in his imagination, he has not yet made the transition to womanhood, but still resides in a transitional and pivotal point in time while existing in Marseilles, or his fantasy. The Doctor acknowledges and regards himself as a woman throughout the novel, but through present tense and in a mostly wishful manner. In this passage, his femaleness is being expressed through the image of being a girl rather than a woman. So, not only is it crucial to recognize that the Doctor feels this is from the "old days," that it is a "memory," and that this is strictly a younger, inexperienced, and fantastical version of himself, but also that this is one step in his deeply desired transition to his ideal human existence.

The Doctor maintains the notion of transition throughout this passage when he states that "the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future." His transition, which at this point is only spiritual, whether it is to womanhood or to a fuller, more complete version of himself (which we must assume includes some aspect of femaleness), is still ongoing. There was a past dream – the girl in Marseilles – there is a present Doctor Matthew O'Connor, and there will one day be a future self that has not yet been envisioned. His present form is, again, Doctor Matthew O'Connor, but his present doesn't negate who he envisioned himself as in the past, or who he hopes to be in the future. It is the *remembrance* of the past that leads into the future. The Doctor's present may be a middle point between his imaginative past and his desired future chronologically and linearly; however, it is through investigating his previous wishes that he will achieve a future. Because his past is "all that [he has] for a future" he may see his present as a gap in his transitional timeline. There is nothing to be done about his current state of being, but it clearly is not where he wants to be and does nothing to either accelerate or ease his continuing transition.

Not only is his present a gap in his transitional timeline, but the Doctor seems to be taking his existence into an even more spiritual realm as well as he continues: "am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been?" His present, his form as Doctor Matthew O'Connor, breaks the continuum of his fantasy transition, and also was not a choice that he made for himself. Some wires appeared to cross on the path from girlhood to womanhood in his mind as he finds himself stuck as the present tense Doctor in Barnes's *Nightwood*. He poses his question to the Universe but implicates himself – is he to blame? O'Connor's transition began in his dream state of girlhood in Marseilles, and then in the next moment he finds himself in his present manhood – very far away from his future which will be built out of his blurred dreams about himself in the port city. The Doctor could be argued to be one of the many characters who carries and experiences an immense amount of pain, and his question rising up to the Universe asking if he should be blamed for having "turned up this time as [he] shouldn't have been" only enhances his image of a man filled with sorrow. Becoming the Doctor, the healer, the embodied abnormality of *Nightwood,* didn't occur because of his own actions. This life was thrust upon him and left him in a present where his inner self is in ruins as he waits for the bridge to be built between who he is in the current textual moment and what he wants for his future.

The Doctor proceeds to finish his monologue by listing all of the things that he so desperately wanted: "a high soprano," "deep corn curls," a "womb as big as the king's kettle," and a "bosom." He then says that what he "gets" is "a face on me like an old child's bottom." This, again, highlights that who the Doctor is now didn't come about through his own conscious choices. What he wanted was to manifest his desires into womanhood, particularly in terms of physical attributes like his voice and hair. Instead, he finds himself *given*, because he explicitly stated that he *got* something (perhaps like an unwanted gift) rather than chose or asked for, his

own current body and genetic make-up. His face is what is mentioned as being like an "old child's bottom," and that can be understood as being the most difficult part of himself to deal with without any sort of current transition or physical change. The Doctor often, as the critics say, "cross dresses," and puts himself in women's clothing, wigs, and even makeup. It's his face, however, no matter how much makeup, that most distinguishes him as a man to the public. It is the one part of him that can't be completely and opaquely covered and hidden like the rest of his body with wigs or clothing or shoes. The face is his dead giveaway of manhood and his identity as Doctor O'Connor.

**Robin Vote as Untouchable and Unplaceable Abnormality**

Robin, according to all of the other characters who piece her together through their own perspectives, is the unplaceable and absent presence within the novel. She is somehow always permeating the text itself and the dialogue of others, although she rarely has dialogue of her own. For Barnes, refusing to be categorized or labeled are markers of queerness. Barnes engaged with this type of queerness during her lifetime by rejecting lesbianism and then implementing her perception of queerness as slippery and unattainable in the narrative of *Nightwood* by refusing to allow any of the other characters to pin Robin down and keep her in their lives. During, "Go Down, Matthew," the Doctor and Nora are heatedly discussing Robin, and the Doctor has this to say of her:

> Robin is not in your life, you are in her dream, you'll never get out of it. And why does Robin feel innocent? Every bed she leaves, without caring, fills her heart with peace and happiness. She has made her 'escape' again. That's why she can't 'put herself in another's place,' she herself is the only 'position'; so she resents it when you reproach her with what she had done. (*N* 155)

His language is effectively abrasive and accusatory – she leaves “without caring,” she “resents” when anyone holds her accountable for her actions. The Doctor, in this passage, and in most, speaks as if he is dealing in facts rather than opinions – either his own opinions or someone else’s. Robin “is not” in Nora’s life; this is present tense and formatted as an imperative. This is the Doctor’s statement of fact and truth about Nora’s life over which she appears to no longer have control over. Nora is stuck “in [Robin’s] dream,” which, again, is the Doctor making use of his factual knowledge. Nora *is* currently there, and given that this is her present, it will presumably be her future as well.

Despite dealing in facts as he exposes the truth to Nora, his placement of both her and Robin carry fascinating implications. Robin is the “unplaceable,” but her placement in relation to Nora allows for a better understanding of her character, if only even a little. This refusal to be placed and elusiveness is part of what makes Robin so queer, along with her queer sexual relationships, which also involve Nora. Robin is in Nora’s life – the concrete, ongoing life that she leads. Robin may not be physically present in Nora’s life, but she exists in the same reality as her former love. So, not only is this fact, but Robin is rooted in actual, physical, and tangible existence, which is a reality that Nora cannot escape because it is the truth and content of the life that she leads.

In contrast, Nora is situated *inside* of Robin’s dream. The figure of Nora is fabricated in Robin’s unconscious. Nora, in this instance, can be defined and placed, whereas that is an impossibility for Robin. This implies that Robin’s queerness extends farther than Nora’s, which is only queerness in relation to sexual and romantic relationships. This version might not even be remotely similar to the real Nora that is both everything and nothing all at the same time to Robin. The Nora of Robin’s dream is an entity that was filtered through layers of perception and

subjectivity before the final product was ever created and laid to rest inside of Robin's mind – or more precisely, her dream.

This is exactly why the Doctor insists that this is something that Nora will "never get out of." There is a part of Nora that has been taken from her figuratively, but perhaps it feels literal, as a part of her own soul might have been stolen by Robin to create this false, dream Nora. Nora has been robbed of some sense of self, however small, to be recreated and repurposed for Robin and to her liking. Because this part has been stolen, and because it is Robin who is doing the repurposing, that fraction of Nora can never be taken back and is Robin's forever. The false Nora really will "never get out" – she is in some ways a newly created product for Robin. Repurposed and reproduced Nora is being placed *concretely* inside of an unreal *fantasy* – she is the placeable and rather than Robin being simply unplaceable, she could also be considered 'the one who places,' or even the placer.

The Doctor then goes on to explain that Robin "leaves" beds, and that in turn "fills [Robin's] heart with peace and happiness." Robin creates her own physical absences as she leaves these beds and her lovers, presumably without warning. This appears to create not only a physical absence of her own presence for her lovers, but also an absence inside of Robin herself. The absence that Robin creates for herself is a figurative absence, and this is one of the few instances in which she is her own paradox – both the absence generator as well as generating an absence in herself.

This is an absence, or more precisely, a void, that Robin is able to fill and fix for herself. There must be an actual *gap* that is left behind as she leaves, because if there weren't, there would be no need to use the word "fills," in the explanation that the Doctor gives. By creating an absence that is detrimental to others, and in turn, somewhat detrimental to herself, Robin quickly

repairs the damages on her end by being flooded with "peace and happiness." There is joy for her in creating absences. She brings harms to others, and even to herself, by leaping so quickly in and out of lives and the text. The harm inflicted upon Robin, however, is mitigated through the act of experiencing an intense flood of emotion. Robin heals herself through an internal process of experiencing and filtering emotions that, again, "fill" her. Everyone else left in her wake, though brought to suffering because of her, is subject to their own personal processes of healing and repairing.

O'Connor himself gives evidence and support to his previously mentioned points during that very same passage: "She has made her 'escape' again. That's why she can't 'put herself in another's place,' she herself is the only 'position.'" Robin finds escape routes and loopholes in all of her interpersonal relationships and interactions with other people. The loopholes – leaving beds, leaving one lover for another – are her 'escape,' as the Doctor puts it. The 'escape' is the void that she creates – the physical absence in reality and the escaping of herself in her own psyche.

There is no other 'position,' as he says, and she's incapable of what we could describe as basic human empathy or, as the Doctor describes it, as putting herself 'in another's place.' This once again brings up the eternal paradox of Robin; she is the absence generator as well as generating an absence within herself. Robin is the unplaceable, and yet, the one who places. Everyone else's 'position' falls into place after she has established her own 'position,' in both her own life and the lives of others. It's also interesting to note that the word 'position,' alludes to the act of playing a game. It could be indicative of any type of game, but perhaps an appropriate one would be chess, which is a game of strategy, intensity, and focus – three elements that help to make up Robin and her always unexpected actions.

Robin can recognize her 'position' in the games that she plays, and absolutely must realize that she is both the unplaceable as well as the one who places. If she weren't aware of all of this, it would be impossible for her to be resentful when someone, and namely, Nora, "reproach[es] [Robin] with what she had done." Nora is starting to come down from Cloud Nine, and not only that, but she is able to see through Robin's façade as rationality is beginning to win over her emotionality. Robin enjoys being elusive and difficult to pin down, which contributes to her queer presence in the novel, and therefore, should Nora really bear witness to her strategies which set in motion her sly, harmful behavior, Robin will be that much easier to place. She knows this to be true, and that must have been the catalyst that set Robin off and caused her to create an aching, painful absence of herself in Nora's life. To reiterate, Robin's queerness in the novel, and more precisely this passage, is multifaceted, because Robin rejects confinement and placeability from Nora and also engages in sexual and romantic relations with her.

**Co-Dependency and Obsession as Embodied Through Nora Flood**

Nora Flood, one of Robin Vote's lovers in the novel, becomes twisted into an image of abnormality that extends from the abnormality which Robin created around and within herself: the queerness of refusing to be placed. In this example from the text, Barnes's definitional queerness is presented in two different ways: the queerness of Nora and Robin, two women, engaging in sexual and romantic relations, and the queerness of Robin being unattainable for Nora and Nora's reaction to that fact. During a conversation with Doctor Matthew O'Connor, Nora states: "It was *me* made [Robin's] hair stand on end because I loved her. She turned bitter because I made her fate colossal" (*N* 165). Nora explains and elaborates on her perception of herself, as she stands in relation to Robin. As previously explained, Robin exists as the absent present within *Nightwood*, and works as the center of abnormality throughout the text and for the

other characters within the novel. Many of the other characters, including Nora, can only understand themselves through their understanding of Robin, and what binds them to her.

Nora's dialogue in this section of *Nightwood* seems profoundly accusatory, although she accuses herself. She explains that 'It was *me*,' and she 'made [Robin's] hair stand on end.' For most of the novel, Robin exists as the cause that produces the effect within other characters. In this passage, Nora asserts herself as the causation which effects Robin, rather than the classic reversed example. Nora's accusation is just that – an accusation. It is declarative, as well as imperative, implying that her words are final. There doesn't need to be a justification for this accusation, nor is there cause for Nora to convince the Doctor that her points are true. Her statement becomes final, not simply because of the language she uses, but also because it ends with a period, and she provides no evidence to back herself up. Thus, her statement become fact, and unquestionable.

Nora also makes a point to say that what happened to Robin, her hair standing on end, happened because Nora loved her. The cause wasn't simply Nora's own existence in Robin's life, but rather, her love, which influenced and penetrated Robin so deeply that it in turn made her hair stand on end. To say that "hair stands on end" is a common expression, however, the meaning in this context exceeds the simple implications of the common expression. The feelings associated with it in this passage are much more complex, and stronger, than simple fear or surprise which the common expression may connote. Contrarily, hair might stand on end if one is aroused, or being intimate.

The language used, however, becomes very important to notice when close reading this passage. Nora doesn't simply state, "This thing happened to Robin because I made it happen." Instead, she says "It was *me* made [Robin's] hair stand on end," which implies that Nora is

precisely the “thing” or event that occurred that in turn made Robin’s hair stand on end. Nora didn’t make something happen to Robin, but Nora’s existence, and love, are what happened to Robin and forced this fear, nervousness, or a related feeling through her, which caused her hair to stand on end.

Nora continues with the notion that she became the “thing” that made things “happen” to Robin, as she continues speaking with the Doctor. “[Robin] turned bitter because I made her fate colossal” (*N* 165), explains Nora, and again, she is the entity, the *force*, that made Robin experience what she did. It isn’t “Robin has become bitter because of me,” but Nora states that Robin turned bitter. The implication of the word “turn” is that one either turns towards something, or turns away from something. In this case, Robin turns towards bitterness, but it may also be an indication that she turns herself away from Nora in the process. Not only has Robin turned bitter, and turned away from Nora, but this occurred, once again, because of Nora. Nora “made,” although it might be more appropriate to use the word “forced,” Robin’s “fate” to become “colossal.”

As previously discussed, Robin refuses to be pinned down, just as much as she refuses to be confronted with her own actions, and both are exactly what Nora attempts, and succeeds, to do. By making Robin’s fate “colossal,” Nora places her actions and wrongdoings right in front of her. If Robin were to continue her relationship with Nora, she would spend the rest of her life being held accountable for her actions, like all normal people. It is crucial to remember, however, that Robin exudes abnormality, and if she were to experience life in a way similar to the accepted “normal,” she would not have the power that she has in the novel, and over the other characters. Robin’s power gathers through her absence, which becomes an extension of her abnormality, and if she were forced to be both “present” and “normal,” her power would deplete.

**What Does This All Mean and Where Does One Go from Here?**

The queerness exhibited by Barnes's characters – queerness that is exhibited by each character in unique yet precise ways, seems to imply that queerness as a concept, especially for Barnes, has become essential to her identity both as a person and as a writer. Unable to prevent any of her personal life from bleeding into her work, Barnes produces literary works out of abnormality which then gather in the form of general queerness manifested in style, text, and characters. I propose that this queerness is an integral part of Barnes's style that cannot be removed from her narratives, or her life, regardless of the ways in which one might read her work. Queerness, which is crucial to everything Barnes wrote; whether we look at the macro level, at plot or the micro level of sentences, we find writing that makes the non-normative, normative. To reiterate, this theory can be seen in the gender fluidity of O'Connor, the refusal to be categorized by Vote, and the sexual queerness of Flood. This theory will be further expanded upon in my next section in which I view *Nightwood*, and Barnes's chapbook entitled *The Book of Repulsive Women*, through theoretical lenses that promote the idea of queerness and abnormality being the structural foundations for these two publications.

# CHAPTER III. Doctor Matthew O'Connor and *The Book of Repulsive Women*: Fractures and Subversions

## Theoretical Evidence: *Nightwood* and *The Book of Repulsive Women* as Parallels

Thus far in my project I have argued that queerness and abnormality were crucial for Barnes, and that non-normative elements, sometimes subtle, and sometimes explicit – make themselves felt in her writing of *Nightwood* and its characters. It is worth noting, however, that this queerness extends beyond just *Nightwood*. It may seem as though Barnes presents readers with a rigid, even straightforward notion of queerness in *Nightwood*, presumably by having women sleep with women and by featuring other characters whose gender identities are constantly in flux. If, however, my working definition of queerness is applicable here, which is that queerness is the non-normative in general, then Barnes presents various forms of queerness that cannot be contained to just sex and sexuality, and must extend into other areas such as narrative disruptions and textual fracturing throughout *Nightwood* as well as Barnes's other texts.

In this section of my project, I investigate these ideas through theoretical viewpoints about Barnes's queerness in *Nightwood,* from critics Brian Glavey and Jane Marcus, who suggest that the queerness in *Nightwood* fractures the narrative, and that *Nightwood* presents the "outcast" as truly human, respectively. Also, I examine Barnes's interpretations of feminism and male/female dynamics in *The Book of Repulsive Women*, through the lens of theorist Laura Mulvey, who asserts that sexual deviance, and particularly voyeurism and sadism, must exist within a narrative context and format, which they do in Barnes's poetry. Within each respective text, we find examples of queerness that might seem like new concepts, but that Barnes was already aware of when writing her fiction and poetry. The characters providing this evidence of these various forms of queerness include the women and Doctor Matthew O'Connor in *Nightwood,* as well as the central female figures in the poems Barnes included in *The Book of*

*Repulsive Women*. I specifically consider how in her poetry, Barnes rethinks feminism and subverts traditional structures of relating between men and women – including the patriarchal power dynamic that exists between them.

**Doctor Matthew O'Connor as Barnes's Figure of the Abnormal**

As I mentioned in my introduction, Jane Marcus asserts that "*Nightwood*'s project is…[to] make 'normal' what is consider[ed] to be the sexually aberrant misfit" (164), and much of her evidence for this claim derives from her analysis of character. Marcus goes on to claim that "*Nightwood* asserts that the outcast is normal and truly human" (164). This claim can be viewed most clearly in Doctor Matthew O'Connor – *Nightwood*'s most prominent figure of abnormality and the novel's main Other. Doctor O'Connor can be described as the "storyteller" of the narrative. Moreover, O'Connor serves as the self-proclaimed Doctor who has no real medical practice; who exists as the emotional healer and crutch for other characters, namely Nora and Felix; and who seems to be the sexual, as well as gender, non-conforming pariah. He takes on the aliases, if not the full-blown identities, of woman, sexual deviant, and even outcast.

The Doctor's character itself is situated on the fringes of society. Indeed, the Doctor's character exhibits many different forms of abnormality – one being that he isn't really a licensed doctor, and thus exists on the margins of professional life and institutions. Furthermore, he has no stable, or disposable, income; and he exists mostly on his own, as he lives a lonely and isolated existence, except when other characters ask him to meddle in their lives. The Doctor himself is queer and abnormal, and works as a conduit for queerness, meaning he brings this queerness to others, who then embrace and perform in their own ways.

**The Doctor as Woman: Queer and Disconnected**

Doctor O'Connor mentions that he is "the last woman left in the world, though [he is] the bearded lady" (107) as he inserts himself into the narrative of the relationship between Jenny and Robin in a misguided attempt to ease Nora's pain. O'Connor takes on the role of 'Other,' and situates himself as what could be described as abnormal – not only though his position as the third party with no concrete loyalties to any other character within the text of *Nightwood* but also through his own personal narrative throughout the text. By calling himself "the last woman left in the world," we see that the Doctor exists as the only "woman," one does not have the same "womanly" problems as other characters – particularly losses and wins in love. That is to say, Robin, Nora, and Jenny exist within a love triangle and suffer through romantic complications, while the Doctor exists free from sex and romance, thus subverting normative sexual desire. Although he tries to commiserate with Nora by classifying himself as a woman, he notes that he in fact is the "bearded woman," and cannot join in on the same gender solidarity that Nora may feel with Robin, or even Jenny. The connection he tries to make with Nora becomes lost through his assertion of being the bearded lady, which also might imply that there is no gender solidarity, and he is in fact really the only "woman" left.

Again, the Doctor does not align himself with any one particular character. Rather, he tries to ally himself with all of them, especially with the women. This task of ally-ship, however, becomes futile, because the Doctor at the same time sets himself apart from the other women by being the last woman on earth who also happens to have a beard. Although he plays the role of the ally when communicating with Nora, he secretly regards himself as the true woman. The singular fact that the Doctor calls himself a woman implies that womanhood is a slippery and

porous identity within *Nightwood* and, to claim it, one must only feel "womanly" to identify as one. The "rules" for being a woman in *Nightwood* dissolve nearly into nonexistence, and rely solely on one's own perception of oneself, which may also indicate that gender fluidity becomes much more important than rigid gender roles and structures or even biology. It's crucial to note as well that, by mentioning that he has a beard, the Doctor implies something interesting about standard male characteristics: that there are none. In the Doctor's case, having a beard, which is typically reserved for men, is a personal characteristic that he translates over into his womanhood. In this instance, this means that whatever characteristics one might see as "male" or "female" are no longer confined to just one or the other and in fact, can move fluidly, and simultaneously, between both.

O'Connor even seems to imply or hint at the fact that his own masculine existence was never meant to be: "am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been" (97). He knows that he simply "shouldn't be," and this leaves room for further extrapolation. The Doctor may be referring to his gender, trying to express that he too knows he exists as the wrong person at the wrong time. O'Connor "shouldn't be" a man – he should have been a woman. Just as with the comment about being the bearded lady, in this quotation the Doctor admits to his abnormality, and because of that acknowledges what could be considered inferior. Yet also, at the same time, he claims that that which is inferior or abnormal is, in fact, the true and essential gendered self. By subverting traditional femaleness and femininity, he himself proves the best example of "woman" in the text, because he believes that womanhood can only be achieved through queerness, and feels that he is the best example of queerness, because of his specifically fluid gender identity.

**The Doctor's Social Queerness in Relation to Community and Peers**

The Doctor's queerness can be seen not only through his self-identified gender, but also through his strange social identity. Throughout the entirety of *Nightwood*, the Doctor exists as several different kinds of person – many of which categorize him as Other. This helps us to discern Barnes's notion of identity: for her, identity is always multiple and shifting, as identity slides from the normative into the non-normative with great frequency. One identity marker that remains powerful for the Doctor is the fact that he is American. Few Americans exist in the novel, making room for the Doctor to be singled out because of his American status. What is so "Other" about being American in *Nightwood* is precisely that it is not at all an American novel, and instead is extremely European. Not only does the novel take place in Europe; there are constant references to European history and culture, and its characters are extremely invested in this which is stereotypically an un-American concern. For example, Felix displays a fascination with nobility and status. He calls himself Baron Volkbein, and because of his embarrassment about his own (secret) lower status, he has "an obsession for what he termed 'Old Europe:' aristocracy, nobility, royalty" (N 11). The Doctor does not concern himself with anything regarding status, and his lack of interest, and apathy towards, European nobility standards that other (European) characters have sets him even farther apart.

To be clear, the Doctor isn't the only American character in *Nightwood*. Crucially, Nora is American as well. For the time being, though, it's worth noting how the Doctor's American identity informs our sense of him standing alone in social structures. During "La Somnambule," the Doctor finds himself singled out for his Americanness during a conversation with the Baron: as the Baron says, "But [the Doctor is] American, so [he doesn't] believe" (N 44) in aristocracy and monarchy – ideas which the Baron tries to impress upon him. The importance in this

instance is that his Americanness acts as a fact of difference, although it exists as one of many facts that make the Doctor so different and foreign.

The Doctor replies to this statement with his own self-deprecation and admission of his own status as an outsider: “because I’m an American I believe anything, so I say beware!” (N 44). This declaration doesn’t appear to be forced, although it is coaxed out of him by the Baron’s comment. The Doctor understands that he is considered Other, and goes along with that categorization, presumably both to avoid confrontation and also perhaps to inadvertently keep himself marginalized. Here, the Doctor equates being American with the willingness to believe anything. This is another way of saying that he equates Americanness with a slipperiness of opinion, and an unwillingness to be pinned down, which is part of Barnes’s working definition of queerness within the text. He goes on to say, “In the king’s bed is always found, just before it becomes a museum piece, the droppings of the black sheep” (N 44). In this statement, the Doctor refers to himself as the black sheep, and, moreover, admits to what could be considered his own nonsense – in other words, his ‘droppings.’ The Doctor recognizes here that because he is an American, his opinion, which, again, can be slippery, is unwanted and doesn’t match up with the opinions of his European peers. This quotation implies that the Doctor knows that all he’s adding to this situation with Felix is nonsense that shouldn’t be taken very seriously, just as he implied that he shouldn’t be taken seriously because he is an American.

In the article “Dazzling Estrangement: Modernism, Queer Ekphrasis, and the Spatial Form of ‘*Nightwood*,’” Brian Glavey asserts that “Queerness short-circuits the regenerative, linear logic of the social, a logic that continually defers meaning and wholeness” (759). Applying this to *Nightwood*, we could say that the Doctor’s social queerness and estrangement from society only amplifies his fractured status and place within that society – and, through his

presence, fractures that society itself. The Doctor exhibits what Jane Marcus deems the abnormal, and what Brian Glavey describes as queerness, and so we can see that the Doctor has no set place within his community. In fact, he forces a rupture in the structure that would give that community any meaning or merit. Barnes's inclusion of queer love alone in her novel disrupts and destabilizes the narrative; her inclusion of the Doctor's character, a figure who exhibits queerness of various kinds, only fuels that.

On the surface, it appears that Barnes works to create a love story between three women, that just so happens to spiral out of control. By looking deeper at textual meanings, however, and by pressing harder on the figure of the Doctor specifically, we discover that Barnes creates a narrative that can be read as queer and that highlights the darker underbelly of the society that is being scrutinized. Glavey also asserts that "Barnes does not aestheticize courtship or anticipated pleasure but instead proliferates images of separation, violation, and anger" (758) throughout her novel. The Doctor stands as the exemplary image of "separation, violation, and anger." He finds himself separate from all of those around him; he is violated insofar as being invalidated for each part of his identity; and he represents a silent anger that can't be expressed in any other form in the narrative, aside from perhaps loosely through the character of Robin. Robin figures as the novel's largest anomaly, and although her character may exhibit abnormalities, she isn't what could be considered abnormal. That is to say, although she intentionally sets herself apart from many of the other characters, she isn't forcibly marginalized in any way, and purposely puts herself in the positions that she does. The Doctor is not afforded this luxury, as his isolation does not occur of his own free will.

**Why Barnes's Ideas Must Span Across Literary Works**

In my earlier biographical section, I made the argument that Barnes's life – both childhood and adulthood – featured their own elements of queerness and abnormality. Barnes could never separate herself from the parts, or the people, in her life that helped her live atypically, and because of that, these same queer people and these same queer threads bled into her professional work. To narrow the points that I've already posited, her work reflects womanhood and what it means to exist as a woman – socially, spiritually, or otherwise – and participate in queerness.

*The Book of Repulsive Women* presents female characters existing under the male gaze. Theorist Laura Mulvey examines this dichotomy, and it is through her critical perspective that I will analyze *The Book of Repulsive Women*. Throughout these poems, the male narrators appear to constantly be in control. However, there exists fleeting moments when traditional gender norms and patriarchal power dynamics fracture and break down through the responses of the female subjects in the poems. These women subvert male/female power dynamics both by avoiding interaction with, and by finding pleasure without intrusion from, their male counterparts. *The Book of Repulsive Women* seems to allow this queerness – in other words, the troubling of narrative and social norms – to seep into the text, and thus acts as a stepping stone for *Nightwood*, which Barnes wrote later. In other words, *Nightwood* constantly presents disruptions and fractures in sexuality and identity throughout its entirety, and perhaps wouldn't have been written that way had it not been for *The Book of Repulsive Women* coming before it.

**Voyeurism as Laura Mulvey Explains It Applied to *The Book of Repulsive Women***

*The Book of Repulsive Women*, written through the lens of the male gaze, focuses on the effects of the gaze on the subjects of Barnes's poems, who are all women. In this, and the

following subsection, I offer a close reading of a poem that exhibits a form of sexual deviance and queerness in relation to patriarchal power dynamics. Although the voyeurs embody the sexual deviance, it is the female character who expresses queerness in her quest to challenge the male gaze and unknowingly refuse to participate in the voyeurs' fantasy.

According to Mulvey, men attempt to reduce the power of woman by turning her into an icon displayed for the male gaze, and the "enjoyment of men" (64). This is how avenues of escape for the male unconscious appear, one of which is voyeurism, and voyeurism heavily relies on the woman's transformation into an icon. In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey states that "preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma" (64), or investigating the woman to debunk her mystery, is the first part of voyeurism. Her mystery becomes debunked when the man who looks at her twists her image into something that he finds pleasurable. This investigation occurs through the "looking" aspect of voyeurism, as the voyeur examines and scrutinizes the woman. When unraveling the woman, the man tries to dismantle her power, as he perceives her as an oppositional force. The attempt to lessen her perceived threat to him produces two separate results: the first is that the woman becomes an "object," or "image" that the man finds pleasurable and "ideal," and the second is that she subsequently appears much less threatening, and because of this the man's fear dissipates.

In the poem "Seen From the 'L,'" a group of unknown voyeurs watch and analyze a woman, while they (the men) sit inside a train and recount their experience. To make the woman appear pleasurable and less threatening, the group participates in the voyeurism Mulvey describes. Because the poem is written from the perspective of the male gaze, it is fitting that they partake in this method to ease their fear of woman. In the first stanza, they introduce their subject:

So she stands – nude – stretching dully

Two amber combs loll through her hair

A vague molested carpet pitches

Down the dusty length of stair.

She does not see, she does not care

It's always there. (1-6)

Although the imagined male narrators state that her action is done "dully," they point out the naked female figure, which makes the image of her more pleasurable for male "consumption," and more pleasing for them to view in general. It's fitting that the word "nude" becomes singled out, between the hyphens, similar to the way in which the woman becomes singled out by the voyeurs, as the men begin to obsess over her to ease their fear. Because she is described as "dull," one can infer that she lacks liveliness, and thus becomes more of an object in the eyes of the voyeurs. With less animation in her movements the voyeurs can objectify her more easily, as she becomes malleable for male transformation into an object of pleasure. She becomes more pleasurable, and more reassuring, because the voyeurs have turned her into their ideal image of woman. The ideal woman, in the eyes of the voyeurs, would be obedient, non-threatening, and passive. The woman also lacks her own dialogue – and thus, readers perceive her in the same manner as the voyeurs.

**Mulvey's Concept of Voyeurism, as it Develops into Sadism**

Because voyeurism contains elements of emotional, as well as sometimes physical, punishment, it becomes associated with sadism – the receiving of pleasure from causing pain. This often involves humiliation and a mix of physical and emotional abuse. Mulvey explains the sadistic aspect of voyeurism as "the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object" (64),

and in this case, the guilty “object” is the woman. In “Seen from the ‘L,’” the female subject’s punishment in the voyeurs’ fantasy figure as molestation and physical violence: “A vague molested carpet pitches / Down the dusty length of stair” (3-4). As previously mentioned, because the female subject in the poem acts dully, one can infer that she escapes performing for the voyeurs. She simply stands, and stretches, and unwittingly avoids engagement with or performance for the voyeurs. She remains unaware of the voyeurs watching her, which also accounts for her lack of active recognition of them. Because she is unresponsive, she is imagined by the voyeurs to be down a flight of stairs, which one considers part of her “punishment.”

The sadistic element that Mulvey addresses in her essay extends even further within this stanza, as emotional abuse becomes incorporated into the punishment. After the physical violence, the voyeurs instantly write the woman off. That in turn makes her disposable to them. The voyeurs say that “She does not see, she does not care” (5), and this translates to both a lack of regard for her by the voyeurs, as well as a lack of regard for herself. The reader does not have access to this woman’s interiority, nor does she have any dialogue, as previously mentioned, so it becomes impossible to grasp her sentiments. Presumably, the woman is not aware of the voyeurs watching her, and this becomes part of their fantasy. If the woman were aware of being looked at, we can assume her reactions would be negative. The voyeurs provide an image of her as vague and unfeeling, presumably with regard to their imagined molestation of her. This carelessness, as interpreted by the voyeurs, only perpetuates the cycle of punishment and sadism. The woman, who is the subject of the poem, becomes physically punished in the fantasy because of her lack of engagement with, and even recognition of, the voyeurs. They then proceed to subject her to emotional punishment, blaming her for her mannerisms and her own imaginary assault (which they perpetrated), all the while circling back to her perceived coldness.

Sadism, as it evolves into voyeurism, works best, Mulvey argues, when set inside the confines of narrative through film, literature, or any other narrative-based format. As Mulvey asserts, "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end" (64). In other words, sadism must be situated in a series of events, beginning with causing harm to someone and then on to the next part until the end of the punishment is finally reached. Sadism has a structured format that has a begin, middle, and end, and cannot exist outside of that format. The queerness represented in this poem, and my subsequent analysis, exists as the female subject's rejection of patriarchal power that is being impressed upon her by the voyeurs, although this rejection is fleeting, and she ends up being punished for her lack of responsive. Thus, the woman breaks out of traditional male/female dynamics, if only for a moment, to assert her own power, and a form of Barnes's queerness.

**Mulvey on the Female Gaze and Woman Experiencing Pleasure**

In the poem "To a Cabaret Dancer," queerness is represented through the transformation of the male gaze into the female gaze. Again, just as in the other poems within *The Book of Repulsive Women*, queerness manifests itself through the fracturing of male/female patriarchal dynamics. The disruption within the narrative – which is the female subject finding pleasure through her own act of looking – destabilizes traditional gender norms which in turn can be labeled as a form of queerness that Barnes sought to implement within her literary works. Although the cabaret dancer imperfectly, and only momentarily, succeeds in subverting this power dynamic, this example still remains powerful in Barnes's overall quest to weave queerness into her work.

While the entirety of Mulvey's essay focuses on the perspective of the male and the male gaze, she implies the existence of a female gaze – that is to say, a female perspective that pushes back against the male one. A female gaze would allow the woman to experience a different, more complex form of pleasure from that of her male counterpart, and could do so through the act of looking. Her experiences of pleasure become more complex, this pleasure does not arise out of fear and does not involve the humiliation or involvement of anyone else. This implies that the woman can read herself from a different place than the one offered by the dominant male gaze. In the third section of her essay, Mulvey asserts, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (62), which refers to who "looks" and who is "looked at," or who is experiencing pleasure and who becomes the pleasure "object." In her model, the male becomes the active viewer and the female becomes the passive "object." Yet, by subverting the male gaze and looking herself, the woman becomes able to find her own form of pleasure – a logical extension from Mulvey's original theories.

In "To a Cabaret Dancer," a group of voyeurs watch a cabaret dancer as she builds her career, only to inflict the punishment of death onto her later in the poem. This is the cycle of Mulvey's voyeurism being put into play, although the woman in "To a Cabaret Dancer" breaks out of her patriarchal positioning to some extent. The cabaret dancer attempts to capture her own form of pleasure through her own act of looking:

> She came with laughter wide and calm;
>
> And splendid grace;
>
> And looked between the lights and wine
>
> For one fine face (5-8)

Here, the woman finds herself looked at constantly because of her profession as dancer, but she also finds pleasure in her own ability to look; she subverts the male gaze and gains power from it. The woman looks for a “fine face” in the crowd, while being looked at herself. So, just as the male gaze targets her, her own gaze targets the male gazer back. Although the woman in the poem “came with laughter,” she hasn’t yet found pleasure, though she tries. She looks “for one fine face,” thus implying that most of the faces looking back at her aren’t fine: most of the faces are not what she hopes for.

Despite how the discovery of “one fine face” becomes her goal, the speaker of the poem suggests that there are not any for her. In the following stanza, the speaker makes a point that her efforts are useless:

> And found life only passion wide
>
> ‘Twixt mouth and wine.
>
> She ceased to search, and growing wise
>
> Became less fine. (9-12)

Pleasure can only be experienced by the others who are looking (and they are the men) because passion can only be found in relation to them. Eventually, she stops searching for her own pleasure, though she attempts to find it by looking between “the lights and wine,” in the previous stanza. This looking and experiencing of pleasure again exhibits what Mulvey means by voyeurism. The speaker asserts that this giving up means that she has grown wise. Yet that cannot be the case, since he berates her. She suddenly becomes “less fine,” after she ceases her search for pleasure in looking. That stanza then becomes the introduction to the subsequent, and final, punishment that ends the poem.

## Critical Summary and Conclusion on the Intersection Between *The Book of Repulsive Women* and *Nightwood*

Although queerness and abnormality manifest themselves differently in *The Book of Repulsive Women* than they have in the characters of *Nightwood*, they still exist in Barnes's earlier chapbook. To rephrase my previous arguments, queerness works in Barnes as the rupturing of gender, sexual, and identity norms; in her poetry the shift from the male to the female gaze ruptures patriarchal power dynamics between the women characters and the men who try to control them. Queerness has existed throughout Barnes's various literary works, just presented in different forms within/among different narratives.

# CHAPTER IV. Closing Statement

I first began reading *Nightwood* in the spring of 2018 and, upon several readings, was struck by how queer the text seemed to be. Soon thereafter, I made the decision to devote my entire senior project to *Nightwood* and the narrow claim that *Nightwood* is a queer text, that it normalizes the abnormal. During the writing of this essay, however, was the creation of the definition of queerness that I have used. It feels expansive and all encompassing, as though it extends farther outside of *Nightwood*, into other pieces of literature and even into everyday experiences in society. I feel that this concrete definition is an integral product of the writing of this essay that I can now carry on to other parts of my life.

The most crucial element of this entire project that I learned is that the queerness and aspects of queerness that *Nightwood* presents aren't necessarily new concepts, and have been around for even longer than the novel has. Gender fluidity, sexual queerness, and the disruption of traditional and binary infrastructures, to name a few facets of my working definition of queerness, are ideas and practices that have their place not only in literature, but in our broader society as a whole. For example, in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, written in the modernist era just like *Nightwood*, the main character lives out the two halves of his life as opposite genders – initially as a man and then later on as a woman, disrupting traditional gender norms in the process. Also, in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss," both also modernist fiction, the main characters experience an unfamiliar queer desire that carries on throughout the narrative of the respective texts.

To say that I am the first to discover these themes in *Nightwood*, or in modernist literature more generally, would be false. I do believe, however, that perhaps I have helped to solidify an already forming picture of queerness, specifically in *Nightwood*, that can then be

looked at in the more general context of both literature and our society. I feel extremely grateful for having had the opportunity to read *Nightwood*, and also to Djuna Barnes, who took the time to write such a daring, and queer, novel.

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