
Natalie Clifford Barney's Transatlantic Journey into Liminal Identity

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Abstract

Scholars have likened liminality to death, invisibility, and bi- and homosexuality and have considered it as detachment from fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions. Liminality is associated with rites which accompany change of place and social position, and is thus closely tied to definitions of mobility, which further entails heightened tolerance of difference, reassessment of identity, and altered self-understanding. In this paper I will explore Natalie Clifford Barney's conceptualization and articulation of love and womanhood in the context of liminality. I will argue that Barney encouraged women to explore alternatives beyond heteronormative social conventions, proposing an alternative reading of female identity, which she formulated during her expatriation in France. Barney, who was born into a wealthy Ohio family in 1876, spent most of her life in France and in her adulthood considered Paris her home. In the Latin Quarter of the French capital, she hosted one of the most important literary salons of the early twentieth century, attended by such writers as Truman Capote and Gertrude Stein. Barney, who was a prolific writer, explored womanhood in many of her novels, short stories, and poems that were colored with her unique feminism. The transatlantic detachment from her previous set of cultural conditions led to a heightened self-understanding and enabled her to challenge existing norms and to propose radical alternatives. Significantly, at the end of her story "Illicit Love Defended" Barney pondered: "Does it not take more courage to dare to be oneself than to conform to contemporary morality?"

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