

## CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S CAMP

*Thomas Castañeda*

### Abstract

In this paper I consider recurrent themes in the work of Christopher Isherwood, a novelist best known for his portrayal of Berlin's seedy cabaret scene just before the outbreak of the Second World War. The themes I discuss each hinge on uncanny discrepancies between youth and old age, male and female, sacred and profane, real and sham. Together, I argue, these themes indicate the author's investment in a queer camp sensibility devoted to theatricality, ironic humor, and the supremacy of style. I focus on specific descriptions of characters, objects, and places throughout the author's work in order to foreground camp's rather exuberant interest in artifice, affectation, and excess, as well as its ability to apprehend beauty and worthiness even, or especially, in degraded objects, people, or places. Ultimately, I argue that the term *camp*, especially as it applies to Isherwood's work, names both a comedic style and a specifically queer empathetic mode rooted in shared histories of hurt, secrecy, and social marginalization.

### Keywords

Artifice; camp; dandy; humor; irony; style; theatricality; queerness

\* \* \*

CHRISTOPHER Isherwood (1904–1986) first glossed the term *camp* in a 1954 novel entitled *The World in the Evening*; there, he describes camp as a way of “expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (125). The novel centers around a bisexual widower named Stephen Monk, who flees his second marriage in Los Angeles to live with his “aunt” Sarah – a close family friend – in a small Quaker community outside Philadelphia. Not long after his arrival at the commune, Stephen gets hit by a car and must undergo regular physical therapy at home; his therapist, a homosexual man named Charles Kennedy, arrives one day for a routine check-up and the two discuss camp.

CHARLES: “In any of your *voyages au bout de la nuit*, did you ever run across the word camp?”

STEPHEN: “I’ve heard people use it in bars. But I thought. . .”

CHARLES: “You thought it meant a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich?”

### *Christopher Isherwood's Camp*

Yes, in queer circles, they call *that* camping. It's all very well in its place, but it's an utterly debased form. . . What I mean by camp is something much more fundamental. You can call the other Low Camp, if you like. . . what I'm talking about is High Camp. High Camp is the whole emotional basis of the ballet, for example, and of course Baroque art."

[...]

STEPHEN: "What about Mozart?"

CHARLES: "Mozart's definitely a camp; Beethoven, on the other hand, isn't."

STEPHEN: "Is Flaubert?"

CHARLES: "God, no!"

STEPHEN: "But El Greco is?"

CHARLES: "Certainly." (Isherwood 1954, 125)

Apart from drawing a rather dubious distinction between "Low" and "High" forms of camp,<sup>1</sup> this brief discussion signals a specific and indeed quite esoteric kind of taste; such is evident in the way Charles categorically includes some historical figures within the camp canon (Mozart, El Greco) while excluding others altogether (Beethoven, Flaubert). In this way, Charles's explanation of the term recalls Susan Sontag's seminal 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," where she describes camp as something of a stylized "private code, a badge of honor even, among small urban cliques" (275).

While Charles's rather dogmatic, even snobbish, definition of the term is significant in itself, a later conversation between him and Stephen adds further nuance to the idea of camp. During another routine visit, Charles compares Stephen's plaster cast to the chrysalis of a butterfly. Tapping the cast with his finger, Charles asks, "How's this whitened sepulcher?" "Not too bad," Stephen responds, "except for the stink" (1954, 128).

My poor friend, you call *that* stinking? Wait till you've been in it another two months. Nobody will be able to come near the house. Loathsome worms and beetles will crawl out of it. Buzzards and vultures will assemble and sharpen their beaks. And then, one morning, it'll crack wide open and the most gorgeous butterfly, all dazzling white, will emerge and spread its wings and flutter away over the treetops. (128–129; author's emphasis)

Isherwood's evocative description of a foul cast indicates camp's specific, if morbid, fascination with deterioration and decay. However, by emphasizing the singular beauty of a butterfly emerging from the cast, the author registers an even more complicated camp engagement with the grotesque: its ability to find worthiness in

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles's definition of camp as either high or low seems to derive from a rather flimsy distinction between popular and high culture vis-à-vis camp. Indeed, as Dennis Denisoff points out, "an aspect of much camp is its satirizing of 'serious,' or 'high,' artistic concerns through seemingly low-brow methods" (1998, 85).

supposedly worthless things, that is, its ability to apprehend or recover beauty even, or *especially*, in degraded objects, people, and places.

In this paper I argue that the term camp names both a comedic style and a specifically queer empathetic mode that is rooted in shared histories of hurt and social exclusion. Quite simply put, camp describes “those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay sensibility,” a comic vision of the world that is “colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness” (Babuscio 1993, 19–20). Through comedy, camp enables identification across invisibility, difference, and disgrace; it is, according to Heather Love, “a humor that laughs through tears” (Villanova 2009). To be sure, the history of camp culture in the United States intertwines with the historical institution and conditioning logic of ‘the closet.’ Fearing professional sabotage and legal backlash, Isherwood chose not to write candidly about his own sexuality until after the Stonewall Riots of 1969.<sup>2</sup> Yet, what is truly exceptional about Isherwood’s work is how it aestheticizes, through camp, what is not explicitly disclosed. Indeed, despite the lack of explicit homosexuality in Isherwood’s pre-Stonewall work, camp pervades his novels as tacit evidence, through traces of queerness encoded in clever language; intertextual references aimed at a coterie readership; and decadent descriptions of people, objects, and places that align most conspicuously with a gay sensibility.

The modern camp, construed as a kind of persona, originates in the late-Victorian dandy, a historical figure epitomized by the public personality and literature of Oscar Wilde.<sup>3</sup> In *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), Ellis Hanson describes the typical dandy as, with few exceptions, an “upper-class, overly educated, impeccably dressed aesthete,” and a person prone to same-sex attraction (3). Noting his arrival in London in “a velvet beret, lace shirts, velveteen knee-breeches, and black silk stockings,” Susan Sontag describes Wilde as a man who “could never depart too far in his life from the pleasures of the old-style dandy” (2009, 289):

It was Wilde who formulated an important element of the Camp sensibility – the equivalence of all objects – when he announced his intention of “living up”

---

<sup>2</sup> Fearing legal repercussions following the obscenity trials held around the publication of Radcliffe Hall’s lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, British publishers were reluctant to put out work that dealt explicitly with homosexuality – or “sexual inversion,” as it was called at the time (Page 1998, 38).

<sup>3</sup> A prolific Irish novelist, poet, and playwright associated with the Decadent literary and artistic movement of the late nineteenth century, Wilde was condemned to two years in prison for ‘gross indecency’ under Section 11 of the notorious Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1895. More commonly known as the Labouchere Amendment, the law criminalized sexual activity between men in the United Kingdom at the time and was used broadly to prosecute male homosexuals where actual sodomy could not be proven.

### *Christopher Isherwood's Camp*

to his blue-and-white china, or declared that a doorknob could be as admirable as a painting. When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonnière, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic *esprit* of Camp. (289)

Published in 1939 as a collection of six short stories, Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* captures the unbridled hedonism of the Berlin demimonde just before the fateful rise of National Socialism in Germany. The book begins in the brisk autumn of 1930 with a curious description of a cluttered rooming house at Nollendorfstraße 17 in Berlin's Schöneberg district. Blurring the line between sacred and profane, Isherwood's eponymous first-person narrator, a young Englishman, describes banal household objects in essentially ecclesiastical terms: in the kitchen stands a "tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured," which resembles an altar; a washstand, which looks like a Gothic shrine; a cupboard whose splendid stained glass windows recall a cathedral; and an enormous chair fit for a bishop's throne (2008b, 208).<sup>4</sup>

The narrator's religious description of a domestic interior – the home of his landlady, Fräulein Schroeder – indicates Isherwood's own investment in a camp sensibility that "nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles" (Sontag 2009, 292).<sup>5</sup> In *Down There on a Visit* (1962) – a novel set in four different places (Berlin, the Greek islands, London, Los Angeles) at four different times (1928, 1932, 1938, the 1940s) – a character named Ambrose explains why he left Cambridge to establish a queer separatist commune on a small Greek island:

I'd been to a dinner party. . . . A dreadfully dull party, actually. . . . I'd have much rather stayed in my rooms and read. I remember, I'd just discovered Ronald Firbank, and I couldn't put him down. Well, I got back – it was about eleven, I suppose – and I opened the door, and I just couldn't believe my eyes. . . . The entire place was wrecked – literally everything. They'd broken all the china, all the glass. They'd smeared some filth on the walls, and over the pictures. They'd even found my little egg-cup that I loved so. It was a present on my birthday; and I kept it hidden away in a cupboard, because it didn't go with the color scheme. But I loved it all the more, because nobody but me ever saw it. Well, they'd taken it out – this little bit of my childhood – and they'd smashed it. How could they have *known* that I'd mind that most of all? (1962, 115–116)

---

<sup>4</sup> Given camp's fondness for ceremony and ornamentation, it is hardly surprising that Isherwood sprinkles his work with references to the architectural excesses and accouterments of the Catholic Church.

<sup>5</sup> The narrator's description of the house also suggests a keen interest in exaggeration and artifice, in things-being-what-they-are-not: "three sham medieval halberds [...] fastened together to form a hatstand [...] a pair of candlesticks shaped like entwined serpents, an ashtray from which emerges the head of a crocodile, a paper knife copied from a Florentine dagger, a brass dolphin holding on the end of its tail a small broken clock" (Isherwood 2008, 208); tiny table napkins perforated along the edges to look like lace" (238).

Here, Ambrose recalls the time an unruly group of hearties<sup>6</sup> ransacked his student dormitory at Cambridge, which he had color-coded in a then-fashionable emerald green. Ambrose's painful recollection of the incident is rife with camp references. Writing through Ambrose, Isherwood suggests his taste for camp when he cites Ronald Firbank (1886–1926), a homosexual British novelist and literary camp icon best known for his self-consciously stylized fictions set in the English countryside. Ambrose's camp sense is also clearly evident in his sentimental, if neurotic, attachment to a tiny egg-cup, which he nevertheless keeps hidden away in a cupboard lest it clash with his color scheme. Devastated, Ambrose leaves Cambridge upon finding his egg-cup in shards scattered across the floor of his room.

Upon hearing Ambrose's story, the novel's narrator hurries off to record what Ambrose has just told him. "I feel like something has been revealed to me," he writes, "not only about Ambrose but about myself" (117). The narrator's recollection of the egg-cup incident suggests a form of empathy rooted both in a shared history of homophobic aggression and a heightened affection for certain objects: "What astonishes me is how violently I was affected by his story. While he was telling it, all my undergraduate hostilities came back to me; I was grinding my teeth in fury against those hearties, and the smashing of the egg-cup nearly made me shed tears, too" (117).

As a taste in objects camp luxuriates in lavish décor, elaborate pattern, sensuous surface and texture; as a taste in persons it adheres to the notion of life-as-theater, of *being-as-playing-a-role*. In this way, camp encourages a particular "glorification of 'character,'" understood as "a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing" (Sontag 2009, 286). In his 1976 memoir *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood remembers Gerald Hamilton as an exquisite, "enchantingly 'period'" persona whom he claims to have "'recognized' as Arthur Norris, his character-to-be, almost as soon as he set eyes on him" (2012, 76–77). Something about Gerald's prim appearance and his anachronistic "courtly mannerisms" made him seem, to Christopher and his circle of friends, like "an absurd artwork which had been rediscovered by a later generation" (77). In his 1935 novel *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, Isherwood depicts Mr Norris "[s]eated before his dressing-table in a delicate mauve wrap" (2008a, 105):

Arthur would impart to me the various secrets of his toilet. He was astonishingly fastidious. It was a revelation to me to discover, after all this time,

---

<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term 'hearties' referred to athletic students attending elite universities in England. In collegiate circles, the athletic hearties were set apart from the less athletic 'aesthetes,' who were known for their refined interests in art and literature.

the complex preparations which led up to his appearance in public. I hadn't dreamed, for example, that he spent ten minutes three times a week in thinning his eyebrows with a pair of pincers. ("Thinning, William; *not* plucking. That is a piece of effeminacy which I abhor.") A massage-roller occupied another fifteen minutes daily of his valuable time; and then there was a thorough manipulation of his cheeks with face cream (seven or eight minutes) and a little judicious powdering (three or four). Pedicure, of course, was an extra; but Arthur usually spent a few moments rubbing ointment on his toes to avert blisters and corns. Nor did he ever neglect a gargle and mouthwash. ("Coming into daily contact, as I do, with members of the proletariat, I have to defend myself against positive onslaughts of microbes.") All this is not to mention the days on which he actually made up his face. ("I felt I needed a dash of color this morning; the weather's so depressing.") Or the great fortnightly ablution of his hands and wrists with depilatory lotion. ("I prefer not to be reminded of our kinship with the larger apes.") (105)

Here and elsewhere, Isherwood clearly draws inspiration from the dandy tradition, defined largely by its interest in masquerade, cosmetics, and self-conscious sartorial styling. By evoking the historical figure of the dandy, then, Isherwood hints at a contemporary camp persona drawn similarly to the pleasures of style and artifice.

As a verb, camp refers to a specific type of attitude or style of behavior. 'To camp' is to theatricalize posture and gesture, to turn temperament and speech itself into style (Keller 1993, 118). Camp speech, for example, typically incorporates foreign, often French, words and phrases. Many of Isherwood's characters behave and speak according to camp conventions. Before departing for an army camp in *Down There on a Visit*, Paul grabs "Christopher," Isherwood's eponymous narrator, and pretentiously exclaims, "*Au revoir, mon amour. . . tu sais que je t'adore*" (1962, 290). Elsewhere, in the "Ambrose" section of the same novel, a character named Maria Constantinescu arrives on Ambrose's island wearing a thick, almost theatrical, cake of blue eyeshadow: "*Mais, c'est ravissant!* [...] Oh, I like your island, Ambrose. One could be *très content* here" (17). Although the narrator recognizes Constantinescu's French as pure affectation and finds her appearance "ridiculous," even "monstrous," her theatricality puts her "somehow beyond criticism" (17).

In "Describing Camp Talk: Language/Pragmatics/Politics," Keith Harvey links the prevalent use of French in camp speech to its historical appropriation of outmoded aristocratic manners and styles.<sup>7</sup> In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, William

---

<sup>7</sup> Harvey traces camp's aristocratic impulse to the homosexual urban subcultures of eighteenth-century England. These communities, Harvey argues, deliberately challenged the values and conventions of the then emerging middle class, in part, by recouping the use of French – the lingua franca

Bradshaw<sup>8</sup> is struck by one character's anachronistic laugh, which seems to have been "handed down from the dinner-tables of the last century" (2008a, 116):

Kuno threw back his head and laughed out loud: "Ho! Ho! Ho!" I had never heard him really laugh before. His laugh was a curiosity, an heirloom [...] aristocratic, manly and sham, scarcely to be heard nowadays except on the legitimate stage. (116)

By comparing Kuno's curious laugh to an "heirloom," the narrator not only raises a fundamental question – *whether camp inheres in objects or in the subject(s) perceiving them* – he also reduces an actual person, a homosexual German baron, to the status of an object, a relic. Indeed, Isherwood's work is filled with stylized descriptions of characters as objects. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, even before the narrator notices Mr. Norris's wig, he is fascinated by the man's forehead, which is "sculpturally white, like marble" (5). Later in the novel, the narrator meets a dominatrix named Olga at a New Year's Eve party. Her fleshy, grotesque appearance recalls the uncanniness of a life-size doll: "Like a doll, she had staring china-blue eyes which did not laugh, although her lips were parted in a smile revealing several gold teeth" (27). In *Down There on a Visit*, the narrator's description of Paul's girlfriend, Ruthie, evokes camp's interest in chinoiserie: "Ruthie's face is chalky white, with huge vermillion lips daubed upon it [...] Her great, beautiful gentle cow eyes have sculptured lids which make me think of an Asian bas-relief – the carving of some giant goddess" (1962, 192).

Sally Bowles, based on the real-life Jean Ross,<sup>9</sup> is one of Isherwood's most enduring camp characters. Her story in *Goodbye to Berlin* has inspired several stage and film adaptations, including the 1951 Broadway production *I Am a Camera*, directed by John Van Druten; *Cabaret*, a Kander and Ebb stage musical that premiered on Broadway in 1966; and a 1972 Bob Fosse film musical starring Liza Minnelli alongside Michael York as "Brian Roberts," a character based loosely on Isherwood's eponymous narrator. In the book, Sally Bowles is a young Englishwoman working as a dancer at a seedy

---

of the European aristocracy during the early modern period (2000, 252). By appropriating French words and phrases, disaffected urban homosexuals could critique the cultural and economic transformations of the day; more specifically, through affected French speech, eighteenth-century English homosexuals could, according to Harvey, assert an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the emerging bourgeoisie while also parodying the declining aristocratic class (252).

<sup>8</sup> Isherwood named the narrator after his own two middle names, William and Bradshaw.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Ross was born in 1911 in Alexandria, Egypt to a wealthy cotton industrialist. In 1931, at age 20, Ross moved to Berlin to try her luck as an actress, but like Isherwood's Sally, ultimately fell into work as a magazine model and cabaret singer. In Berlin, Ross met and befriended the young Isherwood, who had been living there since 1929, and the two lived together for a period at Nollendorfstraße 17. Ross was on holiday in England, recovering from an almost fatal abortion, when Hitler came to power in March 1933. She chose not to return to Berlin, and Isherwood followed suit not long afterward (Carr 2019).

cabaret club called The Lady Windermere, a rather conspicuous allusion to Oscar Wilde's four-act comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Play About a Good Woman*, which premiered at the St. James's Theatre in London in 1893.

In an essay entitled *Divine Decadence*, Linda Mizejewski lists some of the quirks that confirm Sally Bowles's enduring camp appeal: "her little stage-laugh" (qtd. in 1992, 64); her ability to spontaneously fabricate "some really startling lies" which she half-believed herself (64); and "her mock-elegant language in which nearly everything is 'most marvelous' and in which she 'adores' or is 'adored' by nearly everyone" (65). Her flirtatiousness also seems fit for the stage. A later scene in the Sally Bowles story depicts Sally "dauntly curled up" on a sofa in a modest dress. She is "absurdly conscious" of her own beauty as if playing a part in a play (Isherwood 2008, 27). But, as Mizejewski notes, Sally's incessant talk of "gold-digging" contradicts her coy posturing (1992, 65). Earlier on, the narrator visits the Lady Windermere and observes Sally flirting in vain with men at work: "For a would-be demimondaine, she seemed to have surprisingly little business sense or tact. She wasted a lot of time making advances to an elderly gentleman who would obviously have preferred a chat with the barman" (65). The narrator's observation indicates a thematic concern at the heart of camp: *failure*. Through laughter, camp commiserates with the unsuccessful.<sup>10</sup>

As a comedic mode, camp derives humor from exaggeration and irony – uncanny discrepancies between youth and old age, male and female, sacred and profane, real and sham, or otherwise "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association" (Babuscio 1993, 20). Incongruities of this kind abound in Isherwood's work. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, William Bradshaw is initially enthralled by Arthur Norris's preposterous wig. Later, Mr. Norris charms Bradshaw with his hideous teeth, which resemble jagged rocks (2008a, 4). Blurring the divide between sacred and profane, Paul in *Down There on a Visit* imagines his lapdog, Gigi, transmuting into "the world's first dog-saint"

---

<sup>10</sup> Ella Carr, in an article entitled "The Real Sally Bowles," points out that Jean Ross was in fact quite far removed from the character depicted in *Goodbye to Berlin*: "For Ross, Sally – in particular her naivety and indifference to the political climate in Germany – remained a source of embarrassment throughout her life" (2019). Unlike Sally, Ross – a lifelong member of the Chelsea Communist Party – was an ardent activist, "pursuing her anti-fascist writings throughout the 1930s, and campaigning for nuclear disarmament and against the Vietnam War in the 1950s and 1960s" (Carr 2019). In light of this knowledge, Isherwood's famously one-dimensional portrayal of Ross/Sally as an apolitical and ditzy dilettante speak to what some regard as camp's entrenched misogyny. While a more elaborate interrogation of camp's misogynistic impulse exceeds the scope of the current paper, I do wish to suggest that there might perhaps be a limit to camp's empathetic function. Indeed, when considering Isherwood's often flat or even hostile portrayal of women – as well as effeminate men – throughout his work, it is often unclear whether the author is laughing with or at the subjects of his camp gaze.

(1962, 313). And Fräulein Mayr, a stout anti-Semite at Fräulein Schroeder's flat, is described in rather masculine terms, with a "bull-dog jaw, enormous arms, and coarse string-coloured hair" (2008a, 214). Camp also finds exceptional humor in discrepancies between youth and old age. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Sally's green fingernails betray her hands, which resemble "the hands of a middle-aged woman" – "nervous," "veined," and "very thin" (2008b, 235). In *Down There on a Visit*, Paul is portrayed as a man in his late twenties who dresses "like a boy in his teens" (1962, 194). His youthfulness, according to Isherwood, has "a slightly sinister effect, like something uncannily preserved" (194).

Throughout this paper I have focused on camp's rather obtuse attachment to certain types of objects as well as its odd, if also somewhat ambivalent, interest in certain kinds of personas. Before I conclude, I wish to shift attention to a version of camp that attaches itself instead to specific environments. In his memoir, Isherwood recounts a sea voyage from Antwerp to Rio de Janeiro aboard a Brazilian boat.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on diary entries from December 1935, the author recalls a lengthy stopover in Portugal, where he encounters an extravagant nineteenth-century palace perched high atop a hill overlooking Sintra, a small town near Lisbon "composed chiefly of palaces, ruinous and to let" (234). Built by Ferdinand II, King Consort to Queen Maria II, on the site of a derelict sixteenth-century monastery, the Pena Palace features an eclectic profusion of architectural styles – German Gothic and Renaissance Revival, Neo-Manueline and Moorish – and is flanked by turrets and fortified ramparts, battlements, domes, and a drawbridge. "The Castle of Pena is easily the most beautiful building any of us have ever seen," writes Isherwood (234), "[i]n fact, it has the immediate staggering appeal of something which is a sham, faked, and architecturally wrong. It could hardly be more effective if it had been erected overnight by a film company for a super-production about the Middle Ages" (234).

Isherwood's reference to filmmaking here is remarkable, since he would later support himself as a screenwriter upon moving to Los Angeles in 1939. The author's screenwriting experience in Hollywood greatly informed his later prose, which is suffused with a "heightened understanding of surfaces and gestures," a sensitivity to "outward experience," and a camp sensibility drawn as much from the insincerity of studio cinema as from the work of Oscar Wilde (Berg & Freeman

---

<sup>11</sup> Referring to himself and his travel companions, Stephen Spender, Jimmy Younger, and Heinz Neddermeyer — all homosexuals — Isherwood writes: "I remember the voyage in terms of opera, with the four of them relating to each other as quartets, trios, or duets" (2012, 230). Isherwood's reference to the opera signals a camp sense drawn to the high drama and emotional intensity characteristic of the operatic tradition, whose origins intertwine with the histories of Ballet, Mannerism, and contrapuntal music (143).

### *Christopher Isherwood's Camp*

2001, x). His novel *Prater Violet* (1945), for instance, takes place almost entirely on the set of a period melodrama set in nineteenth-century Vienna. The novel's narrator draws a striking comparison between the Hollywood film studios of the 1930s and the castles of the sixteenth century, suggesting, again, camp's fondness for duplicity and façade:

You see, the film studio of today is really the palace of the sixteenth century. There, one sees what Shakespeare saw: the absolute power of the tyrant, the courtiers, the flatterers, the jesters, the cunningly ambitious intriguers [...] There is enormous splendor, which is a sham; and also the horrible squalor hidden behind the scenery [...]” (1945, 60)

In the first volume of his posthumously published collection of diaries, Isherwood notes that he initially intended *A Single Man* to be a film, which is why the novel “reads somewhat like a screenplay – especially in the dialogue” (1997, xl). In 1969, he appeared in a BBC television documentary to discuss his inspiration for the novel.<sup>12</sup> By then, Isherwood had become not only a fixture in Hollywood, but a staunch pacifist and active member of the Vedanta Society of Hollywood led by Swami Prabhavananda. In the documentary, BBC journalist Derek Hart asks Isherwood, an Englishman from Cheshire, to explain why exactly he is so drawn to life in Southern California. The author responds by describing the region, and Los Angeles in particular, in quintessentially camp terms:

HART: You've written that you're rather fascinated by the sense of impermanence that you get here – Los Angeles, particularly.

ISHERWOOD: Yes, well, of course, in a way, this country is fundamentally desert country; it's been adapted and planted and settled, but nevertheless it's desert country. And there is always a certain sense of the mirage about it. But you know, I like that; it appeals to me altogether. Of course, as a devotee of Hindu philosophy, it's very much like the Hindu account of the universe as being just a kind of projection [...] and sometimes the great noble traditional buildings of Europe seem rather too solid in comparison. Here on the coast it's all rather dreamy and strange. [One] simply cannot recognize a street because they've built some other things on it, and since [Los Angeles] really always consisted of large billboards and neon signs more than buildings, you can change the whole place by just changing the lights. There's a sort of theatrical impermanence in that sense. (McDevitt 2014)

---

<sup>12</sup> Set in 1962 Los Angeles, the novel depicts the last day in the life of George Falconer, a middle-aged English professor who is grieving the sudden death of his longtime partner, Jim.

In his rather affectionate comparison of Los Angeles to a film set, Isherwood projects a camp sensibility onto an entire city, emphasizing and exalting its atmosphere of impermanence and mutability, a sentiment echoed in *Exhumations*, in which he claims affiliation with a certain tribe, “a tiny perverse minority who prefer the ignoble ruins of the day before yesterday, [who] would rather wander through an abandoned army camp or the remains of a world fair than visit Pompeii or Chan-Chan” (1966, 165). This is Isherwood’s perhaps most telling description of camp; indeed, even without naming the term explicitly, the author manages to capture the communal spirit at the heart of the camp sensibility. For Isherwood, camp ultimately always implies a tiny tribe, a queer clan assembled around a love of the marginal, the artificial, the absurd, the defunct thing, and the person past their prime.

## Bibliography

- Babuscio, Jack. 1993. “Camp and the Gay Sensibility.” *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, Ed. David Bergman, 19–38. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Berg, James J. & Chris Freeman, eds. 2001. *Conversations with Christopher Isherwood*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Carr, Ella. 2019. “The Real Sally Bowles.” *The Exberliner*, March 22, 2019. <https://www.exberliner.com/features/culture/the-real-sally-bowles/>.
- Denisoff, Dennis. 1998. “Camp, Aestheticism, and Cultural Inclusiveness in Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories*.” In *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts and Contexts*, edited by Shannon Hengen, 81–94. Australia: Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Hanson, Ellis. 1997. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, Keith. 2000. “Describing Camp Talk: Language/Pragmatics/Politics.” *Language and Literature* 9, no. 3: 240–260. London: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096394700000900303>.
- Isherwood, Christopher. 1945. *Prater Violet*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- . 1954. *The World in the Evening*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1962. *Down There on a Visit*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- . 1966. *Exhumations: Stories, Articles, Verses*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd.
- . 1997. *Diaries: Volume 1, 1939–1960*. Katherine Bucknell (Ed.). New York: HarperCollins.
- . 2008a. *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. In *The Berlin Stories*. New York: New Directions. First published 1935.
- . 2008b. *Goodbye to Berlin*. In *The Berlin Stories*. New York: New Directions. First published 1939.
- . 2010. *A Single Man*. London: Vintage Books. First published 1964.
- . 2012. *Christopher and His Kind*. London: Vintage Books. First published 1976.
- Keller, Karl. 1993. “Walt Whitman Camping.” In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman, 113–120. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- McDevitt, Brian. 2014. “A Born Foreigner.” YouTube video, 43:49. January 25, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yteeOPI2Qg>.

## *Christopher Isherwood's Camp*

- Mizejewski, Linda. 1992. *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Page, Norman. 1998. *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 2009. "Notes on Camp." In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 275–292. New York & London: Penguin Classics.
- Villanova University. 2015. "Heather Love: 'Failure Camp,'" YouTube video, 1:05:16. August 15, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5MHYTcF\\_DU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5MHYTcF_DU).

Thomas Castañeda is an MA student in American studies at the John F. Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin. He holds an interdisciplinary BA in cultural analysis from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University and a minor in performance studies from the NYU Tisch School of the Arts. This is his first publication.



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.