

## *Nightwood: Otherness & Anti-Semitism*

By Rachel Cruz and Ryan Bilbee

In *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, the author discusses the sacrifices marginalized groups make to feel accepted by society; by giving up their true identities in return for social acceptance. In particular, characters Felix Volkbein and his father Guido Volkbein (senior) struggle to feel accepted by their Jewish heritage. Knowing the social consequences of ostracization, criticism, and exclusion that their inherent identities entail, the characters take on false identities, as aristocracies and Christians, that hide their oppressive backgrounds. Through this analysis, we will discuss “otherness” in *Nightwood* as Felix and Guido Volkbein conceal their true identities, yearning to feel accepted by an Anti-Semitic society.

Felix's father Guido Volkebein distances himself from the Jewish community, taking on traditions of the Christian religion while faking aristocratic belonging. In Jerome A Chanes, "Anti-Semitism." the author discusses society's negative views of the Jewish community, who, according to the author, were thought to have promoted "immorality" (95). It is important to note prejudice as this plays a significant role in Guido's decision to “hide his Jewish ancestry” (Smith 196). Guido, not wanting to be, himself, an "other," decides to separate himself from his true identity (Field 66). In one instance, Guido decides to move away from the Jewish community by following Christian practices and lifestyle traditions (Hanrahan 32). In an attempt to pass as an aristocrat, Guido pretended to be a Viennese baron, faking his ancestral history and bearing a counterfeit coat of arms. Guido's rather extreme actions prove how desperate he was to feel accepted by society and distanced from his internalized feelings of hatred against his own people.

Like his father, Felix Volkbein takes on the false role of an aristocrat in an attempt to hide his Jewish beginnings. Felix, being half Jewish (“his father Guido, an Italian Jew, his mother, Hedvig, Viennese”), finds it difficult to be accepted among higher ranks of society (38 Schehr). In response, he “claims a heritage that... is *not* Jewish,” taking on the false name “Baron Felix” (Trubowitz 315; Fama 43). Desperate to continue his false identity, Felix tries to make Robin, a romantic interest, think he is fully knowledgeable of the historical background of Vienna, a place in Europe where aristocracy thrive. He even calls her a “Baronin” to give the impression that he himself is a baron (47). He, like his father, also tries desperately to fit into a society that fails to accept them.

In summary, Felix and Guido Volkbein go through great lengths to conceal their true identities as Jewish individuals. Felix takes on the name of a baron while his father follows Christian traditions. In doing so, the Volkbeins draw attention to problems in society; that fail to accept marginalized groups. *Nightwood* expresses the struggles marginalized groups experience to be accepted within society.