

## ANALYSIS

### *Nightwood*



Djuna Barnes

(1892-1982)

“It took me, with this book, some time to come to an appreciation of its meaning as a whole... To say that *Nightwood* will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it.... When I first read the book I found the opening movement rather slow and dragging, until the appearance of the doctor.... The book is not simply a collection of individual portraits; the characters are all knotted together, as people are in real life, by what we may call chance or destiny, rather than by deliberate choice of each other’s company: it is the whole pattern that they form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest.... To regard this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks is not only to miss the point, but to confirm our wills and harden our hearts in an inveterate sin of pride.... What I would leave the reader prepared to find is the great achievement of a style, the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterization, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy.”

T. S. Eliot  
Introduction  
*Nightwood* (1937)

“If genius is perfection wrought out of anguish and pain and intellectual flagellation, then Djuna Barnes’s novel *Nightwood* is a book of genius. In language, in philosophy, in the story it unfolds, she has woven a dark tapestry of spiritual and emotional disintegration whose threads never outrage each other in clashing disharmony. No gayety and no light falls upon her pattern, which is not to say that her pages are devoid of laughter or humor. For humor she has in abundance but it runs deep in hidden places and the laughter it evokes is tragic. If she has been ruthless and cruel to herself in writing this book out of the rich essence of her knowledge and her thinking and her experience, she has the compensating reward of compelling the thoughtful reader into attention to what she has to say and her manner of saying it. Her prose is lyrical to a degree where it seems of another age and another world but at the same time it does not lose kinship with the earthiness of humans.”

Rose C. Field  
*New York Herald Tribune*  
(7 March 1937) 4

“In her novel [*Nightwood*] poetry is the bloodstream of the universal organism, a poetry that derives its coherence from the meeting of kindred spirits. The ‘alien and external’ are, more than ever, props; they form the hard rock on which Miss Barnes’s metaphysically minded characters stand and let their words soar. The story of the novel is like the biological routine of the body; it is the pattern of life, something that cannot be avoided, but it has the function of a spring, and nothing more. It is in their release from mere sensation, or rather the expression of such an attempted release, that Miss Barnes’s characters have their being.”

Alfred Kazin  
*New York Times*  
(7 March 1937) 6

“[In *Nightwood*] the web of entanglement is naturally and inevitably woven, and the action progresses powerfully to its horrible conclusion. Though the characters are plainly and obtrusively psychopaths, the quality of the book does not derive from that particular, which is simply the mechanism of the tragedy, but from the force and distinction of Miss Barnes’s writing. Her style is richly poetic; sometimes it becomes oppressive from a too conscious refinement of perception and language, but for the most part her wit and passion rescue it from its faults. In some passages the intensity of pity and terror effects something akin to genuine catharsis; in other words, where the scope of implication contracts to the particular dilemma of the characters, a kind of hysteria results that leaves the reader merely horrified.”

Philip Horton  
*New Republic*  
(31 March 1937) 247

“This [writer] stares away from her in a rigor of horror, probing distance with fixed eyes in the hope that it will yield a niche where the contemporary mind, trained on distrust and disgust, can lose itself in stretches of time beyond our time.... For brilliance and formal beauty few novels of any age can compare with it [*Nightwood*]. But one must also say how desperate it is.”

Mark Van Doren  
*Nation*  
(3 April 1937) 382-3

“In *Nightwood*, as in the work of Braque and the later abstract painters, the naturalistic principle is totally abandoned: no attempt is made to convince us that the characters are actual flesh-and-blood human beings. We are asked only to accept their world as we accept an abstract painting...as an autonomous pattern giving us an individual vision of reality, rather than what we might consider its exact reflection.... The eight chapters of *Nightwood* are like searchlights, probing the darkness each from a different direction, yet ultimately focusing on and illuminating the same entanglement of the human spirit... [*Nightwood*] combines the simple majesty of a medieval morality play with the verbal subtlety and refinement of a symbolist poem.”

Joseph Frank  
*Sewanee Review*  
(Summer 1945) 435, 438, 455-6

“In *Nightwood*, published in 1936, Djuna Barnes gave us a novel of extraordinary and appalling force, a study of moral degeneration recited in a rhetoric so intensely wrought, so violent and so artificial, that it discouraged all but the hardiest readers and became a kind of symbol of sinister magnificence. *The Antiphon*, a verse play in three acts, repeats the oratorical modes of the novel, though with less obscurity and with some reduction of queerness. It is still difficult, perversely wayward; but it does make concessions to ordinary humanity, and there are in it moments of poetry and true excitement. It is scarcely a play: one cannot imagine it on any stage this side of Chaos and Old Night; but it is dramatic poetry of a curious and sometimes high order.”

Dudley Fitts

*New York Times*  
(20 April 1958) 22

“In 1928 she published *Ryder*, which was expurgated for the American edition. In 1936 appeared *Nightwood*, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot; it is a novel dealing with life in the Parisian underground and has been one of the most highly regarded modern novels among avant-garde critics and writers. She has also written *The Antiphon* (1958), a surrealistic play in blank verse.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)