

The tragedy of permanence in "nightwood"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the chapter "Go Down, Matthew" of *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, Dr. Matthew O'Connor, speaking to an ex-priest at the Café de la Mairie du Vie after an extensive and exhausting session of consoling a lamenting Nora Flood, relates himself and the ex-priest to ducks in Golden Gate park. In inebriated exasperation, he proceeds to complain: "...[E]verybody with their damnable kindness having fed [the ducks] all the year round to their ruin because when it comes time for their going south they are all a bitter consternation, being too fat and heavy to rise off the water [...] how they flop and struggle all over the park in autumn, crying and tearing their hair out because their nature is weighted down with bread and their migration stopped by crumbs" (160). Though the doctor does not seem to be taken seriously by cafe-goers who observe and await this drunken speech, through this passage, readers derive a further understanding of his attitudes toward both life and the nature of his very being, encapsulating a theme Barnes is working to affirm—a notion of tragic permanence by what you are and how it is bestowed upon you, all if not accepted, becoming the source of one's own demise.

The ducks, symbolically representing the Doctor's predicament, are trapped in a struggle of reaching their true nature. Instead of migrating, as he argues, they have been permanently bound to the park, in which what has been given to them—food, a necessity—serves as their bindings. Having become unnaturally plumper than they should, they have been made no longer able to fly as their instincts tell them to, thanks to the interference of those that believe they are doing good. The Doctor in a similar nature, is aware and obsessed with his state of permanence, and questions God as to

what is true and permanent of him as seen in an earlier passage of "Go Down, Matthew"—the male body given to him, or the true female identity he knows himself to be. He is found in a continuous state of longing to be the opposite of what he has been made to be all throughout the novel, observed for example through his constant cross-dressing. The conclusion of the chapter, brings along the conclusion of the Doctor, who in frustration with himself and the plights of others, screams out that he has "lived his life for nothing, [and has] told it for nothing," (165) while arriving at a tragic end in which there will be "nothing, but wrath and weeping," (166), further cementing his permanence in the type of life he wishes not to lead.

This entanglement of permanence is further observed in the case of Baron Felix, born a Jew, a person of lowered status in the current society, yet impersonating aristocracy. Similar to the ducks of Golden Gate park, Felix is trapped in the permanence of who he is, based on a factor out of his control—his birth. However, in his case, Felix is concerned with not only erasing the permanence of his own familial history, but also with establishing a new permanence of the type of person he wishes to be and the type of family he wishes to create, as seen in his desire to create a lasting lineage through Robin Vote, and his discussion with the doctor concerning "history versus legend."

The irony within this lesson for Felix of "history versus legend," lies within the doctor's own preaching of it. While the Doctor preaches to become legend, little do his peers know of the ending that is to come—his giving in to the permanence of his very being—essentially, giving in to 'history'. Felix's

ending, much like the Doctor's, brings about yet another establishment of the permanence of who he truly is, bowing down to aristocracy, itself.

While the characters in the novel exhibit a failure through this notion of tragic permanence, Robin, on the other hand, is essentially the embodiment of the total opposite. Through Robin, readers observe a total change: her fleeting nature and evolving personality. An enigmatic and puzzling character, Robin's thoughts and motives are never quite fully understood by characters.

Robin's impermanence throughout the novel begins with her turning down of a classic family life with Felix and Guido, their first and only child. Following that initial chapter, she leaves with Nora in the next stating "I don't want to be here," (55), but another understanding of Robin's fleeting nature. By the end of the novel, we find Robin has left Nora to be with Jenny, then comes back to Nora in confusion, desperation, and regret. However, with Robin, in peculiar irony, we still observe signs of her entrapment, through her choosing-to-leave nature—her dissatisfaction in whatever predicament she finds herself in leading readers to believe her nature is caused by the very fear of permanence, or settling down.

In the chapter, "Go Down, Matthew," we observe Nora's telling of Robin's nature: "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 high above her head, as if she would cast it down..." (147). This passage leads readers to believe, like the ducks in the park, Robin is concerned with the permanent nature of her being—a woman in a

man's body—and quite possibly, another sign of her longing to retreat back to the days of her youth hindered by the permanence of the present. The character infamous for her sense of impermanence being the most weighed down by the permanence of herself.