

Grotesque Bodies and Repulsive Women

Explorations of the marginalised and “grotesque” in
Djuna Barnes’s *The Book of Repulsive Women*

Introduction

My thesis examines the notion of the grotesque in the work of Djuna Barnes, with particular focus on the depiction of dance and the body. This study is unique in that it includes a thorough exploration of Barnes’s *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915). Until now, this collection of eight poems and five illustrations has been largely dismissed by scholars as a juvenile piece of work, meriting little serious, scholarly attention.

Throughout this thesis I examine Barnes’s portrayal of marginalised figures, e.g. dancers, prostitutes and boxers and question whether her grotesque portrayals are concurrent with socio-cultural views in twentieth-century America.



Djuna
Barnes

Research Aims



1.

- 1) Fill the existing gap in scholarship on *The Book of Repulsive Women*.
- 2) Explore the ways in which *The Book of Repulsive Women* foreshadowed Barnes’s recurrent desire to represent the marginalised and stigmatised throughout her work.
- 3) Explore the effect to which Barnes uses dance and the female body in relation to that of her contemporaries.

Findings

So far my research has revealed a tension in Barnes’s work between the humanisation of previously “feared” characters that inhabit society’s underbelly (e.g. the prostitute), and highly grotesque, sexualised portrayals of these figures.

While a large degree of attention has been given to works such as *Ryder* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1936) there remains a great deal of research waiting to be done on *The Book of Repulsive women*, which in fact acts as ‘a realm...open to ideological, physical, and aesthetic differences in American culture.’ (3)



2.

References

- 1) Djuna Barnes, ‘The portion of dramatic art that locates in the small of the back’, *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, 1917.
- 2) Djuna Barnes, *The Book of Repulsive Women* ed. Douglas Messerli (LA: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), p. 30.
- 3) Mary Unger, ‘“Dropping crooked into rhyme”: Djuna Barnes’s Disabled Poetics in The Book of Repulsive Women’, *Legacy: A Journal of Women Writers* 30:1, p. 124.