



*“What is this thing, Lord? ”: Matthew O’Connor and
the Queer Theology of the Catholic Church in
Nightwood (1937)*

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Introduction

The modernist novel *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) is a celebration of difference. Published in 1937,¹ it precociously spotlights the voices of those who are often marginalized: homosexuals, women, Jews, starving artists, political activists, the working class.² The story focuses on a lesbian love triangle in Paris: a publicist named Nora Flood has a romantic relationship with the callous and detached Robin Vote, who then is unfaithful to Nora with the sycophantic Jenny Petherbridge. To cope with the stress of Robin's infidelity, Nora turns to Dr. Matthew O'Connor, a devout Catholic, transvestite,³ and unlicensed gynecologist. His gender identity and religious identity are inextricable—they intersect to construct his Otherness.⁴ As a result, O'Connor's character can be interpreted as both a queering⁵ of the body and a queering of the Catholic Church. Djuna Barnes effectively queers the Church via O'Connor by first invoking the Tiresian archetype, subsequently constructing him as the epitome of the Other, and lastly incorporating Christian references and symbolism. The rhetoric of this complicated process can be explained using critical essays in the fields of literature, philosophy, and history. The implications of this process for *Nightwood* and society as a whole are illuminated by queer theology. Gerard Loughlin describes queer theology as an approach to Christianity that “serves those who find themselves and others to be other than the characters prescribed by an identity.”⁶ Although queer theology is a relatively new discipline, *Nightwood* can be interpreted as a precursor to this approach because the inextricability of O'Connor's faith and gender expression

¹ While *Nightwood* was first published in Britain in 1936, it was republished in 1937 in the United States by Harcourt, Brace, & Co. I used the 1937 pagination, including the foreword by T.S. Eliot, for this analysis.

² On page 55 of *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes proudly states that Nora's salon was “the strangest in America.” The attendees are “poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love.”

³ I use the term “transvestite” instead of the term “transgender” because the former is ubiquitous in the literary criticism of *Nightwood*. Today, Matthew would be considered transgender—if given the option, he would want to live his entire life as female. He absolutely despises his male genitalia. However, in the 1930s, sex reassignment surgery was not widely available, so it's possible that he didn't even consider transitioning to a female full-time or adequately passing in public a possibility.

⁴ In this context, the terms “Other” and “Otherness” refer to the literary representation of marginalized identities as inherently outside the dominant society.

⁵ In this context, the verb “queering” implies the process of disrupting the heteronormativity—assumption of heterosexuality—of an object or space.

⁶ Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (New York: Blackwell, 2007), 9.

challenges readers' preconceived notions about God's identity and suggests that queer people have special connections to God.

Matthew O'Connor as a Tiresian Figure & the Epitome of the Other

A comprehensive analysis of O'Connor's character is largely missing from literary criticism due to *Nightwood*'s unique focus on a lesbian love triangle. The scholars who have begun mapping the implications of O'Connor's character rely almost exclusively on Barnes's employment of the Tiresian figure.⁷ As a result, the literature emphasizes the aesthetics of O'Connor's feminine gender expression while overlooking its intersections with his Christian identity. According to the cultural studies scholar Marjorie Garber, transvestism fascinates academics because of its visibility, and perhaps this is why so much attention has been paid to that aspect of O'Connor's identity.⁸ Though useful for interpreting the feminist message of *Nightwood*, analyzing O'Connor's transvestism alone leaves Barnes's strong criticism of the Church undiscussed. The overlap of gender nonconforming expression and religious faith shapes O'Connor's experience, and enables Djuna Barnes's queering of Christianity.

Barnes encourages readers to associate Matthew O'Connor with the Tiresian archetype by characterizing him not only as a transvestite, but as a person who has experienced life multiple times. When discussing how he feels trapped in his current male body, he suggests that he has inhabited various bodies in the past. He demands, "Am I to blame if I've been summoned before and this is my last and oddest call?"⁹ Other characters throughout the novel perceive that O'Connor may have past lives. For example, a priest friend interrupts one of O'Connor's

⁷ In the field of literary studies, transvestite characters like Matthew O'Connor are often considered Tiresian figures. According to literary critic Ed Madden, this term originates from an Ovidian myth in which a man named Tiresias experiences life multiple times as both a man and a woman. When the gods ask him whether men or women prefer sexual intercourse, Tiresias claims that women enjoy sex ten times more than men. Juno responds by blinding him, and Zeus ameliorates the damage by giving him the power of prophecy. In modernist and postmodernist literature, authors who invoke the Tiresian figure are typically referencing two characteristics: Tiresias's existence as both male and female as well as his prophetic powers (cf. Chapter 1).

⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), 149.

⁹ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1937), 97.

soliloquys to tell him he is a “man with a prehistoric memory.”¹⁰ This statement implies that his past lives have given him a reservoir of knowledge from which to draw.

The priest grows frustrated because O'Connor tells disjointed and confusing stories constantly. The content of the stories, however, reflects the wealth of O'Connor's lived—or imagined as lived—experience in multiple bodies. For example, at a large dinner party he claims he “was in a war once himself,” where he learned that “there are directions and speeds that no one has calculated.”¹¹ While the spatial and temporal context of these events is unclear, O'Connor is using the fragment of a memory or fantasy to share insight with as many people as he can. Thus, O'Connor has a prophetic level of insight about human experience and interpersonal relationships that is typically associated with the Tiresian.

Even though O'Connor is a sort of prophet, Barnes also associates the Tiresian with despair and isolation. Ed Madden claims that the Tiresian is “a misery situated in the economies of the sexual order and the identities made available or denied to those who find themselves outside of socially prescribed roles and socially accepted constructs of desire.”¹² O'Connor's sense of having lived multiple lives causes immense suffering, as evidenced by his statement that he “began to mourn for [his] spirit...[which] cast[s] a shadow long beyond what [he is].”¹³ More broadly, the discord between O'Connor's physical appearance and gender expression permeates the novel. One character noted upon seeing him in public that “his dark shaved chin was lowered as if in a melancholy that had no beginning or end.”¹⁴ Even though he is always emotionally available to the other characters and shares as much knowledge with them as he can, no one can fully comprehend his distress.

O'Connor's distress stems from a sense of having lived multiple lives and his sense of living in the wrong body. As a transvestite, O'Connor is the Other among Others. He experiences debilitating gender dysphoria, finally disclosing to the protagonist Nora Flood when she comes

¹⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹¹ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 25-6.

¹² Ed Madden, *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888-2001* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont, 2008), 192.

¹³ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 122.

¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

upon him in drag that “it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as a king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner.”¹⁵ Instead of trying to empathize with O’Connor’s suffering, Flood simply responds by saying, “you are so like a child.”¹⁶ As he communicates his distress to her, Flood steers the conversation toward her own troubles with Robin Vote. Even though O’Connor serves as a confidante to the other characters in the novel, he cannot engage in meaningful discussion about his own identity with any of them. His subsequent isolation further reinforces his otherness.

Transvestites are so marginalized in daily life because they dare to challenge the socially constructed barriers between male and female. Marjorie Garber and Judith Butler posit that transvestites face an extra-concentrated form of oppression and exclusion because they pose a direct threat to the legitimacy of the patriarchy. According to Butler, gender “is a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects.”¹⁷ Those who do not neatly conform to the socially constructed gender binary weaken the supremacy of patriarchal power because they exist outside of conventional classifications. Marjorie Garber concurs, stating that “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.”¹⁸ Thus, transvestite identities directly challenge entire belief systems about how society should function. If there are more than two distinct and socially sanctioned genders, it is difficult to maintain patriarchal hegemony.

While the works of Garber and Butler were published long after *Nightwood*, Barnes’ portrayal of O’Connor also suggests that she viewed transvestism as a rejection of the socially constructed gender binary. However, instead of underscoring the nonconformity of his behavior as modern scholars might, Barnes focuses on the unusual appearance of O’Connor’s body. When Flood enters O’Connor’s bedroom, she cannot look away from his “head, with its over-large black

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 48.

¹⁸ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 17.

eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin...framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendant curls that touched his shoulders.”¹⁹ She describes herself as feeling “dismayed” by his appearance.²⁰ Flood expresses shock not at the social transgression O’Connor is committing, but at the nonconformity of his physical appearance. His cross-dressed body, as an expression of his gender identity, is a spectacle by which Nora Flood cannot help but be enthralled.

In Djuna Barnes’ historical context, this framework of conceptualizing difference as freakishness would be immediately legible to her audience. According to historian of American popular culture Elizabeth Grosz, freaks were understood in the twentieth century as “those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition.”²¹ When talking about the Coney Island freak show, O’Connor himself says, “take away a man’s conformity and you take away his remedy.”²² He uses the shock of seeing physically disabled bodies as evidence that the physical representation of nonconformity shocks society. Presenting a gender non-conforming character as a freak because of his failure to adhere to the gender binary is an early corollary to Butler’s and Garber’s later claims that transvestites challenge the social power of categorization.

One result of O’Connor’s extreme marginalization is his unprecedented ability to empathize with the other characters in the novel, all of whom are themselves Other. If Barnes’ novels are forays into what it means to be different, O’Connor’s experiences qualify him as a guide for the reader into the world of *Nightwood*. He knows more about Robin Vote, Nora Flood, and Jenny Petherbridge than they know themselves. It is no accident that this unparalleled ability to understand others occurs through the most marginalized character in the book: literary critic Sarah Hayden asserts that Connor’s “crossgendered sensibility is uniquely calibrated to channel the frequencies of the abjected bodies of the underworld.”²³ Thus, Barnes explicitly links

¹⁹ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 85.

²⁰ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 86.

²¹ Elizabeth Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 57.

²² Barnes, *Nightwood*, 155.

²³ Sarah Hayden, “What Happens When a Transvestite Gynaecologist Usurps the Narrator?: Cross-Gendered Ventriloquism in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices*, edited by Rina Kim and Claire Westall (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 89.

O'Connor's unique gender presentation with a capacity to empathize with the experiences of oppressed individuals.

Queering Catholicism, Questioning Assumptions

Many authors discuss Barnes' use of the Tiresian as a purely feminist technique. For example, Nancy Bombaci claims Barnes deliberately "appropriated the prerogative of the fetishistic gaze associated with the masculine observer" in order to assert herself as a female writer and challenge dominant ideas about female inferiority.²⁴ Ostensibly, Barnes' motive for employing the Tiresian figure in *Nightwood* is to challenge male productions of the Tiresian around the same time. Male authors who incorporated Tiresian figures often used them to tap into "the developing cultural concern over sexual identity" and the perceived destruction of category that would follow.²⁵ Barnes, on the other hand, presents the Tiresian O'Connor not as a dangerous threat to the social order, but as a "predicament" who suffers because of the social expectations of gender forced upon him.²⁶ In so doing, she turns the dominant narrative that portrays gender variance as inherently negative on its head. Challenging contemporary masculine anxieties is thus one motivating factor in Djuna Barnes' portrayal of O'Connor as a Tiresian figure.

Barnes goes a step further and uses the Tiresian figure to challenge religious epistemologies of sexual deviance. Marjorie Garber explains that allowing transvestites to express themselves freely would create unmitigated disaster for the Church. The Church has historically been permeated by the "general and pervasive fear of transvestism as a powerful agent of destabilization and change, the sign of the ungroundedness of identities on which social structures and hierarchies depend."²⁷ This view, which would have been commonplace at the time of Barnes' writing, implies that gender nonconforming identities are deliberate transgressions across

²⁴ Nancy Bombaci, *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning, and Carson McCullers* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006), 49.

²⁵ Madden, *Tiresian Poetics*, 33.

²⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 18.

²⁷ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 223.

important boundaries that protect society. The Tiresian figure, in all of its gender nonconformity, “interrogate[s] the relation of universalizing, normative, and disciplinary formations of cultural meaning to the particular embodiments of sexual and social marginality.”²⁸ The Tiresian dismantles the borders and boundaries of gender performance and acceptable sexual behavior. It asks why those barriers exist in the first place, and who exactly they are meant to protect.²⁹

At the same time that O’Connor’s oppression enhances his gift of empathy, his exercise of it is that of a clergyman or priest. Barnes makes this comparison in order to further problematize the authority of the church. The literary modernism expert Alex Goody remarks that for the other characters in *Nightwood*, O’Connor “listens, much as a priest would, to the confession of central characters.”³⁰ Even though Flood is a Christian, she often calls upon O’Connor for guidance about her deteriorating relationship with Vote. Because she respects his unfathomable depths of experience, she often asks him, ““What am I to do?””³¹ Flood trusts O’Connor to help her solve pressing spiritual and emotional problems the same way one would solicit assistance from an ordained priest.

Djuna Barnes furthers the associations between O’Connor as Other and O’Connor as priest through her representation of his living quarters. When Flood comes to see O’Connor for advice, she notices that his bedroom is almost like a sanctuary. However, it is a sanctuary to female iconography: “perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs...laces, ribands, stockings, ladies’ underclothing.”³² In addition to collecting Catholic icons for religious rituals, O’Connor has also sanctified femininity and collected associated relics. In just one scene, O’Connor’s character “merge[s] the sacred and the profane, destroying the boundaries between the clean and polluted, the proper and the corrupted, masculine and

²⁸ Madden, *Tiresian Poetics*, 19.

²⁹ It’s not women or queer people.

³⁰ Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations: A Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 191.

³¹ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 99.

³² Barnes, *Nightwood*, 85.

feminine.”³³ He creates a religious space that is designated for the discussion of queer relationships and shines a queer light on the physical space of the church.

By effectively queering Christianity, Djuna Barnes implicitly criticizes the heteronormativity of the Catholic Church. Readers are shocked at Barnes’ connection between ecclesiastical godliness and an unlicensed gynecologist who pulls out his penis in church and asks, ““What is this thing, Lord?””³⁴ Confusion about why she would draw this parallel creates the perfect niche for Barnes to challenge the Church’s regulation of sexuality and gender expression.

Queer Theology for a Queer Future

While Barnes criticizes the Church, she makes O’Connor a devout Catholic. It is at first astonishing that she would give a faith in the Christian God to a character who is a symbol of cultural anxiety about sexual deviants—the epitome of the Other. After all, verses in Deuteronomy historically have been used to justify the repression and marginalization of transvestites when there was no codified law to do so.³⁵ But Barnes is arguing that in spite of the Church’s repressive teachings, Christianity itself is queer. Furthermore, she uses O’Connor to express hope for a more progressive future, one in which the Church appreciates the rich experience of marginalized people and the insight they can provide to a church community.

The field of queer theology is dedicated to envisioning this same hope. While the discipline is relatively new, Nightwood shares many of its core tenets and can be considered a precursor. One of the discipline’s major goals is to expose the queer underbelly of an institution that imposes

³³ Goody, *Modernist Articulations*, 171.

³⁴ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 141.

³⁵ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 28-9. The Book of Deuteronomy is a book of the Old Testament (in the Christian tradition) or the Torah (in the Jewish tradition) which puts forth several stipulations about how adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition should conduct themselves regardless of coexisting secular law. Deuteronomy 22:5 states, “A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment” (King James Version).

strict controls on sexuality and gender expression. For example, Marjorie Garber's chapter "Religious Habits" in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* mentions that despite the Church's fear of transvestism, the attire of clergymen has often been associated with female

dress.³⁶ Additionally, according to the queer theologian Mark D. Jordan, "[i]n the Catholic Church, the priesthood has been assigned gender roles that mix or confuse ordinary gender expectations."³⁷ Both Garber and Jordan argue that not only is it unethical for the Church to limit freedom with respect to gender expression, but several of the Church's traditions can be construed as queer.

Like the queer theology texts mentioned above, the novel explicitly refutes the Church's authority as a social institution to set boundaries for sexuality and gender expression because of its inherently queer traditions. Although Flood initially expresses shock upon seeing O'Connor in stereotypically feminine clothing, she later comes to the realization that her horror is a cultural production. She remarks, "is not the gown the natural raiment of extremity? What nation, what religion, what ghost, what dream, has not worn it—infants, angels, priests, the dead."³⁸ Even though O'Connor destabilizes the gender binary by wearing clothes commonly associated with the opposite sex, Flood—who is also queer and Christian—begins to question who sets those boundaries and who benefits from their imposition.³⁹

In addition to questioning the Church's authority to police sexuality and gender expression, Barnes also compels us to meditate on the nature of God. The characters often express confusion about who God is and what he or she wants. This is an application of negative theology which many queer theologians use to create space for queer identities and expressions within the Christian tradition. For example, Susannah Cornwall compares the "unknowability of God"

³⁶ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 211.

³⁷ Mark D. Jordan, "God's Body," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, edited by Gerard Loughlin (New York: Blackwell, 2007), 286.

³⁸ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 86.

³⁹ It's also possible that Matthew's portrayal as a Christian transvestite who deliberately adopts femininity is an argument for women's liberation in the Church.

expressed by negative theology to the “profoundly ineffable and indescribable nature of the manner in which human sex, gender and sexuality fit together.”⁴⁰ Even though O’Connor refers to himself as “a good man” and a “lioness” in the same breath, that does not necessarily mean that his fluid concept of self conflicts with his Christian identity.⁴¹ Although the Church as an institution has historically insisted that gender identity be concrete and expressed in finite ways, Christianity as a relationship between God and the individual is largely undefined because God is unknowable.

It is this resistance to definition and evasion of clear language that makes Christianity so queer. As queer theologian Gerard Loughlin eloquently states, “even when theology was culturally dominant it was strange, for it sought the strange; it sought to know the unknowable in Christ, the mystery it was called to seek through following Jesus.”⁴² Jesus’ sexuality and gender expression are unknown, but we do know that as the son of God he was not averse to violating the social norms that organize society.⁴³ The Church as an institution designates God as male, but that was done to establish his supremacy by giving him “the sex/gender that claims particular privileges and powers.”⁴⁴ The ideal Christian must transcend the confines of categorization in the pursuit of divine truth.

In the radical act of expressing his gender nonconforming identity, O’Connor does just that. His transvestism enriches his relationship with God. While he is angry with God for not making him female at birth, praying to God enables him to voice feelings that Flood and the other characters cannot understand. He mentions the relief he feels after confession, going from a “soul in physical stress” to “forgiven.”⁴⁵ He is even able to assign God a female gender as a method of redressing what he perceives to be the “mistake” of his male birth.⁴⁶ While the institution of the Church may marginalize him as a sinner, his inner religiosity provides him with comfort in a

⁴⁰ Susannah Cornwall, “Apophysis and Ambiguity: The ‘Unknowingness’ of Transgender,” in *Trans/Formations*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: SCM Press, 2009), 17.

⁴¹ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 172.

⁴² Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, 7.

⁴³ Jordan, “God’s Body,” 285.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁴⁵ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 33, 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

harsh world. The traditions give him a sense of belonging.⁴⁷ By facing existential questions about his gender identity, O'Connor revisits and strengthens his relationship with God.

Conclusion

Most readers in 1937 would probably not associate transvestism with holiness, spirituality, or closeness to God. Djuna Barnes, however, creates a character that is both gender non-conforming and an observant Catholic. By constructing the queerest Catholic she can conceive of—one who is misunderstood even by his queer peers—Barnes suggests that there is something very queer about Christianity. Despite the Church's obsession with concrete boundaries, Christian theology itself resists the barriers that define normal and abnormal, acceptable and forbidden, male and female. The queer theology perspective asserts that God is never truly knowable and cannot be contained by human inventions, including the gender binary.

Many scholars have investigated Barnes' references to the Tiresian figure in O'Connor's character. These insights are incredibly useful in demonstrating how Barnes appropriates typically male authorial styles to assert her own agency as a female intellectual. O'Connor delivers more than a feminist message, however. His character also critiques the Church for regulating sexuality and gender expression while Christianity is inherently queer. His suffering as a Christian within a heteronormative Church compels readers to dare to imagine a world where queer people are celebrated instead of ostracized by their religious communities.

Like later works in queer theology, *Nightwood* is a treatise on the need for a more progressive and inclusive Church. Djuna Barnes uses O'Connor's character to implode our current notions of what a Christian is and who/what God is. By refusing to accept the social restrictions placed on him by society and even more so by the Church, O'Connor is not prevented from being a Christian. In fact, his gender nonconformity strengthens his relationship with God.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23-4.

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