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2014

"Not Satisfied with the Ending: Connecting The World in the Evening to Maurice."

Joshua G Adair

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/joshua-adair/33/

"Christopher Wasn't Satisfied with Either Ending": Connecting Christopher Isherwood's *The World in the Evening* to E. M. Forster's *Maurice*

Joshua Adair

> In a century whose fiction is remarkable for its growing sexual candour, Isherwood has been no trailblazer. —Jonathan H. Fryer

> [T]exts come before us as the always-already-read; we approach them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions.
> —Fredric Jameson

They Hated the Book

Few books have been so poorly received by friends and critics alike than Christopher Isherwood's *The World in the Evening* (1954). Remarkable for its stylistic and thematic departures from his earlier, much-vaunted works like *All the Conspirators* (1928), *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), and *The Berlin Stories* (1945), *The World in the Evening* was almost unanimously dismissed as a failure and continues to be marginalized by critics and readers today. Peter Parker, author of *Isherwood: A Life Revealed,* notes that Dodie Smith, playwright and personal friend of Isherwood, remarked, "It is the only work of Chris's we have really disliked" (543). Parker observes that the novel "was certainly very bad indeed" and that "The truth was they [Dodie Smith and her partner, Alec Beesley] hated the book" (543-44). This critical perspective persists today: Lisa M. Schwerdt, author of *Isherwood's Fiction: The*

Self and Technique (1989), suggests that *The World in the Evening* is "perhaps Isherwood's worst" novel (119). Claude J. Summers's *Christopher Isherwood* (1980) echoes this sentiment, calling *The World in the Evening* "Isherwood's most problematic novel" and "a relative failure" (79). Furthermore, Katherine Bucknell's "Who is Christopher Isherwood?" asserts, "the book is marred both by repressed anger about the difficulties of trying to write as a homosexual and by psychological inaccuracies" (22). This poor evaluation of *The World in the Evening* may be the result of a combination of elements: Bob Wood and Charles Kennedy, important secondary characters in the novel, mark Isherwood's first depiction of an overtly homosexual, non-stereotypical, couple; furthermore, the novel itself is not organized around an Isherwood-inspired narrator; and finally, the novel's narrative subtly but radically depicts a prototype of gay community. *The World in the Evening* requires reconceptualization to appreciate its value in terms of innovation and for its significant connection to E. M. Forster's *Maurice*. In other words, if we accept Fredric Jameson's assertion that we perpetually read through the lens of prior texts and experiences, we must attempt to read *The World in the Evening* as a text apart from Isherwood's oeuvre: as a unique narrative exploring the possibility of forming spaces within society amenable to gay men.

Furthermore, by drawing upon Jameson's ideas, *The World in the Evening* can be situated as a "socially symbolic act" (20). Jameson argues that a text is not just a text; rather, it represents a unique cultural artifact from a specific moment in history that evokes the sociopolitical climate at the time of its composition and suggests social change or the necessity thereof. Jameson argues that all such "cultural artifacts" are informed (either by the author's choice or subconsciously) by the "political unconscious" and the impetus to analyze and attempt to alter the sociopolitical/ideological situation of any society at a given point in history (20). For Jameson, meaning does not exist apart from contextualization. The temptation here is to suggest "historical"

contextualization, but for the Marxist Jameson history remains largely inaccessible: “history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, [illegible] it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and…our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, it narrativization in the political unconscious” (35). In other words, to grasp any sense of history (however one construes the term) or the past, one must draw upon extant textual evidence. As Jameson argues, however, we cannot read any text without the influence of the other texts we’ve read and the experiences we’ve had.

While I agree fundamentally with Jameson’s assertions, I would like to propose the possibility of actively choosing to read a text as unique, innovative. To do so, we must resist the temptation to rely solely upon familiar interpretive strategies or to attempt an interpretation heavily schematized by the author’s previous works or other novels we’ve read. What I suggest as an effective alternative approach is to read *The World in the Evening* in a purposeful mode, to understand it as part of a literary tradition dedicated to exploring same-sex attraction and community, but also to recognize its treatment of those themes and issues as a unique (perhaps even singular) contribution to that tradition. *The World in the Evening* represents a new narrative for Isherwood and for his audiences. Readers’ and critics’ attempts to contextualize the novel through their experiences of Isherwood’s previous works prove fruitless: for the vast majority of the reading audience (at its publication and today), *The World in the Evening* offers a first glimpse into a community where a gay couple lives with relative openness and success.

Despite the resoundingly negative criticism of the novel, there are a few notable exceptions that must be mentioned before moving forward. The first, and perhaps most well-known, is the reference to it in Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on Camp.” While Sontag acknowledges Isherwood as the first individual to attempt a definition of “camp,” she quickly derides it as “lazy” and moves on to her own definition (1). More recently, Jamie

Carr's *Queer Times: Christopher Isherwood's Modernity* (2006) offers a nuanced understanding of the Isherwood oeuvre and offers a careful examination of the role of camp, Eastern spirituality, homosexuality, and pacifism in his work. His chapter "Letters and Camp: The Presence of "Minor Aesthetics in *The World in the Evening*" is particularly relevant to the matter at hand of reading the novel anew and repositioning the novelty of the narrative. Carr is especially interested in the epistolary features of the narrative:

> Might the representational ruptures the letter enacts *perform* the attitude of camp? Elizabeth's art is presented alongside the social persecution felt by the novel's queer couple Charles Kennedy and Bob Wood, the characters most directly expressive of the novel's camp, thereby uniting historical, sexual, and aesthetic politics. By way of its camp aesthetic, the novel subtly criticizes sexual oppression and points to the performativity of social roles. According critical significance to the epistolary and camp, *The World in the Evening* intervenes in debates in literary history and the politics of sexual difference, self-consciously composing a new reader of modern political art. (76)

By connecting minority groups and so-called minor art forms, like the epistolary novel, Carr argues that Isherwood presents the overwhelming problems of the world-at-large in a miniature fashion that allows for greater perception and understanding by the reader.

Denis Denisoff's "Camp, Aestheticism, and Cultural Inclusiveness in Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*" also aims to rehabilitate Isherwood's subtle (but forceful) narrative, particularly as it employs strategies of camp. Denisoff argues, "His camp is an attempt both to celebrate diversity and to draw on strength found in numbers" (87). He continues:

> The character Charles comments that his boyfriend would "like for us to march down the street with a banner, singing 'we're queer because we're queer because we're queer because we're queer'" (127). This, however, is not Isherwood's style. Aware of the more "direct" or militant options available to him in his challenge to those he sees as the oppressors of his "tribe" and other marginalized individuals, the author concludes that his most ef-

fective tool is writing, and his strongest means of attack is through a campy Aestheticist revival. (88-89)

While Denisoff does not spend much time analyzing *Evening,* these observations coupled with those of Carr form a compelling case for re-examining Isherwood's least successful novel and approaching its reading in a new way.

While *The World in the Evening* unquestionably represents a departure from Isherwood's trademark strategy of focalizing narratives through the voice of a narrator who is a version of himself, the primary narrative remains fairly conventional in a number of ways. Organized around the experiences of the novel's protagonist, Stephen Monk, *Evening* traces Stephen's personal development through a series of failed heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Claude J. Summers suggests "*The World in the Evening* traces the journeys of its worldly, self-absorbed protagonist from egoism to spiritual awareness and from world-weariness to commitment" (*Christopher Isherwood* 80). When the novel opens, Stephen is about to leave his flagrantly adulterous wife, Jane. The untenability of Stephen's life in Hollywood with Jane becomes quite clear, so much so that he must flee in order to salvage himself. After a dramatic parting fueled by violence and infidelity, Stephen returns to his Aunt Sarah, a Quaker living in Dolgelly, Pennsylvania, to reassess his life.

In Pennsylvania, Stephen finds himself in conflict with the tranquil, subdued lifestyle of Dolgelly's Quaker community and entertains the possibility of committing suicide. He is a man without a place in the world and seemingly always has been. Along the way we learn that his first wife, Elizabeth Rydel, was an acclaimed novelist (whose bestselling novel becomes the title of Isherwood's novel) who succumbed to cancer some years before. Seemingly Stephen's most significant romantic relationship, we discover that Stephen's complex union with Elizabeth was rife with difficulty. After being struck by a bus (possibly a subconscious attempt at suicide), Stephen delves deeper into his own tempestuous past while finding himself, somewhat unwillingly,

integrating into the social fabric of Dolgelly. A major feature of this integration, and the subject of the more subversive secondary narrative of the novel, is the formation of a close friendship with a gay couple, Bob Wood and Charles Kennedy. Bob and Charles are not the "stereotypical" gay men depicted in much literature at the time: both are masculine, socially and emotionally well-adjusted, and each evinces a strong desire to gain equal rights for homosexuals. Much like Stephen's, Bob's and Charles's stories center on the need for increased self-awareness and the necessity of creating a community for oneself in society.

While the secondary narrative represents a small portion of the overall narrative of *The World in the Evening* (fewer than 20 out of 301 pages), this sub-narrative suggests a significant linkage with other literature that imagines community for gay men (namely E. M. Forster's *Maurice*) as well as an important development in Isherwood's fiction. The narrative of Bob and Charles in its own right, as well as in the ways it intertwines with Stephen's, represents a "truly transgressive" narrative space, to use the concept of Marilyn R. Farwell. The transgressiveness of this narrative space is manifold and bears some close examination before proceeding. First, Isherwood neatly subverts the established norms for a British writer by choosing the United States as the setting for his novel. As a defector from England, Isherwood was widely criticized as being unpatriotic and selfish. Such criticisms expanded further into accusations of failed masculinity and homosexuality as well. Isherwood clearly grasped the full complexity of feelings of displacement and disenfranchisement and chose a setting paralleled by his own life experience and the greater freedom he experienced as a homosexual living in the United States. It is also worth noting that while Isherwood's personal freedom always seemed to expand when he left England—either for Germany or the United States—that freedom also tended to contract shortly afterwards due to social and political climate changes. Jamie Carr, in his *Queer Times: Christopher Isherwood's Modernity,* observes:

> In the increased atmosphere of militancy and conformity imposed in the Cold War era and under McCarthyism, the methods of exclusion of "deviant" others were many: surveillance, arrest, expulsion from jobs, trials, and internment. Those considered unpatriotic or a threat to national security—Communists, foreigners, conscientious objectors, homosexuals—became targets of explicit forms of discipline and punishment. (91-92)

As the space where Isherwood saw a potential for change, the United States in the 1950s proved as frightening as 1930s Germany and therefore the perfect setting for a reimagined world.

Isherwood takes this social critique one step further by choosing a Quaker community as the transgressive space for his narrative, a seemingly unlikely locale for an exploration of gay men creating a community for themselves. As Carr argues in his chapter "*The World in the Evening*: Pacifism, and the Cultural Politics of the 1930s and Beyond," however, homosexuals were not the only group of alienated individuals during wartime: two other important groups, mentioned above, were pacifists and conscientious objectors. These groups of so-called deviants were frequently lumped together and treated as unpatriotic, effeminate troublemakers. By clearly aligning these various groups of outsiders, Isherwood makes an important statement about the necessity of minorities finding expression and power by uniting. Finally, rather than selecting an urban environment, as is often the case in gay novels, Isherwood chooses a rural community; a choice at once purposeful and jarring for his readers. The implication of this particular choice may be that our well-established socio-governmental infrastructure, best evidenced in urban spaces, must be abandoned in favor of starting fresh and abandoning outmoded approaches that lead to the marginalization of many groups in society.

In addition, Isherwood's narrative centers on characters whose sexuality would have been considered aberrant at the time of publication. Surprisingly, though, Bob and Charles are characterized as a fairly average couple encountering difficulties similar to any comparable heterosexual couple. Stephen's sexu-

ality is far more complex, however, and at points inexplicable. While Stephen should be easily categorized as a rich, white, male, heterosexual protagonist, he confounds these categories by having sexual affairs with men and failing to perform adequately as a traditional husband. Stephen, Bob, and Charles form a narrative about men, their sexuality, and their place in society. Women do appear within this narrative; while their presence is integral at various points, however, Isherwood focuses more directly upon men marginalized by society. Isherwood, though, never resorts to prevailing stereotypes about homosexuals being mentally ill or effeminate. Instead, he focuses upon creating a community of individuals striving for personal enlightenment despite the heterogeneity of the individuals assembled there. Ultimately, Isherwood's narrative explores how men who do not fulfill patriarchal mandates might find a place within society.

It is this focus on men who do not fit societal stereotypes that allows Marilyn R. Farwell's theories to operate effectively here. Whereas the traditional Western narrative is structured around dichotomous difference (i.e. heterosexuality, binary gender opposition, good vs. evil), Farwell argues that narratives refusing such dichotomies ultimately work to subvert the established order (95). Farwell notes, "Sameness, ironically, undercuts the stark symbolic gender differences which are created in the rest of the text and undercuts the heterosexuality which informs the rest of the narrative" (103). By organizing his narrative around three men who do not conform to mandatory patriarchal sexual mores, Isherwood presents readers with an opportunity to experience an innovative narrative that calls into question their life and literary experiences.

Only Connect

Before moving into the textual analysis of *The World in the Evening,* offering a bit of historical and biographical Jamesonian contextualization seems essential. At no point during this exploration do I mean to suggest a direct causal link between

actual events in Isherwood's life and the features of his work because to do so seems both reductive and dangerous. However, the intense symbiotic relationship that developed between E. M. Forster and Isherwood doubtlessly greatly impacted the outlooks of both writers and their artistic choices; thus, these influences become avenues for understanding *The World in the Evening* as a text writing back to Forster's *Maurice*.

One cannot read literary criticism of Isherwood's work, biographies about his life, or transcripts of interviews with Isherwood himself without encountering some discussion of E. M. Forster. The celebrated relationship between these literary luminaries is well-known and equally well-documented. Forster greatly influenced Isherwood's life long before they met, according to Schwerdt:

> In the spring of 1926 Isherwood joined [Edward] Upward in the Scilly Isles and heard of his new discovery, E. M. Forster, whose "tea-tabling" technique—the downplaying of important events—excited him. By the end of the week he had started writing a novel in the Forsterian style. (18)

Isherwood formally met Forster until 1932. Parker observes, "The lunch took place in Forster's flat at 26 Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, and Isherwood at once fell under Forster's spell" (211). From then until Forster's death in 1970, the two maintained a warm friendship that often included discussion about their literary pursuits.

During these conversations, a major point of discussion was Forster's *Maurice* (1971). Forster had been working on his "gay novel" since the years immediately preceding WWI but maintained dissatisfaction with the novel as a whole, particularly its ending. Not long after they became friends, Forster shared the manuscript with Isherwood:

> Christopher felt greatly honored, of course, by being allowed to read it. Its antique locutions bothered him, here and there. And yet the wonder of the novel was that it had been written when it had been written; the wonder was Forster himself, imprisoned within the jungle of pre-war prejudice, putting these unthinkable thoughts into words. Perhaps listening from time to time,

to give himself courage, to the faraway chop-chop of those pioneer heroes, Edward Carpenter and George Merrill, boldly enlarging *their* clearing in the jungle. (*Christopher and His Kind* 126)

Far more than just a well-established author sharing a piece of work with a younger, less well-known writer, the exchange of the *Maurice* manuscript created a dialogue between the two men about the creation and depiction of gay community. Forster insisted that *Maurice* subvert traditional narratives about homosexual men by ending happily; nevertheless, achieving this goal eluded him. In his memoir *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), Isherwood recalls:

Almost every time they met, after this, they discussed the problem: how should *Maurice* end? That the ending should be a happy one was taken for granted; Forster had written the novel in order to affirm that such an ending is possible for homosexuals. But the choice of a final scene remained open. Should it be a glimpse of Maurice and Alec enjoying a life of freedom, outside the bounds of society? Should it be Maurice's good-humored parting from his faithless former lover, Clive: "Why don't you stop being shocked and attend to your own happiness?" Christopher wasn't satisfied with either ending. (The second was the one finally adopted.) He made his own suggestions—as did several of Forster's other friends. He loved this continuing discussion, simply as a game. (127)

Forster's willingness to invite criticism about his (arguably) most personal work impressed Isherwood, who felt that *Maurice* didn't ring quite true. For Isherwood, it seems, the formation of gay community looked quite different than Forster's vision. Isherwood's dissatisfaction with the novel's denouement does not diminish its impact upon him; rather, this difference in viewpoint suggests that Isherwood may have recognized a jumping-off point from which he might formulate his own notions of gay community.

As a result, Forster became both a respected elder and a valued colleague to Isherwood. Isherwood does not so much reject the ideals of *Maurice* as he redirects its energies, infusing them with his own life experiences and ideals. Of their relationship, Isherwood reminisces:

> My memory sees them sitting together, facing each other. Christopher sits gazing as this master of their art, this great prophet of their tribe, who declares that there can be real love, love without limits or excuse, between two men. Here he is, humble in his greatness, unsure of his own genius. Christopher stammers some words of praise and devotion, his eyes brimming with tears. And Forster—amused and touched, but more touched than amused—leans forward and kisses him on the cheek. (*Christopher and His Kind* 126-27)

Isherwood, it seems, valued the spirit and energy of *Maurice* tremendously; he also recognized the absolute necessity of contextualizing the novel in the time of its composition. At one point, Forster famously asked Isherwood whether the story "dated," to which Isherwood replied, "Why *shouldn't* it date?" (Parker 222). In other words, Forster's text holds value as a historical document and as the first novel to imagine a community for gay men. When examining the development of a social group, timelessness is not necessarily a feature of great value if one wishes to trace the progression of thought regarding social change. Isherwood noted that he felt *Maurice* "superior [to Forster's other novels] because of its purer passion, its franker declaration of its author's faith" (Parker 222). I believe we can say the same about *The World in the Evening.*

Whereas Isherwood found both potential endings to *Maurice* unsatisfactory, he recognized its potential power to inspire new modes of thought about gay men forging space for themselves in British society. Isherwood would carry this awareness with him for the rest of his life. James Kelly's "Aunt Mary, Uncle Henry, and Anti-Ancestral Impulses in *The Memorial*" recounts a meeting in 1970: upon seeing John Lehmann [Isherwood's Hogarth Press contact] examine his collection of books on E. M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood commented, "Of course all those books have got to be re-written. Unless you start with the fact that he was homosexual, nothing's any good at all" (141). In short, Isherwood's interactions with Forster emphasized the necessity of acknowledging and exploring homosexuality in creating and understanding literature that impacts how all people,

homosexuals included, construe homosexuality. This approach to writing, in turn, ultimately influences homosexuals' place in society and the potential for the creation of a safe space for such individuals. While Forster's endings might not have rung true to Isherwood, the novel's goal did. This interaction with Forster inspired Isherwood to create his own vision of gay community. Over time, Isherwood would become the clear legatee of Forster's efforts in imagining and depicting gay sanctuary: James J. Berg and Chris Freeman note, "because Isherwood began to incorporate gay issues into his published fiction, notably in *The World in the Evening* (1954), their relationship began to shift as Isherwood became a mentor figure, with Forster admiring and envying his candor and courage" (5).

Whereas *Maurice* concludes with Maurice Hall and Alec Scudder venturing into the Greenwood to start a quasi-mythical life of happiness and fulfillment together, Isherwood presents a practical, down-to-earth depiction of two men, Bob Wood and Charles Kennedy, forging a community for themselves within the confines of Quaker community (though still a rural space) in Pennsylvania. In contrast to Forster, for Isherwood, the formation of gay community is neither magical nor wish-fulfillment; rather, creating community is a mundane (though not dull or unimportant) pursuit with numerous practical considerations.

The Berlin Story

Along with Forster's influence, Isherwood's ideas of community formation began to take shape during his experiences in Berlin from 1929-1933 (*Christopher Isherwood* vii-viii). During this time, he enjoyed a series of homosexual affairs and became well-acquainted with Berlin's gay community. This was a halcyon time for Isherwood, full of sexual experimentation and pushing the boundaries of his own role as an upper-class British male. One of his most significant experiences was to visit Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Research, devoted to studying human sexuality as well as gaining legal and social rights for

those individuals disenfranchised because of "aberrant" sexuality. After a visit to the Institute Isherwood observed, "I suddenly realized or gradually realized through meeting Magnus Hirschfeld that we [homosexuals] really were a cause, that we were part of something which seemed very important and had a meaning and was not just my private affair but there were lots of us and we had rights and that one should agitate for them" (qtd. in Berg 39).

Parker also notes, "At the same time, Isherwood was forced to acknowledge many of the exhibits in Dr. Hirschfeld's freak-show as his own sexual kin. Homosexuality, he now knew, was not some private peccadillo he had in common with Auden and a few other friends, but something that was scientifically recognized and shared by all manner of people" (146). For Isherwood, this was no small revelation: his growing awareness of the interconnectedness of his experiences with others like him helped him forge a strong commitment to the ideals of a widely-accepting community that would embrace all varieties of people. In 1929, Isherwood himself proudly declared, "My will is to live according to my nature, and to find a place where I can be what I am" (qtd. in Parker 155). That impulse pushed him to begin imagining a place for others, like himself, excluded from mainstream society. Because Berlin at the time allowed greater freedom to Isherwood and hundreds of other men like him, they were able, for a brief time, to experience a world where they belonged. However, this situation was not perfect: the circumstances of gay life in Berlin were changing daily because of the encroachment of the Nazi regime and its increasingly despotic enforcement of bigoted social practices.

Despite the Nazi presence, Isherwood found love in Berlin. This relationship, with a young man called Heinz Neddermeyer, would shape Isherwood's beliefs about the possibility of community for gay men. "Heinz was a semi-orphan, an only child whose mother had died young and who, although in contact with his father, lived with his elderly grandmother in a basement

flat in Frankfurter Allee in the eastern part of the city" (Parker 205). Heinz was hired to help around the boarding house that Isherwood was staying in, and the two started an affair during this time. Their life together was fairly domestic, with Isherwood writing and Heinz maintaining the household chores (Parker 206). Parker even suggests some verisimilitude between the Heinz/Isherwood romance and Forster's work:

> Isherwood's relationship with Heinz, which defied the generally accepted and potentially warring divisions of class and nationality, must have seemed a cause for optimism. It recalled the discarded epilogue to *Maurice,* where "two men can defy the world" and find an emblematic "greenwood" in which they can pursue their lives without the interference of Church and State. (245)

The threat of Heinz's compulsory military service darkened the future of their relationship, however; as a result Isherwood resolved to prevent it. He worked to gain British citizenship for his lover with the help of his mother, Kathleen.

> He [Isherwood] was determined to get Heinz out of Germany again as soon as possible. As usual, his concern was mixed with aggression against Kathleen. She had to be shown that Heinz was the one whose safety he put before every other consideration. Her England—the England of Nearly Everybody—had rejected Heinz. Before long, he would be rejecting her England. (*Christopher and His Kind* 164)

Heinz and Isherwood traveled exhaustively during this period to circumvent the demands of the German government. Unfortunately, the nature of Heinz's relationship with Isherwood was well known, frustrating his pleas for asylum. Isherwood reminisces, "According to the lawyer, it was indeed on 'moral' grounds that Heinz had been refused permission to land in England; but the officials admitted that the refusal was only based on suspicion and might be reconsidered" ("Christopher" 265). Nevertheless, Heinz's request was ultimately refused.

Looking back, Isherwood observed that the couple was happy "except when we think of the Future. We hold endless conferences on where to go, what to do, when the Smash comes, but arrive nowhere. We are like two frightened rabbits" (qtd.

in Parker 251). Indeed, Isherwood's respite in Berlin from English stuffiness rapidly disintegrated. Heinz was ultimately arrested and imprisoned for evading military service and for his homosexual relationship with Isherwood. Later, in *Christopher and His Kind,* Isherwood would note that "Heinz got what was in those days considered a light sentence: six months in prison, to be followed by a year of labor service for the state and two years in the Army" (286). Both men's experiences during this time solidified Isherwood's feelings of dispossession: there was no sanctuary for him or his lover.

Beyond his experiences with Heinz, Isherwood witnessed the destruction of Berlin's gay community. This was brought into high relief by the fate of the Institute for Sexual Research, the site of his original recognition of connection to others like him. The German government revoked Hirschfeld's (founder of the Institute) citizenship, and he died shortly thereafter on May 15, 1935. In addition, his lover, Karl Giese, committed suicide in 1936 ("Christopher" 129). Thus, Isherwood witnessed firsthand the decimation of an important enclave of gay sanctuary in Berlin and the creation of a new diaspora of sexual minorities. Another important site of Isherwood's formative experiences in Berlin also came under fire: "boy bars." Initially sites of personal freedom and sexual exploration, Berlin's gay bars became the target of police crackdowns. As a result, these final sites of gay community for Isherwood and many others like him were systematically disbanded. These events sent a clear message to Isherwood and his compatriates: you are neither welcome nor safe here. Fortunately, Isherwood experienced (for a comparatively long time) what it meant to be part of a gay community. Sadly, he also experienced firsthand the horrors of seeing that space decimated. In the process, he realized that his own homeland, England, was just as unwelcoming to homosexuals. As a result, Isherwood immigrated to the United States in 1939, where he began to envision what a successful, durable gay community might look like. While his emigration

incited much criticism from his fellow countrymen, it provided him with the opportunity and experiences to fashion a new kind of gay community, extending Forster's project and furthering the potential outcomes of gay narratives.

Pennsylvania Deutsch

In the Quaker community of Dolgelly, Isherwood especially emphasizes the necessity of creating a community wherein all voices are considered and group consensus a fundamental requirement. For this reason, *The World in the Evening* presents a gay couple negotiating their place within an established community rather than removing themselves from it. Rather than choosing separatism, as Forster does with *Maurice,* Isherwood suggests that if gay men (and all marginalized peoples) are going to secure a place in the world for themselves, it must be done *within* society. Bob Wood and Charles Kennedy actively participate in society and work to change the attitudes and perceptions that previously marginalized them. Staying their ground and fighting is the only option; it is society that must change, not the marginalized. For Isherwood, withdrawal from society can only be disastrous. Summers argues, "The lack of community has always been of interest to Isherwood; and he has been particularly concerned with the predicament of one constituent group of 'The Lost,' the homosexual" ("Need for Community" 30). Isherwood never suggests withdrawal as a solution for his gay characters; for him, the current social standards must be altered and reformed.

Bob Wood and Charles Kennedy represent both diversity in an unlikely place and the necessity for greater social awareness and acceptance of individuals who do not conform to patriarchal, hegemonic standards of normalcy. Although Bob Wood has been labeled by Jonathan H. Fryer's unkind critical phrase as "another retarded adolescent fairy" (350), he represents one of the few early positive characterizations of a gay man in fiction. We learn almost immediately that Bob defies stereotypical characterizations of gay men: "Bob had an unexpectedly gruff voice

which contradicted the delicacy of his face but went with his broad strong shoulders" (*Evening* 58). We discover that Bob is an amateur painter and lapsed Quaker. He proudly declares his belief in God to Stephen but asserts that he "can't stand the sort of people who do [believe in God]" (102). In other words, the judgment and lack of acceptance often attendant to Christian belief irritate him. Nevertheless, we learn that he has recently attended a Meeting, leaving us to surmise that perhaps some shred of the Quaker belief system still persists within him.

One of the clearest pictures of Bob is delivered by Sarah (Stephen's aunt and host):

> "Oh, he's Luke and Esther Wood's son, from over at New Faith. They were both birthright Friends, such splendid people. Esther was clerk of the Monthly Meeting for many years. They've both passed away, now. Oh, you're just going to love Bob! Such a fine, clean boy. So thoroughly wholesome." (59)

Bob defies gay stereotypes. He is not a neurotic, ill-intentioned pleasure seeker bent on destroying all morality in anyone he meets; rather, he is a nearly picturesque specimen of American masculinity—that is if one can overlook his homosexuality. Furthermore, he is not rootless, like so many gay men in literature preceding *The World in the Evening*: he has a clearly delineated genealogy and family history and is an established part of his community. In addition, he also served time in the military "and might be going back in the Navy, soon" (103). His willingness to join and serve in the military, the least hospitable of all spaces for gay men, demonstrates his bravery and willingness to defend his beliefs. Bob represents a new breed of gay man in fiction. Furthermore, *The World in the Evening* narrates uncharted territory: gay men in a successful relationship who are not depraved shrinking violets.

Despite the level of admiration for the couple in the community, it is clear that Sarah does not fully understand Bob and Charles's relationship:

"Those two boys! They're so comical, when they're together, I could laugh myself into a fit! Though, half the time, I really haven't the least idea what they're talking about. You know, Charles Kennedy was so wonderfully kind and helpful to us when I had poor dear old Anna Partland laid up here last winter, with her pleurisy and the three great-grandchildren. A regular tower of strength." (59).

While Sarah misapprehends, perhaps willfully, Bob and Charles's relationship, she feels great affection for them: "You should see their house! They've made it so charming, in an informal, masculine way. I always think it's so nice when two men get along together, like that" (60). From the tenor of her discussion, Sarah clearly accepts Bob and Charles's relationship on many levels. While she may completely understand it, she represents a model of acceptance and interest that would benefit many individuals in society, even today.

While Charles fades into the background for much of the narrative, Bob makes a stronger impression. After coming out to Stephen (who already knew), he bursts into a diatribe because Stephen suggests he be less aggressive in declaring his and Charles's homosexuality:

Maybe we should put people against us. Maybe we're too damned tactful. People just ignore us most of the time, and we let them. We encourage them to. So this whole business never gets discussed, and the laws never get changed. There's a few people right here in the village who really know what the score is with Charles and me, but they won't admit it, not even to themselves. We're such nice boys, they say. So wholesome. They just refuse to imagine how nice boys like us could be arrested and locked up as crooks. (105)

This brief passage elucidates much: Bob's statement establishes his complete comfort with his sexuality. He transcends the self-loathing permeating most gay literature to that point. In addition, he's angry about his treatment by the society at large. He appreciates the kindness shown to him and Charles by the citizens of Dolgelly but resents the community's inability to openly confront homosexuality. Bob's rage represents an important development for a nascent gay community: no longer is it sufficient for gay

men to find personal fulfillment; they must gain equal rights under the law. In short, Bob demands his own position of safety and equality for himself and others like him.

One of the most insightful scenes involving Charles underlines the importance of the Quaker [...]l-inclusive approach to living as an ideal to strive for in gay community formation. While Stephen and Charles discuss Bob's conflicted relationship with the Quaker faith and his irritation about Charles's opinions on the topic, Charles announces:

> "He accuses me of sneering at them. But he's quite wrong. I respect them. And I admire them in a lot of ways. They don't sit nursing guilty consciences, they go right out and work the guilt off, helping people. They've got the courage of their convictions, and they mean exactly what they say, and they've found their own answers to everything without resorting to any trick theology." (109)

For Charles, the fundamental tenets of Quakerism represent a healthy approach to life that might improve any community. Like Bob, he admires the move to action and service rather than guilt-ridden inertia. The key, Charles seems to suggest, to community formation for gay men is action on all parts and a willingness to speak frankly. Without honesty, dialogue, and action there can be no forward movement. In this way, Quaker tenets form a skeletal framework for the achievement of an inclusive community.

After these initial passages, Bob and Charles disappear from the text for many chapters. In the interim, Isherwood focuses upon Stephen Monk and the spectrum of variation inherent in all human relationships. While the tendency with reading Bob and Charles might be to dismiss them as assimilationists or as homosexuals forced into a heterosexual relationship model, Isherwood makes clear that all relationships possess similarities regardless of the sexual orientation of the parties involved. Furthermore, through the explication of Stephen's relationship history we come to recognize that the hallmark of relationships is variation; no single model exists, and romantic relationships

between members of the opposite sex are often as rife with tribulation and dysfunction as homosexual relationships can be. In other words, heterosexuality fails to stave off infidelity, mental and physical abuse, and general unhappiness, just as it does not ensure the solidification of a well-balanced personal identity or contribution to one's community. Isherwood carefully attacks these long-held and cherished beliefs about the institutions of heterosexuality and marriage in order to elucidate his belief in the possibility of successful romantic relationships of any permutation.

Stephen, in *The World in the Evening,* is the least stable in terms of personal identity, community identity, and sexual orientation of all the characters Isherwood presents. His narrative foils Bob and Charles's, underscoring the highly functional nature of their homosexual relationship while highlighting Stephen's continuously precarious position. On the surface, Stephen personifies the American Dream and possesses every advantage imaginable: he's young, rich, white, male, and presumably heterosexual. And yet, from the start, he possesses little or no sense of self. During the party scene that opens the novel he thinks to himself, "If you had asked who I was, almost every one of them [the party guests] would have answered 'Jane Monk's husband,' and let it go at that" (5). Jane, Stephen's second wife, dominates his life and his sense of self; Isherwood presents her as the stereotypical femme fatale doing everything in her power to emasculate Monk. However, the relationship is not presented in a way that makes us want to sympathize with either Stephen or Jane: in a traditional heterosexist narrative the temptation becomes to construe an adulterous wife as evil and her cuckolded husband as a victim of her wantonness. Isherwood depicts both husband and wife in this scenario, however, as destructive, selfish, and cruel; Stephen hates Jane because she outshines, and simultaneously defines, him, and Jane despises Stephen for his weakness and toleration of her licentiousness. Isherwood's presentation of this relationship initiates the novel with a tone of skepticism

about the institution of heterosexuality—Jane and Stephen appear to be a movie-star-beautiful couple worthy of aspiration—and the hypocrisy and deception often inherent in such model unions.

After catching her in the act of infidelity ("Caught. Caught her at last."), Stephen flees the party and hurriedly decides to leave Jane for good. Immediately upon leaving, his dearth of identity reveals itself upon checking into a hotel: "After all, I suppose I do actually exist [. . .] We [the hotel staff] shall assume that you are a real person. All our guests, by definition, are real people" (13). At no point do we see that Stephen has any self awareness or an identity apart from his relationships. This reality is doubly illustrated by Stephen's final action before leaving his and Jane's house:

> When I had washed myself, I came back into the bedroom for my suitcase, feeling weak and shaken and nearly sober. It was then that I remembered Elizabeth's letters. They were in a file, standing on the desk in the room I called my study but never used; I hadn't looked at them in months. I couldn't leave them alone with Jane. She might burn them. She might even read them. I should have to take them along with me—wherever it was that I was going. (12)

Elizabeth's letters, the remaining emblems of his first wife, shore up Stephen's sense of identity prior to marrying Jane, an identity developed through Elizabeth herself. Whereas Jane represents the ideal trophy wife for Stephen with her perfect looks and sophisticated sense of fashion, Elizabeth represented Stephen's search for an identity based in intellect and the need for someone presumably older (twelve years his senior) and wiser to define him so that he would not be required to do so himself.

Throughout the novel Stephen mentally conjures the deceased Elizabeth to either bolster or explore his sense of self: "Yes, I admit it, you invented me. Until you'd told me who I was, I didn't begin to exist. I was the most lifelike of all your characters" (19). Later, once he's arrived at Tawelfan, he imagines Elizabeth in his room so that he can analyze the choice he

makes to come to Pennsylvania: "In order to hear what Elizabeth would say, I had to make her appear [...] Closing my eyes now, I willed myself to see the tiny slant-ceilinged upstairs room of our house on the Schwarzee" (42). Even after her death, Stephen is unwilling to rely on his own thoughts or beliefs in order to assess his place in life; he continues to be defined by his relationships. In a traditionally patriarchal society (and world, in general), Stephen assumes a feminine position where he becomes the weaker partner in all his relationships and refuses to forge his identity on his own. He spends the majority of his first weeks at Tawelfan rehashing his relationship with Elizabeth, clearly indicating his desire to return to a relationship where he felt he had an identity; without a relationship to define him, he is without moorings.

One possible reason for this dependence upon self-definition via his partners is his nebulous sexual preference. While Isherwood initially depicts Stephen as heterosexual, we learn through the course of his musings about Elizabeth that he may be bisexual. Isherwood makes such suggestions about Stephen's sexuality before we actually receive confirmation. When Charles Kennedy, the local physician, attends Stephen after his accident, a strong homoerotic interest on Stephen's part becomes apparent:

> Kennedy brought a chair over and sat down by the bed, taking my wrist in his big hand. His eyes focused intently on my face, with a delighted amusement, as though my broken thigh in its clumsy cast were a private joke between the two of us. I began to feel pleasantly passive and cozy and safe. His mere presence was almost hypnotically protective; it made you want to go to sleep. If there was any worrying to be done, I felt, he would take care of it all. (54)

Stephen's near-euphoric instant capitulation to Charles's presence clearly suggests more than a high level of comfort with the physician-patient relationship. Rather, Stephen acquiesces to Charles's will in the same fashion he succumbs to the power of Jane or Elizabeth. He is a man without an identity, searching for another person to define him. It is this lack of identity that Isherwood repeatedly underscores for our edification: a society

that prohibits a free expression of variations of sexual desire produces beings who never reach their potential because to do so would entail breaking laws and becoming an outcast.

While Stephen's interactions with Charles could be explained away in a variety of ways, his affair with Michael Drummond cannot. During the course of his marriage to Elizabeth, they meet a young man they both immediately admire:

> I [Stephen] first saw him as he passed our windows, quite near to the shore, in a collapsible rubber boat, bronzed like an Indian and naked except for a pair of very British-looking football shorts. His suntan made his blue eyes pale and vivid and his blond hair seem almost white. He was a strikingly handsome boy with a slim, muscular body, and he paddled with ferocious concentration. (151)

An erotic intonation to Stephen's observation is readily apparent; clearly he finds the young man physically desirable. We quickly learn that Stephen finds Michael all the more appealing because "He was young enough to accept me uncritically in my new role of the mature married man" (153). Stephen can relax in Michael's presence because he believes the young man accepts the identity he has constructed via his marriage to Elizabeth. In addition, he can fulfill some homoerotic desires with Michael while never actually transgressing any societal boundaries. Before long, though, the relationship is complicated by Stephen and Michael's mutual attraction; Stephen puts distance between himself and Michael when he thinks Elizabeth might be pregnant and he will have to play-act at being a father (158). The separation does not endure, however; Elizabeth unexpectedly meets him in the Canary Islands a few years later and their acquaintance renews (174). Awkwardness characterizes the initial meeting; tension endures between the two men: "Michael's tone was impersonal and extremely polite. He would tell us whatever we wanted to know, nothing more" (176). Stephen immediately becomes aware that something more is happening:

> In spite of themselves, as it seemed, his eyes kept leaving Elizabeth's face and turning to mine. And there was an expression in them which I couldn't

interpret: it was some kind of challenge or question, I thought. As though he were claiming a private understanding between the two of us, from which Elizabeth was excluded. (178)

Stephen feels discomfort at this shared knowledge, particularly after Michael reveals that they did not meet by chance but that he'd been looking for Stephen (182).

Nevertheless, the two men begin to spend more time together again, and their mutual attraction reestablishes itself. Michael challenges Stephen's sense of self: "Stephen, I can't stand seeing you unhappy like this," indicating that he ought not be in a heterosexual relationship (185). Stephen blithely dismisses Michael's concerns but is clearly ruffled by his directness. Shortly thereafter Michael and Stephen travel to El Nublo together in order for Michael to photograph (he's a photojournalist) a Nazi flag flying there and remove it. During the course of their trip, Michael reveals his feelings for Stephen, and the two enter into a combative stage in their relationship, although neither seems willing to leave it. Stephen behaves as though he's offended by Michael's effrontery, but he continues to flirt with the young man even to the point of offering him anything he wants to come down from a steep cliff. As a result of descending from the unsafe cliff, Michael propositions Stephen, and his concession takes little cajoling:

Suddenly, I didn't care any more. The problem had dissolved itself in the beer; and now there wasn't any problem at all, no drama, no tenseness. This was all clean fun, I told myself; and it didn't have to be anything more than that. In the darkness I remembered the adolescent, half-angry pleasure of wrestling with boys at school. And then, later, there was a going even further back, into the nursery sleep of childhood with its teddy bear, or of puppies or kittens in a basket, wanting only the warmness of anybody. (194)

Immediately after their night together, Stephen dismisses the event by saying "It simply isn't important" (195). In this way, he simultaneously dismisses his desire and reaffirms his identity as Elizabeth's husband. Michael, understandably, is hurt by his reaction, and their relationship never recovers. Stephen informs

Michael, "You don't understand the kind of life I have with Elizabeth. You don't understand any kind of real happiness" (201). For Stephen, at this point in time, happiness means living within societal boundaries and feigning an identity defined by social expectation, one with no room for desire outside heterosexuality. As a result, the quality of all his relationships at the time, including his marriage, deteriorates, and his sense of personal fulfillment is diminished. In this way, Stephen represents Isherwood writing back to Forster's *Maurice* as he embodies a Clive Durham-type character who values social mandate more than personal desire or integrity.

When the nature of the relationship between Stephen and Michael becomes apparent, Elizabeth handles the revelation unexpectedly: "Oh darling, please let's be open with each other, now! This may be the first time that it's actually 'happened,' as you call it. But it's certainly been on your mind before. You've wanted it. You've played all round it. Won't you even admit that?" (211). Clearly, Stephen's desire is more of a mystery to himself than anyone else. He is unwilling to allow his identity to be defined by desires that fail to conform to heteronormative standards, even though his relationship with Elizabeth has headed in a similar direction; the couple no longer enjoys physical intimacy (211). Ultimately, Elizabeth's unwillingness to hate her husband for his indiscretion with Michael leaves Stephen's identity in ruins; because he uses Elizabeth as a mirror for himself, he turns from her when she begins to reflect something he finds unacceptable. In order to escape his shaken identity, Stephen begins an affair with Jane. A rich American socialite, Jane re-establishes Stephen's sense of self as a heterosexual male, diminishing the self-doubt created by his affair with Michael and Elizabeth's reaction to that infidelity. As we are already aware, that relationship also fails because Stephen refuses to develop an identity independent of Jane. Once he flees Jane, he begins to search for an identity with the help of Bob and Charles and the community of Dolgelly. However, we

are not left with a convincing sense that Stephen will come to terms with his identity or move beyond being defined by societal standards of the time via his relationships with women. His is the last line of the novel: "I really do forgive myself, from the bottom of my heart?" Uncertain in tone and lacking conviction, Stephen exemplifies for Isherwood the damage inflicted by a society insistent upon dichotomous definitions and rigid standards of patriarchal heterosexuality.

When Bob and Charles re-enter the narrative Isherwood gives them a memorable and encouraging send-off, finding a sure footing for the narrative that Forster never quite achieves in *Maurice.* Bob has reenlisted, demonstrating once again his dedication to the values of service and action. In addition, his decision reveals his willingness to defend a country unwilling to do the same for him. Amusingly, Bob sheepishly admits his decision to enlist, all traces of his former militancy evaporated: "Bob Wood came around to Tawelfan with the car to pick me up, shortly before supper. He was in his Navy uniform. He grinned at me with the embarrassment almost any serviceman feels on first meeting a friend who has known him only in civilian clothes" (273). This scene marks an important shift in Bob; he decides to live as an example of what a gay man can be rather than descending into bitterness over his disenfranchisement. His embarrassed grin suggests a reversal in his previously cynical attitude toward the community and country he will defend and a renewed optimism in the possibility of change created through action.

More importantly, however, is the exchange that follows with Charles. Stephen has been invited to Bob and Charles's house as a dinner guest, and the ensuing tableau resembles the domesticity of any married couple. Bob, with a tone of pride, queries, "Do you know, Steve… this is nearly our [his and Charles's] fourth anniversary? Charles never remembers things like that" (275). A perfectly commonplace observation typical of any couple, by establishing the longevity of Bob and Charles's relationship, Isherwood signals to his audience that gay relationships can be

both healthy and long-lived. A short, playful squabble immediately ensues with both Bob and Charles teasing one another about who remembers the events of their relationship accurately. The scene is hopeful and satisfyingly mundane; Bob and Charles are simply another couple (the only successful one) among the range of couples presented in the novel trying to make their way in the world and dealing with obstacles, however great they may be, as they arise. Bob will go off to fight and Charles will continue to serve the community they both hope to continue to develop as a sanctuary for themselves and others like them.

An Even World?

Can a novel that has been routinely marginalized and undervalued get a second chance? Is it possible that perhaps rather than representing a sub-par piece of fiction, *The World in the Evening* delivers a narrative that is outside established norms of appreciation and criticism? A transformation in how we read Isherwood's novel is absolutely necessary in order to give it both its proper due and its place within the tradition of gay fiction. If we read, as Jameson suggests, through the lens of all we've read before and the experiences we've had, then we must work to become more aware of this tendency. In so doing, we can create a process of reading and interpretation that facilitates heightened awareness and a more insightful critique of our culture. While such a strategy can never completely escape prior experience, even a small shift in our reading and comprehension strategies allows for the possibility of beginning to understand texts that offer unfamiliar narratives in new and productive ways.

One of the most valuable tools we have at our disposal to begin this process is the narrative theories of Marilyn R. Farwell: her ideas pivot upon conceptions of sameness (similarities in outlooks and goals, as much as the eradication of gender difference and other related binary systems) allow us to understand how counternarratives become useful methods for beginning to understand our world in new and challenging ways. Isherwood's

The World in the Evening offers such a narrative; Bob Wood and Charles Kennedy represent a happy gay couple forging a space for themselves in an unlikely community. Both men are well-adjusted, service-minded, and adamant (Bob particularly) in their desire to garner rights for themselves and others like them. Isherwood refuses reliance upon past stereotypes of gay men presented in literature, men who are often depicted as weak, depraved, or mentally unstable. Bob and Charles are both exemplary in their normalcy; Isherwood bravely circumvents prevailing notions of homosexuality in his depiction of these men and presents characters worthy of respect and admiration. Conversely, Stephen represents the harm inflicted upon individuals quashed by societal standards, made too uncomfortable to express their desires.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish to assert that Isherwood single-handedly conjured such well-adjusted characters. His experiences in Berlin helped him fully conceive the possibility of successful homosexual relationships and understand how a community of gay men might function. Of particular import during that period of Isherwood's life are his experiences at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Research, a center for the learning, study, and acceptance of people traditionally marginalized as deviants deserving of public derision. His experience of both thriving centers of gay sanctuary influenced his dedication to gay sanctuary as an essential part of any healthy society.

Isherwood's personal relationships also affected the final version of *The World in the Evening*. While his love affair with Heinz did not survive past WWII, it offered Isherwood the chilling experience of witnessing a gay man with no community or support system. Isherwood and Heinz endured the horror of being treated as criminals simply for behaving as their natures dictated. Beyond his relationship with Heinz, Isherwood's long-standing friendship with E. M. Forster shaped his work and worldview in numerous ways. Forster and Isherwood's collaboration on the final chapter of *Maurice* helped both men conceptualize how a

gay sanctuary might form and sustain itself. While Isherwood disliked Forster's choice of closure for the narrative of Maurice Hall and Alec Scudder, exposure to that novel helped him write back to Forster's text, thus altering the depiction of gay communities in British fiction and creating another link in the tradition of gay fiction.

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Joshua Adair is an assistant professor of English and the coordinator of Gender and Diversity Studies at Murray State University. He has also published on E. M. Forster's *Maurice,* Beverley Nichols's trilogies, John Fowler's interior decoration, and the house museums of gay men in the United States.