

Crisis-Ridden Heteronormativity and Homonormativity in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

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Abstract: The present article explores how Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* transgresses and undermines binary conceptions of gender and with them the distinction between hetero- and homosexual relationships. I seek to determine whether the failure of the relationships in the novel can be viewed as a criticism of the heteronormative constraints that are shown to permeate both the heterosexual and the homosexual partnerships in the novel. Consequently, it is argued that the failure of these relationships signifies the failure of the underlying heteronormative structures. The novel reveals not only the constructed nature of this system but also the limiting and ultimately destructive effects that it has on the relationships of those who try to live up to its stipulations. To illustrate this, I utilize the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity in conjunction with Judith Butler's conception of gender performance. Using these concepts, I demonstrate not only that all of the relationships in the novel reproduce the same heteronormative structures but also that this has disastrous effects on those relationships, which in turn is shown to reveal the failure of the heteronormative order.

Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* has always been a novel of paradoxes, and as such it is "[s]trangely canonized and unread" (Marcus 87). As Brian Glavey points out, this situation is the result of the challenge that *Nightwood* presents both to casual readers and to literary scholars (749). According to Tyrus Miller, this status is the consequence of "a certain 'positionless' quality" of Barnes's writing, which is expressed in "its generic and categorical uncertainty and its correlative unsettling of literary historical oppositions" (124). This tendency is also expressed in Barnes's ambiguous "position on political issues" in the novel, such as "her treatment of Jews, blacks, lesbians, [and] gay men" (Martins 109). This ambivalence has resulted

in the paradoxical fact that the novel is heralded as “an important milestone on any map of gay literature” despite its tendency to undermine “any categorisation, especially of gender and sexuality” (Winterson). Precisely these subversions of identity categories and the effects they have on the novel’s characters will be the focus of this article. In order to investigate them, I will concern myself with a close reading of selected passages of the novel. On the basis of this reading, I will demonstrate that the novel undermines the concept of a gender binary and the related juxtaposition of hetero- and homosexual relationships. I will argue that the failure of the two major relationships in the novel can be read as criticism of the underlying heteronormative constraints that pervade both the heterosexual and the homosexual partnerships in the novel. Therefore, Inmaculada Cobos Fernández is correct in asserting that

[i]n *Nightwood*, the relationships among couples show the absurdity of the patriarchal conception inherent in fairy tales. This myth, which constitutes a large part of childhood, perpetuates traditional gender values. According to this model, masculine and feminine characters assume opposite roles. Independence, liberty and the reasoning of men is contrasted with dependence, passivity and the emotionality of the heroine in fairy tales. (80)

However, in her argument regarding the subversive potential of the lesbian relationships of the novel’s protagonist, Robin, Fernández fails to recognize the extent to which these relationships reproduce analogous structures when she writes:

The couples in *Nightwood* invert the gender paradigm. [...] The two lesbian relationships that are introduced in *Nightwood* break the heterosexual system and its fairy tale. In consequence, the book attempts to define a new relationship for the woman free from gender patterns. (80)

Although Robin’s relationship with Nora is initially presented in a more favorable light than the one with Felix, it ultimately suffers a similar fate because it reestablishes heteronormative structures. I will show that Robin’s lesbian relationship with Nora emulates its heterosexual counterparts and as such can be considered to be homonormative (van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 565). The novel reveals not only the constructed nature of the heteronormative order but also the limiting and ultimately destructive effects on those who try to live up to its stipulations.

The characters’ espousal to heteronormative ideals proves detrimental to the relationships that Robin Vote engages in throughout the novel, both with the fake Baron Felix Volkbein and with Nora Flood. Whereas the first relationship is portrayed as dispassionate and focused on producing an heir to Felix’s legacy, the relationship with Nora is shown to be romantic. Nevertheless, both relationships experience

similarly dramatic ends with lasting effects on all participants. Robin's relationship with Felix ends because of his attempts to transform her into his ideal partner. Upon realizing his failure, Felix urges her into bearing him an heir, after whose birth she flees. Her relationship with Nora meets a similar end when Nora attempts to curtail Robin's freedom, discovers Robin's relationship with Jenny, and breaks up with her.

In order to demonstrate this, I first establish working definitions of heteronormativity and homonormativity and their related terminology. I then analyze the two major relationships in the novel, Robin's partnerships with Felix and Nora, respectively. In this analysis, I show that both relationships are structured in accordance with heteronormativity and that the partners involved try to live up to this ideology. I also show that these attempts have disastrous effects on the relationships. In the course of this article, I argue that the failure of the relationships in *Nightwood* expresses the failure of heteronormative relationship structures, which are perpetuated in the heterosexual relationship between Robin and Felix as well as in Robin's homonormative, lesbian relationship with Nora.

WORKING DEFINITIONS OF HETERONORMATIVITY AND HOMONORMATIVITY

The term heteronormativity is a central aspect of queer theory, where it is commonly used to refer to and problematize the privileged status of heterosexuality and to criticize "the heterosexual/homosexual binary" (Richardson 65). In this context, heteronormativity is understood as

the perceived reinforcement of certain beliefs about sexuality within social institutions and policies. These beliefs include [...] the notion that sex equals penis-in-vagina intercourse, that 'family' constitutes a heterosexual couple and their children, and that marriage is a procreative institution and therefore should only be available to 'opposite-sex' couples. (Clarke et al. 120)

Consequently, a queer analysis works toward "denaturaliz[ing] heterosexuality as a taken-for-granted biological entity and unpacks its meaning-making processes" (Oswald et al. 45). As such, a queer analysis reveals heteronormativity to be "an ideological code that promotes rigidly defined conventional gender norms, heterosexuality, and 'traditional family values'" (Oswald et al. 45). In this vein, Ramona Faith Oswald et al. argue that

[Judith] Butler rejects both gender and sexuality as 'natural' or fixed and argues that they are ongoing fictions constructed by the repetition of

‘stylized bodily acts’ that reify male and female as natural opposites that desire each other. Reification occurs because the performance is discursive; it reaffirms the ‘truth’ of existing cultural narratives. (46-47)

Chrys Ingraham asserts that “gender and sexuality are historically variable and constantly changing” (313). Consequently, Butler argues that “[c]ompulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm,” compared to which all other sexual identities are thought to represent derivatives or deviations that will inevitably fail to live up to the norm (722). Butler insists that there is no original from which homosexuality—and other sexualities—derive. She understands “*gender [as] a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself” (722). This assertion is based on her analysis of drag, which argues that drag reveals that a specific gender is not “the rightful property of [a specific] sex” and that the idea that there is “a gender proper to one sex rather than another” is “only improperly installed as the effect of a compulsory system” (722). She argues that “all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” and concludes that “heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization—and *failing*” (722). According to Butler, it is this failure and the continuous, futile attempt to succeed that cause

the project of heterosexual identity [to be] propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the [original][,] heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of its own originality. (723)

Butler concludes that lesbian, gay, and queer identities are not imitations, in the sense that they are derived from or come after an original heterosexuality, since this “itself is a copy of nothing” (723). Thus, heteronormativity requires constant repetition and policing to establish itself as the norm.

As Oswald et al. point out, “being lesbian or gay is not in itself enough to transcend heteronormativity” (45). Consequently, the fact that an individual identifies as homosexual or queer “does not necessarily mean that they enact queer genders, sexual practices, or family configurations” (45). This phenomenon can be explained by stating that “to queer one’s gender, sexuality, or family” can have severe consequences (46) in so far as it

expose[s] oneself to risk; risk of rejection by members of one’s family of origin, hostility from neighbors and friends, interference from the state, threats to one’s livelihood from employers, and physical violence from strangers and acquaintances. (Oswald, Blume, and Marks 151)

Therefore, conforming to or reproducing heteronormative practices by nonheterosexual individuals may be explained as an attempt to circumvent being ostracized or discriminated against (Oswald et al. 46). Such relationships represent what Brad van Eeden-Moorefield et al., with reference to Lisa Duggan, call “homonormativity, or the assimilation of heteronormative structures, such as the nuclear family, into the relationships of lesbians and gay men” (563). Duggan uses the term “*new homonormativity*” to refer to a form of politics that does not question the heteronormative standards of society and creates “a demobilized gay constituency” that is “anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50).

Van Eeden-Moorefield et al., however, view it in a more positive light and discuss it both as a social phenomenon and as a political means of nonheterosexuals to navigate a world structured according to heteronormativity (565). Moreover, they argue that it may be employed by nonheterosexuals in order to avoid discrimination and to gain access to otherwise inaccessible privileges (565). Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. even assert that performing homonormativity might allow nonheterosexuals to position themselves in “a place that allows for transformative social change by providing access to certain rights and privileges that garner social power” (565).¹ However, Jasbir K. Puar points out that homonormativity is not just established and patrolled in the context of heteronormativity but can also represent a disciplinary system in its own right in that it “effectively surveils and disciplines those sexually perverse bodies that fall outside its purview” (50).²

Although I certainly agree with their analysis, for the purpose of this article I will argue that homonormativity is also the result of queer identities, sexual practices, as well as family structures and practices—similar to their straight counterparts—carrying in them the markers of having originated within the “heteronormative matrix” (Lloyd 42). In this context, the term matrix is meant to connote the fact that heteronormativity constitutes “a ‘structure’ [...] in which (or by which) the subject is ‘cast’” or shaped (Salih 51-52). Nonheterosexual relationships are bound to reproduce the norms and structures that constitute this matrix. Similarly, Butler remarks that

[i]t is important to recognize the ways in which heterosexual norms reappear within gay identities, to affirm that gay and lesbian identities are not only structured in part by dominant heterosexual frames, but that they are *not* for that reason *determined* by them. (724)

1 As we will see in the course of this article, this is certainly not the case in *Nightwood*.

2 This is a tendency that Nora will be shown to embody when she tries to contain Robin within the constraints of their homonormative relationship.

As Butler continues, gay and lesbian identities can be viewed as “running commentaries on those naturalized positions as well, parodic replays and resignifications of precisely those heterosexual structures that would consign gay life to discursive domains of unreality and unthinkability” (724). As such, in her opinion, these relationships “[bring] into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original [and show] that heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition” (724). Thus, as Butler goes on to assert, “[t]he more that ‘act’ is expropriated, the more the heterosexual claim to originality is exposed as illusory” (724).

ANALYSIS OF HETERO- AND HOMONORMATIVE RELATIONSHIP STRUCTURES AND THEIR EFFECTS

Felix and Robin

The following section employs the concept of heteronormativity to show that Felix wants to turn Robin into his ideal wife and change their relationship according to the heterosexual norm. However, as will be shown, this attempt, and with it the relationship, fails due to the fact that Robin’s gender performance and sexual identity are incompatible with heteronormative requirements.

Baron Felix Volkbein is obsessed with “what he termed ‘Old Europe’: aristocracy, nobility, royalty” (Barnes 8). This obsession can be viewed as overcompensation for the fact that his aristocratic heritage was fabricated by his father Guido to hide their Jewish roots (3). It is also responsible for his compulsive habit of “[hunting] down his own disqualification,” a tendency that influences his relationship with Robin (8). Deborah L. Parsons also notes that “Felix desperately desires social acceptance, manifest in his adherence to conventional social values” (273-74). This obsessive desire to conform to the social norm—rooted in his fixation on nobility—causes him to pressure Robin into a role she is uncomfortable with, ultimately leading to the collapse of their relationship.

This already becomes apparent before their relationship begins, when Felix, shortly after encountering Robin for the first time, discusses “women and marriage” with Doctor Matthew O’Connor and remarks that “he wished a son who would feel as he felt about the ‘great past’” (Barnes 34-35). On the one hand, this quote reveals Felix’s fixation on preserving the ‘great past’; on the other hand, it shows his desire to live up to the heteronormative ideal even before entering into the relationship. However, his determination to preserve the ‘great past’ is expressed not only in his desire to preserve

his bloodline but also in his attempts to convince Robin of its importance. This already becomes evident when Felix approaches Robin for the first time and is said to be “carrying two volumes on the life of the Bourbons” with him (36). Additionally, he takes her to museums, where they, to his delight, “spen[d] hours,” but he also is forced to realize that “her taste, turning from an appreciation of the most beautiful, would also include the cheaper and debased, with an emotion as real” (37). Nevertheless, Felix is convinced that, with Robin, his destiny “stand[s] before him,” and he asks her to marry him (38).

However, Felix is still uncertain when it comes to Robin's commitment to the ‘great past’ and, thus, decides to bring her to Vienna in order to “reassure himself” (Barnes 38). He shows her the city and attempts to introduce her to its history in the hopes that “sooner or later, in this garden or that palace, she would suddenly be moved as he was moved” (38). Despite his continuous efforts, he is forced to conclude that “he was not sufficient to make her what he had hoped; it would require more than his own argument” (39). This shows Robin's incompatibility with, and her refusal to submit to, the social norms and standards that are of utmost significance to Felix.

Therefore, he abandons his attempts to convince Robin of the importance of the ‘great past’ since he has persuaded himself that Robin's destiny lies in giving him a son “who would recognize and honour the past,” and it is even said that “this was all he could base his intimacy [for her] upon” (Barnes 40). Thus, he concentrates all his efforts on convincing her of the importance of having a child and even goes as far as pressuring her to conform to his wishes when he angrily confronts her saying: “Why is there no child? *Wo ist das Kind? Warum? Warum?*” (40-41). Although he is successful in coercing her into having his child, Robin is only able to prepare herself for the pregnancy with some difficulty and is “strangely aware of some lost land in herself” when she perceives her coming pregnancy (41). This shows that she associates the pregnancy with losing control over her own body because it is in accordance neither with her self-determination nor with her gender identity (Harris 236). Significantly, her preparations also take the form of leaving Felix in order to “[wander] the country side” for days, a habit that she continues throughout the relationship and that can be viewed as an escape from Felix and the demands he places on her (Barnes 41). As Judith Lee points out, Robin is also shown to identify with “women who were never tamed by their culture” (210), among them “Louise de la Vallière, Catherine of Russia, Madame de Maintenon, Catherine de Medici” (Barnes 42). According to Lee, “[t]his list suggests that in the history and culture for which Felix has chosen Robin, the life of women is a death sentence; Robin's choice to leave him is an alternative to a form of suicide” (211).

Robin becomes increasingly averse to Felix as her pregnancy progresses, as can be observed when Felix finds her sleeping in a chair shortly before she gives birth:

She awoke but did not move. He came and took her by the arm and lifted her toward him. She put her hand against his chest and pushed him, she looked frightened, she opened her mouth but no words came. He stepped back, he tried to speak but they moved aside from each other saying nothing. (Barnes 42-43)

Her aversion suddenly turns into outright hatred when Robin begins “to curse loudly” and the shocked Felix tries to comfort her only to be told to “[g]o to hell!” (43). During childbirth, Robin associates pregnancy with loss as she is “looking about her in the bed as if she had lost something”—a theme that is continued when Robin, after giving birth, is “lost, as if she had done something irreparable” (43). Her refusal of her role as a mother continues after her pregnancy. This is exemplified when she is shown in a posture that suggests that she might want to kill their son by forcefully throwing him to the ground (Barnes 43; cf. Harris 236). After the pregnancy, the animosity between them continues, Robin resumes her travel routine, and Felix “[pretends] that he noticed nothing” and actively tries to avoid her (Barnes 43-44). This culminates in their breakup when Robin furiously tells him that she never wanted their son and strikes him “across the face” (44).

The rage that she expresses during and toward her pregnancy as well as toward her role as mother can be viewed as a rejection of the heteronormative requirements that Felix places on her (Harris 236). As Glavey points out, *Nightwood* can thus be seen as “a protest against the suffering that results when one’s identifications and desires do not match up with the roles one is expected to play in a culture’s stories of succession” (758). Consequently, these requirements and Robin’s rebellion against them lead to the end of their relationship. Felix is forced to realize his failure to live up to and force Robin to adapt to the heteronormative ideal. He also has to come to terms with the fact that his son is in no condition to continue his legacy because he, “if born to anything, had been born to holy decay” (Barnes 96). Therefore, Felix tries to secure a position in the church for his son (97), even though he is fully aware that “in all probability the child would never be ‘chosen’” (98). Furthermore, Felix is forced into the role of single parent and has to give up his job at a bank and even his pursuit of nobility (96). While Robin demonstrates what Carolyn Allen has called “masculine freedom” (178) in “her refusal of motherhood” and in her abandonment of Felix and their son (Glavey 758), Felix’s actions can be viewed as ‘feminine bondage’ in that he has to give up his own freedom and ambitions in order to provide for his son—a behavior traditionally associated with motherhood.

Thus, Felix's attempt to live up to and to force Robin to comply with the heteronormative ideal not only results in their mutual unhappiness, and the termination of their relationship, but also puts an end to Felix's dreams and ambitions. Consequently, the failure of their relationship can also be read as a failure of the heteronormative values that Felix tried to force upon Robin.

Nora and Robin

Having established that the relationship between Felix and Robin fails due to the heteronormative demands that Felix tries to impose upon Robin, I employ the concept of homonormativity in this section to show how the lesbian relationship between Nora and Robin reproduces similar patterns and how Nora's attempts to enforce these rules ultimately lead to the failure of the relationship. It might be tempting to regard the partnership between Robin and Nora as subversive of the heteronormative order due to the fact that it is a lesbian relationship, as Fernández does when she writes that "[t]he two lesbian relationships that are introduced in *Nightwood* break the heterosexual system" (80). However, this is too simplistic, especially given the fact that gender conceptions in *Nightwood* subvert any attempt of a binary categorization.³ This also means that the binary opposition between hetero- and homosexual relationships is undermined. Therefore, the fact that their relationship would traditionally be defined as same-sex does not put it in opposition to the heteronormative order. Instead, the relationship reproduces the same structures as what seems to be its heterosexual counterpart and can thus be called homonormative.

After leaving Felix, Robin encounters Nora during a circus performance in America in the course of which, as Fernández puts it, "Nora, seeing the animal magnetism between Robin and the lions desires to take her away from that animal world and 'domesticate' her" (77). This observation already foreshadows the problematic undercurrent of their partnership, in which, as Fernández remarks with reference to Shari Benstock, "Nora embodies patriarchal values in her treatment of Robin as an object of desire [...]. Her mistake is to behave with Robin as a man would, trying to destroy Robin's gender indifference" (77; cf. Benstock 258). However, Benstock goes even further than Fernández acknowledges when the former writes that "[e]very time Robin's actions make the strain of conforming to the operations of this

3 A poignant example for this transgression of gender binaries is the character of Doctor Matthew O'Connor, whom Andrea L. Harris refers to as a "transvestite gynecologist" (233) and who, according to Susana S. Martins, expresses his desire to have "a female body, as though he really were an 'invert,' a woman's mind/psyche trapped in a man's body" (113).

society” obvious and thus highlight “Nora’s ‘misreading’ of her” (258). This misreading hurts Nora and causes her to blame Robin for the problems of the relationship rather than resulting in her questioning her own role and the homonormative standards she is trying to enforce (Benstock 258). This reveals the extent to which Nora has internalized the values of the heteronormative matrix. Indeed, Nora informs Doctor Matthew O’Connor that she tried to stop Robin from “drinking and staying out all night, and from being defiled,” and that she is even willing to resort to violence to achieve this: “I struggled with her as with the coils of my own most obvious heart, holding her by the hair, striking her against my knees” (Barnes 136). The violent means that Nora employs to force Robin to conform to these ideals show how homonormativity in *Nightwood* is revealed to be a repressive system that Nora tries to enforce, similar to the controlling heteronormative ideology of Felix.

Robin’s attitude toward Nora is presented as ambivalent: “Two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity. Yet they were so ‘haunted’ of each other that separation was impossible” (Barnes 49). Despite these early similarities to Robin’s previous engagement, the beginnings of her relationship with Nora are presented in a distinctly more positive light. This can, for instance, be seen in the description of their shared home that Robin chooses and Nora buys and in which “every item [...], every word they spoke, attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humours” (50). However, the genesis of their cohabitation already signals the problems to come, as Robin

kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home, as if she were afraid she would be lost again, as if she were aware, without conscious knowledge, that she belonged to Nora, and that if Nora did not make it permanent by her own strength, she would forget. (50)

The quote again highlights not just Nora’s tendency to view Robin as something to be possessed but also the fact that Robin initially actively encourages this—even though she is simultaneously shown to rebel against it. This paradoxical situation can be explained with the aid of what has already been expounded on regarding the reproduction of heteronormative structures in queer identities and homonormative relationships. This can be viewed both as an attempt to avoid marginalization (Oswald et al. 46) and as a result of the fact that they, too, originate in and have been influenced by the heteronormative matrix. Therefore, Robin’s active role in consolidating these norms within their relationship can, on the one hand, be viewed as an attempt to ensure that she is accepted and loved by Nora, and, on the other hand, be interpreted as a result of the internalization of these normative standards both through her interaction with society and in her relationship with Felix.

Crisis-Ridden Heteronormativity and Homonormativity in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

Nora's possessive tendencies remain apparent throughout the novel: "In Nora's heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora's blood" (Barnes 51). It takes on its most extreme form in Nora's conviction that "[t]o keep her [...] there was no way but death. In death Robin would belong to her. Death went with them, together and alone; and with the torment and catastrophe, thoughts of resurrection, the second duel" (52). Nevertheless, Nora tries to adapt to Robin's tendency of taking nightly walks through the city, which resurfaces in the course of their relationship. According to Allen, Robin's nightly walks—and the abandonment of Nora that accompanies them—can be viewed as an expression of "masculine freedom" on Robin's part (Allen 178, 187; cf. Martins 118). In the beginning, Nora tries to accompany Robin on these walks, but she is eventually forced to come to the conclusion that

a growing tension was in Robin, unable to endure the knowledge that she was in the way or forgotten; seeing Robin go from table to table, from drink to drink, from person to person, realizing that if she herself were not there Robin might return to her as the one who, out of all the turbulent night, had not been lived through—Nora stayed at home, lying awake or sleeping. (Barnes 53)

Nora tries to remain at home anxiously awaiting Robin's return but is unable to cope with her absence, which feels like a physical removal, and thus she leaves the house in search for Robin (53).

Robin's perception of her walks is strikingly different than Nora's. For Robin, it is precisely the distance and distinctness of these two worlds that prevent them from "forming a monster with two heads" (Barnes 54). Robin's ambivalent attitude toward Nora is also reflected during these walks, as evidenced by the following passage:

A look of anger, intense and hurried, shadowed her face and drew her mouth down as she neared her company; yet as her eyes moved over the façades of the buildings, searching for the sculptured head that both she and Nora loved [...], a quiet joy radiated from her own eyes; for this head was remembrance of Nora and her love, making the anticipation of the people she was to meet set and melancholy. (54)

However, it is not Robin's animosity toward Nora that leads to the end of the relationship but rather the fact that Nora realizes that Robin has entered into a relationship with Jenny that is comparable to theirs. Nora detects this when visiting Jenny and discovering a doll similar to the one Robin had given her (127). Nora explains the significance of this doll to Doctor Matthew O'Connor by telling him: "We give death to a child when we give it a doll—it's the effigy and the shroud; when a

woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane” (128).

The fact that Robin gave both women a doll is also significant since it is yet another sign of her active reproduction of heteronormative values in her relationships. As Andrea L. Harris remarks, this “indicat[es] the attempt to model their life after a heterosexual relationship” (249). As such, the doll assumes the role of the real child that they cannot have and thus represents and functions as their child (Barnes 127, 133; cf. Harris 248-49). At the same time, Robin’s behavior toward the doll underscores her rejection of these values and of the role of motherhood (Glavey 758). In fact, this time, her rejection of the doll goes even further than her symbolic rejection of her and Felix’s son, as Nora tells Doctor Matthew O’Connor:

Sometimes, if she got tight by evening, I would find her standing in the middle of the room, in boy’s clothes, rocking from foot to foot, holding the doll she had given us—‘our child’—high above her head, as if she would cast it down, a look of fury on her face. And one time, about three in the morning when she came in, she was angry because for once I had not been there all the time, waiting. She picked up the doll and hurled it to the floor and put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it; and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor. (Barnes 133)

As Harris points out, Robin’s actions “[devastate] Nora” since for her, “the doll is a mediator between Robin and herself: it is a replacement for the connection that is lacking between them” (249). Similarly, the doll can be interpreted as fulfilling the same function for Robin in that it allows her to express her rejection of the homonormative constraints that Nora tries to impose on her and that the doll represents. Additionally, Robin’s rejection of the doll, and the associated role of mother, also signifies her rejection of being forced into a specific gender identity or, as Harris puts it, “a means by which Robin understands her distance from femininity” (236). Robin’s distancing from femininity is also expressed in the fact that she “always appears in male clothing and with male mannerisms” (Fernández 75). Robin’s rejection of the doll, similar to her abandonment of Felix and their son, signifies Robin’s refusal to conform to the homonormative standards that Nora attempts to enforce in their relationship.

As a result of her discovery of the doll at Jenny’s house, Nora breaks up with Robin, telling her: “It is over—I can’t go on. You have always lied to me, and you have denied me to her. I can’t stand it any more” (Barnes 128). Upon this, Robin leaves the house and shortly afterward leaves the country with Jenny (128). As Fernández points out, Nora’s behavior reveals that

Nora is not conscious of Robin's difference, nor of her refusal to belong to any gender pattern, so she insists on the possibility that Robin can change. Nora even tries to get closer to her world, adopting Robin's night-life style, but in the end she cannot understand Robin's infidelity, and breaks up with her. (77-78)

Whereas Nora insists that "a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own. If she is taken you cry that you have been robbed of yourself" (Barnes 129), Susana S. Martins refers to Karen Kaivola, who points out that, although Nora "discovers aspects of her own identity in Robin," she "ultimately tries to control her" (Martins 114). According to Kaivola, this exposes "the failure of lesbian love to achieve a desirable alternative to heterosexuality" (87), which results from the fact that they have, in the terms of this article, internalized heteronormative values. According to Martins, Nora actually becomes aware of what she has been doing in her conversations with Doctor Matthew O'Connor, which Martins interprets as "Nora coming to the realization that she *has* recapitulated patriarchal structures in her relationship with Robin" (117). Martins, even though her discussion lacks the term itself, further remarks about the homonormative power relations: "All of these configurations of desire are ultimately dissatisfying, even damaging. They are not [...] about one woman's desire for another" (118). Therefore, according to Martins, they have

led Nora to desperate anger at what she sees now (in her second conversation with O'Connor) as fruitless narcissism: 'God,' she cried, 'what is love? Man seeking his own head?' O'Connor, in his response, implies that it is traditional, heterosexist theorizing that has brought Nora to this impasse: 'There is no truth, and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known.' (118)

In conclusion, the homonormative relationship between Nora and Robin, although being presented as more positive than Robin's relationship with Felix, ultimately fails because both partners have internalized and reproduce heteronormative relationship patterns. Robin reproduces them when she gives Nora a doll that consequently assumes the function of the child they cannot have. Nevertheless, Robin attempts to break out of this limited framework, both in her nightly walks and in her ultimate rejection of the child and the role of a mother. Nora, on the other hand, exemplifies homonormativity in her attempts to control and possess Robin and even resorts to violence in her attempts to limit Robin's freedom and contain her within the bounds of their homonormative relationship. Consequently, the clash between Robin striving to transgress the homonormative constraints of their relationship and Nora's intention of preventing this results in the end of their partnership. As such, the failure

of their partnership can be interpreted as the consequence of homonormative structures that are reproduced in it and that Nora tries to impose upon Robin. The breakdown of their partnership similar to that of Robin's previous relationship with Felix signifies the failure of these hetero- and homonormative structures.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown how the relationship between Felix and Robin fails as a consequence of Felix's attempts to pressure Robin into having a child and Robin's consequential rebellion against the requirements that he places on her. This does not merely result in the end of their relationship but also puts an end to Felix's professional and private ambitions when Robin decides to abandon him and their newly born son, thus turning him into a single parent. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that the partnership between Nora and Robin, despite being more loving than the one with Felix, also reproduces analogous heteronormative structures and can thus be said to constitute a homonormative relationship.

Hence, Nora, much like Felix, struggles to contain Robin within the boundaries of these structures, a process that—like Felix's behavior—has been shown to reveal the repressive tendency inherent in the heteronormative matrix. However, it has also been argued that, in contrast to her previous relationship, Robin is herself an active agent in producing these heteronormative structures against which she will later rebel. This has been explained as a result of Robin's internalization of these structures, which lead her to reproduce the restrictions with which she subsequently struggles. All in all, the relationships in *Nightwood* fail because the characters involved try to live up to and attempt to force their partner (Robin) to live up to a heteronormative ideal that ultimately limits Robin's freedom and forces her into a role that she does not want to fulfill, thus leading to her eventual rejection of these requirements and the relationships that place them on her. Consequently, the analysis of the relationships in *Nightwood* has revealed that the novel can be interpreted as a critique of this heteronormative order.

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