NIGHTWOOD'DA UZLAŞMA VEYA KARIŞIKLIK ARAYIŞI

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: Nightwood, modernism, karışıklık, uzlaşma, kayıp kuşak
LONGING FOR RECONCILIATION OR ORDER IN NIGHTWOOD

Abstract

Barnes’ Nightwood is a story about a group of expatriates in Europe after the First World War. It is a modernist novel which conveys disordered human condition. In Nightwood, humans act subhuman and deny their moral nature and bring destruction to others. Morality is replaced by lost generation which consists of leisure class people having false values. The protagonist Robin is portrayed as selfish and unable to relate to anyone. She chooses Nora as a faithful lover who will keep her safe. Despite Robin's command, Nora's power balances Robin's inner life for a while because Nora is a sign of stability. This article aims at exploring the relationship between Robin and Nora through psychoanalytical approach focusing on how they try to achieve reconciliation through love and yet fail in their lives.

Keywords: Nightwood, modernism, disorder, reconciliation, lost generation

D. Barnes: “The truth is how you say it, and to be ‘one’s self’ is the most shocking custom of all” (Davis, 1996).

Realism enforces supposedly well-understood identity categories within which a few in depth “individual” portraits can be carefully drawn. But these individuals can only exist in a temporary world of stereotypes. In non-realistic world with no privileged point of view, characters become mysteriously flat. In a modernistic world, the central paradox of the reality concerning human condition is related by Herring: “we have lost our animal innocence and yet as humans cannot achieve transcendence, though we are doomed to pine for it in this vale of tears” (1995:209). Nightwood is a novel of memorable grotesque characters who are introduced to one another in salons, bedrooms, or cultural events. As there is not a straightforward plot in it, the novel is concerned with the perception, memory and association of its characters and their behavior. We can associate the novel’s genre with modernism of internal stylization of the form and the distortion of the observed reality. When it was published in 1936, the peak of modernism had already been reached.

Nightwood also depicts the rootlessness of Americans in the years before World War II. Barnes has drawn her characters with such a “quality of horror and doom” that she has only “exploited perversion to create an atmosphere of … psychic disorder that will permit her to transcend reality and make plausible a certain modernistic attitude…” (Marcus, 1991: 200). It is this quality of disorder that stands as the outcome of what Gertrude Stein calls (epigraph of The Sun Also Rises) “You are all a lost generation” (Hemingway, 1986). Barnes manifests the disorder in the human lives — the impossibility of any stable relationship— in the world of Nightwood, where humans act subhuman, deny their moral nature and bring destruction to others. This article aims at exploring the relationship between the main characters through psychoanalytical approach in the world of night as suggested by the title of the novel. It will also focus on how the characters try to achieve reconciliation and yet fail in their lives.
Lesbianism and alcoholism are only two consequences of cultural modernism that has exposed human beings to losing their decent status. A lesbian love relationship is the starting point to scrutinize the unavoidable destruction in *Nightwood*. In Robin-Nora relationship, the inevitability of the degenerate human condition appears at first as a seek for harmony of love. However, it will turn out to be a chaotic experience in the end. The protagonist Robin is one of the most striking examples to the degenerate status of the individual. Robin acts as if living in a dream from which she has not yet awakened. She is desexed as a result of the degradation in American culture caused by the First World War. She represents the lost generation which is way too self-indulgent and self-absorbed and experience-seeking. As a matter of fact, morality is replaced by this new generation which is consisted of leisure class people having false values. For instance, Robin leaves Félix and their son to start a lesbian relationship with Nora. Later Robin leaves Nora, and comes to live with Jenny (a woman presented in the novel as an opportunist).

As an “alcoholic nymphomaniac, Robin is similar to the alcoholic gay abortionist “Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-dante-O’Connor” in *Nightwood*. Dr. O’Connor is another character who is unreliable in his capacity to understand the dark side of life —the night. He seems to be a confidant to Robin and other characters while at the same time being a liar and a thief. Through Dr. O’Connor’s mouth, Barnes relates: “Destiny and history are untidy; we fear memory of that disorder. Robin did not” as she finds peace in the experience of disorder, in the animal world and in insanity (118). Barnes’ viewpoint upon human condition is based on a kind of psychological determinism. “Man is subject to the dictates of his unconscious nature even in his revolt against nature itself” (Boe, 1991: 310). In a modernist and deterministic world, in which human action is predetermined, the humanity lives in a helpless way. Thus, humankind’s mental life influences his/her rational thinking and becomes queer. This is the reason why Robin, portrayed as an irrational being, acts not to alter the disordered conditions in her environment but to actualize her instincts.

In the process of realizing one’s instincts, dreams --the disguised versions of repressed wishes-- play an important part for Robin-Nora relationship. Freud, in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, maintains that the power of the superego, become to a great extent, lessened in sleep, and so the opportunity to have satisfaction for instinctual needs in the world of the dream is proportionately intensified (1913). Dreams represent the subconscious of Nora in *Nightwood*, the world of night. In the first dream, she sees herself in her grandmother’s room, calling Robin to come to this room. The dream reminds Nora of her grandmother dressed in a military outfit, looking at her smiling. “In the eternal present of dream, what was promised—or threatened—by Nora’s grandmother is renewed in Robin…” (Lee, 1991: 213). The child’s desire to be loved is Nora’s repressed desire which is reflected in Nora’s relationship with Robin. Williamson writes, “Her (Nora’s) capacity for love, as she herself confesses, derives from her need for power, her need to possess and save a person, who is in some way lost” (1985: 312). This lost, irrational being she loves is Robin, whom Nora attempts to protect and possess through her “flood of love.”

In spite of the disorder in her condition, Nora tries to have a maternal control in her relationship with Robin and seeks order of love. Love, for Nora, is a means for harmony and meaning as well as communication; so she accepts Robin’s masculine freedom. Barnes narrates, “Love becomes the deposit of the heart, analogous in all degrees to the ‘findings’ in a
Love “seeks to heal fragmentation, to overcome solitude, and to deny mortality” (Williamson, 1985:310). It is, in a way, one’s act of revolt against his/her sense of incompleteness. Freud associates our inner lives with "a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement ...no organization and no unified will, only an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle” (1993:104). In her relationship with Robin, Nora has “the face of all people” to get satisfaction to be able to love people (51). “Robin looks to Nora for a love which can penetrate through her trance... and save her from insanity, while Nora, in loving Robin, is attempting to capture and understand her own subconscious” (Williamson, 1985:310).

Nora’s second dream reflects a juxtaposition of Robin and Nora’s grandmother. She sees her grandmother lying in a grave, and her father going into the grave, while Nora is standing there. She feels the pain of losing Robin: “all of us die over again in somebody’s sleep. And this I have done to Robin it is only through me that she will die over and over” (149). From this angle, Nora is under the influence of her dreams: “Nora’s memories and dreams are the primary key to the subconscious forces which are driving her. Nora Flood is a completely externalized personality, capable of unlimited sympathy and self-giving; she is equally incapable of selfishness and of introspection” (Williamson, 1985:312).

As to Robin, she has an unknown life. Incongruous, repulsive, distorted are the adjectives to describe her. The word somnambule is a metaphor that shows Robin’s inner world in which she is self-absorbed. It is a dream-like world through which she is away from any contact with the outside world of day. “About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of the body of water —as if her life lay through her in un-gainly luminous deterioration— the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds— meet of child and desperado” (34-5). Robin is an “enigma” for those in need of discovering her. She is “sealed in a kind of trance in which she has lost the ability to communicate with the outside world” (310).

In the chapter named “Night Watch,” the relationship between Robin and Nora is depicted in terms of their appreciation of the world. Nora knows that Robin: “…was singing of a life that she herself had no part in... more depressing would be the moment when, after a pause, the song would be taken up again from an inner room where Robin, unseen, gave back an echo of her unknown life more nearly turned to its origin” (57). As a sleepwalker, Robin does not have a chance to satisfy her instinctual needs and has to face a basic human dilemma “The sleeper is the proprietor of an unknown land...” Dr. Matthew explains to Nora in reference to Robin’s inner world (87).

It is not possible to form strong and healthy relationships in a chaotic world of Nightwood. Robin-Nora relationship is doomed to end in mutual destruction. The opposition between love and “animalistic innocence” is a significant example showing the disordered human condition which has lost every firm and harmonious aspect of the universe. When Nora makes efforts to enter Robin’s inner life, Robin becomes aware of Nora, who attempts to penetrate into “the sealed depths of her being” (Williamson, 1985: 312). Thus, Robin must leave Nora to find her reconciliation.
Robin finds peace and happiness for a while out of her animalistic innocence—the child in her. “Animal innocence / insanity means having no haunting conscience, no disturbing memories of the past, no guilt” (Herring, 1995: 209). She, consequently, becomes a grotesque figure since this is a way of satisfaction for her. *Nightwood’s* last chapter, “The Possessed” portrays Robin sliding down before Nora’s dog “as if ready for another sexual conquest” (Herring, 1995: 207). Her loose behavior towards the excitedly barking dog resembles her indifference towards Nora. She tries to hurt the dog: “...the dog reared as if to avoid something that troubled him to such agony that he seemed to be rising from the floor...she struck against his side. He let loose one howl of misery and bit at her, dashing about her, barking...Then she began to bark also, crawling after him—barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching...”(170).

Robin exploits the dog though her animalistic side and gains a sexual victory in the end: “…she gave up (barking, grinning and running), lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees” (170). In that ambiguous scene, Nora discovers Robin kneeling before an altar in a abandoned church. Nora attempts to enter only but accidentally fall unconscious whereas Robin falls asleep after her communication with the animal. This strange connection with Nora’s dog reveals that Robin could see herself through Nora’s vision of reality. This is a kind of transition in Robin’s life towards a state of disorder and chaos. She cannot respond Nora’s possessive and protective love. At this point, she chooses to live her own degradation, in the form of the “sleep of the insanity” (170).

As to Nora’s perception of love, Nora realizes her love for Robin is doomed, and affirms her destruction: “In the resurrection, when we come up looking backward at each other, I shall know you only of all that company. My ear shall turn in the socket of my head; my eyeballs loosened where I am the whirlwind about that cashed expense, my foot stubborn on the cast of your grave” (129). So, for Robin, love becomes a cover that hides the meaninglessness and incompleteness of her animalistic inner world. Nora, on the other hand, attempts to understand and find meaning through love. Barnes condemns Robin’s promiscuity as destructive whereas Nora is “desirous of the exclusive relationship that most people want, regardless of the sexual orientation (Herring, 1985: 209).

If Robin is to be pitied as a beast turning human, “Nora is pitiful as the innocent romantic who believes that love is meant to last” (Herring, 1985: 210). The unsatisfied desires turn into frustration in Nora who becomes self-destructive. She confesses, “have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?” (152). “Nora's declaration of her mutuality with Robin comes from the instruction of her retold narrative of differences, in which she re-experiences the intensity of her loss, restages her desire, and recognizes her own culpability” (Allen, 1993: 187). Nora also relates: “There is something evil in me that loves evil and degradation —purity’s black backside! That loves honesty with a horrid love…” (135). Nora has a perception of reality which is manifested only through her distorted vision of love. As the doctor says, “There is no truth, and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known” (136).

Consequently, when Nora thinks she has found love, she realizes that it is just an unknowable illusion. She says, “Sometimes Robin seemed to return to me for sleep and safety but she always want out again” (139). The doctor further relates, “To treat her lovers to the great pas-
sionate indifference...Dawn, of course, dawn! That’s when she (Robin) came back frightened. At that hour the citizen of the night balances on a thread that is running thin” (139). In a sense, Robin is like a bat who can survive only at nights, who can neither give her love nor attempt to form a stable relationship. Thus, her promiscuousness is never judged by the community she belongs to since there is no morality left but disillusionment. The only state she can achieve order is the degeneration that shows itself through animal innocence. However, Nora, unable to achieve order, accepts her fate of destruction in the end. “Nora is the home, Robin the wanderer; Nora protects, Robin is protected; Nora fears, Robin is feared for. In these exchanges, Robin has the most visible power because she initiates action and Nora responds to it” (Allen, 1993: 187).

In this world of chaos, the destruction is inevitable. Even love that seems to bind the individuals’ disordered worlds together, functions as something annihilating because fragmented life of Robin does not look for love but animal-like unconscious life. Love is strange and painful, to Barnes: “We were created that the earth might be made sensible of her inhuman taste; and love that the body might be so dear that even the earth should mar with it” (138). Trapped between a desire for order, meaning, and love and the impossibility of reconciliation, the essential situation of the lost generation is brutally and inescapably ironic.

REFERENCES


