

Djuna Barnes



(1892-1982)

### INTRODUCTION

Djuna Barnes was a journalist, poet and playwright best known for *Nightwood* (1936), a short novel with lesbian themes set in Paris during the 1920s--ranked 12 of the top 100 gay books by The Publishing Triangle in 1999. She was a sponsor of the Theatre Guild, contributed to *The Little Review* and wrote three experimental plays--*Three from the Earth*, *An Irish Triangle* and *Kurzy from the Sea*--produced in 1919-20 by the Provincetown Players. She published *A Book* in 1923, a collection of stories, plays and verses. In 1928 her novel *Ryder* was expurgated for the American edition. In 1936 she persuaded T.S. Eliot--the most influential literary figure in the world at that time--to write an introduction to *Nightwood*, elevating her reputation. He edited the manuscript to soften language pertaining to sex and religion, but the original was published by Dalkey Archive in 1995.

After her career peaked, Barnes became ill and lived for over 40 years as a bitter alcoholic recluse in Greenwich Village, New York. When the feminist bookstore Djuna Books opened in the Village, Barnes demanded that the name be changed. Over 20 years after *Nightwood*, her closet drama *The Antiphon* (1958) revived interest in her work. The young writer Carson McCullers came to pay homage and camped on her doorstep until Barnes yelled down, "Whoever is ringing this bell, please go the hell away!" Her neighbor the poet e.e. cummings would check on her occasionally, yelling out his window, "Are you still alive, Djuna?"

Ernest Hemingway alluded to Barnes and to Natalie Barney, who was known among expatriates in Paris in the 1920s as the "Popess of Lesbos," by naming the protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) Jake Barnes, a somewhat androgynous sexual outsider because he was rendered impotent when wounded in WWI. Djuna Barnes and Hemingway were among regular guests of Barney at her salon in the rue Jacob. Barnes also had an attractive wit, once remarking to a hyperactive member of her circle in Paris, "You would be marvelous company slightly stunned."

### *Nightwood* (1936)

*Nightwood* is about five characters in the artistic underground of Paris, one of them Barnes herself. It remains a highly regarded modern novel, especially among writers, mainly for its Left Bank subject matter and poetic style. Barnes knew and studied James Joyce and was influenced by his Modernist techniques in *Ulysses* (1922). *Nightwood* exhibits both Modernist features and characteristics of Postmodernism ahead of its time: fragmentary with a nightmarish atmosphere, characters vaguely realized, dehumanized by self-indulgence and disintegrating. The style is so artful it mutes dramatic intensity and distances the reader from the characters, like a water color painting of figures at night embracing under streetlights a block away. William Burroughs called it "one of the great books of the twentieth century" and Dylan Thomas considered it "one of the three great prose books ever written by a woman."

Michael Hollister

