

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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November 24, 2025. Barnes (3).

reminders: paper 2

- ▶ preliminary writing on paper 2 due in class Dec. 3
- ▶ paper 2 due Dec. 9 at 10 p.m.
- ▶ motive, argument, evidence, and evidence
 - ▶ quote and analyze

review

- ▶ what genre is *Nightwood*?
 - ▶ (genres shape meaning through expectations)
 - ▶ a “modernist masterpiece”: well, maybe
 - ▶ a “lesbian novel”? Really?
 - ▶ a romance? Please.
- ▶ the circus “meet-cute” as a “queer” romantic scene
- ▶ romance generically promises stable social integration: not so here
 - ▶ Nora and Robin are disappointed...but why?
 - ▶ Robin sleepwalks away....but why?
 - ▶ Jenny steals her away...but why?
 - ▶ The Doctor thinks they lack religion...maybe?

queer theory (extra-short version)

That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunts, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or...people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 8, [JSTOR](#); ellipsis in original.

that word

Barnes's prose style is “queer” in multiple senses but particularly in its refusal of any easy coupling of the label and the labeled, dominant culture's most effective tool for categorizing and quarantining its misfits and thereby eliminating difference.

Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 240.

objectification won't get you far

In the passage of their lives together every object in the garden, every item in the house, every word they spoke, attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humours. There were circus chairs, wooden horses bought from a ring of an old merry-go-round, venetian chandeliers from the Flea Fair, stage-drops from Munich, cherubim from Vienna, ecclesiastical hangings from Rome, a spinet from England, and a miscellaneous collection of music boxes from many countries; such was the museum of their encounter, as Felix's hearsay house had been testimony of the age when his father had lived with his mother. (61)

smash!

“I would find her standing in the middle of the room in boy’s clothes, rocking from foot to foot, holding the doll she had given us—‘our child’—high above her head, as if she would cast it down, a look of fury on her face. And one time....she picked up the doll and hurled it to the floor and put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it; and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor.” (157)

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“Do you think that Robin had no right to fight you with her only weapon?” (157)

the end

- ▶ What does *this* ending resolve? Use a single passage from “The Possessed” to show how the ending reflects back on a running problem of the novel.

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at the exact moment Nora's body struck the wood (179)

...

- ▶ united by dog
- ▶ church icons
- ▶ bodies in motion

...

someone call a doctor

“But,” Nora said, “I never thought of the night as a life at all—I’ve never lived it—why did she?”

“I’m telling you of French nights at the moment,” the doctor went on, “and why we all go into them.” (88)

“Sometimes I don’t know why I talk to you. You’re so like a child; then again I know well enough.”

“Speaking of children—and thanks for the compliment—take, for instance, the case of Don Anticolo, the young tenor from Beirut—he dipped down into his pelvis for his Wagner and plunged to his breast pit for his Verdi—” (141–42)

“You must say something, Oh, God, say something!”

“Stop it! Stop it!” he cried. “Stop screaming! Put your hands down! You were a ‘good woman,’ and so a bitch on a high plane, the only one able to kill yourself and Robin!” (155)

“Oh,” he cried. “A broken heart have you! I have falling arches, flying

“Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night, about her, about Felix, about Robin.”

Barnes's draft, according to Cheryl Plumb, ed., *Nightwood*, 198n69.22.

“Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night.” (86)

someone call a doctor (of philosophy)

It is the whole pattern that they [the characters] form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest. ... The book is not a psychopathic study...the deeper design is that of the human misery and bondage which is universal.

T.S. Eliot, introduction to *Nightwood*, xxi.

Nightwood lacks a narrative structure in the ordinary sense....And these chapters are knit together, not by the progress of any action—either narrative action, or, as in a stream-of-consciousness novel, the flow of experience—but by the continual reference and cross-reference of images and symbols that must be referred to each other spatially throughout the time-act of reading.

Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945), in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963), 31.

1892	Djuna Barnes b. upstate NY
1912	art classes at the Pratt Institute; Greenwich Village life
1913	reporting, little magazine publications
1915	<i>The Book of Repulsive Women</i> (New York: Bruno Chap Books)
1919	acting and writing with the Provincetown Players
1921	moves to Paris; marginal involvement with "Paris-Lesbos"
1922	"James Joyce," interview in <i>Vanity Fair</i>
1928	<i>Ryder</i> (New York: Liveright): 18th-c. pastiche Radclyffe Hall's <i>Well of Loneliness</i> banned in England
1932	works on "Nightwood" in England, at Peggy Guggenheim's Hayford Hall
1933	Hitler achieves total control of Germany; intensified persecution of homosexuals
1936	<i>Nightwood</i> (London: Faber & Faber)
1937	<i>Nightwood</i> , introduction by T.S. Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Brace)
1938	Austria annexed by Germany
1939	World War II begins
1940	moves back to Greenwich Village: lives reclusively
1952	sells proof sheets of <i>Ulysses</i> (a gift from J) to Harvard for \$125
1982	d.

how to come after

A copy of a book, bound in blue and named *Ulysses*, appeared in the window of Sylvia Beach's bookshop, Shakespeare & Co. Expatriate pens stood still.... This time writers were floored. They wept in joy and copied in despair. Some even returned home deflated and yet proud.

Barnes, "Lament for the Left Bank," *Town and Country* (December 1941), 138.

"like a man waiting at a toilet door for someone inside who had decided to read the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*" (136)

Nora said "Ah!" with the intolerable automatism of the last "ah!" in a body struck at the moment of its final breath. (70)

nope

“What people! All queer in a terrible way. There were a couple of queer good people once in this world—but none of you,” he said, addressing the room, “will ever know them.” (171)

Nightwood does indeed undo grand themes of history and narrative, but it does so not to alter or invert the terms of representation for minority sexual communities. It instead attempts to forgo what Barnes perceived to be the suffocation of communal representation all together. In its myriad forms, her antisapphic modernism fails to exhibit the history of a pathologized queer underworld. It obliquely illuminates how fantastic underworlds help nonnormative subjects escape the imperative to embrace a collective sexual history by putting a stranglehold on this pervasive ideal.

Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 155.

citizens of the world

Here he had neither to be capable nor alien. He became for a little while a part of their splendid and reeking falsification. (14)

There entered with Robin a company unaware. Sometimes it rang clear in the songs she sang, sometimes Italian, sometimes French or German, songs of the people, debased and haunting, songs that Nora had never heard before, or that she had never heard in company with Robin. (63)

next

- ▶ Hurston, at least through 109.