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| Barnes, Djuna (1892-1982) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| Djuna Barnes was a significant U.S. American literary figure of Paris of the 1920s and 1930s, but became a recluse of New York’s Patchin Place in the 1940s, ending her life in obscure poverty. Barnes worked as a poet, journalist, illustrator, playwright, reviewer, and novelist. Her most recognized writings include *The Book of Repulsive Women* (produced 1915), *Ryder* (1928), *Ladies Almanack* (1928), *Nightwood* (1936), *The Antiphon* (1958), and *Creatures in an Alphabet* (1982). |
| Djuna Barnes was a significant U.S. American literary figure of Paris of the 1920s and 1930s, but became a recluse of New York’s Patchin Place in the 1940s, ending her life in obscure poverty. She is best known for her experimental novel *Nightwood,* one of the most influential works of modernist fiction, and for her caustic wit. Barnes worked as a poet, journalist, illustrator, playwright, reviewer, and novelist. Her most recognized writings include *The Book of Repulsive Women* (produced 1915), *Ryder* (1928), *Ladies Almanack* (1928), *Nightwood* (1936), *The Antiphon* (1958), and *Creatures in an Alphabet* (1982).  Barnes’s first novel, *Ryder* (1928), details fifty years of the fictional Ryder family; the same year, *Ladies Almanack*, understood as a *roman à clef* novel parodying participants of Natalie Barney’s salon, was privately published. Many of the qualities of satire, dark humour, and surrealism for which Barnes is known are visible in *Ryder* and *Ladies Almanack.* But it is *Nightwood,* Barnes's third novel, that critics see as her most successful work.  Championed and introduced by T.S. Eliot, who shepherded the book through publication at Faber & Faber, *Nightwood* traces the intrigues of circus publicist Nora Flood in 1920s Paris, especially those involving her lover, the young woman Robin Vote, and the transvestite Dr. Matthew O’Connor. Most critics believe that *Nightwood* is without cohesive narrative structure or conventionally developed characters. Yet the work attracted praise from preeminent Modernists including Ernst Hemingway, James Joyce, and Dylan Thomas — who ambivalently identified *Nightwood* one of three best prose novels written by a woman. Despite such accolades, the novel remains one of the most under-read works of Modernist canon.  By 1940, Barnes returned to New York City, and finished her play *The Antiphon* (1948) — a tale about a drunken family reunion that was championed and translated by then U.N. Secretary — General Dag Hammarskjöld. Though she struggled with alcoholism, Barnes continued work on poetry, including her collection *Creatures in an Alphabet* (1982), published posthumously, and left behind an unpublished biography of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.  Despite early acclaim, Barnes’s writing faded in popularity by the middle of the 20th century. But feminist and queer theorists revived critical interest in *Nightwood* and Barnes’s other writings during the 1980s by identifying various characters from the story as taken from life: Robin Vote is identified as silverpoint artist Thelma Wood, a woman Barnes claimed to have loved, while Nora Flood is seen as Barnes herself. While later scholarship expands an increasingly complex understanding of Barnes’s craft, exemplified in investigations of issues of race and class among others, biographical approaches still underpin much of Barnes criticism, leaving the door open for scholars to dismiss her work as little more than personal diaries. Works from Mary Lynn Broë’s collection *Silence and Power*, Daniela Caselli’s *Improper Modernism*, Diane Warren’s *Consuming Fictions*, Erin G. Carlston’s *Thinking Fascism*, Monika Faltejskova’s *Djuna Barnes, T. S. Eliot, and the Gender Dynamics of Modernism*, and Julie Taylor’s *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* have done much to reassert Barnes’s well-deserved reputation and recover the extraordinary power of her craft. |
| Further reading:  (Broë)  (Carlston)  (Faltejskova)  (Warren) |