

# Nightwood



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DJUNA BARNES

Djuna Barnes was born in a log cabin in New York State on June 12, 1892. She was the second child of Wald and Elizabeth Barnes. Wald Barnes believed in polygamy, and so he brought his mistress, Fanny Clark, to live with the family. Wald was a failed composer and artist, so his mother, Zadel Barnes, kept the growing family financially afloat. When Djuna Barnes was 18, her father and grandmother pressured her into marrying Fanny Clark's brother, Percy Faulkner, who was 52 at the time. The marriage was extremely short-lived (it lasted no more than two months by many accounts) and Barnes moved to New York City with her mother and three brothers in 1912, after Wald and Elizabeth divorced. Barnes briefly studied art at the Pratt Institute and the Art Students League of New York, but eventually took a job as a reporter for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Barnes quickly gained a following for her unusual articles and willingness to go into traditionally male spaces for a story (such as diving into the world of boxing). In 1921, Barnes went to Paris on an assignment and made it her home for the next few years. Barnes was a fixture on the Left Bank, which was also home to notable writers like Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway. While there, Barnes met Thelma Wood (a sculptor from Kansas) and by 1922 the two were in love and living together in Paris. Barnes continued writing articles for newspapers until 1928, when she began writing novels. Her first novel, *Ryder*, proved a success when it was published in 1928. That same year, Barnes and Wood broke up. Over the next few years, Barnes moved around, eventually moving into Peggy Guggenheim's English manor. This is where she wrote the semi-autobiographical *Nightwood*. Barnes also developed a drinking habit that culminated in a suicide attempt in 1939. Guggenheim sent Barnes back to Barnes' mother in New York, and her mother sent Barnes to a sanatorium to get sober. Barnes then moved into her own apartment in Greenwich Village where she struggled to earn a living. Barnes wrote *The Antiphon* (a scathing criticism of her family thinly veiled as a tragedy in verse) in 1958 as well as a few poems, but she didn't publish any more fiction after that. Barnes became a notorious recluse and rarely left her apartment until her death. She was voted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1961 and given a senior fellowship in the National Endowment for the Arts in 1981. Barnes died in her apartment six days after her 90th birthday in 1982.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Djuna Barnes was active as a journalist and fiction writer

during a period of immense sociocultural change and upheaval. In the years after World War I, millions of young people found themselves struggling to make sense of the world after such unprecedented violence and bloodshed changed the European landscape. At the same time, women's movements all over the Western world were taking place as women protested for the right to vote and other feminist issues (notably for prohibition in America and wage equality in England). Barnes herself was an active advocate for women's rights, particularly in support of reproductive rights and for the elimination of double standards that condemn women for sexual behavior that men are free to engage in. During the 1920s, Barnes was one of many writers who settled in Paris to enjoy the bohemian atmosphere and company of some of the biggest names in literature. This atmosphere and the general excitement people felt at the end of World War I led to greater social tolerance of certain groups, including the LGBTQ population. During Barnes's time in Paris, there were a number of salons set up by lesbians where novelists, poets, artists, and musicians (of any gender) would congregate to chat and network. One of the most popular was Gertrude Stein's salon on the Rue de Fleurus, and Barnes herself spent a lot of time at Natalie Barney's salon on the Rue Jacob. This had a huge influence on Barnes's writing and she based many of her characters on the people she met at Barney's salon.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Barnes lived in Paris in the 1920s, when writers and artists from all over the world flocked to the famous Left Bank to socialize, write, party, and enjoy the bohemian atmosphere of the Latin Quarter. Ernest Hemingway famously describes this period in his memoir [A Moveable Feast](#), which was published after his death. Barnes initially went to Paris to interview James Joyce, one of the most important voices of the Modernist movement. Barnes was particularly inspired by Joyce's seminal work, *Ulysses*. Barnes was just one of a large group of LGBTQ people who enjoyed the freedom of life in the Latin Quarter. Like Barnes, Radclyffe Hall drew upon her own experience of being in a same-sex relationship in 1920s Paris—and the dark side of the notorious LGBTQ bars and clubs on the Left Bank—for her novel *The Well of Loneliness*. For a more modern portrayal of same-sex relationships in a big city, try Rita Mae Brown's famous coming-of-age novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*, which traces the experiences of Molly Bolt as she grows up and struggles to make a name for herself as a filmmaker in New York City and find acceptance as a lesbian in the late 20th century. Like *Nightwood*, Graham Greene's [The End of the Affair](#) examines the way infidelity destroys relationships and leaves the participants scarred and miserable. Additionally, numerous

authors have cited Djuna Barnes as an inspiration for their own work, including Truman Capote, who wrote *Breakfast at Tiffany's* about an independent young woman who, like Robin Vote (the protagonist of *Nightwood*), defies traditional definitions of femininity.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nightwood*
- **When Written:** 1932-1933
- **Where Written:** Devon, England
- **When Published:** 1936
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction
- **Setting:** 1920s Paris, Vienna, and America
- **Climax:** Nora finds Robin wearing “boy’s clothes” in a chapel in America
- **Antagonist:** Society
- **Point of View:** Third-Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Extreme Measures.** As a reporter, Djuna Barnes voluntarily submitted to the same force-feeding techniques used on American suffragists in 1914. The process involved tying the individual down to a table, a doctor spraying a combination of cocaine and disinfectant up both nostrils, and then shoving a long rubber hose through the nose and into the stomach before funneling liquid food in. Readers were outraged, and American women kept resorting to hunger strikes in prison and other forms of protest until they won the right to vote in 1920.

**Good Neighbors.** When Djuna Barnes permanently settled herself in Greenwich Village, she became a notorious recluse, rarely leaving her apartment for any reason. In fact, she was so reclusive that her neighbor across the street would lean out his window every day and yell, “Djuna, are you alive?” Her neighbor was none other than Modernist poet E. E. Cummings.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The book opens in 1880 when Hedvig Volkbein delivers her only child—a son named Felix. Immediately after naming her newborn, Hedvig dies. Her husband, Guido Volkbein (senior), died six months earlier of a fever, so the baby is an orphan. Guido was Jewish, but he told everyone that he was both Christian and a Viennese baron. Obsessed with nobility, Guido did his best to seem like a genuine aristocrat, even collecting objects that belonged to noble families and making up a list of ancestors to put any suspicions about his claim to a barony to rest. Hedvig believed everything Guido told her, although she

often questioned why he was so over-the-top in his interactions with anyone he thought might be connected to the nobility, laughing too loudly at their jokes and always singing their praises.

Felix shows up in Paris in 1920 when he’s 30 years old, knowing only what his aunt told him about his parents and determined to become a member of the aristocracy himself. Like his father, Felix is something of a mystery—he has plenty of money but nobody knows how he got it, he seems to belong to every country and nowhere at all, and he carefully chooses clothes that are simultaneously appropriate for evening or daytime wear. He falls in with the circus, attracted to their gaudily decorated rooms and the fact that everyone seems to have a title. Felix befriends a trapeze artist who goes by the title Duchess of Broadback (her real name is Frau Mann) and she brings him to a party in Berlin where he might meet a real count. At the party, Felix meets Dr. Matthew O’Connor, an Irish-American gynecologist from California. Felix begins talking to him, although he’s initially uncomfortable doing so. While Matthew launches into his opinion on the Catholic and Protestant churches, Nora Flood comes up and introduces herself, saying the men find it so easy to talk about sorrow and confusion. Matthew claims he helped deliver Nora and then says people have a hard time holding on to sorrow—it’s finite. The Count comes in and tells everyone to leave, so Matthew, Felix, and the Duchess leave together. Felix goes home, but Matthew and the Duchess go to a café where Matthew expresses his desire to see Felix again one day.

Matthew brings Felix to a café near his home in Paris a few weeks after their first meeting. While they’re talking, a bellhop from a nearby hotel runs over and tells Matthew that there’s an unconscious woman in the hotel and they need help. Felix quickly pays the bill and, at Matthew’s invitation, accompanies him to the hotel. When they get there, they see a beautiful woman unconscious on a couch, surrounded by plants. The woman herself exudes a fungus-like smell and seems to fit in with the plants around her. Matthew, nervous that the police will come and find out he’s unlicensed, quickly douses the woman with water. While the woman starts coming to, Felix watches Matthew look through the makeup on her dresser and steal some money. Felix realizes that this won’t stop him from liking Matthew in future. When the woman wakes up Felix decides she’s attractive and watches her closely. She excuses Felix and Matthew, who learn that her name is Robin Vote.

Back at the café, Matthew realizes that Felix has just had an unusual experience and asks him about marriage. Felix says he wants to have a son who will love the past like he does. Matthew seems to scoff at this, saying nobility and royalty are really just people who have been lied about so much or are so scandalous that people must bow to them. Felix is troubled by this and explains his opinion that paying homage to the past is the only mindset that includes the future. Matthew warns Felix

that the last child born to an aristocratic family is insane. Felix writes this off and Matthew raises a glass to Robin.

Felix seeks Robin out in the coming days and finally runs into her on the street. Over the next few days, they spend a lot of time together and Felix asks her to marry him; she accepts. Felix takes her to Vienna and shows her all the old buildings and historical sites, desperately trying to find something that will move her. In their hotel, Felix tells Robin about some of the greatest figures of the past, but when he looks up, she's asleep. Watching her, Felix realizes he's not strong enough to turn her into what he wants her to be, and he fails to make her understand or appreciate the destiny he's chosen for her. When they get back to Paris, Felix begins to wonder why they don't have a baby yet. He asks Robin and, a short time later, she prepares to have their first baby. During her pregnancy, she starts traveling alone for hours or days at a time, frequently visiting churches (she suddenly takes the Catholic vow). Eventually, Robin delivers their baby, a small, pitiful boy—Guido (junior)—who rarely moves or makes sound. After her recovery, Robin leaves the house more and more. One **night**, Felix sees Robin hold their son into the air like she wants to throw him somewhere, but she gently lowers him back down. A short time later, Robin tells Felix she never wanted a baby and leaves. When she returns to Paris, she's with Nora Flood.

Nora has a well-known social salon in America and loves everyone, which makes it easy for other people to take advantage of her. One day, she goes to the circus (the same one she did publicity for in Europe) and sits next to a young woman who is smoking and watching the animals. A lioness in a nearby cage seems to scare the woman, so Nora grabs her hand and they get out of the tent. Outside, the woman introduces herself as Robin Vote and says she doesn't want to be there anymore. Robin and Nora stay together in America for a few months before going to Europe to travel through different cities. Robin doesn't share much about herself except that she wants a home, so they go to Paris and set up house together. Although they love each other deeply, Robin starts going out at night more and more often while Nora stays at home in a state of torment, waiting for Robin. One night she wakes up from a dream and thinks she sees Robin's shadow in the garden. When she goes out to look, she catches Robin in a passionate embrace with another woman.

Jenny Petherbridge has outlived all four of her husbands. She's small, nervous, and clearly aging. Jenny yearns to be someone that people consider interesting, but she's afraid of being the first person to do anything. Her solution is to collect (or steal) other people's possessions, stories, and even loves. When Jenny learns about the love Nora has for Robin, she decides to take over that love and so she pursues Robin. Robin, however, doesn't seem as interested in Jenny as Jenny is in her. One night, Matthew, Jenny, and Robin all go to Jenny's house from the opera. There are other people at Jenny's house, including

her young niece, Sylvia, who hits it off with Robin. Jenny gets nervous when other women start paying attention to Robin and calls for carriages for the party to drive around in. After a bit of a struggle, Jenny manages to get Robin and a tall Englishwoman Robin's been talking to into her carriage. Jenny quickly grows frustrated with the fact that Robin isn't paying attention to her and starts crying loudly. Robin finally looks over and tells Jenny to shut up. This enrages Jenny, who repeatedly slaps Robin until they both collapse on the floor. When the carriage stops, Robin runs away. A short time later, however, Robin and Nora split up and Jenny takes Robin to America.

Nora goes to Matthew's rooms one night for comfort and to ask him about the night. She catches him wearing a wig, makeup, and a nightdress, but doesn't question it (to herself, she thinks that it's okay). Matthew tries to explain that life at night is different from life during the day, but to understand the night one must think of it during the day as well. When a person sleeps at night, they lose some control—they can't control their dreams or what they do in them—and for this reason a lover is tormented by what their beloved may be doing in dreams. Nora asks Matthew about Jenny and he tries to explain how she collects other people's objects, experiences, and loves. Matthew knows Nora is curious about one night in particular: the night Robin met Jenny. Matthew tells Nora about introducing Robin and Jenny at the opera and the fateful carriage ride they took together later that night. Matthew says that while he watched Jenny slap and scratch Robin in the carriage, he thought to himself that Nora will leave Robin one day, but somehow fate will bring them back together; maybe a dog will find both of their bones after they're buried.

After traveling through Europe with his son, Guido—who is still sickly and, according to some, mentally ill—Felix decides to take one last trip to Paris before settling in Vienna. He meets with Matthew to talk to him about Robin and their son. Felix doesn't understand why Robin married him but admits that he also made a mistake by misunderstanding her attitude as acquiescence. Matthew explains that while most people are afraid of history and destiny, Robin was not, which set her apart. Felix worries about his son's sanity and Matthew tells him to take care of Guido's mind because they don't know what's in it—his sanity is indecipherable, perhaps hidden behind his emotional sensitivity. Felix says he always wanted to understand life and time, but now he realizes that doing so requires a certain amount of insanity, perhaps like Guido's. He theorizes that Robin might be on a quest to understand it herself. A short time later, Felix, Guido, and Frau Mann appear in Vienna. Both Frau Mann and Felix drink excessively and always bring Guido to the bar with them.

Matthew goes to visit Nora and is dismayed to find her writing to Robin. Matthew asks her to rest and reminds her of the pain Robin has caused other people. Nora insists that she can't stop

herself—she must write. Matthew and Nora have a long conversation about Robin, gender and sexuality, death, dreams, and what will happen to them all. Nora tells Matthew about ending her relationship with Robin after going to visit Jenny and learning that Robin had told Jenny that there was nothing between Nora and herself. After Robin left, however, Nora tried to find some hint of her everywhere. Ultimately, Nora wishes she and Robin had died together so there'd be nothing left but their love. Matthew leaves and goes to a bar where he unloads his own misery on an ex-priest. Matthew curses the people who look to him for comfort because he has his own pain to contend with. He says there will be nothing left but anger and tears.

Shortly after Jenny and Robin get to America, their relationship falls apart. Jenny can't understand Robin and it drives her mad. Robin wanders ever closer to Nora's home, eventually setting herself up in the chapel on Nora's property. One night, Nora and her dog find Robin there, dressed in boys' clothes. When she sees them, Robin drops to her knees and pretends to be a dog, terrorizing Nora's dog until they both collapse in exhaustion.



## CHARACTERS

**Robin Vote** – Robin Vote is the primary protagonist of *Nightwood*. Robin's background is almost entirely unknown, although Dr. Matthew O'Connor believes that she lost something important to her during World War I. Her gender identity is somewhat ambiguous (she presents as female and uses she/her pronouns, but she doesn't adhere to most prescribed gender norms) and she openly engages in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Felix Volkbein and Matthew are having lunch together in Paris when someone tells them that a woman has fainted in her room and won't wake up. Felix goes with Matthew and is immediately attracted to Robin. Felix decides relatively quickly that he wants to marry Robin because he wants a son, but he's surprised when Robin actually accepts his proposal. Their marriage is relatively short-lived and not very happy because Robin begins leaving the house for hours at **night** and sometimes goes away for days at a time without leaving word, even during her pregnancy. Robin and Felix have a son, Guido, but she resents him because she never wanted to be a mother. She decides to permanently leave them and, a short time later, meets an American woman named Nora Flood. The two fall in love and buy a house together in Paris, but again Robin starts leaving for hours at a time, particularly at night. Robin drinks to excess and eventually Nora catches her having an affair with Jenny Petherbridge and breaks up with her. Robin and Jenny go to America together, but their relationship also falls apart because, again, Robin starts going out at night. In America, Robin slowly moves her things into a spot in the woods not far from Nora's house. One night, Robin is staying in an abandoned chapel near Nora's

house, dressed up in "boy's clothes," and she stands in front of an altar full of toys and flowers and somehow catches the attention of Nora's dog. The dog leads Nora to the chapel, but as soon as Robin notices them she drops on all fours and acts like a dog. She scares Nora's dog for a few minutes until, exhausted, she collapses on the floor and cries while the dog lies in her lap.

**Dr. Matthew O'Connor** – Matthew is a fake gynecologist who is friends with Nora Flood, Felix Volkbein, and Jenny Petherbridge. Matthew joined the army during World War I and drops hints that he witnessed some terrible things. Although he calls himself a doctor and allegedly helps deliver babies and treat patients, he's not licensed. One night, Nora goes to Matthew's room and finds him wearing a wig, a dress, and makeup. Although Matthew is startled, Nora initially doesn't ask any questions. Soon, however, Matthew reveals that he's "the girl that God forgot," that he's attracted to other men, and that he wishes he could take on traditionally feminine roles (such as making dinner for a husband and having babies). *Nightwood* is set in the 1920s, so the term used to describe Matthew's gender identity is "invert" (today Matthew might identify as transgender), and this sets him apart from the rest of society. Over the course of the novel, other characters turn to Matthew to talk about their heartache as, one by one, their hearts are broken by Robin Vote. Matthew delivers numerous lengthy monologues whenever he talks to these characters as he tries to help them make sense of why their respective relationships with Robin failed and how they should move on. Of the three, Nora spends the most time with Matthew, and it's to Nora that Matthew talks about his frustration and anger that he was born male when he identifies so much more with women.

**Nora Flood** – Nora is Robin Vote's second lover. Nora first meets Felix Volkbein (who later marries Robin; they don't realize the connection at first) and Dr. Matthew O'Connor at a party in Paris and later develops a friendship with Matthew. Nora meets Robin at the circus in America after Robin walks out on Felix and their newborn son Guido. Robin and Nora start a passionate love affair and move back to Paris. Although the love between Robin and Nora seems mutual, Nora becomes obsessed by the idea of possessing Robin. Nora's obsession intensifies as Robin picks up her old habit of wandering through the bars and streets of Paris by **night** and disappearing for hours at a time. One night, Nora thinks she hears Robin coming home and goes out to meet her in the garden. However, Nora learns that not only is Robin having an affair, but Robin has denied that she is in a relationship with Nora to Jenny Petherbridge (the woman Robin is having an affair with). Nora breaks up with Robin, but she still loves and obsesses over her and writes her dozens of letters. Matthew tries to convince Nora to stop writing letters and pleads with her not to go searching for Robin. Eventually, Nora moves back to America

while Jenny and Robin are living there. Robin finds out where Nora is and slowly wanders in that direction, sleeping in the woods and even in an abandoned chapel on Nora's family property. One night, Nora finds Robin in the chapel and watches while Robin pretends to be a dog with Nora's actual dog.

**Felix Volkbein** – Felix is Robin Vote's husband and Guido (junior)'s father. Felix uses a false title (baron) that his father, also named Guido, created to impress the aristocracy in Vienna. *Nightwood* is set in the 1920s and anti-Semitism ran rampant in most of Western civilization. Felix is half Jewish (his father was Jewish, but his mother, Hedvig, was not), and this makes it difficult for him to find acceptance, especially in the upper tiers of society. Guido died before Felix was born and Hedvig died in childbirth, so all Felix knows about them comes from the aunt who raised him. Like his father, Felix wants nothing more than to belong to the aristocracy and he reveres anyone who even looks like they could be part of the European nobility. Felix wants to have a son whom he can raise to love nobility and European history as much as Felix does, and to that end he decides to marry Robin. Felix also tries to inspire a love for nobility and history in Robin, but she takes little interest in either. When Robin gives birth to Guido, Felix is overjoyed. However, Robin has no interest in being a mother and so she leaves Felix and goes to America, where she starts a relationship with Nora Flood (unbeknownst to Robin at the time, Felix had actually met Nora once before at a party that Frau Mann brought him to). Felix starts traveling around Europe with Guido and Frau Mann but is haunted by Robin's memory. Furthermore, Guido is unhealthy and possibly suffers from an unidentified mental illness. Although Felix loves Guido, he believes Guido will die young. Felix turns to alcoholism to cope with his disappointment over his failed marriage and ailing son.

**Jenny Petherbridge** – Jenny is Robin Vote's third lover. Jenny is a four-time widow living in a lavish house full of trinkets that she's stolen from other people. Jenny steals things because she thinks they're interesting and believes that if she possesses them, then *she* will be interesting. Jenny badly wants do something interesting but is also afraid of change or doing anything new. As she neared 50 years old, however, she got even more desperate to be a part of something interesting, and that is when she first saw Robin and learned about Nora Flood's immense love for Robin. Dr. Matthew O'Connor introduces Jenny to Robin (he and Jenny were already friends) at her request and soon after that Jenny and Robin begin a tumultuous relationship. After Nora learns about Robin's affair with Jenny, they break up and Robin goes to America with Jenny. In America, Robin soon takes to her old habit of wandering around alone at **night**, but Jenny tries to follow her at a discreet distance. Ultimately, their relationship falls apart and Jenny finds herself alone in their hotel room, pacing the

floor and crying.

**Guido Volkbein (senior)** – The elder Guido Volkbein is Felix Volkbein's father and Hedvig's husband. Guido's personal history is something of a mystery. He is Jewish, but he tries to pass himself off as a Christian baron, the last of an old Austrian family. He even buys portraits of strangers that he bears a likeness to in order to prove that he came from a noble family. Guido goes out of his way to show reverence to people who he thinks belong to the nobility, and sometimes he unwittingly humiliates himself by showing too much deference to a relatively minor personage. Guido was instantly attracted to Hedvig and she agreed to marrying him blindly, believing that he was, in fact, a baron. Guido was desperate to have a son, but unfortunately he developed a fever and died shortly before Hedvig delivered Felix.

**Hedvig Volkbein** – Hedvig is Felix Volkbein's mother and Guido's wife. Hedvig appears more like a soldier in the military than a typical, dainty, feminine wife. Guido fell in love with Hedvig soon after meeting her, and Hedvig fell in love with Guido partially because he claimed to be a baron. At 45, Hedvig gave birth to Felix, but only lived long enough to name him and pass him off to a nurse.

**Frau Mann / Duchess of Broadback** – Frau Mann is one of Felix Volkbein's friends from the circus. Frau Mann is a trapeze artist and goes by the false title Duchess of Broadback. Frau Mann brings Felix to a party where he meets Dr. Matthew O'Connor and Nora Flood. After the party, Frau Mann disappears from the story until after Robin Vote leaves Felix. Frau Mann accompanies Felix and his son Guido on their travels through Europe. Both Frau Mann and Felix develop a drinking problem by the end of the story.

**Guido Volkbein (junior)** – The younger Guido Volkbein is Felix Volkbein and Robin Vote's son. Guido is named after Felix's father, Guido Volkbein (senior). Robin never wanted to be a mother, and after Guido is born, she abandons both Guido and Felix. As Guido grows up, he develops an interest in the church, so Felix does some research to support his son's interest. Unfortunately, Guido is very underweight (he's described as looking more like a six-year-old when he's ten) and seems to suffer from some sort of mental illness (Felix turns to Dr. Matthew Connor to talk about Guido's mental issues, but they're neither explicitly described nor diagnosed). Both Matthew and Felix believe Guido will die young. Felix and Frau Mann bring Guido all over Europe, making him sit with them in bars while they get drunk.

**Sylvia** – Sylvia is Jenny Petherbridge's young niece. Robin Vote takes an uncharacteristic interest in Sylvia as soon as she sees her. After moving in with Jenny, Robin frequently asks Sylvia if she loves her. Eventually, Sylvia has to go back to her parents and Robin seems to be depressed. Jenny gets Sylvia to come back, but when Sylvia returns it's obvious that Robin has forgotten all about her.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND NONCONFORMITY

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* is set in 1920s

Paris—the same Paris that saw the rise of Ernest

Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce. But underneath the bright, glittering world that these writers lived in and wrote about was a different Paris, a dark Paris full of outcasts and social deviants. This Paris only emerged at **night**, flocking to the bars to drink and to enjoy just being around other people who couldn't be themselves during the day. Many of these people, including two key characters in Barnes's novel, were gay or identified as what was then termed an invert (someone whose gender identity did not match their biological sex). Dr. Matthew O'Connor presents as male but yearns to be a woman (although he shares this with another character, he does not come out to everyone and uses he/him pronouns), and Robin Vote (who uses she/her pronouns) defies all labels but does not conform to heteronormative standards of either sexuality or gender. Both Matthew and Robin suffer because they don't fit in with what society says they should be: straight, cisgender, and monogamous. Through Matthew and Robin, Barnes illustrates the emotional toll of gender and/or sexual nonconformity in a society that demands heteronormativity.

Matthew is an unlicensed gynecologist who is forced to dress and act in traditionally masculine ways during the day, which prevents him from finding happiness or fulfillment because he secretly believes he was supposed to be a woman. Matthew describes himself as “the girl that God forgot,” meaning that he believes he is female in some essential way. However, because “God forgot,” Matthew is biologically male and must abide by traditional standards of masculinity during the day. Matthew tells Nora, “I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months.” Matthew wants to have a traditionally feminine role—cooking, cleaning, marrying “a good man[,]” and having lots of children to care for. Aside from the impossibility of a biological man conceiving and having babies in the 1920s, Matthew is barred from having the kind of relationship he desires or even presenting as female, because society both refuses to acknowledge gender nonconformity and persecutes those who deviate from strictly heteronormative behavior. Instead, he explains that he uses talking as an outlet for his anger and sorrow: “I talk too much because I have been made so

miserable by what you are keeping hushed.”

Robin is something of an enigma, even to herself. In her quest to understand herself better and follow her inclinations, she wreaks havoc in the lives of those who fall in love with her. Matthew describes Robin as “a wild thing caught in a woman's skin.” This shows that Robin is indecipherable to those around her, although the fact that Matthew calls her “wild” indicates that they at least recognize that she doesn't quite fit in with most of society. Barnes writes that “in Robin there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray.” Robin yearns for security (“to be kept”), but security isn't afforded to those who go against the social mores that define acceptable gender identities and sexualities. When Robin does try to find security, it inevitably fails because she's unable to tame the “wild thing” inside of her: her heterosexual marriage to Felix Volkbein unravels when she gives birth to their son and is confronted with the realization that she will have to play the part of feminine mother if she stays; her same-sex relationship with Nora Flood crumbles because Robin struggles with monogamy; and her same-sex relationship with Jenny Petherbridge ironically ends because Robin yearns for the security of life with Nora. Felix, Nora, and Jenny are all devastated by Robin's actions, but Robin herself is just trying to find her place in a world that doesn't make much room for women like her.

Neither Matthew nor Robin find real happiness or fulfillment by the end of the novel—nobody in the book gets a happy ending, really. This, however, is the point Barnes is trying to make: so long as society demands total conformity to prescribed heteronormative standards, untold numbers of innocent people of all genders will be forced to live dark, miserable, and unfulfilling lives. In one of Matthew's final monologues, he discusses the combined misery of Robin's, Felix's, Nora's, and Jenny's stories (all of whom talk to Matthew about their misery at some point). Matthew makes clear that the misery in these stories isn't limited to one small group; actually, this small group is part of a much larger community that society either overtly condemns or tries to oppress by refusing to acknowledge them. Matthew declares, “I say, tell the story of the world to the world!” The stories of Robin, Felix, Nora, and Jenny (and Matthew himself) are also the story of the world and the misery it creates for itself by not being more accepting of those who can't fit in and won't conform to society's heteronormative standards.



## IDENTITY

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* is full of characters who seem to want to be something other than what they are—a circus full of people who adopt false titles (such as Duchess or Prince), mysteriously wealthy characters who claim to be counts or barons, and even a lonely older woman who decorates her home with stolen objects to cover up her own unremarkable life. These characters are not

alone. In the years after World War I, millions of disillusioned people desperately tried to find a place for themselves in a world that no longer made any sense. Felix Volkbein, Jenny Petherbridge, and Robin Vote are three lost souls looking to find or create their ideal identities: Felix wants greatness, Jenny wants to be interesting, and Robin simply wants to understand herself. The primary goal of these characters is to create an identity for themselves, but they do this by lying, stealing, and hurting those around them. In *Nightwood*, Barnes illustrates how people who try to create a new identity for themselves typically have such a specific idea of what kind of person that they want to be that they sabotage their own chances for happiness by failing to recognize or appreciate the good already present in their lives.

Felix's identity is something of a mystery even to him—his mother died in childbirth and his father (a habitual liar who tried to pass himself off as an Austrian baron) died before he was born. Like his father, Felix wants to achieve greatness by being a member of the aristocracy, but his efforts are repeatedly foiled by his inability to control the world (and people) around him. Barnes writes that Felix “clung to his title,” but the title itself was fraudulent—it was something his father made up to gain entry into the upper classes. Felix is so determined to live up to his ideal image of a baron that he actually comes off as ridiculous; his lies don't *really* fool anyone. As part of his quest for greatness, Felix marries Robin. Through her, Felix hopes to have a son who will revere the past and nobility like he does, but he finds that he's “not sufficient to make her what he had hoped.” In other words, Robin won't play the part of “Baronin” that he wants her to, thus thwarting his plan to have a perfectly aristocratic family. Felix believes having a son will somehow legitimize his claims to aristocracy and thus make him happy. However, after Robin leaves him and Guido (their son, named after Felix's father), Felix becomes a miserable alcoholic instead of finding joy, leading Dr. Matthew O'Connor to comment that “a man never knows when he has found what he has always been looking for.”

More than anything else, Jenny wants to be interesting, to have stories to tell everyone, to be talked about. The problem is that she tries to do this by living a second-hand life and stealing truly interesting people's belongings. Barnes writes of Jenny's house that “Her walls, her cupboards, her bureaux, were teeming with second-hand dealings with life.” Jenny steals things from people she thinks are interesting in the hope that other people will think the same about her. Jenny's thefts are not limited to material objects, though: “she appropriated the most passionate love she knew, Nora's for Robin.” In other words, Jenny convinces herself to love and seduce Robin because she thinks it will make her as unusually passionate and interesting as Nora. Unfortunately, all of this is for naught: “She defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person.” Jenny thinks that stealing interesting things (or even

relationships) is a clever shortcut to becoming interesting herself, but in doing so she, like Felix, only appears ridiculous to other people.

Of all the characters, Robin is the least sure of herself. She knows she wants secure relationships, but as soon as she gets them, she finds that she can't fit in with the identity she's expected to have. Felix believes that Robin is “always looking for someone to tell her that she [is] innocent.” This means that, at least on some level, Robin knows that she does bad things sometimes, but because she's only following her nature she believes she's innocent of being malicious, and she desperately wants other people to validate that feeling. Robin carries with her a “wish for a home,” meaning she wants safety, security, stability, and love. Unfortunately, Robin is self-destructive and when she finds people who think she's innocent, she victimizes them by carrying on affairs. Likewise, when she is offered a home and security, she becomes overwhelmed by the desire to not be kept in it and so spends her **nights** roaming the streets of Paris.

In *Nightwood*, most of the characters are their own worst enemies. Robin, Jenny, and Felix all have very specific images of the kind of people they want to be, but this creates a problem because they are so specific about what they want that they self-sabotage by trying too hard to live up to that image. Felix is unable to appreciate his son because he's preoccupied with his failed marriage; Jenny tries to make herself original and interesting by collecting other people's interesting things, thus making herself *unoriginal*; and Robin destroys all the stable homes people offer her because she can't let go of her attraction to the unpredictable nightlife in Paris. In this way each character destroys the very identity they're trying so hard to create, undermining the idea that it's possible to create a perfect identity simply through individual effort.



## OBSESSION AND DESPAIR

The events in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* all revolve around one character: Robin Vote. Robin is something of an enigma—she seems to be attracted to both men and women, she constantly straddles the line between femininity and masculinity, she yearns for other people to understand her but rarely expresses herself clearly, and instead of sleeping at **night** she wanders through the streets and bars of 1920s Paris. Robin has three major relationships: her marriage to Felix Volkbein, her “Boson Marriage” relationship with Nora Flood, and her tumultuous affair with Jenny Petherbridge. Felix, Nora, and Jenny all become obsessed with Robin's mysterious life and devote a lot of mental energy to trying to understand her after she breaks their hearts (she leaves Felix, cheats on Nora, and leaves Jenny). Through the others' fixation on Robin, Barnes illustrates how an unhealthy obsession can ruin a person's life, ultimately leading to loneliness and despair.

Felix was attracted to Robin from the day he met her, and it didn't take long for her to casually agree to marry him. Felix desperately wanted a son to carry on the family name (as it happens, Felix's surname and aristocratic title were made up by his father), but Robin never wanted a son, and so she leaves the family after their son, Guido, is born. Felix tells Dr. Matthew O'Connor that his marriage to Robin "has placed [him] in the dark for the rest of [his] life." However, this isn't because the marriage itself was so miserable—rather, Felix is obsessed with the question of why Robin married him in the first place. After Robin leaves him, Felix tries to get away from her memory by taking their son to Vienna and traveling around Europe. Unfortunately, he's still haunted by Robin's memory and he turns to alcoholism. The last time Felix is seen in *Nightwood*, "his monocle [is] dimmed by the heat of the room, perfectly correct and drunk, trying not to look for what he had always sought, the son of a once great house." Tormented by thoughts of Robin and what his life was supposed to look like, Felix can't even find joy in the one thing he really wanted: a son.

Shortly after meeting Robin, Nora invests all of her energy, heart, and a substantial amount of her money into giving Robin a happy home. Nora invests so much in the relationship that she becomes obsessed with Robin and is unable to move on after Robin runs away to America with Jenny. When Robin started leaving her shared home with Nora to wander around Paris by night, Nora was torn between her fear of driving Robin away by being too overbearing and her desire to possess Robin so she couldn't get away. Nora's thoughts took a decidedly dark turn when she almost began wishing for Robin to die because "In death Robin would belong to her," which highlights Nora's obsession with possessing Robin. After Robin leaves, Nora tells Matthew, "I have been loved [...] by something strange, and it has forgotten me." Nora, however, has not forgotten, and she obsessively writes Robin letters and discusses the relationship with Matthew before setting sail to America in the hope of finding Robin. Nora notes that she loves Robin so much that love has overwhelmed her sense of self; it "rots [her] away." This illustrates Barnes's belief that obsession creates pain and despair, and that an obsessed person can lose all sense of self (at least as long as their obsession lasts).

Jenny wanted to possess Robin because she was impressed by how much Nora loved Robin. Jenny, too, becomes obsessed with Robin because she sees Robin as her last chance to have a great love affair, and she loses her mental balance when the relationship fails. Jenny and Robin go to America together, but the relationship quickly turns sour. Word gets back to Matthew that Jenny's obsessive love for Robin "rots her sleep," which echoes Nora's statement about "rot[ting] away" after Robin leaves her. Barnes notes that when Robin began wandering the streets at night, "Jenny became hysterical." In the 1920s, some doctors still considered hysteria a legitimate mental illness that predominately affected women, so this description could

indicate that Jenny begins to unravel and lose her mind when she realizes that her relationship with Robin is crumbling. In the final description of Jenny after Robin leaves her, Barnes says that she's "walk[ing] up and down her darkened hotel room, crying and stumbling." Jenny is devastated when Robin leaves because Jenny invested her last scraps of love and hope into her desire to possess Robin the way Nora did. Jenny, like Felix and Nora, loses much of her sense of self when she loses Robin—and this, Barnes indicates, is the inevitable, tragic result of harboring an unhealthy obsession.



## OTHERNESS AND THE SEARCH FOR ACCEPTANCE

As an outspoken feminist and someone who openly engaged in a same-sex relationship in the early 20th century, Djuna Barnes knew firsthand what it was like to be the "other," an outsider in society. It's no surprise that the characters in *Nightwood* are also "others." Guido Volkbein (senior) was an Italian Jew who was desperate to be accepted by society at a time when a lot of people looked down on all Jewish people. His solution was to make up a family history (supposedly he was descended from an illustrious Austrian family and was a baron) and strive to be more like the Christian aristocracy. His son Felix Volkbein inherited this hope. Dr. Matthew O'Connor is an Irish-American unlicensed doctor who's what was then called an invert (a person whose gender identity and biological sex did not match up). Matthew, too, wants to be accepted and so he chooses masculine careers that make it easier for him to find acceptance. Robin Vote defies all social understanding, according to the norms of her time—she seems to be bisexual, it's difficult to pin down her gender identity, she struggles with monogamy, and she resents the idea of motherhood. Still, Robin tries to do the acceptable thing so that she'll be accepted, but this is made difficult by the fact that she's so fundamentally different from the kind of woman society says she's supposed to be. In *Nightwood*, the characters are all "others" who yearn for social acceptance, but as Barnes shows, they are caught in a lose-lose situation—acceptance means denying their nature (their "otherness"), while embracing their nature means losing acceptance.

Guido was desperate to be a part of a world (the aristocracy) that he was shut out from because he was Jewish. He passed on this desire to Felix. Guido dedicated every waking moment of his life to paying "remorseless homage to nobility." In other words, he was obsessed with rank and station and this made him pay far more deference than was necessary to anyone he believed was even tangentially connected to the aristocracy. Barnes writes that both Guido and Felix are "heavy with impermissible blood." This means that both Guido and Felix are tormented by the knowledge that, try as they might, they can never be a part of the aristocracy that they are so obsessed with because of their Jewishness and lack of direct genealogical

connection to a noble family. Guido died before Felix was born, but Felix inherited his obsession with passing himself off as an aristocrat and denying his true heritage. To that end, Felix does his best “to be correct at any moment” by wearing clothes that could pass for either evening or daytime clothes, wearing a monocle, and calling himself a baron.

Matthew is an invert, but because he can’t outwardly present as female in public, he tries to fulfill traditionally masculine roles so that other people will accept him. Matthew says that his father never really liked him, but “relented a little” when Matthew joined the army during World War I. Matthew, then, knew that doing traditionally masculine things would lead to society accepting him. Matthew calls himself a doctor, but he’s not actually licensed. Still, medicine was (at the time) considered a masculine career, which could explain why Matthew chooses to tell everyone that he is a doctor—it diverts suspicions about his gender identity or sexuality, making it easier for others to accept him. One day, Felix sees Matthew walking and notes that Matthew looks older than his years, but as soon as Felix calls him, Matthew “threw off his unobserved self, as one hides, hastily, a secret life.” This shows that Matthew makes a conscious effort to appear a certain way when he’s in public, and one of the primary reasons he does that is because he wants others to accept him.

Robin doesn’t quite fit in anywhere, but that doesn’t stop her from craving acceptance and love (as seen in the way she jumps from one relationship to the next). Robin’s primary struggle is in trying to both be exactly herself and exactly what society wants her to be. Speaking after Robin leaves her, Nora (Robin’s first major girlfriend) says that Robin “wanted darkness in her mind—to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter—her dissolute life, her life at **night**.” Robin wants to hide her true self away because she knows that others would scorn and insult her if they knew what she is really like. At the same time, Robin craves security and acceptance—her dearest wish is “for a home.” The word “home” evokes feelings of security, comfort, safety, and acceptance—all things that Robin craves, but to have a traditional home she would need to conform to traditional sex and gender roles, which goes against her nature. Nora says of Robin, “She would kill the world to get at herself if the world were in the way, and it *is* in the way.” In other words, Robin doesn’t just want acceptance; she wants to be totally free to really explore her inner nature, and she’s willing to break social mores to do it.

Matthew, Felix, and Robin are all “others,” and this keeps them from enjoying the security of being accepted by society in the 1920s even though they want to be. They are faced with a seemingly impossible choice: stifle or lie about who they are to win society’s acceptance, or risk social ostracization by being honest about themselves.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## NIGHT

In *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes uses night to represent the hidden parts of Robin Vote’s personality. The other four primary characters—Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge, and Dr. Matthew O’Connor—struggle to understand Robin because there’s so much about herself that she doesn’t say or share with others; one might argue that not even Robin understands herself, as she often seems to simply follow her impulses and drives. Among these impulses is the one to go out at night and wander the streets of Paris or even the woods in America, once she moves there. Although Robin doesn’t explicitly tell her partners not to follow her, they all get the distinct sense that they’re not wanted (in fact, Nora tries to go out with Robin for a while but couldn’t stand feeling like she was unwanted, so she started staying home). Robin feels most like her true self at night. Under cover of darkness, she can drink as much as she wants, act however she wants, and make love to whoever catches her eye. It is at night that Felix walks in on Robin holding their newborn son Guido high in the air “as if she were about to dash [him] down,” and nighttime again when she is finally able to come clean about the fact that she never wanted to have a baby. Night, then, allows Robin to express things that she struggles to articulate during the day. As Nora explains it, Robin “wanted [...] to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter—her dissolute life, her life at night.” Robin returns to her home at dawn and sleeps during the day. She’s only comfortable with the night because by night her “dissolute life” doesn’t seem so dark or unnatural—she finds acceptance, freedom, and even *herself* in the darkness.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the New Directions edition of *Nightwood* published in 2006.

### Bow Down Quotes

●● Childless at fifty-nine, Guido had prepared out of his own heart for his coming child a heart, fashioned on his own preoccupation, the remorseless homage to nobility, the genuflection the hunted body makes from muscular contraction, going down before the impending and inaccessible, as before a great heat. It had made Guido, as it was to make his son, heavy with impermissible blood.

**Related Characters:** Felix Volkbein, Guido Volkbein (senior)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

Obsessed with nobility and the concept of inheritance, Felix's father Guido desperately wants a child. All of his hope for the future lies in the possibility of having a son like a true nobleman (Guido falsely claims to be a baron). Guido's reverence for nobility is "remorseless," which means that it is all-consuming and always present; Guido feels he must never fail to pay homage to nobility when he sees it. However, because it is difficult to tell if someone belongs to nobility just by looking at them, Guido (and later Felix) show deference to literally anyone who looks like they might be even remotely important. This means that they must always be prepared to show their respect—typically by bowing or at least respectfully nodding—and so they are always alert and observant of the people around them. Guido also tries to learn how to act like an aristocrat by observing the movements and habits of actual aristocrats.

In his preoccupation with nobility, Guido is never able to lose sight of the fact that because of his Jewish blood, he'll never be accepted into aristocratic circles. This makes him feel "heavy," like his blood is a burden that keeps him from achieving his ambitions. As Guido hoped, Felix does inherit these qualities, but the result is that he, like Guido, is haunted by the fact that he can't quite fit in with the people he admires most.

●● He was usually seen walking or driving alone, dressed as if expecting to participate in some great event, though there was no function in the world for which he could be said to be properly garbed; wishing to be correct at any moment, he was tailored in part for the evening and in part for the day.

From the mingled passions that made up his past, out of a diversity of bloods, from the crux of a thousand impossible situations, Felix had become the accumulated and single—the embarrassed.

**Related Characters:** Guido Volkbein (senior), Felix Volkbein

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 11

### Explanation and Analysis

Barnes describes what Felix was like when he first arrived on the scene in Paris when he was 30 years old (this was in 1920). Even though Felix never met Guido, his habits and beliefs perfectly reflect his father's. Guido was something of a dandy in his day, and Felix is something similar in his own lifetime. Felix is determined to at least look like he's going somewhere even though he's not, which is why he wears clothes that are suited for either the evening or the daytime. Felix hopes that if he looks like someone important, other people will believe that he *is* important and be as amazed with him as he is with actual nobility.

As Guido hoped, Felix loves history and greatness. He studies it, reads about it, and seeks out opportunities to talk about it. He also tries to imitate all forms of greatness at once—military greatness, social greatness, royalty, and so on. Because he's trying to imitate people from so many different groups, Felix becomes "the accumulated." He has, in fact, accumulated a number of different ideas, words, actions, and habits from people who considers great. At the same time, this combination of accumulated habits makes Felix also seem like the "single." This means that Felix stands out instead of fitting in with any class of people. Whether he realizes it or not, this makes Felix the "embarrassed"—it's obvious to everyone around him that his identity doesn't quite add up.

●● A Jew's undoing is never his own, it is God's; his rehabilitation is never his own, it is a Christian's. The Christian traffic in retribution has made the Jew's history a commodity; it is the medium through which he receives, at the necessary moment, the serum of his own past that he may offer it again as his blood. In this manner the Jew participates in the two conditions; and in like manner Felix took the breast of this wet nurse whose milk was his being but which could never be his birthright.

**Related Characters:** Felix Volkbein

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Barnes explains the unique position Jewish people hold in a Christian-dominated society. This book was written in the early 20th century and at that time, there was still a widespread belief among Christians that the Jews should be punished for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This

is the reason for the “retribution” Barnes refers to. Christianity still dominates Western Europe, and in the period *Nightwood* covers, a Jew who wanted to be accepted into society had to be “rehabilitat[ed]” by a Christian. This means that a Jew would have to act Christian or possibly convert to Christianity. This is what Guido and later Felix tries to do—gain acceptance into Christian society by acting Christian and, to an extent, denying their true heritage.

Through centuries of punishing Jews (seeking “retribution”), Christians have effectively erased Jewish history for those, like Felix and Guido, who don’t live in Jewish communities with leaders to tell them about their history. Jewish history becomes a “commodity,” or something that can be bought and sold, but which isn’t equally available to all. A Jewish person wishing to get hold of this “commodity” must be willing to offer it up again as blood; that is, they have to pay a steep price for what should be rightfully theirs. This gives Jewish people a kind of double-consciousness in which they are aware of both their history and of how they are viewed because of it. They may even feel compelled to judge their own history by Christian standards because they also feel like they’re part of the Christian community. Both Guido and Felix were tormented by this feeling of both “otherness” and belonging—they would be just as out of place in a Jewish community as they are in a Christian one.

## La Somnambule Quotes

☛ “The last muscle of aristocracy is madness—remember that”—the doctor leaned forward—“the last child born to aristocracy is sometimes an idiot, out of respect—we go up—but we come down.”

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O’Connor (speaker), Felix Volkbein

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 44

### Explanation and Analysis

After meeting Robin Vote for the first time, Felix tells Matthew about his dream of getting married and having a son who worships the past and greatness the same way he does. Matthew tells him that “the last child born to aristocracy is sometimes an idiot.” This is meant as a warning for Felix to be cautious. Felix is very confident in his belief that if he has a son, then that child will naturally adopt Felix’s opinions and beliefs. However, no parent can choose their child’s destiny or personality; each child must be

allowed individual growth or else they’ll be miserable. Matthew’s warning about insanity in aristocratic families is a stern reminder to Felix that getting what he wants might come at a price—he might solidify his claim to aristocracy through having a son, but that son, like the final children of so many noble families, might also be the end of Felix’s family tree. This moment foreshadows the apparent mental illness that Felix’s son Guido will later suffer.

Matthew also says, “we go up—but we come down.” By this he means that people might succeed in getting a lot of the things that they want most in life, but at some point things will go wrong. In looking to the future, Felix must consider the possibility of going downhill and prepare for it, so that when it comes it doesn’t completely destroy everything he’s working for.

☛ And as he spoke Felix laboured under the weight of his own remorseless recreation of the great, generals and statesmen and emperors. His chest was as heavy as if it were supporting the combined weight of their apparel and their destiny. Looking up after an interminable flow of fact and fancy, he saw Robin sitting with her legs thrust out, her head thrown back against the embossed cushion of the chair, sleeping, one arm fallen over the chair’s side, the hand somehow older and wiser than her body; and looking at her he knew that he was not sufficient to make her what he had hoped; it would require more than his own argument.

**Related Characters:** Robin Vote, Felix Volkbein

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 47-48

### Explanation and Analysis

After Felix and Robin get married, Felix takes her to Vienna hoping to show her something—a building, a work of art, a view—that evokes an emotional response in her. To Felix, everything about Vienna screams greatness, nobility, and glory. Felix feels like he has a real responsible to accurately recreate greatness, especially if he wants to inspire similar feelings in Robin. Felix does not quite understand how or why Robin isn’t interested in what he has to say. It’s one of the earliest indications that Felix just doesn’t understand Robin; if he did, then he might succeed in moving her. In fact, Felix loses sight of Robin completely when he talks about the past and greatness—he is so wrapped up in his own words that he evidently doesn’t realize how tired (or bored) Robin is.

Felix wants to “make” Robin into something. Even though they’re married, this desire implies that Felix isn’t quite happy with Robin. She must be something other than what she is for him to be completely happy with her. She must reflect his own desires, ambitions, and beliefs. Felix believed and hoped that “his own argument” would be enough to sway Robin, but this instance proves to him that he can’t communicate with her in a way that makes her understand why these things are so important to Felix.

☛ There was something pathetic in the spectacle. Felix reiterating the tragedy of his father. Attired like some haphazard in the mind of a tailor, again in the ambit of his father’s futile attempt to encompass the rhythm of his wife’s stride, Felix, with tightly held monocle, walked beside Robin, talking to her, drawing her attention to this and that, wrecking himself and his peace of mind in an effort to acquaint her with the destiny for which he had chosen her—that she might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past.

**Related Characters:** Hedvig Volkbein, Guido Volkbein (senior), Robin Vote, Felix Volkbein

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 48-49

### Explanation and Analysis

Barnes continues describing Felix’s failed attempts to get Robin to adopt his beliefs and goals. During his lifetime, Guido tried his best to impress or at least keep up with his wife, who was not Jewish and so was closer to Guido’s idea of a noble, honorable person. Like his father, Felix wants to “encompass the rhythm of his wife’s stride,” meaning he wants to surround Robin so that she always moves with him. Instead, Robin continues walking in her own direction and Felix is left pathetically chasing after her and trying to point things out that he thinks are great, in the hope that she’ll share his opinion. Robin, like Hedvig, doesn’t really question what her husband tells her, but she still keeps her own opinion and practices. In other words, neither Guido nor Felix is able to totally “encompass” his wife.

Robin also shows little interest in “the destiny for which [Felix] had chosen her.” Felix, like his father, is desperate for a son to both carry on the family name and share his love of the past. Robin has no personal interest in being a mother, as seen in her lack of enthusiasm about motherhood during her pregnancy or even after it. Unlike Felix, Robin is not anxious to pass her own personal qualities or beliefs down to the next generation; it’s enough for Robin to try and

understand herself without having to care for another person that might be just like her.

### Night Watch Quotes

☛ She stayed with Nora until the mid-winter. Two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity. Yet they were so “haunted” of each other that separation was impossible.

Nora closed her house. They travelled from Munich, Vienna and Budapest into Paris. Robin told only a little of her life, but she 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.

**Related Characters:** Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood, Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 60

### Explanation and Analysis

After leaving Felix and her son, Robin meets and begins a relationship with Nora in America. Robin wants love (something Nora is more than eager to provide), but she also desires “anonymity.” This means that she wants to be loved, but not understood. This reveals that Robin, at this point, sees something within herself that she doesn’t like. If Nora begins to really understand Robin, then she will see these negative personality traits or desires as well. Furthermore, whatever Robin sees in herself is something that she can’t quite understand either. So, her desire for love and her desire for anonymity “haunt” each other, meaning they threaten one another (Robin might not be loved if she loses anonymity, but she must be open and give up her anonymity to truly be loved).

Robin wants a home, but not like the one she had with Felix. When Felix made a home for Robin, he wanted it to be her whole world. Robin’s idea of a home is a place that she can leave and then return to, not a place where she feels trapped. Within their home, Felix tried to change Robin. What Robin wants is the freedom to be herself without pressure to be anything else. Nora wants to possess Robin, but this also means taking responsibility for Robin. Because of this, Nora feels it’s her job to make sure Robin has the safe home-like environment she craves. Nora believes that if she can do this, then Robin will *have* to stay with her, but Robin’s conflicting feeling already indicate that that might

not be the case.

☞ Thus the body of Robin could never be unloved, corrupt or put away. Robin was now beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her. That she could be spilled of this fixed the walking image of Robin in appalling apprehension on Nora's mind—Robin alone, crossing streets, in danger. Her mind became so transfixed that, by the agency of her fear, Robin seemed enormous and polarized, all catastrophes ran toward her, the magnetized predicament; and crying out, Nora would wake from sleep, going back through the tide of dreams into which her anxiety had thrown her[.]

**Related Characters:** Nora Flood, Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 62

### Explanation and Analysis

Barnes tries to explain the deep, passionate, and even obsessive love Nora has for Robin. Right on Nora's heart is an engraved image of Robin, but this image only captures "the body of Robin," not Robin as a person. This is why when Nora imagines Robin in danger, the worst she can imagine is that Robin could get physically hurt. This reflects Nora's lack of understanding of Robin's internal life, but it also means Robin has succeeded in remaining at least partially anonymous, as she so badly desires.

Robin haunts Nora's dreams as well, highlighting how Robin comes to be the central focus of Nora's entire life. Nora wants to possess Robin's body, partially to keep it safe and partially because she loves and admires it. Over time, Nora grows to understand that Robin's body is not the most important part of Robin. Just about anyone can possess another person's body, but trying to possess their actual being (their spirit, soul, personality, and so on) is impossible, a fact that Nora will soon have to confront.

☞ To keep her (in Robin there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray) Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death Robin would belong to her.

**Related Characters:** Nora Flood, Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

As Robin starts to spend more and more time out of the house and away from Nora, Nora herself begins thinking of what she can do to take possession of Robin without causing her to run away. Robin herself has a "tragic longing to be kept," which means that Robin wants someone to keep her safe and take care of her. More importantly, if Robin is "kept" then she won't be able to go "astray" anymore. Being "astray" means that Robin is somewhat lost; she doesn't truly understand herself nor does she feel like she belongs anywhere.

Nora sees death as the best way to keep Robin because it would prevent her from leaving, either physically, emotionally, or mentally. Nora's fears about Robin leaving have grown and now concern Robin's inner life, rather than just her body. Nora is afraid of what will happen if Robin ever develops love for another person. Nora also worries about what would happen if Robin were hurt emotionally and how Robin would cope with it. Nora feels like Robin will never give up her anonymity and let Nora in, so death is the only way to keep Robin from letting anyone else in.

☞ The doctor, seeing Nora out walking alone, said to himself, as the tall black-caped figure passed ahead of him under the lamps, "There goes the dismantled—Love has fallen off her wall. A religious woman," he thought to himself, "without the joy and safety of the Catholic faith, which at a pinch covers up the spots on the wall when the family portraits take a slide; take that safety from a woman," he said to himself, quickening his step to follow her, "and love gets loose and into the rafters. She sees her everywhere," he added, glancing at Nora as she passed into the dark. "Out looking for what she's afraid to find—Robin. There goes mother of mischief, running about, trying to get the world home."

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O'Connor (speaker), Robin Vote, Nora Flood

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

Nora starts wandering around Paris at night hoping to catch a glimpse of things that remind her of Robin. One night,

Matthew sees her and immediately understands what she's doing and why. Matthew calls Nora a "religious woman," meaning that Nora is made to worship something. However, Nora doesn't have a traditional Catholic faith. Nora has made a God out of Robin, and that can't bring her the same comfort as Catholicism would. A traditional religion can replace earthly losses (this is how it "covers up the spots on the wall when the family portraits take a slide") by giving people something higher to love and worship. Without something to direct her love towards, Nora's love "gets loose and into the rafters." This means that it expands beyond Nora's reach, encompassing every part of her life.

Matthew says that Nora is "Out looking for what she's afraid to find": Nora is looking for Robin, but she's purposely avoiding the cafes Robin might be at. This is because Nora is looking for Robin in other people. For example, Nora might spot a woman who makes a gesture similar to one of Robin's and this might indicate that Robin and that woman might have a relationship of some kind. Nora's jealousy makes her suspicious, and she hopes to find justification for her suspicions, but she's also "afraid to find" it because it would confirm her worst fears. This would shatter Nora and Robin's lives together; while it's horrible for Nora to suspect but not know something is happening, she still thinks it'd be worse to be confronted with direct evidence of Robin's betrayal.

an "other," and she wants to be accepted by the world, but only on her terms. Because of this, she seems both demanding and ridiculous. Jenny wants "to be the reason for everything," which is a passive role—she won't have to actually do anything, and other people will do things because of her. But because she's so passive, she ends up being "the cause of nothing." Jenny would have to be brave and take risks doing something original in order to make things happen, but she's crippled with fear and anxiety over being the first person to do anything.

Jenny resembles Felix and his father because she acts like a person who "cannot think for themselves." She recreates the things she's read or heard about rather than looking around and determining what to do on her own. She only ever does the thing that she thinks will be right, much like Felix always strives to be "correct" in any situation. And, like Felix, Jenny looks ridiculous and even insincere as a result.

☛ When she fell in love it was with a perfect fury of accumulated dishonesty; she became instantly a dealer in second-hand and therefore incalculable emotions. As from the solid archives of usage, she had stolen or appropriated the dignity of speech, so she appropriated the most passionate love that she knew, Nora's for Robin. She was a "squatter" by instinct.

## "The Squatter" Quotes

☛ She was nervous about the future; it made her indelicate. She was one of the most unimportantly wicked women of her time—because she could not let her time alone, and yet could never be a part of it. She wanted to be the reason for everything and so was the cause of nothing. She had the fluency of tongue and action meted out by divine providence to those who cannot think for themselves.

**Related Characters:** Jenny Petherbridge

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 74

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Barnes describes Jenny Petherbridge's personality and quirks. Jenny is notoriously torn between her desire to take an active part in the world and her fear of what that might actually require. Jenny is "unimportantly wicked" because she never actually does anything important but still demands that things happen. Jenny, like Felix and Robin, is

**Related Characters:** Robin Vote, Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 74-75

### Explanation and Analysis

Barnes describes what Jenny is like when she falls in love. Jenny is obsessed with the idea of love and wants nothing more than to be part of an epic love story, the kind people talk and read about. She "instantly [becomes] a dealer in the second-hand" for many of the same reasons she never succeeds in being the reason for anything: she is simply incapable of taking an active role in creating anything new or original. Instead, Jenny emulates romantic heroines and uses their words and actions to try to recreate their great love story. This is a form of "dishonesty" because Jenny isn't being herself, but someone else.

Jenny values love the same way Felix values nobility—she considers it the highest, best thing that anybody can attain. But because she's afraid to blaze any new trails and make something by herself, Jenny resorts to "appropriat[ing]"

other people's relationships. This means that she takes an existing relationship and forces herself into it, driving the most interesting person (in this case, Nora, because Nora's passion for Robin is so unusual and strong) out and taking their place. In this way, she can nab a ready-made relationship instead of building one from the bottom up. This also makes Jenny a "squatter," or someone who takes up space where they don't belong.

memories of this past life are what make him so terribly unsuited to his present life in a man's body. Matthew doesn't want to just be feminine, though—he wants to be a biological woman with "a womb as big as a king's kettle" so he can have lots of babies and a naturally high voice. As it is, Matthew says he's "turned up this time as [he] shouldn't have been," meaning he feels like he was born into the wrong body.

## Watchman, What of the Night? Quotes

☞ We go to our Houses by our nature—and our nature, no matter how it is, we all have to stand—as for me, so God has made me, my house is the pissing port. Am I to blame if I've been summoned before and this my last and oddest call? In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it's that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? And what do I get a but a face on me like an old child's bottom—is that a happiness, do you think?

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O'Connor (speaker), Nora Flood

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nora goes to Matthew hoping that he will comfort her because her relationship with Robin has made her so miserable. When Nora first got to Matthew's room, she caught him wearing a woman's wig, nightdress, and make up but declined to ask him anything about it. Throughout their conversation, however, Matthew decides to give her some insight into his sexuality and gender identity. By "Houses," Matthew means bodies, although they're not always pleasant. Matthew makes it clear that he doesn't like his body by calling it the "pissing port." He blames this on God because God is the one who made him as he is.

Matthew reveals that he believes in reincarnation by saying that he's "been summoned before," meaning that he had a past life. Matthew also believes that the person he was in a past life is the person he was always meant to be—a beautiful girl from Marseilles. Matthew thinks his latent

☞ "And do I know my Sodomites?" the doctor said unhappily, "and what the heart goes bang up against if it loves one of them, especially if it's a woman loving one of them. What do they find then, that this lover has committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist—and they come down with a dummy in their arms."

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O'Connor (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

Matthew also reveals that he's sexually attracted to men and seeks them out (in fact, he once had a conversation with other gay men about where to pick up the handsomest men). "Sodomites" is the term many people used in the 19th and early 20th centuries to describe gay men, so Matthew is saying that he can understand them. Far from deriving any joy from the fact that he can recognize and engage with other gay men, Matthew talks about it "unhappily," indicating that he's struggled to really connect with any of the men he's been with.

Matthew differentiates between loving a gay man as a man and loving a gay man as a woman. Matthew wishes and feels like he was meant to be a woman, but even among gay men this is taboo. Gay men are allowed to exist, but men who don't adhere to male gender roles have made an "unpardonable error." The fact that gender nonconformity in this context is considered an "error" highlights a belief that many people had about the connection between biological sex and gender. During this time, there really wasn't an acknowledged difference between sex and gender—if a person had male genitals then they were considered a man and must be masculine, and if they had female genitals then they were considered a woman and must be feminine. There was very little wiggle room on either side of the binary. This means that Matthew is extremely isolated in the world—he's not accepted by

society in general or by the French gay community.

“Have I not shut my eyes with the added shutter of the night and put my hand out? And it’s the same with girls,” he said, “those who turn the day into night, the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish. These can never again live the life of the day. When one meets them at high noon they give off, as if it were a protective emanation, something dark and muted. The light does not become them any longer. They begin to have an unrecorded look. It is as if they were being tried by the continual blows of an unseen adversary.”

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O’Connor (speaker), Nora Flood

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 101

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Matthew tries to explain to Nora the difference between people who belong to the night and those who belong to the day. The people whose dark sides encompass their entire personality are the people who belong to the night, including Robin. Most of these people are dark by choice: they take drugs or drink too much. They do these things as a way to cope with the parts of themselves they don’t like or understand, and this is why Robin drinks so much when she goes out at night—it helps her cope with her pain and shame. These groups are openly self-destructive, which makes them miserable and pitiful. However, there is another group whose self-destructive tendencies are more insidious: “the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish.” This is the group Nora belongs to. Nora fears losing Robin to her life at night, so Nora herself becomes a night person, desperately hoping that things will change and that they can have a normal life during the day.

According to Matthew, once someone is a night person, they will never be able to adjust to life during the day again. It even changes their appearance, which explains why Felix believed there was an abnormal glow about Robin when he first saw her. During the day, night people look like they’re receiving “continual blows [from] an unseen adversary.” In many cases, including Robin’s, the adversary turns out to be themselves as they destroy their own lives and the lives of

those they profess to love.

### Where the Tree Falls Quotes

“Guido is not damned,” he said, and the Baron turned away quickly. “Guido,” the doctor went on, “is blessed—he is peace of mind—he is what you have always been looking for—Aristocracy,” he said, smiling, “is a condition of the mind of the people when they try to think of something else and better—funny,” he added sharply, “that a man never knows when he has found what he has always wanted.”

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O’Connor (speaker), Guido Volkbein (junior), Felix Volkbein

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 129

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Felix seeks Matthew out in Paris to talk to him one more time before moving to Vienna for good. They discuss Robin for a while, and then Matthew notes that everyone is both damned and innocent from the beginning. Felix asks if Robin was damned, but Matthew realizes that Felix is actually curious about his sickly son, Guido. Felix loves Guido fiercely, which is why he has to turn away to hide his emotions when Matthew assures him that Guido isn’t among the damned. Matthew argues that Guido is actually “peace of mind.” Matthew knows that Felix’s greatest ambitions in life were to have a son and then to join the aristocracy, and both of these things are realized in Guido. Matthew once warned Felix that the last child born to an aristocratic family is always insane, so Matthew sees Guido’s possible insanity as evidence of the fact that Felix has actually joined the aristocracy. This is also what Matthew means he tells Felix that Guido is what Felix was always looking for.

Matthew doesn’t see aristocracy as a physical state dependent on inheritance or lineage, but as a “condition of the mind.” It involves wanting “something else and better,” which is always what Felix wanted. This is what makes him an aristocrat. However, Matthew also realizes that Felix’s desire for better doesn’t just include material goods or social status but extends to his son as well. The sharpness in Matthew’s voice signifies that he realizes Felix yearns for a better son than the one he has, and Matthew resents this because he thinks Felix should just be happy that he got what he initially asked for: a male heir.

“One has, I am now certain, to be a little mad to see into the past or the future, to be a little abridged of life to know life, the obscure life—darkly seen, the condition my son lives in; it may also be the errand on which the Baronin is going.”

**Related Characters:** Felix Volkbein (speaker), Robin Vote, Guido Volkbein (junior)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 130

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Felix asks Matthew if he knows anything about Robin’s new life in America. Matthew says he’s heard that Robin feels lost, and Felix says this supports what he’s heard of her, too. This leads Felix to remember what it was he wanted most from life once: to understand it all. Felix tried and failed to understand Robin when they were together, and it’s taught him that a person has to be “a little mad to see into the past or future.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that a person must be insane, but their mind must work different than most people’s. For example, Felix’s life is guided by custom and his love for greatness. Robin, on the other hand, defies customs left and right, insisting that she be able to explore the world and herself on her own terms. To some people, this makes Robin seem “a little mad.”

Felix also notes that there is an “obscure life,” which is a life that is dark and difficult to make out. This is the kind of life Guido lives in because, as Felix and Matthew have agreed, Guido’s sensibilities obscure most of his mind from view. Guido, like Robin, is difficult to read or understand because he seems “a little mad.” If Guido does have a mental illness, it also means that he has the privilege of seeing life from a new perspective and thus creating a new understanding of the world. Felix believes that Robin (he only refers to her as “the Baronin” in their conversation because saying her name still pains him) is trying to understand the same kind of “obscure life” that Guido lives in. Like with Guido, Robin’s “otherness” in the world gives her a unique perspective other than that other people are suspicious of.

### Go Down, Matthew Quotes

“Listen,” the doctor said, putting down his glass. “My war brought me many things; let yours bring you as much. Life is not to be told, call it as loud as you like, it will not tell itself. No one will be much or little except in someone else’s mind, so be careful of the minds you get into, and remember Lady Macbeth, who had her mind in her hand. We can’t all be as safe as that.”

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O’Connor (speaker), Nora Flood

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 137-138

### Explanation and Analysis

While Nora drowns herself in despair over having lost Robin, Matthew tries to get her to learn something from the experience so that she doesn’t walk away from it empty-handed. Matthew refers to his own war, which could be either World War I (which he fought in as a soldier) or his struggle to reconcile his nature with the demands of society throughout this life. Matthew believes he should have been born as a woman and is sexually attracted to men, so he would have had a very difficult time finding acceptance in any segment of society when this book was written (Barnes published it in the 1930s, and it’s set in the 1920s). Matthew’s personal war gave him a deeper understanding of humanity and how to help people, which is what he’s trying to do for Nora right now.

Matthew says, “Life is not to be told,” which means that nobody can explain to anybody else how to get through life happily. That’s something everyone has to learn for themselves because their lives are uniquely their own. One thing one person can do for another is make them “much or little.” If a lot of people think “much” of one person, then that person becomes great. On the other hand, if they think “little” of the person, then the best that person can hope for is neutrality. Because of this, Matthew urges Nora to be careful about what impressions she makes with different people—she never can know what she looks like in her mind. One exception is Lady Macbeth, whose guilt over killing the king manifested itself as a red spot on her hand that only she could see and which drove her insane. This actually made Lady Macbeth “safe” because she could clearly see and understand her mind, and not everyone can do that.

“Time isn’t long enough,” she said, striking the table. “It isn’t long enough to live down her nights. God,” she cried, “what is love? Man seeking his own head? The human head, so rented by misery that even the teeth weigh! She couldn’t tell me the truth because she had never planned it; her life was a continual accident, and how can you be prepared for that? Everything we can’t bear in this world, some day we find in one person, and love it all at once.”

**Related Characters:** Nora Flood (speaker), Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 143-144

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nora tries to explain why she won't ever be able to get over her relationship with Robin. Nora is tortured by what kind of life Robin must have led at night (during their relationship, Robin continually went out all night long without Nora) and doesn't think that time will help her "live [them] down," meaning she won't get over thinking about them nor will she really understand them. Nora describes love as "Man seeking his own head." This means that part of love is one person desperately trying to understand their partner's mind as well as their own. This becomes difficult when misery grows so strong that the heads become heavy and difficult to enter.

Nora has an important realization that Robin couldn't have been honest with Nora about her plans for the night because she truly never had any. Robin simply follows her impulses and things just happen to her. This echoes Nora's early fears that Robin is like a magnet for catastrophes. It seems that Robin is also a magnet for other people who flock to her to try to understand and love her (like Jenny). This means that it's not Robin's fault that she couldn't be honest with Nora—how could she be honest when she had no idea what would come next? There is also some comfort in this because it means Robin didn't devote her time and energy to seeking out ways to hurt Nora. Still, Nora struggles with this because she doesn't like being the kind of person that things just happen to—she likes to take and keep control of her life.

☞ "You never loved anyone before, and you'll never love anyone again, as you love Robin. Very well—what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan!"

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O'Connor (speaker), Robin Vote, Nora Flood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 145

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nora tries to explain her relationship with Robin, saying that she (Nora) wanted power and yet chose to start a relationship with a girl who is just like a boy. Matthew agrees that Nora's relationship with Robin was unique—nothing like it ever happened before, nor will it happen again. Matthew tries to explain the unique love that anyone has for an "invert" (during this time period, the term "invert" was generally used to describe a person whose gender identity did not match up with their biological sex). Matthew attributes the attraction to inverts to early childhood stories about princes, princesses, and adventures. The prince in a romance is male, but he still has some feminine qualities alongside his masculine ones: he's gentle, kind, loving, and caring. A girl who loses herself—that is, a girl who finds that she doesn't quite fit in with the traditionally feminine—finds herself in the prince, and other people find a prince in her. Because she resembles the prince (she has the perfect combination of masculine bravery and independence with feminine kindness and gentleness), she seems like the perfect answer to what children are looking for. A similar statement can be made for "the pretty lad who is a girl," although Matthew doesn't explain this in as much detail; this is even more evidence of the how shameful people thought it was for a man to have feminine traits.

☞ "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."

**Related Characters:** Nora Flood (speaker), Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

Nora shares more details about what her life living with Robin was like. The image of Robin holding a baby doll in the air as if she wants to throw it down is strikingly similar to the time Robin held her newborn son in the air as if she wanted to throw him down. Both of these instances reveal just how adverse Robin is to the idea of motherhood. When Robin got pregnant with her son, she did it because her

husband wanted her to. It forced her to make certain sacrifices—space within herself, pieces of her identity—that she didn't want to make, and that's why she was so furious when she went into labor and delivered her son. Although Nora doesn't provide many details, it seems that Robin decided to get them a doll because she sensed that Robin wanted her to; she wanted a sign that their lives were truly bound together. However, it's for this very reason that Robin resents the doll (just as she resented her son). She doesn't want to be tied down, and she's not yet comfortable slipping into a traditional domestic life.

It is notable that Robin is wearing "boy's clothes" in this instance. This shows that Robin is openly exploring different ways of expressing her gender identity. It doesn't necessarily mean that Robin identifies as male, but it does imply that she likely doesn't *only* identify as female. Even though Robin has more freedom to explore her sense of self this way, she still resents anything that tries to force her into a certain identity (in Robin's mind, a baby would mean she *must* surrender her natural identity and adopt a maternal identity that doesn't come naturally to her).

☛ "Robin can go anywhere, do anything," Nora continued, "because she forgets, and I nowhere because I remember." She came toward him. "Matthew," she said, "you think I have always been like this. Once I was remorseless, but this is another love—it goes everywhere; there is no place for it to stop—it rots me away."

**Related Characters:** Nora Flood (speaker), Dr. Matthew O'Connor, Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 161-162

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nora tries to explain why she has such a difficult time moving on even though it has been a while since she ended her relationship with Robin. Nora thinks that Robin "forgets" things, which also means that Robin is able to push others' feelings out of her mind. Nora believes that Robin is completely wrapped up in herself, so she only ever focuses on her own emotions. This might be true, but it's also part of Robin's journey of self-discovery as she explores her emotions, sexuality, and gender identity. Nora, however, hangs on to the memory of not only her own past emotions, but other people's emotions and desires. For example, she remembers that Robin desperately wanted a

home and feels betrayed that Robin would violate that home after Nora worked so hard to provide it for her.

Nora also tries to emphasize how powerful her love for Robin is by comparing her present to her past. Nora was once "remorseless," which means she (like Robin) was able to do whatever she liked without worrying too much about anyone's feelings, probably including her own. However, something about Robin has made Nora's feelings run haywire. This is because Nora has never come into contact with someone like Robin—someone who lives more in the night than she does in the day. Because Nora can no longer control her emotions, they "rot[]" her personality, and she is losing her sense of self.

☛ She began to walk again. "I have been loved," she said, "by something strange, and it has forgotten me." Her eyes were fixed and she seemed to be talking to herself. "It was *me* [who] made her hair stand on end because I loved her. She turned bitter because I made her fate colossal. She wanted darkness in her mind—to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter—her dissolute life, her life at night; and I, I dashed it down."

**Related Characters:** Nora Flood (speaker), Robin Vote

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis

Nora explains to Matthew why Robin pushed Nora away during their relationship. Robin had always wanted love, but when Nora loved her, she became frightened. This is because Robin wants both love and anonymity, and she thinks that if someone truly loves her, then she is losing her sense of anonymity; she doesn't want to be understood or truly known because there's something within her that she's ashamed of. Robin's "fate" that Nora made "colossal" is that Robin might just be understood and still protected. If that happens then Robin has no reason to keep running, she'll have no reason to hold on so tightly to her life at night. Furthermore, Robin wants to understand herself still. It's not enough for Nora to understand her, Robin still wants to explore her mind and body. In other words, even though Robin craves stability and a home, she's not quite ready to settle down.

Robin wants darkness, but if Nora truly loves and knows her, then it would cast a light into every dark corner of Robin's life. This would also mean that Robin can't avoid confronting some of the things about herself ("her dissolute life") that she doesn't like and doesn't want to deal with. If Robin is a night person, then Nora is a day person, which means that they can complement each other and have a very happy life together if they can reach an understanding.

“May they all be damned! The people in my life who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of degradation and the night. Nora, beating her head against her heart, sprung over, her mind closing her life up like a heel on a fan, rotten to the bone for love of Robin. My God, how that woman hold on to an idea! And that old sandpiper, Jenny! Oh, it's a grand bad story, and who says I'm a betrayer? I say, tell the story of the world to the world!”

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O'Connor (speaker), Jenny Petherbridge, Robin Vote, Nora Flood

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 171

### Explanation and Analysis

After Matthew leaves Nora, he goes to a bar and gets drunk. He talks to an ex-priest that he's friends with about his misery and how he's struggling to deal with so many people looking to him for comfort or advice. As much as Matthew likes helping people, filling the role of therapist for so many different miserable people has rubbed off on him and now he's miserable. Matthew is struggling to carry the burden of the combined misery of Felix, Nora, and Jenny.

Matthew thinks it's particularly cruel of them to ask him about "degradation and the night." This is because Matthew himself is a night person, driven into the darkness because he doesn't conform to heteronormative standards. When Matthew talks to Nora and the others, it forces him to remember his own "degradation" and pain. To help others, Matthew must remember his own struggles in order to give them advice. However, as Matthew indicated to Nora during their conversation, none of their miseries are entirely unique in the world—they have happened before and will happen again. This is why their stories are also "the story of the world." As much as it pains Matthew to talk

about it, he still thinks it's better to talk about these things than to keep this quiet. In Matthew's opinion, it would be better to tell all the world about Jenny, Nora, and Robin so that the world will finally be confronted with the evil it does to all of the "others" in society.

“God, take my hand and get me up out of this great argument—the more you go against your nature, the more you will know of it—hear me, Heaven! I've done and been everything that I didn't want to be or do—Lord, put the light out—so I stand here, beaten up and mauled and weeping, knowing I am not what I thought I was, a good man doing wrong, but the wrong man doing nothing much, and I wouldn't been telling you about it if I weren't talking to myself. I talk too much because I have been made so miserable by what you are keeping hushed.”

**Related Characters:** Dr. Matthew O'Connor (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 172

### Explanation and Analysis

As Matthew gets drunker and drunker, he gets more and more open about his misery and subtly reveals more details about his personal struggles. Matthew asserts that "the more you go against your nature, the more you will know of it." This means that people learn from pain and discomfort that results from acting unnaturally. When they feel that pain, they soon realize that they are doing something that goes against their nature and are then able to identify different elements of their natural selves. Matthew himself has contorted himself into unnatural positions in life out of necessity, and at the end of it all what he has is a deep understanding of the exact type of person he *isn't*.

Matthew says he "talk[s] too much because [he has] been made so miserable by what you are keeping hushed." In other words, Matthew talks so much so that he won't be as aware of a certain silence which surrounds topics that society doesn't approve of. This includes the existence of the LGBTQ community (although Matthew wouldn't have known it by that name), women's sexuality, gender, and the pain all the "others" (people who don't fit in) feel knowing that if they follow their natures then society will scorn them. Silence proves to be a form of oppression. By not talking about these groups and heavy topics, society denies its existence, and this leaves many people feeling isolated, terrified, and ashamed of themselves.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## BOW DOWN

The story begins in 1880 when Hedvig Volkbein gives birth to her and her husband's only child, Felix, on a bed decorated with the Volkbein arms and a valance stamped with the symbol of the House of Hapsburg. She does this "in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people." Immediately after delivering and naming Felix, Hedvig dies. Her husband, Guido Volkbein (senior), unfortunately died six months earlier of a fever. Guido was Jewish and was constantly aware of the fact that his ancestors were victimized by Christian nobility. Still, he held an immense reverence for the nobility and, as he prepared for his first child, hoped that his child would feel the same reverence although it made him (and later Felix) "heavy with impermissible blood."

Guido chose not to live in a Jewish community but instead decided to strike out on his own in the Christian world. Guido, who was always haunted by his Jewishness, tried to follow Christian practices and even pretended to be a Viennese Baron complete with a fraudulent coat of arms and a made-up list of ancestors. Guido loved Hedvig (who was not Jewish) and tried to imitate her to make himself more like her. Guido was often too enthusiastic in showing deference to anyone even remotely connected to European royalty, which Hedvig picked up on and questioned. Still, Hedvig believed everything Guido told her, including that marrying him made her a baroness. The source of Guido's large income was a mystery, but he somehow managed to buy an opulent house and decorate it with the best furniture, including two portraits of a couple he claimed were his parents.

When Felix is 30, he seemingly appears out of nowhere and all he knows of his family history is what his aunt was able to tell him. Felix's personal history, however, is a mystery—he simultaneously seems to have come from everywhere and nowhere. Like his father, Felix goes by Baron Volkbein and nobody knows how he makes his money (although he clearly makes a lot of it). Felix can often be seen driving around wearing clothes that could be fit for either the daytime or the evening. Felix is "the accumulated and single" and, like his father, he's obsessed with nobility and royalty.

*When Barnes references a "race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people," she is talking about Jewish people. In both Barnes's time and in the setting of the book, anti-Semitism ran rampant through the Western world. Biblically speaking, Jews were supposed to be God's chosen people from the time before Christ (hence they have "the sanction of the Lord"), but socially speaking, they were outcasts. This is also why Barnes notes that some people would advise against "perpetuating" the race, which Hedvig is doing by having Guido's baby. Jewishness is also the "impermissible blood" that keeps Felix and Guido from truly becoming part of the European aristocracy.*



*Guido rejects his true heritage because acknowledging it would bar him from taking an equal part in the Christian world—which generally stigmatized Jews and refused to accept them as equals. As a Jew in this context, Guido is an "other" and he craves acceptance. Being an aristocrat would be the ultimate form of acceptance, which is why Guido both holds aristocrats in high esteem and tries to imitate their actions and speech. However, Guido must also grapple with the secret knowledge that he'll never be a part of the nobility that he so adores.*



*Although Felix's father died before his birth, he fulfills his father's wish for a son who shares his reverence for the past and nobility. For Felix, this includes keeping himself in a constant state of readiness for anything (hence his peculiar outfits) and mimicking the habits and other qualities of nobility. This makes him simultaneously seem like everyone else ("the accumulated") and completely different (the "single"). In other words, he stands out from the crowd.*



In 1920, Felix shows up in Paris determined to pay homage to all the right things—the right cafes, streets, people, and buildings. He makes a habit of bowing to anyone who looks like they might be important. Felix reads extensively, especially connecting with writers who seemed “alone, apart, and single.” Felix, like other Jews, finds himself having to learn about his own history from the things Christianity has to say about it—Jewish history is like a commodity that a Jew receives during the process of being “rehabilitat[ed]” by a Christian.

Felix develops an intense interest in the circus and spends time with the members of a local one. Felix feels at home with members of the circus because they, too, claim to have titles (such as Princess and King) and try to dazzle the public; with them, Felix doesn't feel like an outsider. Although he loves the circus and is continually drawn to it, Felix realizes he can't really know the people in it—he can only wonder at and admire them. Through the Duchess of Broadback (a trapeze artist whose real name is Frau Mann), Felix gets his first opportunity to meet with a real member of the nobility in Berlin, a mysterious man who goes by Count Onatario Altamonte and says he's “related to every nation.” The Duchess assures Felix that people enjoy themselves at the Count's house, so Felix decides to go.

When Felix and the Duchess arrive at the Count's house their host isn't there, but a middle-aged man named Dr. Matthew O'Connor (an Irish-American gynecologist from California) is speaking to the party about history and legends. The Duchess tries to interrupt him, but Matthew just talks louder until he has time to observe her. Suddenly he bursts into laughter and says he's suddenly thinking of a circus performer for the Cirque de Paris who used to fight bears wearing nothing but a loin cloth and who was covered from head to foot in tattoos. Felix, who is rather uncomfortable and disappointed with the party, asks Matthew if he is familiar with Vienna. Matthew says he is and talks about watching Viennese children go to and from school, but Felix says he is thinking more about its military and great historical figures.

*Felix's obsession with nobility motivates everything about his day-to-day life—where he goes, where he eats, and even how he treats perfect strangers. He does everything he can to seem like he belongs to the very best circles of society. His private reading, however, shows that he's acutely aware of his own otherness. He is attracted to authors who are “alone, apart, and single,” meaning they, too, are others. To “rehabilitat[e]” a Jew means to convert them to Christianity, which means that as a Jew Felix learns more about his real history by spending so much of his time around Christians.*



*The Count's statement that he is “related to every nation” indicates that he, like Felix, might be secretly Jewish. This belief has roots in the story of Abraham, when God promised him that if he was faithful and did as God asked then his descendants would spread out all over the world. The Count's statement also reflects the way many people feel about Felix—that he seems to be from both everywhere and nowhere.*



*Felix sees the party as his chance to meet someone who is truly great, not just someone pretending to be nobility or royalty. Instead, he's faced with a loud American doctor, which is why he's disappointed. Instead, Felix hopes to get Matthew to talk about great Viennese nobility, highlighting the fact that Felix is never not thinking about his idea of greatness.*



A young woman doing publicity for the circus comes up and introduces herself as Nora Flood. Matthew abruptly claims to have helped bring Nora into the world. Somewhat disquieted, Felix suddenly bursts into hysterical laughter; although he's embarrassed and unable to stop himself, nobody else notices. Eventually, Felix stops laughing and looks directly at the doctor, who declares that Felix will be disappointed—the doctor isn't a poet or a friar, nor does he have a cure-all for people's problems. Matthew tells Felix that all any man really wants is to find someone that he can lie to, or a woman that he loves so much that she can get away with lying to him. Felix says he isn't thinking of women and starts to leave, but Matthew stops him and offers Felix a drink. Felix declines and says he never drinks. The doctor says he will one day.

Matthew tells Felix that the Catholic church is like the girl you love so much she can lie to you, and the Protestant church is like the girl who loves you so much that you can lie to her. The Protestant church hires men who can speak eloquently to the congregation. A Catholic priest, however, tells stories that everyone is familiar with, which makes the Catholic church more comforting. Felix interrupts and says he likes the story of a prince who was reading a book when he was called to be executed. The prince left a bookmark in his book when the executioner came for him. Matthew says the prince "is man living in his miracle." Nora comments that they argue over sorrow and confusion too easily. Matthew replies that there's no pure sorrow—it's easy for anyone to experience short-term sorrow, but difficult to keep it for long.

Matthew shares a story about being in a small town during a wartime bombardment. He ran to a cellar to find safety and found a Breton woman, her cow, and someone from Dublin inside. As the bombs went off, Matthew listened to the person from Dublin pray and noticed that the cow was trembling. A flash from a bomb lit up the room and Matthew noticed the cow had tears in her eyes, so he tried to comfort her even though it seemed like she had gone somewhere very far away. Returning to the present, Matthew offers Felix another drink and Felix again refuses. Matthew assures him that he'll drink one day and then shares a story about meeting an executioner once. The room suddenly goes quiet as the Count walks in with a young girl. Without greeting anyone, the Count tells everyone to get out.

Matthew senses that Felix is looking for some kind of solution or to at least come into contact with someone with a claim to greatness. This is why Matthew thinks Felix will be disappointed with him—he doesn't belong to the classes of people Felix considers great. This also highlights how intuitive Matthew is, which makes him the ideal person to turn to for a personal conversation or even advice, as nearly all the characters do over the course of the book. Furthermore, Matthew thinks that Felix is going to experience some kind of trauma or pain, as shown by his prediction that Felix will start drinking one day.



A "man living in his miracle" is a man living in hope even though there's absolutely no reason for him to have any. In the story Felix references, this is because the man will be executed shortly, making it pointless for him to mark his place in the book. Felix shares this story to send the message that he prefers pure faith to the organized religions that Matthew references.



Matthew's story about waiting out a bombardment in a cellar highlights his attraction to those who are experiencing true despair. Even though both the woman and the Irish person were clearly scared, Matthew only recognized true fear and despair in the cow. This foreshadows the role Matthew will have in the other characters' lives later—they will come to him for comfort in their hours of despair and he will intuitively know what to say to help them.



As Felix, Matthew, and the Duchess leave, Felix asks what the party meant. The Duchess explains that Felix has just had a short audience with greatness. Felix asks if the man was really nobility. In reply, the Duchess asks if anyone is who they say they are. She proposes that they should all go to a bar, but Felix asks to be let out of the carriage. At the bar, Matthew expresses his interest in Felix and says he wants to meet him again one day to talk to him some more. Frau Mann says Felix would enjoy Matthew's stories about the Wittelsbach because Felix loves nobility. Matthew abruptly says he doesn't want to talk about that and describes his family, all of whom were beautiful. When Matthew notices that Frau Mann has nodded off, he slips out, telling the waiter she'll pay the bill.

*It is notable that after the Duchess asks Felix if anyone is who they say they are, Barnes begins referring to her as Frau Mann. This reveals that Frau Mann's reply to Felix has brought her down to his true level—she's no more a duchess than he is a baron. It also sends the message to Felix that he can't really believe that anyone is who they say they are, something he should at least partially understand since he's not who he says he is (nor was his father).*



## LA SOMNAMBULE

Matthew lives in a square near the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris. He is well known in the square, particularly to the proprietor of the local cafe, which is where he brings Felix a few weeks after their first meeting. Felix likes Matthew because he seems valuable—there's an aura about him that reminds Felix of a servant of an extinct noble family—even though he's a liar. After a long silence, Matthew remarks that the Irish and the Jews often meet somewhere in the middle as the one moves up and the other down. Matthew notes that while the Irish are common, they have a great imagination because they've been pushed down and then lifted up again. However, a Jew is, at best, a meddler. Matthew then says that while Jews meddle, the Irish lie.

*Matthew's observation about Jews and the Irish indicates that he is aware that Felix is actually Jewish, even though Felix hasn't said anything about it. The Irish, like the Jews, were stigmatized by much of society. This is because Ireland was colonized by England and forced to convert to Catholicism, and then most Irish people refused to become Protestants during the Reformation. As a result, the Irish were considered somewhat backward and uncultured. In this way, Matthew reveals some of his own "otherness" that he has in common with Felix.*



Matthew explains that nurses know more about medical science than doctors, the best of which simply forget all they've studied and pray to God for help. Matthew says that nobody needs a cure for their "individual sickness" but that they should look to their "universal malady." Felix notes that this sounds like dogma, which causes Matthew to launch into a monologue about how the things that work for or mean something to one person might be different for another. For example, "any man's smile would be consternation on another's mouth." Staring at his hands, Matthew suddenly asks why he feels like a bride whenever he hears music. Felix suggests neurasthenia or impatience and Matthew agrees that the Irish are impatient. Felix notes that Vienna developed an impatience after coffee was introduced there in the 17th century and that every city has its own special drink associated with it.

*The "individual sickness" Matthew refers to is his term for the issues each person faces in being accepted by society. For example, Felix's Jewishness or Matthew's Irishness might be considered "individual sicknesses." But this, Matthew says, isn't the true danger—the "universal malady" is the real problem. The "universal malady" can be described as narrow-mindedness and intolerance. Society in general isn't understanding and can be very exclusionary. This is what actually needs curing. Matthews observation that "any man's smile would be consternation on another's mouth" highlights how what one person considers good or at least okay might be condemned by another person.*



A bellhop from a nearby hotel runs up to Matthew and Felix and tells Matthew that there's a woman in one of the rooms who fainted and won't wake up. Matthew tells Felix to pay the bill and follow him, which Felix does. When they get to the hotel, the men see an unconscious woman lying on a bed surrounded by plants. The woman herself smells vaguely of fungi and there even seems to be a glow around her head, which seems to indicate that she's a "born somnambule." Out of delicacy, Felix steps behind some of the plants while Matthew, afraid that the police will be called and find out he's unlicensed, throws water on the woman's face. The woman comes to momentarily and Felix catches Matthew rummaging through the cosmetics on her dresser, ultimately pocketing a hundred-franc note. Felix knows he'll always like Matthew despite the theft.

When Felix looks back to the woman, she's awake and evidently recognizes Matthew from the café. Felix is taken by the woman's bright blue eyes, which seem more like a wild animal's than a human being's eyes. Some women are like animals that are transforming into humans, and their actions evoke memories of a forgotten experience. These kinds of women are "carrier[s] of the past," and Felix picks up on this feeling. The woman quickly dismisses the two men, saying they can visit when she feels better. On the way out, the bellhop tells them the woman's name is Robin Vote. Matthew and Felix go back to the café and Matthew, sensing that Felix just had a powerful experience, asks if Felix has ever thought about getting married. Felix explains that he wants to have a son who will share his feelings about the past.

Matthew laughs and remarks that "Fate and entanglement" are starting again and then asks what nobility is. Before Felix can answer, Matthew says that the nobility are just the few people whom so many people have lied well about that they become immortal, and a king is just someone who is so scandalous that people must bow to him. Kings and nobility are set apart from other people, most of whom do all the same things in the same places. Somewhat troubled by this, Felix says that paying homage to the past is unique because it includes the future. This is why Felix wants a son. Matthew leans forward and tells Felix that the last child born to any aristocracy is often insane. After this warning, Matthew raises his glass to Robin Vote, noting that she can't be more than 20 years old.

*The title of this chapter is "La Somnambule," which is French for "the sleepwalker." The woman Felix and Matthew find seems to be a "born somnambule," indicating that she is the true focus of this chapter. Barnes writes that there's a peculiar glow around the woman's head that indicates she's a sleepwalker. This could actually be because the woman spends so much time walking around at night instead of the day that she's become very pale, which might make her seem to glow.*



*The first descriptions of Robin draw comparisons between her and plants and animals, which calls attention to the fact that Robin follows her instincts and impulses like an animal. Felix is attracted to her because she's one of the "carrier[s] of the past" and he is obsessed with the past. In this respect, Robin seems like the perfect match for Felix, but it's clear even at this point that Felix may just be projecting his own desires on to her—they only briefly met, after all.*



*Matthew again displays an almost psychic ability to see what's going to happen in the near future. Matthew sees "Fate and entanglement" beginning, which refers to Robin and Felix's relationship. "Fate" implies that Felix essentially has no control over what will happen next—it was his fate to see Robin and, having seen her, he can't help wanting to see her again and again. "Entanglement," meanwhile, implies that there will be some complications and complexities that aren't necessarily positive. Felix, however, is desperate for a son, so he might be willing to overlook the red flags in Robin's behavior and words if she's willing to give him that.*



Felix tries to visit Robin four times before he finally sees her, and that happens entirely by accident when he runs into her on the street. Robin suggests that they take a walk in the Luxembourg Gardens and Felix agrees. While they walk, he brags about how much money he earns and how many languages he speaks. Robin doesn't talk much and walks a little way ahead of him, but Felix is happy with her. In the following days, they spend a lot of time together. Felix is somewhat taken aback by the fact that Robin has a real enthusiasm for cheaper items in addition to nicer ones, and she touches everything with her hands. Felix realizes that he primarily loves Robin because through her Felix can quickly fulfill his destiny. Still, he asks her to marry him and is surprised that she accepts as if she's unable to refuse.

Felix takes Robin to Vienna hoping that he'll be able to show her something that really moves her. Felix tells her that she's a Baronin now that they're married and tries to explain what Vienna was like before the war. One evening in their hotel, Robin opens the blinds and sits in a seat while Felix tells her about Emperor Francis Joseph. As he talks, Felix feels weighed down by his compulsion to recreate greatness until, looking up, he notices that Robin is asleep. As he watches her, Felix realizes that he can't turn her into what he wants her to be on his own. A few days later, they return to Paris and Felix hopes that Robin's Christian leanings will help her become more like the wife he wants her to be. Despite his hopes, Felix realizes her mind always seems to be elsewhere.

Felix finds himself repeating his father's tragic story, trying desperately to make Robin understand the great destiny he has already chosen for her: namely, to have children who would share Felix's reverence for the past and greatness. Thinking of a child, Felix wonders why he and Robin haven't had one yet and abruptly runs to Robin to ask her. Robin quietly prepares herself to have a baby and, feeling like there is "some lost land in herself," begins going out and staying out for hours or even days without sending word of her whereabouts. Robin suddenly converts to Catholicism and is seen in churches all over the place. She thinks about the fate her child will be born into and tries praying, but her prayers are abnormal because they leave no room "for damnation or forgiveness."

*From the start, Felix ignores a lot of Robin's hints that she's not as interested in him as he is in her. It takes him a long time to get back in contact with her (and that only happens in a chance situation that she can't control), and then she doesn't talk much to him or even make an effort to walk next to him. Furthermore, Felix ignores signs in himself that make it clear that their relationship isn't all it should be—Robin is a means to an end, not a desirable partner whom he loves in her own right.*



*Felix believes that if he can show Robin something that evokes an emotional response then she'll fall more in line with his opinions and thoughts. If she can develop the same love and respect for the past and greatness, then she will share his enthusiasm about expanding their own family. Felix believes Robin's Christian leadings will help him with this because they might make her more submissive and eager to please him, since that was considered a Christian duty for any wife during the time period.*



*Robin only gets pregnant after Felix asks her why they haven't had a baby, which could indicate that she's taken some steps on her own to prevent pregnancy. Still, she's willing to have a baby because Felix has asked her to. The "lost land in herself" refers to both the baby physically taking up space in her body and the fact that impending motherhood threatens certain aspects of her identity that she'll have to give up. Her prayers leave no room "for damnation or forgiveness" because she's neither confessing nor apologizing for anything; she's simply stating her opinions and sharing her reality. This unusual quality of her prayers highlights how Robin seems to operate outside society's normal rules.*



Felix comes home one evening to find Robin asleep with a memoir by Marquis de Sade in her hand. When Robin wakes up Felix tries to pull her to him, but she pushes him away and they stare at each other without a word. A short time later, Robin goes into labor, cursing Felix when he tries to comfort her. After an intense labor during which Robin seems furious, she gives birth to their baby, whom they name Guido after Felix's father. Within a week of leaving her bed, however, Robin seems lost, as if she's done something terrible. One **night**, Felix sees her raise their baby high into the air as if she wants to throw him down, but she doesn't.

Robin and Felix's son is small and lethargic, sleeps too much, and rarely makes noise above a whimper. Robin starts wandering again and is rarely home, and Felix, overwhelmed by sorrow, doesn't know what to do. One **night**, Robin tells Felix that she never wanted to have a baby and asks why they don't keep him secret. Felix asks what they should do, and Robin says she'll leave. For months, people wonder where Robin is. When she eventually comes back, she's with Nora Flood and doesn't tell anyone where she's been. Matthew, however, believes that Robin was in America, where Nora's from.

## NIGHT WATCH

Nora's salon is considered the oddest in America. Her house, which has been in her family for two centuries, includes extensive grounds with a chapel and a cemetery. All kinds of people come to Nora's salon—poets, Catholics, Protestants, artists, radicals, and so on. Nora herself reminds many people of covered wagons and early American history, and her face gives away the fact that she loves everyone, gives what she can of herself to everyone. Because of this, many people take advantage of her. Nora lacks a sense of humor—even her smile seems somewhat strained and pessimistic. On the other hand, Nora never reproaches or accuses anyone, which draws people who want to confess something to her.

In 1923, the circus Nora used to do publicity for arrives in New York. Nora goes to see the circus alone and sits next to a "girl" who is trembling as she smokes a cigarette. A lioness in a cage directly opposite the girl suddenly thrusts her paws through the bars while staring at the girl with eyes that seem to be full of tears that can't escape. The girl stands up and suggests they leave when Nora takes her hand. Outside of the tent, Nora introduces herself and the girl tells her that her name is Robin Vote. She says she doesn't want to be there anymore, but she is unable to say where she does want to be.

*Marquis de Sade was an infamous libertine and writer whose memoirs were very sexually explicit for their time (the 18th century). That Robin is reading these memoirs is the first indication that she might not be interested in traditional, heterosexual monogamy. To Robin, her baby represents a life that she doesn't want to have. She doesn't want to be tied down in one place, responsible for caring for someone else. She wants the freedom to move around and do as she likes with whomever she likes.*



*The description of Robin and Felix's son indicates that he's not very healthy. Robin apparently wishes they had kept him a secret, which could mean that there's something about him that signifies he'll have psychological problems (this, unfortunately, proves true). Robin leaves because she doesn't want to be a mother, especially to a sickly baby that will need more selfless love and devotion than she can give.*



*Unlike a lot of the characters in Nightwood, Nora doesn't initially seem to have any issues being accepted by other people. Like a lot of people (especially women) in the 1920s, she hosts a salon that attracts a range of people who want to talk about art, politics, writing, and social issues. It's different than others because Nora doesn't seem like much of a radical herself (she reminds one of American traditions rather than progress), and because it attracts such divergent groups of people rather than groups where everyone agrees with everyone else.*



*Barnes chooses the word "girl" instead of "woman" to describe Robin to emphasize her youth (Matthew also believed she couldn't be more than 20 years old). As a very young woman, Robin is still trying to figure herself out. This could be part of why she struggled so much with the idea of motherhood and wants to spend so much time exploring the world and herself.*



Robin stays with Nora until the middle of the winter, during which time Robin is haunted by her desire for love and her desire for anonymity. Together, Robin and Nora travel around Europe before returning to Paris. During this time, Robin shares little about her past, but continually conveys to Nora her desire for a home. Nora decides to buy an apartment in Paris that Robin likes and they move in together. Everything about their lives in the apartment testifies to the love between them, and they fill it with the knick-knacks they bought during their travels. Eventually, Nora finds herself alone in their house most of the **night** and a part of the day. She roams through the rooms, afraid of moving anything for fear that Robin might get confused and forget it's her home.

If someone were to investigate Nora's heart, they'd find Robin engraved there. Because of this, Robin's "body" is always loved and never changes. Nora becomes obsessed with the image of Robin rambling through the streets, in constant danger of being hurt or killed, as every conceivable accident seems to rush towards her in Nora's mind and dreams. Even when Robin and Nora are happily alone together, there seems to be a presence with Robin that peeks out in the songs she sings about a life that Nora has no part in. Other times, as they walk through the house, Nora and Robin fall into a passionate embrace. During some of these moments, however, Robin will say or do something uncharacteristic of her that indicates to Nora that Robin belongs to a different world that she will eventually return to. Nora believes the only way to keep Robin is death.

As the sun goes down and Robin prepares to go out, Nora listens to her do her hair and makeup until Robin appears in the doorway to tell Nora not to wait up. During the years they live together, Robin's excursions increase in frequency. Initially, Nora accompanied her, but she began staying home because she couldn't bear feeling like she was in the way and believed that if she stayed home then Robin would want to return to her. Tortured by Robin's absence, Nora, too, begins wandering through the streets at **night**, hoping to catch just a glimpse of Robin in a café. On the other hand, Robin determinedly sets off into the night hoping to create distance between herself and Nora, although she takes pleasure in remembering Nora's love. Seeing Nora on the street, Matthew mentally calls her "dismantled" and thinks about her despair and desperation to find Robin.

*Robin wants to be loved, but not necessarily understood. She senses that there is something shameful about herself that other people won't understand or approve of, which is why she desires anonymity (to an extent, anyway). This, however, is isolating, hence her simultaneous desire for a home where she feels safe and cared for. Nora's entire life revolves around Robin—loving Robin, making sure Robin always knows she has a home—which inevitably leads to an unhealthy obsession because so much of Nora's identity gets wrapped up in the relationship.*



*Because Robin maintains so much anonymity in the relationship, the most Nora can love is her "body"—her mind remains something of a mystery. Nora wants to possess Robin because she feels that's the only way to keep Robin safe. Ironically, to actually possess Robin, Robin would have to be dead or unable to leave (either mentally or physically). This, at least, is the troubling conclusion Nora arrives at.*



*Robin goes out at night rather than during the day (presumably she sleeps all day since she's out all night) because the darkness helps Robin remain somewhat anonymous even while she explores the darker parts of herself with other people. Under cover of darkness, Robin can be more herself (for instance, it was at night that Robin was first able to express that she didn't want a baby). For this reason, Nora starts going out at night too—she hopes she'll be able to learn more about Robin this way, at least the parts that Robin tries to keep hidden during the day. Matthew thinks Nora is "dismantled" because Nora's losing her sense of identity and self in her obsession with Robin.*



Nora begins looking for Robin in other people and places, hoping to determine which people have an influence on Robin's life by carefully observing their gestures. While she does this, Nora avoids the area she knows Robin is in so that nobody will connect Nora with Robin. Back in their home, Nora listens to the sounds outside, waiting for the ones that will indicate Robin's return. In her dreams, Nora is in a room that looks like her grandmother's but is evidently not in her grandmother's house. Nora sees Robin in a different room, surrounded by other people but smiling at Nora. Nora calls to Robin to come up, but Robin fades into the distance. Suddenly Nora's mind conjures up a childhood memory of her grandmother dressed in men's clothing. Nora connects this to something having to do with Robin.

Nora wakes up and begins walking around the house. Looking into the garden, Nora notices a strange shadow and wonders if it's Robin returning home. Nora calls out but, receiving no answer, walks toward the shadow. Suddenly, Nora sees Robin's eyes shining out of the darkness, lit up by fear as their gazes meet. As Nora's eyes adjust to the darkness, she realizes there's another woman there clinging to Robin's neck. Devastated, Nora falls to her knees and closes her eyes, hoping that the image will transform into Robin there alone. At the same time, Nora experiences a strange happiness because this affair indicates that other women are keeping Robin safe when she's not with Nora.

## "THE SQUATTER"

Jenny Petherbridge is a middle-aged four-time widow. Jenny is small, visibly aging, and seems perpetually nervous. She's one of those women who never looks good in fashionable clothing because she simultaneously looks old and like a child doing penance for something. She fills her house with other people's belongings: a picture Robin took for Nora, another person's wedding ring, books from other people, and so on. A fragile little woman, Jenny would undoubtedly die from shock if she were the first person to do anything. Listening to her share a story, other people get the distinct sense that she doesn't really understand the importance of what she says. Jenny is obsessed with the idea of being important, of being the reason for things happening. Because Jenny wants to be the reason for things, she never succeeds in causing anything. Unable to think for herself, Jenny continually reiterates other people's facts and stories.

*Nora's dream contains some clues about Robin and her "otherness." Nora connects the image of her grandmother in men's clothing with Robin, who also seems to defy traditional views of femininity and what it is to be female. This could also partially explain what endears Robin to Nora—Robin reminds her of her beloved grandmother.*



*Nora stopped accompanying Robin out at night because she hoped that Robin would always choose to return to her. In this situation, however, Robin has brought another woman (later revealed to be Jenny Petherbridge) to their home, a space that Nora considers sacred to her relationship with Robin. Because so much of Nora's identity is wrapped up in the relationship, Robin's affair is particularly devastating. Nora no longer has a strong sense of self outside of Robin and the love they share.*



*Jenny is constantly torn between her desire to be interesting—the kind of person who has interesting stories and objects, that people talk about and like—and her fear of doing anything original. This could be because Jenny is afraid that if she's the first to do something, other people will mock her for it. She looks at appropriating other people's stories and even possessions as a safe way to be interesting, but it actually makes her look somewhat ridiculous to other people.*



Jenny's other preoccupation is love—she desires love above all things but fails to get it. Her emotions, being shallow, prevent her from taking an active part in a great love, although she loves hearing stories of great loves throughout history. On the occasions when Jenny begins to fall in love, her words and actions are all second-hand things that she has learned from other people's stories. After learning about Nora's love for Robin, Jenny appropriated it like a "squatter." Jenny learned about Robin and Nora from Robin herself, who frequently talks about Nora to other people. After hearing the story, it was inevitable that Jenny would make their love her own. This happens in 1927.

Whenever Jenny and Robin have a scheduled date, Jenny shows up early and Robin shows up late; Jenny leans forward across the table while Robin leans as far back as she can go. Although Jenny has actually known Robin for a year, she asks Matthew to introduce them at the opera. After the opera, Matthew, Robin, and Jenny go back to Jenny's house together. There is already a group of people there, including Jenny's young niece, who takes an interest in Robin. Jenny talks about this with Felix later. While Robin talks to Jenny's niece, the Marchesa de Spada notes that some people will reappear in the world but that one person in the room was at the end of their existence. She says this while looking at Robin, which sends a shiver down Jenny's spine. Jenny calls for some old-fashioned carriages so the party can take a ride outside.

Matthew seems confused by Jenny's sudden call for carriages, but Robin seems to understand. She says that Jenny is in a panic and will get dressed in something old-fashioned. Matthew, who is uncomfortable but loves a scandal and gossip, tells Robin to hush. Sure enough, Jenny scurries out and reappears wearing a hoop skirt and bonnet. Robin, however, doesn't pay attention because she's busy talking to Jenny's niece (whose name is revealed to be Sylvia). Three carriages wait outside for the party and Jenny, terrified that Robin might get in a different carriage with a tall Englishwoman from the party, hurries into an empty one and calls to Robin to come in. Seeing that Robin is about to get in another carriage with the Englishwoman, Jenny panics and begs them both to join her. Sylvia and Matthew are also in Jenny's carriage.

*Barnes describes Jenny as a "squatter," which is someone who moves into another person's space and claims they have a right to be there. Because Jenny struggles to think for herself and is afraid to do anything original, she tries to claim a space in a pre-made relationship, edging one person out so she can take over their spot. This passage also reveals that, ironically, it is Robin's love for Nora that ruins their relationship, since talking about Nora is what draws Jenny to Robin.*



*Like Felix, Jenny doesn't seem to pick up on the fact that Robin isn't nearly as interested in having a relationship as Jenny is (or at least not in the type of relationship Jenny wants). Even before their relationship really starts, Jenny is determined to possess Robin—she's another interesting object to add to her collection, another thing that might make Jenny seem more interesting to other people. Above all things, Jenny (like Nora) is afraid of losing possession of Robin.*



*Robin's comment that Jenny will get dressed in old-fashioned clothes reveals just how familiar Robin is with Jenny's habits and feelings. Notably, Jenny doesn't seem threatened by Nora (Robin's long-term girlfriend), but rather by other women. This shows that Jenny doesn't consider Nora a threat even though Robin talks about her so much and the very thing that first drew Jenny to Robin was the love between her and Nora.*



Matthew tells the driver to go and the carriages start driving. Jenny sits in her corner, watching the other women with suspicion. Matthew, wondering how he ended up in a carriage full of women, says under his breath: “Just the girl that God forgot.” Matthew becomes overwhelmed by grief and calls to God out loud and then wonders what kind of person adopts his brother’s kids to try to be a mother. Without looking at him and hoping that a loud conversation will get Robin and the Englishwoman to stop whispering together, Jenny asks twice what Matthew said. Matthew tells Jenny that his father never liked him but warmed up a little when Matthew joined the military. Matthew believes his father understood Matthew’s fear that he’d be shot and go down crying like a girl, which is why his dad told him to conduct himself like a soldier.

Instead of listening to Matthew, Jenny cries and watches Robin stroke Sylvia’s hair. Noticing this, Matthew tells Jenny that crying makes her look like a single person reflected in 20 mirrors. Jenny cries harder and louder, trying to attract Robin’s attention. Matthew wonders who first thought of a woman loving another woman. Jenny points Robin out and says she brings love “down to a level.” When Matthew tries to sympathize, Jenny lashes out and says men don’t understand love, and her particular love is sacred. Robin finally looks up, tells Jenny to shut up, and says Jenny’s always talking without knowing anything. Jenny starts slapping Robin and keeps going even when Robin is on her knees on the floor. Jenny collapses on top of Robin until the carriage stops and Robin runs out. Not long after this, Nora and Robin separate, and Jenny and Robin go to America.

## WATCHMAN, WHAT OF THE NIGHT?

At about 3:00 a.m. Nora makes an unannounced trip to Matthew’s rooms. When she knocks, he says to come in without asking who’s there. The first thing she notices is that the room is small and cluttered: there are medical instruments all over the place, but also bottles of rouge and makeup, women’s clothing, and an abdominal brace. Matthew is on his bed wearing a wig, a nightdress, and a lot of makeup. Seeing that it’s her, Matthew yanks the wig off and pulls his covers up. Nora says she wants him to tell her about the **night** but is a little remorseful that she came into his rooms after he let his guard down enough to dress himself up. Matthew says she can ask him about anything, but she doesn’t question him. To herself, Nora notes that there’s no reason for Matthew not to wear a dress in his room.

*Matthew’s comment about “the girl that God forgot” is the first clear indication that he doesn’t totally identify as male. God “forgot” that Matthew was supposed to be a girl, and so made him a man (biologically speaking). As this novel is set in the 1920s, Matthew would be prohibited from openly presenting as female; he could be either prosecuted for obscenity or sent to a mental institution to be treated. This situation is the only time Matthew gives the slightest public hint about his gender identity, and he possibly only feels comfortable doing this because it’s obvious Jenny isn’t listening to him. The only other times Matthew openly talks about his gender or sexuality are with Nora Flood.*



*When Jenny says that Robin brings love “down to a level,” she means that Robin degrades love and doesn’t revere it the way Jenny thinks she should. To Jenny, love is sacred, and one person should never hurt a person whom they love or who loves them. This is ironic, considering Jenny is trying to take over Nora and Robin’s relationship—violently, in this scene. Jenny wants to seem like the victim in this situation, but that is difficult to do since, from Nora’s perspective, Jenny must be a villain.*



*Thus far, Matthew has dropped hints about his gender identity (as when he mentioned the “girl that God forgot”) but this confirms that he doesn’t exactly fit within a strict gender binary. When the doors are shut and nobody is there to persecute or judge him, Matthew transforms himself into a woman. His clumsy attempt to shield himself when Nora comes reveals that it’s not something that he wants most people to know. Nora, however, is quick to accept this difference in the doctor, suggesting that in many cases, broad societal norms—rather than individual biases—are what oppress people like Matthew who deviate from those norms.*



Matthew, irritated because he was expecting someone else, asks Nora if she's ever thought about the **night**. She says she has, but it does no good to think about something she knows little about. Matthew asks if Nora has ever thought about the difference between night and day. She tells him she always thought people just went to sleep or acted more naturally at night, but now she believes the night does something to a person's identity. Matthew confirms this, saying people lose control of their identities even when they're asleep. Matthew explains that the nights of the present age and in Paris are different from the nights of past ages or other cities. In fact, the rest of the world wishes it had French nights. Nora says she never thought of night as a life because she never lived it. She asks, "why did she?"

Matthew says he's talking about French nights and explains that they're different because the French keep both **night** and day in their minds all the time until they seem to meld together. There are some things that can only be really seen with "the back of the head," which people fear. Many people, Nora and Matthew included, are full of misery and have their own names for it. People like that should look around and doubt everything because they have a word for misery, but not how it's made. Matthew notes that the night is hard to understand but urges Nora to think about it all day long in order to make a path for an understanding of it to come into her. Otherwise, it will crush her heart all at once.

Nora asks what she should do. Matthew suggests she be like the Frenchman who puts a coin in the collection box for the poor at **night** so that he'll have it to spend the next morning. Matthew goes on to say that Americans split up the night and day because they don't like mystery or indignities; the result is crime. For many, the thought of nights makes their days a torment. Nora says she'll never be able to understand "her," and it will always make her miserable. Matthew notes that things look different—perhaps scarier—by night than they do by day. Nora says she's frightened and begs Matthew to tell her what it is in "her" that makes "her" act the way she does. Matthew becomes exasperated and asks for his smelling salts.

*Even though Nora and Robin are separated, Nora is still preoccupied with thoughts about her. The thought that torments her most of all is why Robin was so drawn to the night (Robin is the "she" Nora references in her final question). Nora has never thought about night as a life because she herself has never felt like she truly had something to hide; there are no dark corners of her life, or at least there weren't before she got involved with Robin.*



*France (especially Paris) was notorious for being a place where just about anything goes. This is also why so many people in the LGBTQ community were drawn there in the 1920s. When Matthew says that people in France think about night all the time, he means they don't ignore the fact that there are darker sides to human nature. By not ignoring them, they also tacitly accept those differences, at least on some level. Nora, too, must think about night (the darker parts of Robin) to begin to understand them during the day.*



*Once again, Nora refers to Robin only as "her," never by name. This shows how much pain Nora has been in since their separation. The Frenchman in Matthew's story tries to prepare for his life in the morning by setting something aside at night. Similarly, Matthew wants Nora to keep some part of herself, something that will sustain her, preserved so that she has something to hang on to after she gets through the dark times.*



Matthew notes that some of the worst atrocities and tragedies happen during the **night**. In this way, the dead are responsible for some of the evil of the night, but love and sleep are responsible for the rest. Sleep is an unknown world in which a person might do anything, such as a husband falling asleep with his wife but dreaming of other women. Sleep leads into the unknown, which is what scares people who choose instead to go out to the bars at night. Matthew then explains that lovers fear the night because it's where their beloveds go to find company with other people. The beloved is only forgiven for the infidelity because their sleep is so heavy. Although people say that what a person doesn't see, they can't mourn, night and sleep still inspire suspicion; people look to sleepers for secrets they'll never find.

"**Night** people" never bury their dead, but their wakeful partners carry both the beloved's dead and their own living everywhere. Matthew goes on to say that people try to wash away their sins in various ways, but they only manage to make them more noticeable. Nora asks how Matthew can stand it if he's right. Matthew calls her a hag and asks her to pardon his voice, which was nicer before he lost his kidney during the war. Matthew says if he could do it all over again, he'd rather be the girl who follows behind the army. Matthew asks if it's his fault that he's had a past life and has been called back into another. In another life, Matthew thinks he was a beautiful girl who spent her night with sailors on the dock. He believes he's "turned up this time as [he] shouldn't have been."

Matthew says that no matter what else he's doing, he'd rather be knitting, having children, and making dinner for a husband. He mourns the fact that he can't even have the comfortable home he dreams of and talks about a discussion he had with another group of men about the best place to pick up handsome men. Nora asks what she's supposed to do. In reply, Matthew asks her if she's ever thought about the other women who share her position, waiting for their partners to return at **night**, which makes Nora cry. Matthew rhetorically asks if he knows his "Sodomites" and what it's like to love one as a woman. Some of them find that the person who loves them is "[un]able to exist." Matthew explains that people who live in the night struggle to exist during the day—they seem out of place in the light.

*Matthew illustrates how people lose some control over themselves in sleep, which echoes Nora's previous comment that the night acts on a person's identity even when they're asleep. People who stay awake have some sense of this, which is why a lover becomes jealous of whatever their beloved is doing in their sleep. Matthew emphasizes that wakeful people (or metaphorically, people like Nora who aren't hiding anything) become suspicious and jealous of what they can't see, which explains why Nora felt so tortured every time Robin left her for the night.*



*Matthew believes in reincarnation because he believes that in a past life, he was a woman. When he says that this time he "turned up [...] as [he] shouldn't have been," he means that he was born into the wrong body—he is biologically male, but he believes he should have been a woman like he was in the past.*



*"Sodomites" is what many people in the 19th and 20th centuries called gay men. Matthew not only wants to be a biological woman so he can be a mother, but he also wants to fulfill feminine gender roles and have a husband. Matthew's comment about not being "able to exist" even with another gay man highlights how unaccepting even some gay men or lesbians were of gender nonconformity—they might accept being gay, but they might still be suspicious of biological men who don't identify as male.*



Matthew says that this isn't everything about the **night**—there's so much more, but he can't explain it all. He assures Nora that a person's unique evil has an end, and in old age many people are so feeble that they forget the strong passions they had in their youth. He tells Nora to remember that. Nora asks him what will happen to "her." Matthew doesn't immediately answer but talks about death until Nora interrupts to try to repeat the question. Matthew tells her to wait because he's going to tell her about the night that Nora's most curious about. Matthew says he's arrived at the subject of Jenny, who yearns to have other people's property and measures the worth of objects by how much their owners prize them. For this reason, Jenny wanted Robin.

Nora asks what Jenny is like. Matthew says that Jenny is small, nervous, and tries to "collect[]" her destiny. Jenny believes her primary destiny is love, but because she's a collector, the best love she can have is someone else's. Matthew repeats that he's coming to the **night** Nora is most interested in—the night Jenny met Robin. Matthew says he was at the opera and spotted Jenny there; more importantly, Jenny spotted Robin. Matthew watched Jenny and Robin at the opera, thinking about Nora and how the three would inevitably become entangled with one another, like fighting deer who get their antlers crossed and die that way. Matthew recognized that Jenny was looking for trouble because she knew this was her last chance to do something; soon she'd be too old. Matthew felt bad for Jenny, so he did as she asked and introduced her to Robin.

Matthew notes that he couldn't have made things much worse because Robin had met so many people, and Nora agrees. Returning to the story, Matthew says that when the opera ended Jenny went trotting after Robin and him, asking them to have dinner at her house. They agreed—Matthew notes that most people will betray a friend for a good meal and whiskey—and this led to the ride they took that **night**. Matthew describes their route, which took them along the very street where Nora and Robin's house was. Matthew says he knew Jenny was doing something terrible and suddenly became grateful that he didn't want anything in the world that he couldn't get cheap; he wasn't even jealous of Jenny's valuables.

*Nora continues avoiding using Robin's name, calling her "her" instead. Matthew's words about personal evil having an end and passions being forgotten are meant to comfort Nora: the pain she's feeling now won't always exist; one day she will forget about it and possibly be happy again. Once again, Matthew displays a strong sense of intuition—Nora asks about the night in general, but Matthew knows she's particularly curious about the night Robin and Jenny met. However, even Matthew is mistaken about this. As mentioned in the last chapter, Jenny actually met Robin a year before Matthew introduced them at the opera.*



*Matthew says Jenny tries to "collect[]" her destiny, which emphasizes the fact that most of Jenny's feelings, words, and experiences are second-hand. They already existed and she simply picks them up and claims them as her own. This is what Jenny does to Robin: collects her. This also means that Jenny's love for Robin, at least at first, isn't genuine. It's not quite the intense, sincere love that Nora has for Robin, but instead a pale imitation of it.*



*Matthew acknowledges that by helping Jenny spend time with Robin he was betraying Nora. Earlier Barnes wrote that Matthew loves gossip and scandal, so this could be part of the reason why he was willing to bring Jenny and Robin together—he wanted to watch the drama unfold. Furthermore, because Matthew asks for very little (only what he can get cheap), he also has very little to lose and it is more difficult for other people to really hurt him.*



Matthew says that when the carriages pulled up, Robin was the first one out of the house but had Jenny chasing and calling after her. In the carriage, Matthew thought to himself that everything a person does seems decent when they begin to forget (which happens in life), and then it seems good when the person becomes forgotten (which happens in death). As they drove, Matthew mourned for his spirit and the spirits of people like him, including those who hadn't been born. Matthew thought to himself that he'd do anything for them, but nothing for Jenny. Still, Matthew decided that he'd forgive Jenny if she were dying. When Matthew looked up, Robin was bleeding, Jenny was shaking, and the other people in the carriage were frightened. Watching the struggle, Matthew knew Nora would leave Robin one day, but even if they were buried far apart a dog would find them both.

*The reference to a dog finding both Nora and Robin's bones no matter how much distance is between them means that something will always manage to draw Robin and Nora together. This echoes Matthew's earlier comment to Felix that "Fate and entanglement" were beginning again when Felix first met Robin. Felix, Nora, and Jenny—no matter how different they are—are now entangled together through their love for Robin and the havoc she causes in their lives.*



## WHERE THE TREE FALLS

Felix has been seen in numerous countries standing in front of palace gates, contemplating everything he sees. He's written about different noblemen, but his articles are never printed. When Felix realized Guido (junior) was unwell (he's very small, obsessed with death, and "Mentally deficient"), he began collecting religious items with the intention to send them to the Pope. Guido once told Felix that he wanted to go into the church and Felix knew this meant that to be a good father he would have to let go much of his own identity and hopes. Now, Felix researches the church and even wrote a long letter to the Pope about the state of the Catholic church. Felix never got an answer to this letter, but that's okay because he only wanted to write to explore his own thoughts, and he knows Guido won't ever be called to become a priest or monk.

*Felix's immense love for Guido can be seen in the fact that Felix is willing to let go many of his past interests and ambitions to help Guido accomplish his. Although Barnes writes that Guido is "Mentally deficient," Felix seems to think that he's not totally helpless. Guido still has potential and promise, which is also why Felix is so willing to go the extra mile to understand his son's interests. Matthew's earlier warning to Felix that the last person born into an aristocratic family will be insane now seems like foreshadowing. With Robin gone, Guido will be Felix's only child, and he evidently is mentally ill.*



Felix decides to settle in Vienna, but first goes to visit Matthew. Back in Paris, Felix sees Matthew walking down the street in clothes he just wore to a funeral and looking much older. Felix calls to him and Matthew hurriedly snaps himself out of his thoughts and greets Felix. Felix explains that he's had some trouble and asks Matthew to accompany him to dinner at a nice restaurant. As they drive into the night, Felix mentions he's never seen "the Baronin" in this light and never really understood her. Since she left, Felix has heard a lot about her from others, but it only confuses him more. Felix explains that his knowledge of his family history comes from a single source, which gives him a feeling of immortality because the information never changes; eternity is something that doesn't change, and everyone craves that stability.

*Just as Nora only refers to Robin as "her" when she talks to Matthew, Felix only refers to Robin as "the Baronin." Felix's unwillingness to say Robin's name shows that he's still devastated by what happened to their relationship; just saying her name would cause him pain. What's more, his continued fixation on titles that he knows to be false (she's not really a baronin, just like he's not really a baron) demonstrates that he values the comfort of superficial stability over genuine pursuit of the truth.*



Felix says that he was drawn to Robin because she seemed to represent security, but he learned that it was actually loss. His great mistake was seeing acquiescence where there was none and he tells Matthew that what he really wants to know is why she married him because it's made his life dark. Matthew theorizes that she was "mourning for something taken away from her" in the war. Felix doesn't respond to this but says Jenny came to visit him, which takes Matthew by surprise. Felix says he didn't know who Jenny was at first because she was heavily veiled. Jenny told him she wanted to buy a painting, but Felix soon realized this was a front. Jenny began talking about Robin, but not by name so Felix didn't realize who it was at first.

In Felix's story, Jenny talked about Robin and her strange relationship with Sylvia, who loved her. Robin would wake Sylvia up to ask if she loved her throughout the night. When Sylvia returned to her parents for the holidays, Jenny became anxious and called the child back to see if Robin had a heart. When Sylvia came back Robin had clearly forgotten all about her. As Jenny was about to leave her conversation with Felix, she finally mentioned Robin by name. When Felix turned around, he realized that Guido (junior) had heard everything. This was okay because Felix has always encouraged Guido to expect Robin one day. Matthew lights up and says Felix did right because Guido is maladjusted, which Matthew assures Felix isn't a bad thing because Guido will never need to be pitied.

Felix pauses and then confesses to Matthew that he recognizes a form of happiness in the possibility that his son will die young. It's the worst thing that could happen to Felix, but once that happens then Felix could start over again and find joy. Felix's whole life revolves around Guido. Matthew asks about Robin and Felix explains that Robin is still with him in Guido. Felix goes on to say that Robin was always looking for someone to tell her that she was innocent; Guido is like that, but he is *actually* innocent. Robin kept searching for reassurance until she found Nora. Felix also says that Robin is one of those people who needs permission to live, and if nobody gives it to her then she'll create her own innocence even if the rest of the world calls it depraved.

*Matthew's theory about Robin is that she lost something in the war, meaning World War I (which had been over for less than 10 years at this point). Part of Robin's "mourning" included marrying Felix. It is unclear what Robin may have lost, but it could have been a loved one, a home, or even her sense of self. Ever since then, Robin has been looking for what she lost, and it seems that she thought maybe Felix could restore it to her.*



*Robin's attachment to Sylvia is notable because Robin had little to no interest in her own child. Robin might be drawn to Sylvia because Sylvia is a young girl, possibly around the same age Robin was during the war when she lost whatever she's been in mourning for. Matthew seems to think that Guido doesn't need to be pitied because Guido exists on a different plane than most of humanity; it may be that Guido embraces his own "otherness" in a way that characters like Matthew cannot, which in Matthew's eyes makes him enviable.*



*Felix loves Guido fiercely even though Guido's presence is a constant reminder of Robin—or perhaps because of that fact. The end of Guido, then, will be the true end of Felix's relationship with Robin. For Felix to move forward, he must cut all ties with the past, which is directly opposed to the belief system he's nurtured all his life. But he can't move on if Guido is with him, which is why he sees the possibility of Guido's imminent death as simultaneously the worst and best thing that could happen to him.*



Matthew declares that accepting depravity is the best way to capture the past. He says people are born and die “rebuking cleanliness,” but there is a middle period of “slovenliness.” Felix agrees and Matthew goes on to say that cleanliness creates a fear of destiny and history, which aren’t clean. Robin, however, didn’t fear them. Felix says that Robin seemed to be covered with the past and it slowed her movements. He likens this to the air of an old building, which seems denser than the air around a new building. Felix was attracted to Robin’s “density of youth.” After a short silence, Felix asks Matthew if his son’s “preoccupation” is better than Felix’s. Troubled, Matthew tells Felix to stop looking for calamity because he already has it in Guido. People are only whole when they consider their shadows, and Guido is Felix’s anxiety’s shadow.

Felix tells Matthew that people say his son isn’t sane and asks what Matthew thinks. Matthew’s opinion is that Guido’s mind is apt and that means there’s hope. Felix mutters that Guido never grows up and Matthew responds that Guido’s emotional sensitivity might obscure the workings of his mind. Matthew admits that Guido’s sanity is an unknown but urges Felix to take care of Guido’s mind because nobody knows what’s in it. Felix orders an alcoholic drink and Matthew, smiling, reminds Felix that he said he’d start drinking one day. Felix says he always thought Matthew meant that he’d give up. Matthew says he might have meant that, but he might have been wrong; people are both innocent and damned from the start and must find their own ways to live.

Felix asks if Robin is damned. Matthew, recognizing Felix’s hidden meaning, replies that Guido is not damned but blessed, and that aristocracy is a state of mind. He also observes that nobody realizes it when they find what they’re looking for. Felix asks if Matthew ever hears from Robin and Felix says that she’s in America and writes to her friends (not Matthew, which he’s grateful for) asking them not to forget her. Matthew theorizes that she struggles to remember herself. Felix says that he, like Matthew, once wanted to go behind the scenes of life to find the secrets of time but discovered that it’s impossible for a sane person to do that. Felix now thinks one must be a little bit insane to understand the past or the “obscure life,” which Guido lives in. Felix says this might be what Robin is looking for and then cleans his monocle.

*Matthew notes here that when people are born they embrace destiny, and when they prepare to die they cling to their history. Both destiny and history are untidy, so by holding onto them people are “rebuking cleanliness” when they’re born and when they die. Felix sensed a certain “density” around Robin that reminded him of old buildings and made him think that she wasn’t as concerned as other people about keeping life tidy and containing the past. Robin manages to have both density and youth (the “density of youth”) and something about this contradiction—the way it joins together past and present—is what made her attractive to Felix.*



*Matthew’s prediction that Felix would start drinking one day comes true here, although Felix says he thought the prediction meant he’d give up. In a way, though, Felix has given up. The fact that he’s drinking shows that he no longer takes certain parts of himself so seriously. His ill-fated marriage to Robin and struggle with raising Guido alone have humbled Felix and he’s lost some of his pride—even though, ironically, he got precisely what he wanted by having a son to devote himself to.*



*Felix has told Matthew before that his dearest wish is for a son. Now that he has one, however, Felix is overwhelmed with apprehension and fear because Guido doesn’t quite live up to Felix’s ideals (although Felix has tried to let go of some of these in order to support Guido). This is what Matthew means when he observes that many people don’t realize that the thing they’ve always wanted is under their nose. What Felix means by the “obscure life” is the life at night—that is, the life of hidden things—that Nora and Matthew talked about earlier. As it turns out, Guido has inherited Robin’s obscurity and Felix is no better at understanding Guido than he was at understanding Robin.*



Felix, his son, and Frau Mann arrive in Vienna together a short time later. Felix drinks heavily and has grown a beard to hide how red his face is as a result. Frau Mann, too, drinks a lot and they bring Guido to the café with them. The three make an odd picture together, Guido sitting in the middle with large glasses, watching while Felix calls for music and Frau Mann laughs. Felix tries not to look for the one thing he always wanted: a son. One night, Felix thinks he sees the late Czar Nicholas's brother-in-law and makes a clumsy bow. He and Guido get into the carriage and Felix rubs Guido's chapped hands.

*Matthew's prediction that Felix would start drinking proves too true. In the end, Felix becomes a common alcoholic. Although he maintains a deep respect for royalty, he can no longer pretend he's part of their world. This is also why he struggles to look at Guido, who is a constant reminder of both Robin and everything Felix was supposed to do an accomplish in his lifetime. Again, he fails to genuinely appreciate the obvious: he has a son, just like he always wanted.*



## GO DOWN, MATTHEW

Walking into Nora's house one afternoon, Matthew asks her why she can't stop writing to Robin and rest now that she knows that the world is "about nothing." He implies that writing to Robin, who seems to have lost herself, only makes Robin's life more bitter. Nora looks at him and he urges her to think about Jenny, who's begun drinking heavily and is in a constant state of torment because she can't be part of the past or copy the present. Matthew again asks Nora why she can't rest. Nora asks him what she's supposed to do if she can't write, since she can't bear to just sit and think. Exasperated, Matthew declares that Nora will end up going after Robin and that nothing can stop Nora from writing to her. Nora confirms that she won't stop writing, nor does she consider what she's putting Robin through by writing so much.

*When Matthew says the world is "about nothing" he means that there is no overarching purpose to life. This seems bleak, but it also means that everyone is totally free to choose their own path without fear that they won't fulfill the purpose of life. Matthew puts his intuition to work again, as shown by his concern for Robin's wellbeing. He, at least, realizes that Robin loves Nora enough to still be hurt by Nora's letters. Matthew hopes that if Nora realizes the same thing, she'll slowly start to move on.*



Nora insists that she must keep writing. Matthew accepts this but says Nora should know the worst. He reminds her of Felix and Guido, whose best hope is for Guido to die early. Matthew questions if there's a reason for Robin and Jenny's torment and again asks Nora why she can't rest. He considers what his own fate will be and states that time makes everything possible and space makes anything forgivable. Matthew asks Nora again if she can't put her pen down and rest, but then changes tack and tells her to go ahead and "lie weeping with a sword in [her] hand." Matthew admits that he's done something similar and knows the pain. Still, he tells Nora to think of Jenny, who can't write anything, and Robin, who only has Nora's pet name for her to live on. Matthew acknowledges that the memory of love carries weight.

*Matthew zeroes in on how Nora's continual letter-writing is actually self-destructive as well as painful for Robin. Matthew likens Nora's pen to a "sword in [her] hand," capable of hurting whoever she points it at as well as herself. Still, Matthew understands Nora's motivation—love's memory is heavy, and writing letters allows Nora to momentarily lighten her load.*



Nora asks what she should do. Matthew tells her to make birds' nests out of her teeth like his friend. The birds liked his friend's nests and stopped making their own. They simply wait by her window for her to make them a new one every spring. Nora turns back to her letter and says that she once wished Robin would die in her sleep but now realizes that wouldn't change anything. Matthew agrees, saying that death would be worse because it puts the beloved out of reach. With a sigh, Matthew says he wishes that Nora would take herself out of the situation but that she's clearly still in it. Nora asks what will happen to her and Robin. Matthew says nothing will happen—heartache happens to everyone, but life goes on. Nora says she can only find Robin in sleep or death, but Robin's forgotten her in both.

Matthew tells Nora that he learned a lot in his personal war and tells her to let hers do as much for her. He tells her that life doesn't tell itself and nobody is ever great or small except in someone else's mind. Because of this, Nora must be careful about whose minds she enters. Nora begins pacing and tells Matthew that as much as she wants and needs to talk, she can't. Matthew tells Nora that she's combining her pain with suffering. Matthew says that all people carry death inside of them (their skeleton), but real danger comes from the outside. Matthew says he wants to share a personal story about being destroyed.

One **night**, Matthew was hurrying home to bed, hoping that in the morning he wouldn't wake with his "hands on [his] hips." On the way he saw a prostitute and thought of the advice a priest gave him to stay simple but also to think and never hurt anyone. Matthew decided to find an empty church to think in. He found one and settled himself in a quiet corner. Looking down he "spoke to Tiny O'Toole" to make him "face the mystery." Matthew cried out to God to explain what was wrong and started crying. Matthew told God that he knows there's beauty in him even if he's a mistake. He asked God which part of him was permanent—himself as a person or Tiny. Matthew kept crying and talking to God until he forgot his purpose and, putting Tiny away, left the church wondering if he'd been thoughtful or foolish.

*Matthew's story about making birds' nests actually means that Nora should try to attract other, more faithful birds—that is, other Robins (robins are often considered to be symbols of spring and rebirth). Matthew wants Nora to put her energy into relationships with people who will actually return to her, unlike Robin, who betrayed and left her.*



*Nora must be careful not to enter the mind of someone who will degrade her and make her small. This, however, is difficult because Nora can't know what's going on in other people's minds; Matthew's words highlight how Nora situation exemplifies one of the most common and agonizing parts of being human.*



*When Matthew refers to his "hands on [his] hips," he means his natural flamboyance that is the outward indication of his secret sexuality and gender identity. Tiny O'Toole is the name Matthew has given to his penis, and by making him "face the mystery," Matthew is actually interrogating his own body about its sexual attractions. This passage, then, details Matthew's spiritual struggle to identify and understand his sexuality and gender expression. He wants God to explain it to him because, at this time, Matthew didn't understand it himself; he only felt that it was wrong.*



In the present, Nora smiles and tells Matthew he's like a child. Matthew thanks her for the compliment and tells her the story of a young boy who died of an infection while his father, a famed singer, was performing one night. Then Matthew changes the subject back to Robin, saying that she's beautiful but he never liked her. Nora apparently doesn't hear him but asks how she's supposed to live her last hour for the rest of her life. Matthew tells her that even a quiet life is difficult. In agony Nora says that time isn't long enough to understand Robin's **nights**. She questions what love is and says that everyone finds everything they can't stand in another person and then love that person anyway. Nora wonders if Robin will always regret rather than appreciate things but decides this can't be true, because Robin gets wearied by her memory.

Nora says there's something inside her that makes her love evil. Matthew tells Nora that her mistake was in trying to transform the unknowable (Robin) into the known. Nora explains that she wanted power but chose to start a relationship with "a girl who resembles a boy." Matthew says that's right and that she never has and never will love someone the way she loves Robin. Matthew explains that the love they have "for the invert, boy or girl" can be traced back to childhood romance stories. A lost girl suggests that a prince will find her, and the "pretty lad who is a girl" is both the prince and the princess *and*, somehow, neither of them. The "invert" reminds people of these romances and that's why they're so loved. Nora compares love to death and says that she loves Robin as if she were "condemned to it."

Matthew tells Nora that he understands her pain but, contrary to what many people think, suffering won't purify them. Nora mentions Jenny and Matthew says suffering ruins her ability to sleep. Matthew remarks that nobody ever suffers as much as they should or loves as strongly as they say they do. Furthermore, the only way to know evil is to also know truth and good, and to be innocent is to not know one's self. Nora says that Robin sometimes did come back (presumably for safety and to sleep) but she always left again. Matthew mentions that she must have been coming back at dawn, when **night** people are most frightened. Nora says that the love between her and Robin was impossible and seemed to kill itself, yet they still love each other. Matthew notes that it's difficult to escape an entanglement.

*Nora feels like every moment is her last hour—that is, the end of her life—which emphasizes how much pain she's still experiencing over the end of her relationship with Robin. Because Robin doesn't seem to appreciate things when she has them, she loses them and is left with regret. Nora believes that if Robin could learn to appreciate things in the moment, then she wouldn't have to experience regret in the future.*



*Robin is the "girl who resembles a boy." By this Nora means that Robin doesn't have the feminine qualities women are conventionally supposed to have—she rejects monogamy, prefers going out while her partner waits at home for her, and demands complete independence. In the 1920s, "invert" was the term used to describe someone whose biological sex and gender identity did not match. An example of this is Matthew, who is biologically male but repeatedly expresses his desire to be a woman. Nora feels "condemned to" her love for Robin, meaning that Nora feels like she has no choice and that love for Robin is like a punishment.*



*Nora seems to focus on the darker side of things (saying that she's drawn to evil), but Matthew believes that this also means Nora is drawn toward the light. To recognize darkness or evil, after all, Nora would have to also be familiar with the light and goodness. Unlike so many other people, Nora is able to recognize both the light and darkness in Robin even though Robin herself was afraid of the light. Robin's fear of the light is why she always scurried back to Nora at the first sight of dawn.*



Nora tells Matthew she wishes he could take her mind off everything. She notes that she's happier alone in the house she bought for her and Robin to live in. When she's alone, she's not tortured with watching Robin prepare to leave and then come stumbling back again. Nora asks if she was wrong to believe Robin and Matthew yes, because it made Robin's life "wrong." Nora says that there came a time when she no longer believed Robin, the same night she went to talk to Matthew in his room. Matthew says that all Robin had was Nora's faith in her, and it was wrong of Nora to take it away; she should have kept that faith even though it was a myth. Nora ignores this and says that after that night she went to see Jenny herself.

Inside Jenny's house Nora saw a doll like the one Robin gave her. That's how Nora knew that she was in the right place. Nora came out and asked Jenny if she was Robin's mistress and Jenny immediately confirmed it. Nora quickly realized that Jenny viewed Nora as someone who could sympathize with her, rather than a rival. Robin apparently told Jenny that there was nothing between her and Nora, though Nora cared deeply for her and Robin didn't want to hurt her. Jenny wanted to know what to do so Nora told her there was nothing to do. As they talked Nora realized part of her hurt was because of the doll—when a woman gives another woman a doll, it's supposed to represent the life they can't have together. That night Nora broke up with Robin, who left immediately.

Matthew finishes Nora's story, saying that when Robin left, Nora must have walked all over the house crying and wringing her hands, ashamed with herself for acting so theatrical. Matthew says that Nora wants to talk to him so much because he's "the other woman that God forgot." Matthew tells Nora that she's both died and been resurrected for love, but always the same love. Matthew asks her if she was ever disgusted by Robin or happy to be alone. Nora says she simultaneously was and wasn't. Her real fear was of Robin's gentleness. Nora recalls one night when Robin got so drunk that someone called Nora to bring her home. Robin hurled insults at Nora the whole time until they got to the hotel and Nora slapped her. After that Robin calmed down and went to sleep. That night Nora wished Robin would die so she'd belong to Nora.

*Nora contributes to the "wrong[ness]" of Robin's life by believing Robin's assurances to her. By believing Robin, Nora becomes complicit in her own betrayal. On the other hand, if she had simply and quietly accepted that Robin was lying, then they could have arrived at an understanding and Robin's actions would no longer have been a betrayal. This might not have made Robin right, but it would have saved her the burden of being wrong—according to Matthew, anyway.*



*Nora might have understood if Robin had had a one-night stand, but Nora is more hurt by the evidence of an emotional affair between Robin and Jenny. Robin began a life with Jenny that Nora couldn't be a part of, and that is the ultimate betrayal.*



*Matthew again describes himself as "the [...] woman that God forgot" (earlier he called himself the "girl that God forgot"). Matthew literally means God, but Nora is the woman Robin (who is effectively Nora's God) forgot. This is something Nora herself mentions more than once, that Robin has forgotten her. Nora feared Robin's gentleness because she knew it wouldn't last, and it was harder to watch that gentleness end than it was to just not have it.*



Nora admits that she never really understood Robin. Nora always saw Robin as a big child who needed to be saved and protected. Nora tried to save her, but she couldn't. Nora recounts the moment she knew their relationship was over: she slapped Robin while she was asleep, and it seemed like Robin became corrupt as she woke up. Nora says she went mad seeing that—indeed, she's been mad ever since—and begs Matthew to say something. Matthew tells Nora to stop screaming and says that because Nora is a good woman, she was the only one who could ruin her relationship with Robin. Matthew says Robin is a “wild thing caught in a woman's skin,” completely wrapped up in herself; Robin can't empathize with other people, and so she always believes herself innocent of any wrongdoing when she hurts other people.

Matthew asks Nora why she couldn't be happy to not learn her lesson. Matthew advises Nora to move quietly through life and try not to learn anything because all lessons come through someone else, and that person will have the means to hurt her. By guarding her heart, Nora will be able to crawl through life without experiencing as much pain and with more of her self intact. Nora says that sometimes when Robin stayed home she would carefully watch Nora to make sure nobody wrote or came to see her—Robin, too, wanted to own Nora. Sometimes, Robin would get drunk, dress up in boy's clothes, and raise their doll into the air like she wanted to crush it. Another time Nora came home late so Robin actually destroyed the doll.

Nora asks Matthew if there are devils and if she is Robin's devil for trying to comfort her. Nora describes seeing dead loved ones in her dreams, including her grandmother. Nora believes that everyone dies in someone else's sleep, and Robin dies over and over again in Nora's. Matthew declares that he wants his mother and Nora asks him to tell Robin to never forget that Nora loves her. Matthew tells Nora to tell Robin all this herself, or else sit in silence and stew in her own trouble. Matthew goes on to say that Nora should pray to God and refers to God as a woman because it “balances the mistake” God made when she made him. Matthew theorizes that Robin will ultimately wish Nora was locked away in a nunnery where she can be safe. As it is, Nora keeps dragging her up.

*In their first conversation, Matthew told Nora that lovers are suspicious of their beloved's sleep because their partner might betray them in dreams. With Robin, it seems to be the opposite. Robin becomes more corrupt as she wakes up, meaning that in sleep she seems innocent. Matthew's comment that Robin is a “wild thing caught in a woman's skin” supports previous descriptions of Robin as more animal-like than human. This is because Robin follows her impulses and desires rather than being guided by reason and logic.*



*Nora's description of Robin raising their doll into the air like she wanted to destroy it is reminiscent of the time Felix saw her raise their newborn son in the air. Robin sees babies—whether real or fake—as a limitation; they box her in and bind her to another person. Robin doesn't want this because she doesn't want to be possessed by anyone but herself. If she destroys the baby, then she breaks that tie to another person and sets herself free.*



*If Robin dies over and over in Nora's dreams, then she's also resurrected through Nora's waking thoughts. This is what Matthew means when he says Nora keeps raising Robin back up. Matthew again indicates that God made a “mistake” by making him a man. Since God misgendered Matthew, Matthew misgenders God.*



Nora tells Matthew that the women Robin had hurt come to her for comfort, which makes Nora realize what it is she's always wanted: "secure torment." The only better thing would be hope. Nora describes her attempts to keep Robin from going out and Robin's resistance to her. Nora concludes that she always loved Robin for her own sake, not for Robin's. Matthew says he's always known this and, smiling, Nora says that Matthew always knows things that other people don't learn until they're dead, because Matthew was born dead. As the sun sets, Matthew asks Nora why she doesn't rest—she's nearly 40 and her body must be tired. Nora says she knows and begins to cry. She asks Matthew if he's ever loved someone so much that he and his love became one. Matthew doesn't answer.

Nora says that Robin can go wherever and do whatever she wants because she forgets. However, Nora is limited because she remembers. She tells Matthew that she used to be different, but this love is also different; it permeates her whole life and eats away at it. Matthew says that when his brother died their mother wanted to see Matthew instead of their friends because she wanted to talk to the person who remembered his brother best. Robin will turn to Nora for similar reasons—she will want Nora to build her back up. Matthew goes on to say that he was doing well in life until he met Nora and she dragged him out from under a rock. Now he finds himself surrounded by people who need comfort and asks Nora if she thinks he's happy or if her sorrow is the only one in the world.

Matthew tells Nora that he has reasons to be miserable and points out that he doesn't waste his energy wailing about it. Nora tells him to listen and says that Robin used to lie in bed and taunt her, saying she wanted everyone but Nora to be happy. Nora thinks Robin knew she was hurting Nora but couldn't stop herself. For this reason, Robin simultaneously wants to be loved and to be alone. Pacing, Nora says that Robin loved her but has since forgotten. Nora believes Robin wanted darkness, but Nora got in the way. Nora talks about mentally seeking Robin out all over the world after she left, but says she was unable to find her. Nora concludes that she and Robin should've died in bed so they'd break down to nothing but love. Confused, Matthew grabs his hat and leaves.

*Nora wants "secure torment," which also means she wants stability or consistency no matter how much it hurts. Even if all Nora expects is the worst ("torment"), at least she knows to expect it. Nora's comment that Matthew was born dead highlights the extent to which his life is a shadow of what it could be; without being able to express his gender freely, Nora implies, Matthew isn't fully alive.*



*Matthew makes another prediction: Robin will return to Nora to be rebuilt. This means that Robin will reach rock bottom one day and look to someone to help her put herself back together, which foreshadows Robin's breakdown at the end of the book. Nora knows the best and the worst of Robin, which makes her the most qualified to help Robin. Matthew is crying out for sympathy by implying that he isn't actually happy himself. Nora's pain has made her selfish, though, and she doesn't pick up on Matthew's feelings.*



*Robin is a night person, but Nora naturally belongs to the day. Interrupting Robin's darkness really means shining a light into it, making it impossible for Robin to ignore the parts of herself that she doesn't like or understand. Nora feels that if life wouldn't get in the way, then she and Robin could just experience their love. To Nora, death (the literal removal of life) would make it easier for them to see and experience their love. In this case, death might not have to be literal, physical death, but instead a kind of spiritual or emotional death that allows them to start over.*



Matthew goes to his favorite café and orders a drink at the bar. He's still thinking about Nora and the others and tells the bartender that thinking makes a person sick. The people at the café watch Matthew expectantly, knowing that if he gets drunk then he'll start talking. An ex-priest calls Matthew over for a drink. The priest asks Matthew if he really was married once and Matthew confirms that he once *said* he was married and vaguely hints at having slept with his brother's wife. The priest says he wants the truth, but instead of answering Matthew launches into a drunken ramble about overfed ducks in a park. Suddenly Matthew curses the people who make him miserable by looking to him for comfort, including Nora and Jenny. Matthew says it's all a bad story, but the world should hear its own story.

Out loud, Matthew questions why people choose to turn to him to keep their secrets. He rails against Felix for keeping so much quiet while Guido searches in vain for his mother, Robin. Other people in the bar listen while Matthew continues rambling. He says that when a person goes against their nature, they learn more about it, and the reason he talks so much is because he's tortured by what others keep quiet. Matthew calls himself a coward for never being who he actually is long enough to understand what being himself really means. Matthew goes on about a magician doing tricks and claims that once he was called to bleed Catherine the Great. The priest asks Matthew to remember what century he lives in. Matthew angrily tells him not to interrupt, that a man with a good memory can't do any harm.

The priest points out that women cause trouble, too. Matthew agrees, saying that's all Jenny, Nora, and Robin have ever done. Matthew drunkenly rambles on about trying to be recognized until the priest offers to take him home because he's clearly very drunk. Matthew waves him off and says that revenge is only for people who have loved and then asks again why everyone turns to him for comfort. The priest tries to lead Matthew away again, but Matthew becomes hysterical, asking why he's the only one who ever understands when something is over. Speaking to nobody in particular Matthew asks if they can let him free yet, now that he's shared his life for nothing. Matthew tries to get up but falls over, saying they've reached the end and there'll be nothing *"but wrath and weeping."*

*Just as Matthew has studiously avoided answering Nora's questions about his past, he refuses to give a solid answer to the priest. Instead, he hints at an affair with his brother's wife. If this is true, then it could indicate that he was thinking of his brother's wife when Nora asked him if he'd ever lost himself in love before. However, it's difficult to know if Matthew is being honest—he is an admitted liar and shares very few details of his personal history with anyone.*



*Matthew's nonheteronormative sexuality and gender identity make him an "other." More importantly, he's a type of "other" that wasn't generally spoken about openly in the 1920s. People talked about different kinds of others (such as Jews, like Felix), but not about people like Matthew. This silence becomes a form of oppression, so Matthew sees speaking as a form of liberation and freedom. By talking about anything and everything, he is dragging it all out into the light where it can't be ignored anymore. He resents anyone, including Felix, who chooses silence instead of openness, because it makes life harder for those who aren't talked about and are therefore treated as nonexistent.*



*Matthew is tortured by the fact that so many people turn to him for comfort because it makes it that much more difficult for him to comfort himself. If they let him go, then Matthew would have a chance to immerse himself in his own sorrow and explore it. As it is, he has little time to think of himself. However, his misery doesn't disappear just because he doesn't have time to think about it—it only grows stronger, culminating this hysterical crying fit. What Matthew says about everything ending in "wrath and weeping" also turns out to be literally true for him: this is Matthew's final scene in the novel.*



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## THE POSSESSED

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When Jenny and Robin arrive in New York, Robin shoots down Jenny's suggestion that they get a house; Robin insists a hotel is good enough. Robin refuses to leave their room for two weeks and seems broken. Eventually, however, she decides to start going out. She goes to churches and seems like she's renouncing something. Usually Jenny follows at a discreet distance. Jenny loses patience with how difficult it is to understand Robin—in fact, Jenny thinks Robin has some relationship with dark spirits—and becomes hysterical, spending all of her time stumbling around their room and crying.

Robin wanders closer and closer to Nora's house. Sometimes Robin sleeps in the woods, and sometimes she sleeps in the chapel near Nora's house. Eventually, Robin moves her belongings into the chapel. One **night**, she wakes up to the sound of Nora's dog barking in the distance. Nora also hears the dog and realizes something is happening. Unwilling to wait for whatever's coming, Nora runs outside and notices a light coming from the chapel. Cursing, she runs over and stops in the doorway. Inside, Robin is dressed in boy's clothes in front of a candlelit altar full of toys. As the dog runs in, Robin drops to all fours and barks at him. Robin chases the dog around on all fours while the dog, evidently frightened, tries to get away. Eventually Robin, exhausted, collapses on the floor and weeps, and the dog lies down with her.

*When Robin was first with Nora, she begged for a home; with Jenny, Robin begs for the opposite. She sees Jenny as a temporary respite, a place to rest before she inevitably leaves in search of her home. Although she didn't show it, Robin's split with Nora was traumatizing. By breaking up with her, Nora effectively sent a message: if Robin wants to enjoy the security of a home with Nora, then Robin will have to learn to appreciate her. The thing that Robin is renouncing here is her former life—she intends to give up wandering and let go of her past in order to move forward, although she's still not sure how to do that.*



*Just as Matthew predicted, Robin returns to Nora in the end. Since being back in America, Robin has gone through a process of renunciation, but the process doesn't finish until the final scene when Robin acts like a dog. Throughout Nightwood, Robin has been compared to an animal, meaning that she is somewhat wild and ill-suited to a domestic life. In the end, Robin almost seems possessed by an animal spirit, but by succumbing to her animal-like impulses, she's also able to exorcise them. This leaves Robin raw, vulnerable, and emotional when it's all over, but from this point Nora will be able to help her rebuild herself. After this, Robin and Nora may finally be able to find happiness and security in their relationship, coming to a sense of peace that's hinted at when the dog lies down with Robin.*





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