

The following slides are by Cassandra Schiffman.

Early Twentieth Century Fiction

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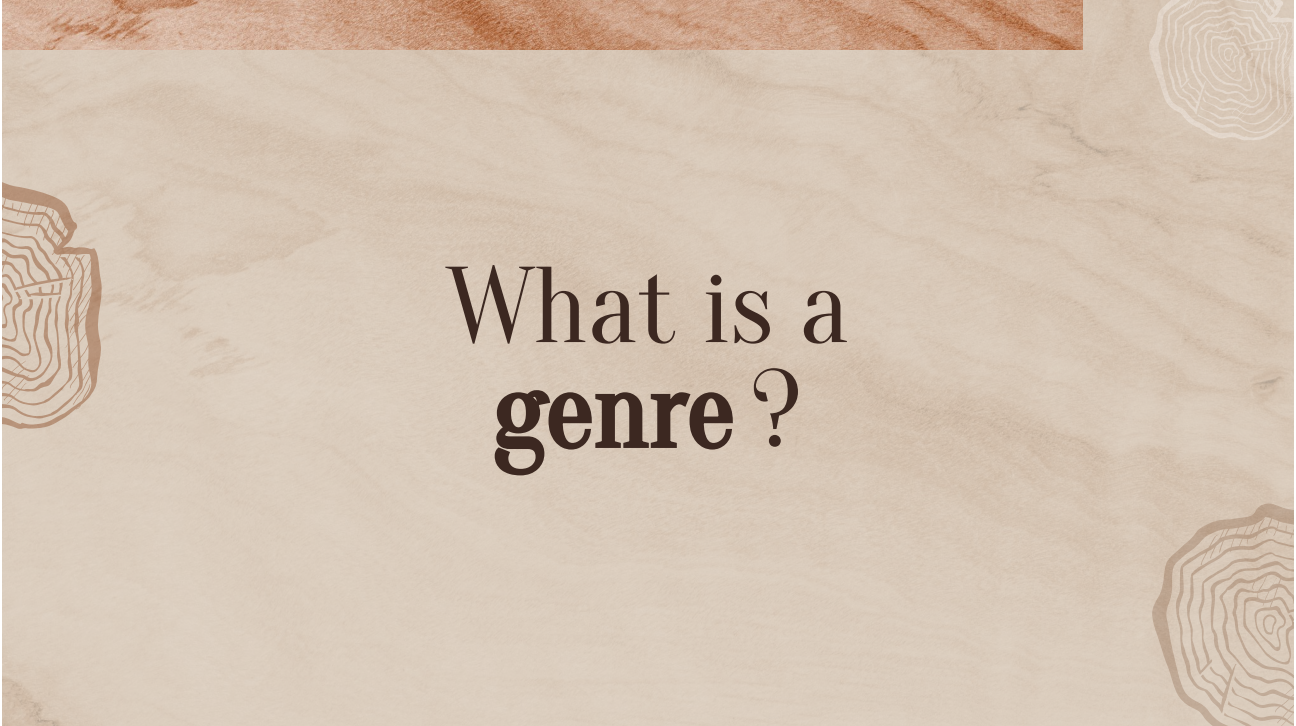
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November 19th – Nightwood, Day Two.

Review

- *Nightwood* is an **unsettling and difficult novel**, both in terms of its form and its themes; pay attention to Barnes' use of strange similes and catachresis throughout the text
- Barnes sketches a landscape that is strange and often unpleasant at the level of **tone and affect** (What's "wonderful" about Mademoiselle Basquette?)
- So far, *Nightwood*'s characters impress us as **unsympathetic and disconnected**, both from one another and to the "normal" human world. This seems to have something (what?) to do with variously non-normative identities re: gender, sexuality, desire, and ethnicity

The background is a light beige color with a subtle wood grain texture. There are three stylized illustrations of tree cross-sections: one on the left side, one in the top right corner, and one in the bottom right corner. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

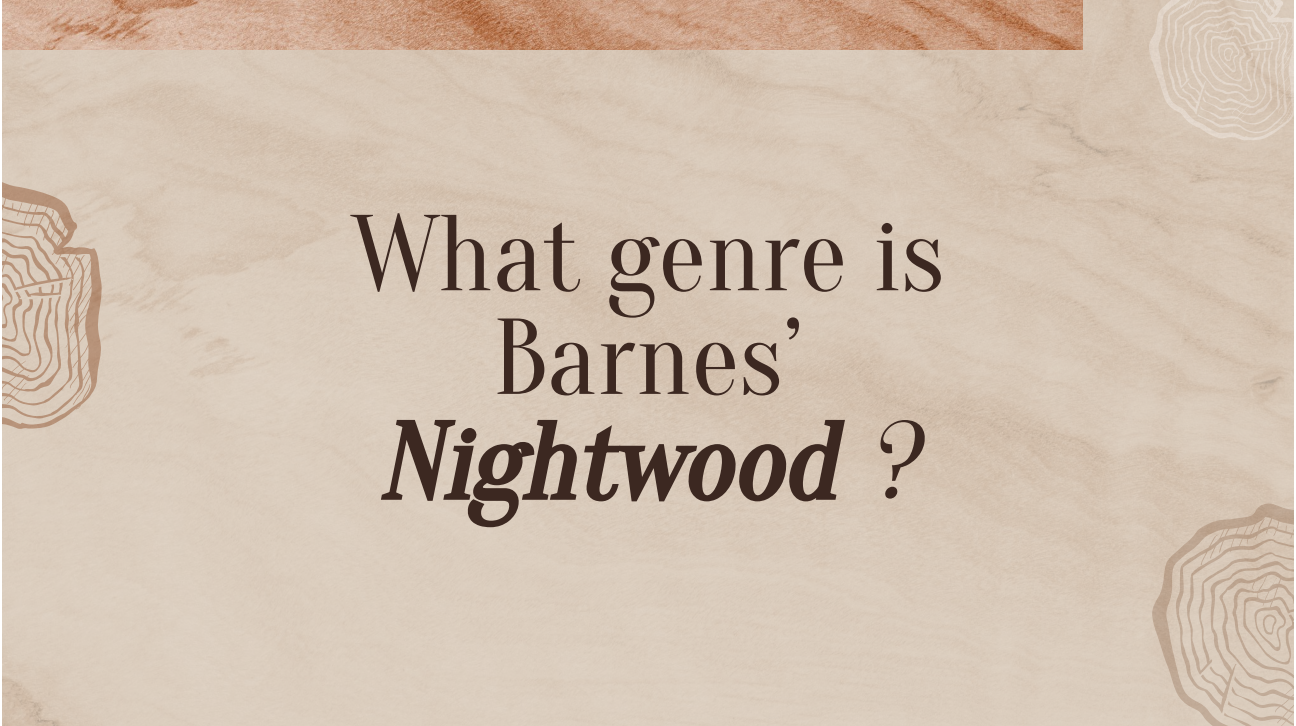
What is a
genre ?

So, what is a genre, technically?

- Per John Frow, genre is “a set of **conventional** and **highly organized constraints** on the production and interpretation of meaning [in a given text or set of texts]...its structuring effects are productive of meaning; they shape and guide, in the way that a builder’s form gives shape to a pour of concrete, or a sculptor’s mould shapes and gives structure to its materials” (*Genre*, p. 10)
- For our purposes, genre can be loosely described **as a tool for categorizing and interpreting texts based on shared features** which shapes how we understand its content, especially in terms of tone, irony, and intent



“She would have liked always to have had a baby. She was happiest carrying one in her arms. Then people might say she was tyrannical, domineering, masterful, if they chose, she did not mind.”

The background is a light beige, textured surface resembling aged paper or wood grain. There are four circular cross-sections of tree trunks, showing concentric growth rings, positioned at the corners: top-left, top-right, bottom-left, and bottom-right. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

What genre is
Barnes'
Nightwood ?

Nightwood is...

- A novel! (T.S. Eliot agrees)
- A work of fiction; per Eliot, “a work of creative imagination, not a philosophical treatise” (*Nightwood*, p. xxii)
- A work of “literary” fiction or “art novel” (i.e. not “genre” fiction)
- A (late) Modernist text
- A *semi*-autobiographical or autofictional novel
- A work of lesbian/queer literature
- A ...**romance**?

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barnes, Djuna.

Nightwood / Djuna Barnes ; preface by Jeanette Winterson ; introduction by T. S. Eliot.

p. cm. — (New Directions paperbook ; 1049)

“A New Directions Book.”

Originally published: New York : New Directions, 1946. With new preface.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8112-1671-5 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8112-1671-3 (alk. paper)

1. Lesbians—Fiction. 2. Sex addicts—Fiction. 3. Psychological fiction.
I. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888–1965. II. Title.

PS3503.A614N5 2006

813'.52—dc22

2006019359

The Library of Congress (sort of) tags works by genre; note *Nightwood*'s labels for the 2016 New Directions paperback edition above!

The Love Story Strikes Again

- “Romance” is a literary genre that follows the development of one or more love stories, often between a focalizing heroine and her male love interest
- Typically, a romance story has a happy ending that allows the protagonist to symbolically achieve some marker of the good life
 - Think back to “Vasantica,” where Vasantica’s marriage to Rama Rao gives her financial security and greater access to markers of English cultural prestige like tennis and *Othello* (in addition to love, in theory)
- Romance is often viewed as a **socially conservative genre** in the sense that it is invested in reinforcing extant norms re: gender, sexuality, race, class, etc.

Queer? Romance? Pt. 1: “Lady, Your Pardon”

- Is the romance (ca. 1937) necessarily conservative in its approach to gender and sexuality? Think back to Georgette Heyer’s love story “Lady, Your Pardon,”
- Heyer’s story is pretty conventional relative to our working definition – we’ve got a central love story and a happy ending, although there are complications...
 - Our focalizing character in this story is a man (Sir Henry) and our heroine (Deborah) is initially courting his younger cousin – but it all works out in the end!
- **Midterm recap:** What’s ironic about the passage I’ve quoted from Heyer’s story? Who is Mr. Varley?

“Furthermore,” said Mr. Varley, still in that cold voice of anger, “my sister would have you know that even a gamester’s daughter may have not only reputation, but honor. She is not to be bought, sir! Had you known that there was a man behind her, I daresay you might have hesitated before making her an offer which was as unnecessary as it was insulting!”

“You wrong me,” said Sir Henry amiably.

A contemptuous laugh broke from Mr. Varley. He shrugged his shoulders, and replied: “You would naturally say as much.”

“You know, you are fast becoming offensive,” said Sir Henry.

“It’s my intention. Do you expect me to apologise?” flashed Mr. Varley.

Ladies, Pardons

- There's definitely *something* going on with respect to normative understandings of gender as a stable condition attached to insurmountable social roles
 - Recall that there are ways in which Deborah's depiction as a "very tall...strapping wench" is eroticized, and Sir Henry's focalizing role makes Deborah (not Henry) the focus of the reader's erotic gaze
- Still, the story ends with a proposal – which is exactly *why* it can get away with these non-normative elements
 - Genre allows for progressive resistance **only to a point** here; Deborah can only move through the world as a man while in pursuit of her happy heterosexual ending



Cover of the First
Edition of *Faro's
Daughter*, c/o [Wikipedia](#)

Queer? Romance? Pt. 2: *Nightwood*

- A bit of a fake-out: *Nightwood* isn't a romance novel
- But! The chapters we read for today's class are self-consciously invested in many of the same social narratives around love, sex, and courtship norms that the romance plays (mostly) straight

“Nora went [to the circus] alone. She came into the circle of the ring taking her place in the front row...A girl sitting beside Nora took out a cigarette and lit it; her hands shook and Nora turned to look at her; she looked at her suddenly because the animals, going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at that point. They did not seem to see the girl, but as their dusty eyes moved past, the orbit of their light seemed to turn on her. At that moment Nora turned”
(*Nightwood*, p. 59).



The Meet Cute: Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)

and on the tide of sound she stepped into the room to collide amusingly with the tall man.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she laughed, crinkling her eyes up at him. She had to bend her head far back to see his face because he was so tall. Then all she saw was his eyes, dark, angry. “Oh,” she said again.

The Meet Cute: Gertrude Schalk's “Love in a Penthouse” (1931)

Love in the Time of Nora's "Salon"

- Love poses a problem for Nora in "Night Watch," as it does for many of the characters in *Nightwood* – but the problem in question isn't (or isn't just) that she's a lesbian in a homophobic society (even though that is roughly true)
- What kind(s) of love haunt Nora at the beginning of this chapter?

"Nora had the face of all people who love the people – a face that would be evil when she found out that to love without criticism is to be betrayed. Nora robbed herself for everyone; incapable of giving herself warning, she was continually turning about to find herself diminished. Wandering people the world over found her profitable in that she could be sold for a price forever, for she carried her betrayal money in her own pocket. Those who love everything are despised by everything" (*Nightwood*, p. 57).

In Love = Of The World, For Good?

- Not unlike Vasantica's marriage or Sir Henry's proposal, Nora's love + cohabitation with Robin initially promises her a stable integration in her social world

“The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem.

Then she met Robin.” (*Nightwood*, p. 59).

“Love becomes the deposit of the heart, analogous in all degrees to the ‘findings’ in a tomb. As in one will be charted the taken place of the body, the raiment, the utensils necessary to its other life, so in the heart of the lover will be traced, as an indelible shadow, that which he loves. In Nora’s heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora’s blood. Thus the body of Robin could never be unloved, corrupt or put away. Robin was now beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her.” (*Nightwood*, pps. 61-62).

Discussion: What Goes Wrong?

Across “Night Watch” and “The Squatter,” several characters offer some account of why Nora and Robin’s romance doesn’t work from a generic standpoint – that is to say, why love breaks down *and* fails to result in stable material or social benefits for our protagonist(s). In groups, consider what your assigned character **says** or **does** that helps us to explain this failure, drawing on **at least one specific passage** from these two chapters. What forces (literal or symbolic/metaphorical) interfere with Nora and Robin’s love story? What problem(s) can love not solve in this novel? Focus on...

- **Groups 1 + 2:** Robin Vote
- **Groups 3 + 4:** Dr. O’Connor
- **Groups 5 + 6:** Jenny Petherbridge

Queer? Romance? Pt. 3: Who's Afraid of Genre?

- *Nightwood* isn't a romance novel per se, but it makes use of generic elements to construct a particular view of a social world where connection fails
- The text's queer characters heighten our awareness of these failures, in part because they are more likely to be excluded from the mainstream social space
- Still, *Nightwood* shows us a world where love won't save you *even if you're straight*
 - **Poor Felix:** "Felix had each day the sorrow born with him; for the rest, he pretended that he noticed nothing. Robin was almost never home; he did not know how to inquire for her." (*Nightwood*, p. 53)

The Object of My Affections

- One way we might explain this is as a critique of materialism and/or consumerism, particularly in the 1920s (note that Nora and Robin meet in 1923)
- Pulp love stories we looked are embedded within these structures of modern capitalism, as we noted in the advertisements that make up much of their paratext (boilers, faucets, and...babies?)

“In a far corner, as usual, Nanette held court with half a dozen attentive men surrounding her. She lounged in a **specially made blue velvet chair** that was a perfect frame for her golden beauty. To-night, clad in a **gold tissue hostess pajama ensemble**, she was superb. Even Martha, accustomed as she was to seeing her in all her gorgeous costumes, gasped a little” (“Love in a Penthouse,” 25).





Objecting on Principle

- Barnes' version of Modernism recreates an association between intimacy/desirability and material objects, but there are complications
- Shared objects form the basis for an intimacy that is curtailed and unsustainable, as models from the previous generation demonstrate

“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” (*Nightwood*, p. 61).



Things Fall Apart...

- Jenny's function is not just to seduce Robin and ruin the romance plot but also to show us that this object-oriented model of Modern intimacy is insufficient and fallible

“Her walls, her cupboards, her bureaux, were teeming with second-hand dealings with life. It takes a bold and authentic robber to get first-hand plunder. Someone else's marriage ring was on her finger; the photograph taken of Robin for Nora sat upon her table. The books in her library were other people's selections. She lived among her own things like a visitor to a room kept ‘exactly as it was when–’” (*Nightwood*, p. 72).

“When she fell in love it was with a perfect fury of accumulated dishonesty; she became instantly a dealer in second-hand and therefore incalculable emotions. As, from the solid archives of usage, she had stolen or appropriated the dignity of speech, so she appropriated the most passionate love that she knew, Nora's for Robin. She was a ‘squatter’ by instinct.” (*Nightwood*, p. 74-75).

Sometimes, you just have to move on

- *Nightwood* isn't really a novel that is interested in offering solutions for the problems of modernity it depicts
- Motion/movement/traversals of space and time offer a different account of how the queer or otherwise alienated modern subject might navigate the world
 - Often associated with violence and/or pain, but ultimately productive – take a look at the carriage scene at the end of “The Squatter”

“Then Jenny struck Robin, scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking, clutching and crying. Slowly the blood began to run down Robin’s cheeks, and as Jenny struck repeatedly Robin began to go forward as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves...The carriage at this moment drew smartly up into the *rue du Cherche-Midi*. Robin jumped before the carriage stopped, but Jenny was close behind her, following her as far as the garden. It was not long after this that Nora and Robin separated; a little later Jenny and Robin sailed for America” (*Nightwood*, p. 83).

Speaking of moving on:

For next class, please finish *Nightwood* and take a look at T. S. Eliot's preface to the novel if you haven't already (pps. xvii-xxiii in the New Directions paperback). Note that we will meet on Monday as usual, but we will not meet on Wednesday (11/26), which is a Rutgers Friday!

