Danielle Palatin

SWLF Undergraduate Conference 2017

The Prince is a Woman: The Third Sex in *Nightwood*

In the early 20th century in Europe and the U.S., the visibility of same-sex relationships, specifically between women, sparked an interest in unveiling and describing the complexities of gender identity and sexuality. In 1928, Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* was charged with obscenity for depicting a lesbian relationship. Hall’s novel focused on the concept of inversion in order to defend same-sex relationships. The idea of inversion during the late 19th and early 20th century follows the psychological definition of someone who alters his or her behavior with that of the opposite sex, as well as a term to define homosexuality, or sexual inversion. Following the trial of Hall’s novel, *Nightwood* (1936) by Djuna Barnes was one of earlier works of literature to portray a somewhat more sexually explicit relationship between women. While it is in some ways more explicit, Barnes’ dark and disorienting subjective prose also unravels claims about sexual identity deployed in Hall’s legal battles over the defense of gender and sexuality. *Nightwood* claims to disrupt heteronormative structures with the concept of inversion; however, I show that the novel lacks a clear binary between queer and heteronormative structures as they remain interwoven.

In *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes examines the relationships and identities of diverse characters during the early 20th century. The novel follows Robin Vote through her various relationships with both men and women. Throughout the novel, Robin chooses to leave her lovers behind and wanders off into the night seeking pleasure and ultimately, other relationships. Her relationship with Nora Flood introduces readers to the continuing dialogue Nora has with Dr. Matthew O’Connor about Robin’s behavior and their relationship. It is with Matthew O’Connor that Barnes navigates through the complexities of the novel. Matthew as a character provides an entanglement of identities that both reflect and reject ideologies of gender, sexuality, religion, and science. He presents himself as an unlicensed gynecologist preoccupied with the female anatomy and conflicted about his own identity: he mimics the dress and performance of a woman in the privacy of his own apartment, wanders through the streets of Paris in search of sexual gratification, and seeks confession in the Catholic church. Throughout Matthew and Nora’s discussions, Matthew’s monologues consist of remarks about love and the questioning of normative environments and identity. More specifically, Matthew advises Nora through her struggles with Robin and weaves in and out of discussing the role of inversion within queer relationships.

According to sexologist during this time period, sexual inversion consisted of a reversal of gender traits that defined homosexuality as a masculine complex in women and a feminine complex in men. The concept of transgender identities and the differences between gender and sexuality were not established. Thus, the role of the invert failed to separate the ideas of gender binaries and sexual identity. As many critics have noted, Djuna Barnes’ modern novel attempts to question the stability of such terms with characters like Matthew and Robin. But as I argue in this paper, the novel remains locked within the established binaries of gender identity and its conflicts with sexual orientation.

The role of the invert, as Dr. Matthew O’Connor suggests, is to remain between genders and break gender binaries within heteronormative structures of men and women. In this case, both Robin and Matthew are inverts in *Nightwood*. Throughout his monologues, Matthew applies an example of a common childhood fairytale to show how queer desire is embedded in heteronormativity. The original fairytale consists of the typical damsel in distress, the princess, and her hero, the prince, which Matthew claims is a consistent narrative in our lives: “We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers” (Barnes 145). This narrative is rooted in the heteronormative structures that have been set in society. Yet, Matthew’s monologues reveal the queer undertones that the prince and princess have always carried. As the images of man and woman are blurred in the feminine form of the prince, the “pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace – neither one and half the other” becomes an androgynous image that is brought about by the fairytale itself (Barnes 145). The inclusion of the prince-or-invert into this fairytale breaks the idea of heterosexual relationships by claiming the structure of the invert’s love interest to be a reversed heterosexual love for the same sex.

However, this fairytale of the prince and princess is only attainable between women in Barnes’ novel because the structures of private and public spheres in *Nightwood* allow heteronormative structures to contain aspects of same-sex relationships between characters such as Robin with Nora, and Jenny later on in the novel. Such a fulfillment of sexuality and identity is not attainable for a character such as Matthew, whose gender identity consists of feminine gender norms that he can’t achieve under the constructs of inversion. For this reason, Matthew’s description of the prince and princess fairytale is directly related to the dynamics between Nora and Robin’s relationship and their sexual orientation. It answers questions about Robin’s identity as an invert and ultimately allows Nora to come to terms with Robin’s passivity and the dynamics of their relationship.

The time period in which *Nightwood* takes place during the early 20th century defined “queer” culture as a representation of reversed heterosexual identity and contained distinctions between normative and non-normative sexual behavior. The prince-princess fairytale in Barnes’ novel shows a direct connection to ideas that Siobhan Somerville suggests, “challenge identity categories that are presented as stable, transhistorical, or authentic,” such as heteronormativity (Somerville 206).

Barnes’ novel challenges its contemporaries by portraying the invert as a character that isn’t an abnormal presentation of desire within the fairytale, but rather a longing for an already queer relationship. The invert, in Matthew and Robin’s case, breaks gender binaries between man and woman by claiming both masculine and feminine identities. The way they dress and the way their bodies move through public and private spheres showcase nonconforming ideas of gender. However, Matthew, as an invert, is very different than Robin. His desire to be a woman under the constructs of heteronormativity creates a distinct split between his sexuality and gender. For instance, his desire to have a female’s body and be able to “toss up a child for [a husband] every nine months” describes a heteronormative relationship within heterosexual binaries (Barnes 98). Nevertheless, Robin’s gender and her relationships allow her to blend in with more attainable constructs of sexuality as an invert. Although she is perceived as biologically female, her gender is non-binary and involves a “wider range of possible identifications” within gender constructs defined by theorist Jack Halberstam (Halberstam 119). The Doctor refers to Robin as being of the third sex, or the “identical cleaved halves of sexless misgiving” by representing neither woman nor man (Barnes 157). These differences of gender binaries between Matthew and Robin’s identities influence the way they are able to move through the world and form relationships. In both public and private spheres, Robin breaks away from heteronormative structures by leaving her first relationship with Felix behind, a relationship that put her in a particularly alienating role as a woman and a mother. Yet with Nora, Robin’s identity as a lesbian allows their relationship to build over her identity as an invert.

The dynamics of Nora and Robin’s relationship represent a non-normative version of heterosexual ideals by establishing a normative structured relationship furnished with non-normative objects and images; thus, allowing them to pass in both the public and private spheres in *Nightwood*. Yet, the novel is also very explicit that their relationship as two women is a very intimate and sexual relationship. They move in together and surround themselves with items that “attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humours.” In doing so, they are almost taking the place of husband and wife. However, these furnishings consist of objects that don’t belong in a home and don’t represent a typical marriage, such as a couch and dining room table. Rather, there are “circus chairs, wooden horses,” and wonders from all over the world that create a “museum of their encounters” (Barnes 61). This image introduces the queering of heterosexual relationship ideals, and simultaneously makes Nora and Robin’s relationship appear as attainable as a seemingly heteronormative construct, such as the prince-princess fairytale. Matthew points out to Nora that loving an invert reveals a longing for love between the same-sex, which has been hidden under heterosexuality. Matthew says of inverts that “we love them for that reason” because they represent a lack of consciousness over gender identity (Barnes 145). That lack of consciousness that is within Robin’s identity and behavior is what makes her attractive to both men and women. Despite that, the destabilization of gender norms between queer women makes Nora and Robin’s relationship more attainable and acceptable.

With that being said, Nora and Robin’s relationship defines our understanding of the narrative. Nora’s narrative is guided by Matthew’s insight about love, identity, and nature. Matthew’s advice, although laced with his own personal experiences and desires, is only applicable to Nora. It is only available this way, because Matthew’s desires for identity and love are completely unattainable in both public and private spheres. What is available to Matthew are sexual encounters with other men, but only in places like public urinals in the middle of the night. However, even these relationships seem to have their faults for him because they do not represent his desired identity and often fail due to his struggle with impotence. He views his impotence as a failure of nature, not necessarily one of identity, but of a physical, “permanent mistake,” which he reveals through his struggle with sexual arousal in the church and compares his body to “a ruined bird” (Barnes 141). It’s as if his only satisfaction would come in the form of a woman’s body as his own. Matthew considers himself an invert in a way that resonates with our contemporary depictions of someone who identifies as transgender as someone who asserts they were “born in the wrong body” – which is a very particular vision of trans identity and doesn’t describe many people’s experience. Also, his ideas of womanhood involve very heteronormative ideals, such as being able to carry a child for a man.

When Nora first comes to Matthew’s apartment, his desires for femininity are on display through objects such as “laces, ribands, stockings, ladies’ underclothing and an abdominal brace,” but they appear “in a room in which a woman has never set foot” (Barnes 85). Unlike Robin, Matthew’s role as an invert is constantly at war with what is realistically available to him. With Matthew’s character in mind, Barnes was pushing the boundaries of heteronormative ideas of gender in the same way contemporary queer studies are managing to breakdown binaries of gender, as scholars such as Halberstam suggests (Halberstam 208). However, Matthew’s environment does not breakdown bodily difference from heterosexual relationships and behavior. His view of femininity and the female body is based on the perspective of the male sex. Thus, the only relationship that passes under heteronormative structures is Nora and Robin’s. The image of two women in a relationship bends the idea of gender identity and female sexuality in ways that Matthew’s identity doesn’t because it remains held together by very distinct gender binaries between men and women.

The main reason why Nora and Robin’s narrative is able to stand in for the prince-princess fairytale is because of Robin’s ability to pass as an invert between queer and heteronormative binaries. Robin’s identity as an invert doesn’t position her as a man, but rather a “boyish” woman with very masculine behavior. Her freedom of identity comes to her as she chooses to wander at night and leave all of her lovers. Robin’s ability to have numerous sexual encounters with other women shows a certain freedom other characters don’t seem to have. Nevertheless she returns to Nora during the day, and this resembles a marriage of a struggling husband and wife and simultaneously, the dependent nature of mother and child. Her nature at night transforms into a child-like innocence, in search of true peace of mind, “That’s why she can’t ‘put herself in another’s place,’ she herself is the only position,” and even Nora can’t prevent it, but only accept it whenever Robin returns to her side (Barnes 155). The division of night and day for Robin is what Matthew fails to achieve and what Nora fails to understand. Ultimately, this is why Nora and Robin’s relationship continues to exist within the constructs of the fairytale, but fails to continue as a narrative.

Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* presents a series of complex ideas about gender, sexuality, and the dynamics of relationships. However, it’s the role of the invert, demonstrated with Robin that shows the queer structures already existing within heteronormative constructs. Robin’s nonconforming identity and sexuality reveal a woman who plays by non-normative desires and moves through the world by seeking various lovers. As Nora struggles to understand her lost lover’s actions, she comes to Matthew for answers. Matthew reveals that the fairytale of the prince and princess already presents very queer representations of masculinity and femininity. Within these constructs, such a relationship with an invert only appears to be available within same-sex relationships passing under heteronormative structures, according to the novel. Thus, the ability for an invert such as Matthew to publicly and privately identify as a woman is unattainable. His vision of womanhood is constructed by patriarchal ideals and in a novel where female relationships are at the forefront; his identity cannot be achieved under the same relationship structures. In doing so, it is apparent that Barnes’ novel allows us to bend the gender and sexual identities available to contemporary audiences at the time; however, *Nightwood* presents some faults in which the questions of identity that the novel asks of its characters continue to linger in the dark.

Works Cited

Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. New York: New Directions Books, 1937. Print. 30 October 2016.

Halberstam, Jack. “Gender.” *Keywords in American Cultural Studies*, 2nd Ed. New York: NYU

Press. 116-118. Web. 30 October 2016.

Somerville, Siobhan B. “Queer.” *Keywords in American Cultural Studies*, 2nd Ed. New York:

NYU Press. 203-207. Web. 30 October 2016.