Sexuality, as presented directly and indirectly, in ‘mr. norris changes trains’

Throughout Mr Norris Changes Trains, Isherwood utilises implicit, and sometimes explicit, queer coding. One can argue that Isherwood draws parallels between espionage and being homosexual during the 1930s, specifically through the coded language he employs. Moreover, by deliberately conflating political oppression with sexual repression, the novel explores the duplicity and paranoia one would experience living in a society where your sexuality is considered illegal. However, it can be argued that the narrator is too cold and detached from the political shifts shown in the novel, as well as generally too privileged, to truly represent a member of a repressed minority. Instead Bradshaw is presented as merely as a cool observer, and thus too removed to experience any true oppression. Yet, it can be posited that these readings are not totally incompatible, that Isherwood explores sexual repression in relation to real world politics, or rather how to break from its literary traditions, through this narration. Isherwood deliberately eschews the confessional tone and its relation to guilt and sin, to show characters sexuality unabashedly. By choosing ambiguous methods of presenting homosexuality, and utilising narrative gaps for the audience to fill themselves, Isherwood rejects the strict psychosexual classifications of his era that were used to categorise and shame.

It can be argued that the codes Isherwood uses throughout the text to express characters' queerness are a product of the repression those, who did not conform to the heterosexual norms of the 1930s, experienced. Isherwood can rarely express the characters homosexual natures explicitly and then, if he were to conform to his contemporary literary traditions, have these characters remain sympathetic or alive. Instead Isherwood uses metaphors

of political oppression and intrigue to represent the repression felt by the homosexual community at the time. In the early 1930s any consenting sexual act between two men was considered a criminal act under the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act (“ the blackmailer’s charter”).[1] Any individual found to be participating in homosexual acts would be sentenced to a period of penal servitude from ten years to life.[2] Under these oppressive forces the gay sub-culture that emerged during this period was defined by the codes and signs it used to both communicate with its ilk, and yet remain protected from those who would view it as criminal. An example of one of these codes is the slang ‘ Parlare’, a language derived from the language of circus showmen, intinerent actors and tramps that the gay subculture of the 19th and early 21st century developed to discuss its taboo sexuality.[3] A few examples of Parlare can be found throughout the text. Specifically, the only time Isherwood ever explicitly states that someone is homosexual is during Helen Pratt’s recounting of the death of Baron Pregnitz, in which he calls him “ a fairy.” Similarly, the most direct indirect allusion to Mr Norris’ own sexuality is when he invokes Oscar Wilde, “ I put my genius into my life, not my art,” arguably an intertextual reference that invokes the queer.

While Lehmann, one of Isherwood’s close contemporaries, does confirm that “ Christopher concealed Mr Norris’s homosexuality”[4] the most explicit confirmations of homosexual behaviours within the text still operate through a form of code. The only direct references to homosexuality are made in another language or through the language of another, such is the extent of the linguistic repression operating on the text. These linguistic codes,

specifically invented to disguise homosexuality, parallel with Isherwood's repeated reference to espionage throughout the text. Using as espionage a metaphor for expressing a repressed sexuality is apt, as evident in Weeks description of gay subculture in the 1930s: " In the developing homosexual underground individuals...could imbibe the rituals of social contact and behaviour, the codes for communicating and the modes of living a double life."[5] Like espionage, homosexuality required a duplicity and code, and training in such codes. In Mr Norris Changes Trains a parallel can be drawn between this coding of queer language and the spy code Mr Norris uses to communicate with his handlers in Paris. Through the messages to ' Margot' concerning " Stuff about teapots and kettles and bread and butter and cake" he disguises political intrigue with innocuous domesticity. Furthermore, ' Margot' functions on a secondary level of code, as ' she' obscures Mr Norris' queerness from Fraulein Schroeder. Her overt heterosexual affection, " I am sending you a hug" as well as Fraulein Schroder's interpretation of the obscure code as a means of disguising a pregnancy, making Mr Norris conform to a heterosexual norm that he seems to be in total opposition to as " More like a lady than a gentleman." Fraulein Schroder is reassured of her tenant's sexuality by taking the heteronormative language that is presented literally, as she does not have the privileged information to the decode these messages. Foucault argued that " inexhaustible and corrective discourses were imposed,"[6] to keep taboo sexualities in check. These repressive discourses are evident in Fraulein Schroder's projection of heterosexuality onto Mr Norris. Thus, while this code allows Mr Norris to continue this double life, one can argue linguistic codes closets and represses him too. Therefore, while coded language is utilised both to hide privileged information and

express the characters queerness to a society where it was criminal, Isherwood also demonstrates the eras inherent linguistic repressiveness constantly enforcing the sexual norms.

However, it can be argued that the characters in Mr Norris Changes Trains are too privileged to truly represent a repressed minority. When Mr Norris claims that “ Hatred of tyranny is in my blood” because “ I remember my feelings when I was first unjustly punished by my nurse,” he appears tone deaf and removed from the true political reality of the lower classes. This distance between the middle class, left-wing British idealists who visited Berlin and the actual residents is also evident in the ambivalent narration of Bradshaw. When he visits the communist meeting, he views the working classes gathered with both snobbery, “ their soiled everyday clothes” and exoticism “ faces…pale and prematurely lined, often haggard and ascetic, like the heads of scholars.” To middle-class Bradshaw the working-class is always othered. Bradshaw is not galvanized by the struggle and is instead “ puzzled and troubled by the superficially exciting events,” and when faced with true adversity exhibits “ a clear element of shock and even resistance.”[7] Emig argues that this detachment is “ generated by the middle-class perspective based on literal humanist principle.”[8] Because of Bradshaw and Mr Norris’s upper class and middle-class background, they can never truly integrate into the repressed class. The homosexual culture of the era was also delineated by class. High profile homosexual men were celebrated, such as Noel Coward, Cecil Beaton, Stephen Spender and John Lehmann. These were “ men moving in and around artists or intellectual circles where difference and eccentricity were appreciated and

esteemed,”[9] there behaviour was arguably more accepted in their intellectual cliques than it would have been in the greater working population. Mr Norris can be considered a similar eccentric figure. He wears make-up and exhibits effeminate mannerisms such as “ giggling” and “ blushing,” yet is still held in a high regard by the Bradshaw, the middle class intellectual.

Emig also highlights how class lines were drawn in Berlin’s gay sub-culture due to the Germany’s economic downturn, where “ a particular kind of class encounter took place. Unemployed heterosexual, working class boys featured strongly in it, provided their middle-class customers paid the bill.”[10] While Mr Norris favours female prostitutes in the novel, the sexual encounters he has are still alternative to the norms of the period. Though they are women, Anni and Olga take the dominant (and one can argue traditionally masculine role) in the sexual relationship while Mr Norris takes the submissive (the feminine role.) Isherwood uses Mr Norris predilection for paying prostitutes for BDSM, as a substitute for the transactional homosexual relationships that occurred across class boundaries in Berlin. Again, Mr Norris is separated from the ordinary residents of Berlin – Otto, Anni, even Fraulein Schroeder – due to the privileges of his class, in this case capital. It can also be argued that Mr Norris and Bradshaw use of queer coded language and behaviour throughout the text distances them from the repressed class, and even arguably the reader. In the opening of the novel Bradshaw begins a conversation by asking Mr Norris if he was a match for a cigarette, a common method to instigate a homosexual hook up during the era.[11] Something Bradshaw hints he is aware of when he describes Mr

Norris’s immediate reaction of surprise and shame to the pedestrian question as like “ a schoolboy caught in the act of breaking one of the rules.” From the outset of the novel Bradshaw distinguishes Mr Norris and himself as privy to distinct set of implicit codes and signs that the common man, or even the reader, are not. Isherwood further obscures these codes by never explaining them to the reader – either you are in the know or you’re are not. Producing multiple ways of reading the text, it can be both a political thriller or a metaphor for the queer experience in the 1930s depending on whether the audience possesses privileged information. Therefore, the coding Isherwood does not only express the repression of the period, but also its privileges.

However, it should be noted that Isherwood’s use of code does not present a simplistic binary of the powerful and the unempowered. These codes are not just utilised but also investigated and disrupted by Isherwood himself. Leading up to Mr Norris’s ultimate betrayal of the communist party, the audience is unaware of the subversion of Mr Norris uses to disguise his duplicity until the reveal of him being a spy. On returning to the novel, Mr Norris’ submissive and effeminate presentation of his body can be read as a Machiavellian technique as to causing other characters, and the reader, to underestimate him. His nervousness and effeminacy, his concern over the superficial aspects of his appearance like spending “ ten minutes three times a week thinning his eyebrows with a pair of pincers,” presents a ridiculous character mined from ‘ High Camp.’ A literary and cultural motif associated with satire. Weeks describes it as: …the most familiar aspect of the homosexual language and style. ‘ Camp’ is not just a vehicle of

communication between peers, but a way of presenting the self to the straight world. It is deeply ambivalent because it celebrates effeminacy while retaining a sharp awareness of conventional values. [12] If we return to Foucault's oppressive discourses, Isherwood's decision for Mr Norris's political alignment – code for his sexuality – to remain ambiguous is a way of freeing the text from the language restricting sexual expression.

Mr Norris can remain free of the restrictive categories, " garrulous attention"[13] that enforced heterosexuality of his era. Isherwood is this able to avoid presenting him as merely, " a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life…a morphology, with indiscreet anatomy."[14] Though Mr Norris is presented as Camp – a conceit of heightened exaggeration[15] – out of all the characters his motivations are subtlest and most ambiguous, and thus compelling. His character is not what an audience of the era, or even of our own contemporary age, would associate with a secret agent. Therefore, Mr Norris's duplicity comes as much more of a surprise to both Bradshaw and the reader. Mr Norris ultimately uses the coded language of Camp as " a form of ' ministrelization', an ambiguous playing to the gallery,"[16] as he fulfils every aspect of the Camp stereotype, he is also able to disguise his true intentions and deceive those who project their preconceived notions onto his mannerisms. Ironically it is also this transgressive behaviour, which many of the time would interpret as evident of criminality, that absolves him of his crimes in the eyes of the narrator. Thomas argues that the heightened ridiculousness of Mr Norris in juxtaposition with the reality presented in the text serves as an indictment of the fraudulent political situation in Berlin, The implicit contrast

between Camp motifs and social realism provides a brilliant means of exposing the distinction between the ‘ objective’ politics of the Left and the fantasy elements of Nazism.[17] The exposure of Mr Norris’ deceit coincides with the rise of the Nazis and their use of the Reichstag fire to consolidate power; the personal and political lies become intertwined. This use of literary techniques associated homosexuality to explore politics disrupts the literary norm. Isherwood uses of political oppression as an analogy for sexual repression, and then subverts this by using sexual repression to explore political oppression.

Isherwood presents homosexuality as coded through the language and literary conceits associated with politics and political intrigue, because of the repressive societal forces acting in and around the text. While the characters do exhibit the licenses of their class status in relation to these codes, this does not undermine Isherwood’s exploration of repression. By leveraging the code to a form of privileged information and then deconstructing the preconceived notions around these codes, Isherwood frees the narrative from these oppressive forces. His expression of homosexual characters through code relies on them being able to retain a continuous ambiguity. By never explicitly stating their specific political ambitions or moral standing – a cipher for their sexuality – and further shielding the few moments of sexual expression with code, Isherwood can present a view of taboo sexuality free from the traditional moralistic, heterosexual literary traditions of the 1930s.

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