

# MODERN BODIES

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**Tensions between Liberation and Suppression of the Body in  
Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* and Jean Rhys' *Good  
Morning, Midnight*.**

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## Samandrag

Denne masteroppgåva undersøker spenninga mellom undertrykking og frigjering av kroppen slik den er skildra i mellomkrigstidslitteratur ved å samanlikne *Good Morning, Midnight* av Jean Rhys og *Goodbye to Berlin* av Christopher Isherwood. Grunna monumentale endringar i samfunnsstrukturen i mellomkrigstida, vart også idear og ideal om kroppen debattert. Kva faktorar som spelar inn i denne spenninga blir granska gjennom historisk kontekstualisering og karakteranalyse.

Bøkene kastar lys over ulike perspektiv og aspekt av kroppsleg frigjering og undertrykking. Karakterane eg drøftar uttrykker alle eit ønske om å bryte med gamle konvensjonar for å oppnå eit friare tilvære i den moderne metropolen. Diskusjonen min har fokus på dei kvinnelege karakterane, men mannlege karakterar blir også undersøkt for å kunne vise kjønnsforskjellar portrettert i bøkene. Begge kjønn viser seg å vere i spenning mellom undertrykking og frigjering på ulike vis.

Oppgåva presenterer nye moglegheiter for kvinner og seksuell frigjering, men også dei destruktive aspekta og føresetnadene deira. Ulike kroppskulturar som tilsynelatande søker frigjering av kroppen viser seg å vere i samspel med restriktive aspekt. Også den nye kapitalistiske handelskulturen bidreg til ei kroppsleg undertrykking gjennom averteringa deira av «ideal-kroppen» og «prostetiske» midlar. Bøkene deler ein kritikk av system knytt til kroppsleg undertrykking. Rhys og Isherwood synleggjer ei mørk underside av økonomisk nødvendighet og utnytting i søken etter frigjering.

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# Introduction

This thesis will examine the tension between liberation and suppression of the body portrayed in literature from the 1930s by exploring *Good Morning, Midnight* by Jean Rhys and *Goodbye to Berlin* by Christopher Isherwood. The novels I have chosen represent distinct perspectives on corporeal liberation and discipline that link them to contemporary debates on the body in the interwar years. Studying these novels together allows for a comparison between male and female contemporary perspectives on the body. Moreover, since both novels are set within the same temporal frame, both published in the pivotal year of 1939, it will be possible to explore how they engage with and illuminate corporeal ideals and debated issues concerning the body at the time.

In the years after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new sciences and theoretical paradigms contributed to debates concerning the body. At the same time the body was implicated in the monumental social, philosophical and political changes taking place in society at the time. Traditional social and moral constraints were still present, but the aspiration to break free from conventions and to hopefully achieve a more modern and liberated mode of life was a concern for many. Modern technologies and social and economic formations such as the metropolis and commodity culture were both enabling and restrictive forces in this process. Towards the end of the interwar period, however, the new totalitarian ideologies with their corporeal regimes introduced new norms and repressive measures. This thesis will examine the tension between liberating and repressive forces as it plays itself out in the lives of the characters of the two novels. Through historical contextualization my study will show how the novels in different ways represent a critique of systems of bodily repression.

In approaching the two texts, my focus has been, first and foremost, on the female characters. Sasha Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight* and Sally Bowles in *Goodbye to Berlin*

represent different projects of liberation for women in the metropolis. Their lifestyles reflect the increasing opportunities for women, but they are still subject to restrictive measures, both new and traditional. The female characters emphasized in this thesis reveal sexual liberation as a complex system which can easily become a new mode of suppression. They are to some degree free from the Victorian constraints, but they show the capitalist commodity culture as a potential new oppressive force. However, they also exemplify and explore some of the actions of modern, independent women.

While my main focus has been on the female characters, male characters are also studied to be able to show the gender differences in the pursuit of liberation. In the discussion of the physical culture movements the focus is on male characters, as there are no women connected to this culture in *Goodbye to Berlin*. Like the women in the novels, the male characters are shown to exist in a tension between liberating actions and suppressive measures. In the last subsection of the thesis, the male characters I discuss show sexual liberation as contingent on their financial situation. A more open homosexuality is explored in Isherwood's novel, in addition to the ostensibly liberating intentions of the physical culture movements. My discussion will show how the novel reveals the physical culture movements, which espouse liberation of bodies, in interplay with restrictive corporeal measures.

The metropolitan setting of both novels is significant to the understanding of the different projects of liberation the novels portray. The metropolitan cities of Paris and Berlin were centers known for sexual and artistic experimentation at the time. Metropolises were the heart of the world of commerce and commodity culture, but were also the site for sexual 'deviants' and breaking with traditional conventions regarding gender. Despite the liberating potential of the metropolis, a threat to the individual's freedom still existed. Georg Simmel claims in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" that: "The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which

results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (175). The metropolis creates different psychological conditions caused by the violent stimuli, as opposed to the personal and emotional relationships in rural areas. “Thus the metropolitan type of man – which, of course, exists in a thousand individual variants – develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him” (176). The metropolitan type manages these impressions by reacting in a rational manner, instead of an emotional. Subjects to the city’s swift fluctuations use impersonality and reservation as protection of the “[...] subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life” (176). These intruding impressions on the metropolitan individual, in particular the women, and the individual’s subsequent protective reaction will be examined in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

Paris, the setting for *Good Morning, Midnight*, with its iconic place in modern history, with its ‘Jazz Age’ and the famous writers residing there, was an important site for the earlier Modernist movement. Pericles Lewis claims in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* that Paris as a site for “[...] artistic experiment, laxer social mores, and especially sexual licence” (219), was the attraction for the Americans Ernest Hemingway and Scott F. Fitzgerald. The same attraction adhered to Berlin in the 1920s-1930s during the liberal Weimar Republic, when W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood went there. Berlin was, as Armstrong points out in *Modernism, Technology and the Body*, “an important site for Modernism” (166). The Hirschfeld Institute for Sexual Science promoted gay rights and explored different ‘sexual inversions’ until its closing by the Nazis in 1933, and was Isherwood’s first home in Berlin, where he lived for a short period. Lewis argues that “Weimar Germany provided a congenial atmosphere for social and artistic experiments” and that Berlin was “[...] famous for its discarding of the old conventions governing women’s roles and homosexuality” (218).

The author of *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood has now an iconic position in queer literature through the portrayal of the ‘camp’ icon of Sally Bowles and the exploration of a homosexual relationship in *A Single Man* (1964). Isherwood himself ventured to Berlin to escape from the British middle-class conventions he grew up with, to experience the sexual freedom and artistic experimentation offered in Berlin. Francis King in *Christopher Isherwood* asserts that Isherwood went to Berlin to “[...] fully explore his sexual nature” (7), which reflects the image of Berlin as a haven for homosexuals at the time. Furthermore, Brian Finney in *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography* claims Isherwood to be the “political champion of the oppressed” (16), a characterization which underscores my aim in this thesis.

Prior to *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jean Rhys, or Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams’ other novels had also centered on issues concerning the lonely modern women situated in the metropolis. In a similar manner, these women have their problems with sexuality and relationships with men. However, in *Good Morning, Midnight* the loneliness experienced by an unmarried woman in a patriarchal society, and her complicated relationship with her own body, men and sexuality, are portrayed through the experiences of a middle-aged woman, as opposed to the younger female protagonists of the preceding novels.

Ways of achieving liberation of the body, bodily ideals and oppressive corporeal elements are depicted across interwar literature. Marianne DeKoven claims in “Modernism and Gender” that “[...] in modernist writing [there was] an unprecedented preoccupation with gender, both thematically and formally” (174). A lesbian awakening is portrayed in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Sexual liberation, the body’s relationship to technology and industry and a longing to go back to the ‘natural’ body is explored in D.H Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920). Virginia Woolf’s mock biography *Orlando* (1928) debates and transcends notions of traditional gender conventions. Furthermore, Woolf portrayed the

modern independent woman in the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Ernest Hemingway debated the changing role of masculinity in the modern era in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). These were all published prior to my selected novels, but they contextualize a continuum of ideas and ideals concerning the body.

Gender roles were changing after World War I when women had experienced a newfound sense of equality and freedom as they were allowed into the public domain to work, in turn intensifying the women's struggle for equality. Some women had the opportunity to live without a man's financial aid, as shown by Sasha Jansen, however, this opportunity was not available to all members of the female sex. Sexual liberation for women was advocated by feminist thinkers at the time, criticizing traditional gender conventions of the Victorian era, and struggling to give women more agency and autonomy. However, there were still remnants of traditional norms limiting women's struggle for equality in various domains as my discussion in this thesis will show.

Sexuality and sexual liberation was not only a concern for female liberationists, but a concern for homosexuals alike. There was a rising awareness concerning homosexuality, as revealed in *Goodbye to Berlin*. Michael Bell writes in "The Metaphysics of Modernism" that: "Sexual liberation, and liberation through sexuality, were conscious and central projects of the time" (25), while Armstrong points to "an international network" of free thinkers, reformers, eugenicists, surgeons, writers and others which participated in congresses organized by the World League of Sexual Reform, discussing notions such as fetishism and homosexuality (145). These new ideas on sexuality emerged with the work of Sigmund Freud whose theories in turn contributed to the rise of sexology as a scientific discipline. Sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing helped educate a wider public on sexuality and sexual behavior. Havelock Ellis wrote *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, and in one of the volumes, on *Sexual Inversion* (1897), claimed the normality of homosexuality (Lewis 90).

Harry Oosterhuis in the introduction to *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany* asserts that Richard von Krafft-Ebing's catalogue of "deviant sexual behavior" in *Psychopatia Sexualis* "[...] contributed to the result that homosexuality could be recognized and discussed" (13).

Regardless of the general liberal climate at the time, sexual liberation is shown in the two novels as contingent on economic factors, class and gender. Several of the characters depicted in the novels, while supposedly embodying a newfound sexual liberation, implicitly or explicitly show the potential destructiveness of this liberation. The female characters seem to pursue sexual liberation, but are constrained by repressive measures. Some of the men portrayed also suffer from this, but their situation seems more contingent on the economic situation, where they drift into prostitution out of financial need, a further critique of the capitalist system.

With the rise of new technologies and industry after WWI, their consequences for the use and idea of the body were debated. The body was to a greater extent able to alter through different means, and new opportunities to intervene in the body were made possible. New technologies "[...] were applied to it: drugs, inoculation, electricity; as well as various external regimes to improve its make-up, shape and the flow of energies through it" (Armstrong 2). Such techniques sought to improve the body by making it stronger, fitter, more healthy and beautiful, thus making up for its inadequacies. Tim Armstrong notes several interventionist schemes designed to improve the physical body in the interwar period. New scientific discoveries contributed to new ways of exploring of the body, both internally and externally. Operations to improve and alter the body became a possibility, while the first attempts at sexual reassignment surgery were carried out. Armstrong argues that "Modernism is, then, characterized by the desire to *intervene* in the body; to render it part of modernity by techniques which may be biological, mechanical or behavioral" (6).

The body is important to modernism because of the intellectual and scientific shifts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Armstrong contends that: “In the modern period, the body is re-energized, re-formed, subject to new modes of production, representation, and commodification (2). Modernist writers were concerned with bodily reforms and interventions. Armstrong argues that modernist writers saw the body as harbouring a crisis: that it was at the “[...] locus of anxiety, even crisis; as requiring an intervention through which it might be made the grounds of a new form of production” (4). Modernist writers found these new sciences a matter for concern, but were also intrigued by them. Some wrote about the changes taking place, while others experimented with them. The male modernists W.B Yeats, H. G. Wells, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis were concerned with prosthetic thinking modelled on the ‘deficient’ body and quite concrete forms of bodily intervention. Yeats underwent the so-called ‘Steinarch Operation’, a semi-vasectomy, to rejuvenate his artistic powers, youthfulness and sexual energy (Armstrong 133). Other modernist writers were concerned with other aspects of the body in modernity. H. G. Wells was preoccupied with “bodily modification” and Ezra Pound had a “[...] positive sense of the possibilities of prosthesis”, and tried to influence other writers to alter their bodies through corrective interventions, such as recommendations to James Joyce on how to correct his eye-sight (Armstrong 89). Wyndham Lewis issued a campaign against the worship of the machine (Armstrong 85-86) and saw the body as a “surface to be manipulated by the artist”, as shown in *Tarr* and *The Wild Body* (Armstrong 109).

While the male modernists were concerned with prosthetics and bodily interventions, female writers such as Mina Loy and Djuna Barnes became more aware of the body’s visibility. Djuana Barnes, an acclaimed writer, was in addition, a fashionable reporter. In Barnes’ example, Armstrong claims that: “The body of the reporter is a part of the act” (126).

Additionally, Mina Loy, although an accomplished female writer was “[...] above all, a *face* seen in profile” (Armstrong 113).

This emphasis on the female body’s visibility was also a prominent feature in commodity culture. Armstrong claims there to be an “explosion of cosmetic visibility” of the female body at the time (100). The interwar years experienced a tremendous increase of images of the body through advertisements in magazines and posters in the city. This visibility influenced women’s perceptions regarding their own bodies, constructing and promoting a need to buy these items to improve their physical appearances. In Tim Armstrong’s words:

Modernity [...] brings both a fragmentation and augmentation of the body in relation to technology; it offers the body as a lack, at the same time as it offers technological compensation. Increasingly, that compensation is offered as a part of capitalism’s fantasy of the complete body; in the mechanisms of advertising, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, and cinema: all prosthetic in the sense that they promise the perfection of the body. (3)

The image of the ideal body could only be achieved by these prosthetic means. These images of the body in advertising exposed the body as a lack, while pointing out the available cures. Another paradox was that the ideal feminine body presented in advertisement was supposed to “[...] achieve perfect shape while remaining ‘natural’” (Armstrong 110).

Advertising posits a body-in-crisis, a zone of deficits in terms of attributes [...] with matching remedies. These compensations are offered through the medium of the image of the perfected body, a phantasmic version of the ‘lit up’ body; a prosthetic god which we are always just failing to be. (Armstrong 98)

The mechanisms of advertisements, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery and cinema were all features of the advancement of the capitalist commodity culture. Christopher Lindner in *Fictions of Commodity Culture* asserts that: “By the mid-nineteenth century, the increasing influence of capitalism on everyday life generated in Britain what has come to be known as a ‘commodity culture’ - a culture organized around the production and exchange of material goods” (3). The mechanisms of commodity culture listed above are all concerned with manufacturing the image of perceived and fabricated needs. A general conviction that one needed all these means of transformation to become ‘your ideal self’ was the ultimate goal. The persuasive strategies of commodity culture are both implicitly and explicitly present in the novels. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha is visibly constrained by the norms of commodity culture as she self-critically comments on her looks, and how she needs a new hat, a new dress and a new hair-dye to go through a transformation act which will end in a happier state of mind. She has worked as both a mannequin and as an assistant in a clothing store, both of which feature in the world of commerce and commodity culture. Through her interiorized repression influenced by commodity culture, she believes her body to be inadequate and ‘lacking’ according to the contemporary norms promoted. In *Goodbye to Berlin* the oppressive ideology of commodity capitalism, takes a different form. Here characters are preoccupied with how they can assert themselves as ‘commodities’ with their attractive physical features. This presents a more implicit critique of the influence of the image of the ‘perfect body’ and commodity culture.

Commodity culture influenced the popular imagination, where everything could be perceived as merchandise. Although prostitution is a part of an ancient tradition, in the modern era women became intricately linked to the images they promoted in media, where they became objects to be consumed as well as the objects they were supposed to advertise. The female characters explored in this thesis all seem to assert themselves according to their

self-perceived values as ‘commodities’, as the patriarchal society, manifested in capitalism and commodity culture have decided their worth.

However, the images promoted in commodity culture were also used by reformers and physicians, in a project of unveiling truths about the body. Michael Hau argues in *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany* that: “Aesthetic representations of the human body- such as photographs [...] made it possible for life reformers and regular physicians to visualize concepts such as health, disease, and degeneration” (2). As a result of people’s concern with health and illness, and their inability to trust physicians, health reformers promoted various outdoor activities to improve the body. Hau argues that in Germany from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “[...] despite the growing prestige of the medical and life sciences [...] health and illness became important concerns for a growing number of Germans” (1). In accordance with this, Tim Armstrong writes of this period in general that “[...] the body became the site of techniques which operated externally and internally to regulate and reorganize” (106), where new movements such as “[...] Futurism and the Bauhaus absorbed the ideals of the gymnasium, and celebrated the efficient, streamlined body” (106).

Michael Hau argues that many Germans at the time:

[...] believed that modern civilization, urbanization, and industrialization had alienated human beings from their “natural” living conditions, leading them down a path of progressive degeneration that could only be reversed by living in accordance with man’s and woman’s nature. (1)

This caused people during the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic to organize themselves into organizations involved with “natural therapy and lifestyle reform” (Hau 1). Some tried to improve their health on their own: “[...] they experimented with vegetarianism, therapeutic baths, and psychotherapies; they explored the therapeutic value of nudity and sunlight” (Hau

1). Physical culture was thought to have a generally liberating effect, where physical exercise compensated for inactive, desk-bound work and was a quite heterogeneous formation where people from different social backgrounds contributed and participated. While clothes became less confining, leisure activities such as hiking, open-air exercise and sunbathing were recommended (Hau 4).

Ian McDonald in “Political Somatics: Fascism, Physical Culture, and the Sporting Body” writes of the period in general:

The physical culture movements of Weimar society were a part of a remarkable period in European history of politicization, experimentation, and innovation of the moving body. This multifarious movement raised complex questions to do with the issues of freedom and constraint underpinned by a concern with the interplay between the body and soul, spirit, and consciousness. (63)

He further contends that it was the modern expressive dance movements that started exploring these issues. In addition to modern expressive dance, rhythmic gymnastics and other forms of physical culture questioned conventional notions of high and low culture (McDonald 63). These movements were interested in the liberating aspects of body culture, and were usually connected to leftist politics. The health reforms were liberating to a certain degree for women, but were mainly concerned with the “*aesthetic* reformation” of the female body (Armstrong 110). This was caused by a concern about women not being able to perform as guardians for generations to come by the male body reformers. “[...] women might be liberated from convention and sexual restraints, but not at the risk of jeopardizing their role as guardians of the future generation” (Armstrong 109-10).

Women serve as the point of mediation between the natural and artificial, between the being of the body and its shaping - a shaping ‘already there’ rather than produced (in

the case of the masculine body) by visible effort. If the muscular masculine body is constructed by the kind of work advocated in the pages of *Physical Culture*, the feminine body - in the double-bind which endures in advertising - is supposed to achieve perfect shape while remaining 'natural'. (Armstrong 110)

By the turn of the century, there was more exercise directed towards women, as a result of the concerns about aesthetic shape and movement. There were daily exercises for working women in Washington and the 'stretch- and-swing' technique in Britain (Armstrong 110). The female body was supposed to emphasize "[...] grace, poise, and both mass and individual display" (Armstrong 111), as already noted by the examples of Mina Loy and Djuana Barnes. This contention will also be explored in relation to the female characters discussed in the thesis.

However, the ostensibly liberating intentions of the physical culture movements turned into a repressive force for some, where the pursuit of the healthy and beautiful body became an agency of constraint. A "[...] growing number of Germans scrutinized and disciplined their bodies in a utopian search for perfect health and beauty" (Hau 1). A beautiful healthy body, modelled on the aesthetic ideals derived from the Greek, was supposed to correlate with a high morality. This suppressive ideal was also present in other ideologies and cultures connected to corporeal discipline and repression. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Nazi and Communist organizations alike are shown to promote forms of repressive corporeal discipline. But even British middle-class conventions exemplified by the public school system are shown to be repressive. This thesis will explore the satirical critique of these in Isherwood's novel.

Through close reading and historical contextualisation of *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Good Morning, Midnight* I will explore the tension between liberation and suppression of the body, as played out in the characters' lives in the in the two novels. The narrative strategies

employed by Rhys and Isherwood will be briefly discussed and compared in the concluding chapter of the thesis, to further illuminate and conclude the discussion.



# *Good Morning, Midnight*

## The Woman in the Modern Metropolis

In Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* published in 1939, the protagonist Sasha Jansen is portrayed as a modern woman on holiday in Paris. The atmosphere of the novel, however, is bleak and depressing, as Sasha contemplates killing herself by drinking. This novel varies between Sasha's witty, sarcastic, intelligent and humorous observations and her detrimental drinking and destructive self-criticism. This juxtaposition between depressing and humorous aspects helps show how complex the novel is in its representation of the modern liberated woman struggling to come to terms with her situation. Sasha is a liberated woman to the extent that she is financially independent. Though relatively poor, she is free to travel and stroll around the city by herself. There are some moments where she believes in her ability to construct her own identity, her own labels. She exclaims that she has "[...] no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere" (Rhys 38). She even changes her name from Sophie to Sasha, hoping it will bring her luck. By choosing a name of androgynous character, such as Sasha, she wants to liberate herself from the constraints of being a woman. Wanting to position herself as a cosmopolite, at home, anywhere, she nonetheless finds herself alien and exposed due to her sex, her limited financial means and in her status as a single woman with no close ties to her family. As a woman, she remains constrained by her previous relations with men and by the norms of commodity culture, both of which shape her present emotional and sexual encounters. Thus, I will consider the tension between liberation and suppression in the character of Sasha by investigating her relations with men and the influence of commodity culture.

In the following discussion I will view commodity culture, as discussed in the introductory chapter, together with the expanding force of fashion and advertisement as a potential oppressive influence on Sasha. In the interwar period, the increase of advertisements in papers, magazines, and on posters displayed in the city streets influenced the idea of how the healthy, perfect body should look. Through the prosthetic means referred to in the introduction, the ideal body was forced upon the public, contributing to a new awareness of the body as image. For the first time one could see uncovered knees, the backside of a pair of legs and the first nude woman presented in advertising (Armstrong 100).

This perfection or completion of the body as image was constantly pushed further, and different means of perfection offered to men and women. Armstrong points to the predicament of the female body as one of remaining natural while still presenting the perfect shape promoted by advertisement (110). The male body was given a kind of agency denied the passive female body which becomes an object. The female body “[...] becomes decor, just as the house is, as *habitus*, an extension of the self, a zone of embodied virtue” (Armstrong 111).

A central motif in works by female writers in the 1930s, such as Radclyffe Hall, Storm Jameson, Christina Stead and Jean Rhys as identified by Tim Armstrong, is the moment of “[...] looking into a mirror and experiencing the body as a humiliation” (100). This also applies to the character of Sasha Jansen, supporting my point that the new technologies of cosmetic surgery, along with the pressures of advertising, commodity culture and the growing force of the fashion industry are shown to make the character feel inadequate in her own body. Armstrong asserts that: “Though it is perhaps a truism to note that such moments are reinforced by the burgeoning advertising and cosmetic industries, it is striking how often the mirror suggests an internalization of such perceptions, a disciplining of the self in the name of its ‘true’ (ideal) shape” (101). This notion of ‘disciplining the self’ applies to Sasha’s

character in relation to her interiorized oppression of her body. The woman Sasha sees in the mirror is a 'product' of commodity culture, where she has internalized the oppressive mechanisms of cosmetics and hairdye. Sasha frequently looks at herself in mirrors, and finds her body inadequate: "My god, how awful I looked in that mirror! If I'm going to look like that, there's not a hope" (Rhys 102). Moreover, she invests the mirror with a hostile, critical voice:

'Well, well,' it says, 'last time you looked in here, you were a bit different, weren't you? Would you believe me that, of all the faces I see, I remember each one, that I keep a ghost to throw back at each one - lightly, like an echo- when it looks into me again?' All glasses in all lavaboes do this. (Rhys 142).

In this passage the mirror incarnates Sasha's self-criticism. Sasha's moments of looking into the mirror are often portrayed in lavaboes in public places, like cafes or restaurants. The lavabo is where she often has to go to disguise her crying, when she has had too much to drink and has to apply more cosmetics. Significantly, she looks at herself in the mirror in places associated with the repulsive and unclean: anticipating the abjection she submits to in the end.

Armstrong further claims that the bodily ideal of the female body was "the body-as-display" as opposed to the masculine "body-as-work" in the modern era (99). This is shown in Sasha's interest in presenting her body at its best. Women had fewer means available to fulfill the criteria of the perfect body. Those with the necessary financial means could buy the help to improve their appearance, through clothes, cosmetics and cosmetic surgery. Sasha believes that it was her looks that gave her leverage in life and now that she believes her looks to be declining, she does everything in her power to maintain her beauty. I will investigate to what

degree the novel connects such fixation to a shifting climate in commodity culture and the forms of repression and self-imposed corporeal discipline it brings about.

One of these new means to improve the body was cosmetic surgery. To be able to intervene and penetrate the body surgically to make it better was a new attractive phenomenon which arose after World War I. Armstrong writes: “Rather than replacing a lost part, cosmetic surgery works on a ‘natural’ body which it has declared inadequate, misshapen, or past its prime” (100). Sasha, while getting her hair dyed, reads an article in a magazine about a woman who has had her breasts lifted:

No, mademoiselle, your letter is nonsensical. You will never get thin that way - never. Life is not so easy. Life, mademoiselle, is difficult. At your age it will be very difficult to get thin. [...] But there is hope (turn to page 5), and yet more hope (turn to page 9)... I am in the middle of a long article by a lady who has had her breasts lifted when he takes the dryer off my head. (Rhys 52-53)

Here, not only is the new technology of cosmetic surgery of the breast lift operation presented, but additionally the impact commodity culture, which is exemplified by magazine article, had on its subjects. The magazine article illustrates Armstrong’s claim that the body was portrayed as a ‘lack’, to which prosthetic technologies were offered as the cure. The middle-aged body’s capital that Sasha is concerned with, is shown incapable of increasing. Another instance when this and the ideal of a perfect body are presented are when Sasha loses her and Enno’s baby. Sasha reflects on the catastrophe with bitter irony:

And five weeks afterwards there I am, with not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease. And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital. And there I am looking down at him, without one line, without one wrinkle, without one crease.... (Rhys 52)

The nurse who swathes Sasha after she has given birth tells her that she will look exactly the same as before. In *The Rhys Woman*, the critic Paula Le Gallez notes that “[...] the very suggestion of beauty being conceived of as a commodity cheapens the whole notion of it. Certainly, this interest in the commercial potential of vanity is found wanting when it is set against the genuine beauty of a vulnerable baby, so delicately drawn by the narrator” (123). The baby is described as having: “A lovely forehead, incredibly white, the eyebrows drawn very faintly in gold dust..” (Rhys 51). The view that is presented is based on the exterior, not on the loss of new life. Beauty, as it features in commodity culture, is debased by being juxtaposed to the beautiful portrayal of the dead baby.

Another feature of commodity culture is illustrated through Sasha’s memories of her time as an employee in a French clothing store. She would sit and envy the perfection of the mannequins: “[...] those damned dolls, thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart - all complete” (Rhys 16). The idolisation of the inanimate objects, which represent the ideal female body displayed in store-windows and magazines all over the city, helps to illustrate what kind of oppressive influence these figures of the perfect body had on Sasha. If a woman does not fit into the ideal shape, she will, like Sasha, feel inadequate. However, her anguish about her appearance and its declining state does not seem to be altogether unfounded. This is made apparent when we are told how male authoritative figures, like the manager of the London branch of the clothing-store, Mr. Blank sizes Sasha up:

‘Oh, really, you worked for Chose, did you? You worked for Chose.’ His voice is more respectful. ‘Were you a receptionist there?’ ‘No,’ I say. ‘I worked as a mannequin.’ ‘You worked as a mannequin?’ Down and up his eyes go, up and down. ‘How long ago was this?’ he says. (Rhys 18)

In this passage, not only is Sasha's insecurity about her looks clearly depicted, but Mr. Blank's means to oppress her as his employee, in particular as a female employee. He inscribes her aging body as something unworthy and her beauty as lacking. Thus she is an "inefficient member of Society" (Rhys 25) which he can ridicule as he wishes. Furthermore, Mr. Blank's name implies his blank stare as something impenetrable to her, underscoring his power as a male authority in a position where he is free to expose her insecurities. The word "blank" may in addition allude to a "faceless" quality, making him a symbol of the male-dominated society. Her silence in the section that follows also indicates how Sasha was oppressed at her work and as a woman. She is unable to voice her opposition to this, but protests in her own thoughts:

Well, let's argue this out, Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky - and it would be so much less fun if we were. Isn't it so, Mr Blank? (Rhys 25-26)

"Society" in this excerpt alludes to the patriarchal, market-driven society that Sasha, as a woman, finds herself trapped in. She has a 'market value' in this society, and her worth is estimated to four hundred francs a month, which was not a lot to live on. She significantly says 'market value', which again refers to herself as a commodity, thus confirming her internalization of commodity culture's prevailing norms. She is an "inefficient member of Society" because she is middle-aged, single, relatively poor, and, foremost, a woman in a patriarchal system. She deems herself "slightly damaged in the fray" through Mr Blank's

eyes, which exposes her self-criticism enhanced by his critical view of women. She is in an inferior position where she can be subjected to the point where she will “blush at a look, cry at a word.”

As a consequence of her precarious situation Sasha searches throughout the narrative to achieve the perfect appearance, by the help of cosmetics, a new hat, a new dress or a new hair-dye. What she could hope for if she were to alter is not said, but we are led to believe that it would help her out of her bleak situation. Sitting in a café she tries to pose as a ‘respectable woman’ to the waiter and the other guests, but finds it futile:

And a lot he cares - I could have spared myself the trouble. But this is my attitude to life. Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis, and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don’t succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning an hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else. Every word I say has chains round its ankles; every thought I think is weighted with heavy weights. (Rhys 88)

This reveals not only how much she cares what others think, but in addition how she also represses herself in conversation with others. There is an implicit link between the exterior and the interior in this passage, which manifests itself in the character as a suppressive force. She is unable to voice her opinions and views because of what she sees as her declining looks. She feels like “the stranger, the alien, the old one” (Rhys 46) when she enters cafés and restaurants alone to fill her days with something other than staying in bed. She is constantly worried about how others perceive her, whether they’ll believe her to be rich and old, mad and poor or a depressed drunk. Sasha reads into a smile from an acquaintance that: “She’s getting to look old. She drinks” (Rhys 11), which aptly shows her destructive self-criticism. Sasha’s destructive self-consciousness can be traced back to her work as a mannequin and her

work at the French clothing store: both features of commodity culture and factors in her internal repression of her body.

Sasha has always experienced her female body as a source of capital, and now that it is aging, this capital is decreasing. She says that she is “[...] sad as a woman who is growing old” (Rhys 39). She could use her youth and beauty to obtain money from men in the past: “I am standing there with the note in my hand, when he comes up to me and kisses me. I am hating him more than I have ever hated anyone in my life, yet I feel my mouth go soft under his, and my arms go limp” (Rhys 100). This describes a sort of mild prostitution she was able to participate in because of her youth and attractiveness. Now that she is middle-aged, it is she who acts as the benefactor for Serge and René. She is now in need of means to upgrade her looks and has to compensate for her aging body by other methods. Albeit her relations with men in the past were on unequal terms, she was at least able to perceive herself as having a certain value, a body with a higher value because of its youth than the one she has at present.

The new form of commodity culture where everything could be perceived as merchandise influenced the popular imagination regarding the view on women. In the introduction to *New Woman Hybridities*, Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham assert that “[...] the New Woman turned into an object of desire, a commodity that, like the products her image was used to advertise, was to be possessed by the public gaze” (4). This altered perception could be related to Sasha’s notion of herself as a potential object because of her sex. Furthermore, commodity culture relates to the importance of money. She reminisces about her past when she was in need of money to be able to buy the black dress she wanted, but for her to be able to buy it she would have to borrow more money from someone, which again put her in an inferior and financially dependent position. Now that she is older and her bodily capital is reduced she needs: “Money for my hair, money for my teeth, money for shoes that won’t deform my feet (it’s not so easy now to walk around in cheap shoes with

very high heels), money for good clothes, money, money” (Rhys 120). Armstrong notes that by this statement: “The equation of capital and the commoditized body replaces the biblical injunction to work” (101). Sasha goes on to say that it is “[...] the sensation of spending, that’s the point” (Rhys 121), again pointing to the alluring effect advertisement has in a consumer culture where you are told that if you are able to buy this new item you will be happier and more complete. Sasha is led to believe that she needs all of these means of transformation to become happy. A new hair-dye will make everything all right: “It’s all right. Tomorrow I’ll be pretty again, tomorrow I’ll be happy again, tomorrow, tomorrow....” (Rhys 48). She holds on to the thought of what color she will have her hair dyed “[...] as you hang on to something when you are drowning” (Rhys 44). But she ends up disappointed, not being able to distract herself from her misery by the thought of her new hair, which she thought she would obsess over for days.

Sasha is now in a somewhat financially independent situation. She receives a weekly allowance from a distant relative, but her trip to Paris is financed by a female acquaintance. Le Gallez asserts: “The importance of money to Sasha in the establishment of her independence is stressed by the amount of narrative time which is spent on the subject” (128). Thus her position as a liberated woman relies on a certain income. If she did not have this independence she would have to rely on men as she had done in the past, as when she had to trust in Enno to find resources they could live by. She was put into an inferior position in her relationship with him. However, Sasha no longer finds herself in an oppressive unequal relationship like the one she had with Enno. Through her memories from her past with him, she implicitly tells the story of a financially dependent female. He is pictured as the traditional dominant male who she is dependent on to be in a state of comfort. Le Gallez asserts that “[...] Sasha’s plight highlights the root of oppressive patriarchal relationships in which the woman is also dependent on the man for her material and physical well-being” (126). This is

suggested by the following passage, in which Enno returns to their room after having abandoned her, pregnant, for three days:

‘I’ve got some money,’ he says. ‘My God, isn’t it hot? Peel me an orange.’ ‘I’m very thirsty,’ he says. ‘Peel me an orange.’ Now is the time to say ‘Peel it yourself’, now is the time to say ‘Go to hell’, now is the time to say ‘I won’t be treated like this’. But much too strong - the room, the street, the thing in myself, oh, much too strong..... I peel the orange, put it on a plate and give it to him [.....] ‘My girl....’ He draws the curtains to keep the sun out. When he kissed my eyelids to wake me it was dark. (Rhys 108)

This shows the structure of their relationship where the man is the dominant party and the financial provider in the relationship, whereas the woman figures as the silent, inferior dependent. Her silence in this passage indicates how subservient she finds herself in this financially and emotionally oppressive relationship. Sasha knows that she should not tolerate his behavior, but she is unable to voice her opposition to his nonchalant return. Instead, she succumbs, gives him the orange and goes to bed with him. His right to her domestic services lies in the structure of the unequal relationship, where if he is able to position himself as the provider, she will have to answer to his wishes. Furthermore, Enno oppresses Sasha by telling her she doesn’t know how to make love: “‘You’re too passive, you’re lazy, you bore me” (Rhys 107). Helen Nebeker in *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage* argues that “the masculine denigration of woman’s sexual performance” (105) is a recurrent theme in Rhys’ fiction. Thereby Enno finds other means of control in addition to her financial dependence on him: by belittling her achievements in the bedroom. Enno ultimately leaves Sasha heartbroken. Her experience of an unequal relationship such as this, despite the fact that she truly loved Enno, renders her unable to deeply connect and fully trust René, even though their roles are a reversal of the former relationship.

Sasha believes that René initially made contact with her because he believed her to be a rich woman looking for a gigolo, with her new hair-dye, hat and the old fur-coat. “Oh Lord, is that what I look like? Do I really look like a wealthy dame trotting round Montparnasse in the hope of - ? After all the trouble I’ve gone to, is that what I look like? I suppose I do” (Rhys 61). To Sasha it is important to signal to René that she is not a woman of means, but still she finds herself paying for their dinners and drinks because he is even poorer. This leads her into a reversal of the kind of relationship she had with Enno. Le Gallez asserts that since Sasha is now financially independent, her relationship with René “[...] inverts the usual gender order” (140). In her friendship with René she is able to assert herself to a greater extent and say what she feels without ‘every word having chains round its ankles’. She finds herself happier with him: “I don’t know what it is about this man that seems to me so natural, so gay - that makes me also feel natural and happy, just as if I was young” (Rhys 130). In this moment Sasha experiences the happiness she hoped to find in changing her hair, dress and hat, but she is only able to experience these glimpses of happiness with a fellow human. Nonetheless, she tries to undermine and repress these feelings by pushing him away, because of her anxiety and distrust of her fellow human beings. A sign of their increasing intimacy is when she tells him that she is afraid of men, of women, of the whole human race. This statement does not only reveal her to be honest and open with René, but additionally how she has been oppressed as a woman throughout her life, which has engraved on her this view of people. She feels alone in a world that is judgmental about her and the way she lives her life. She believes people judge her because she drinks and because she is a single middle-aged woman. Elaine Savoury in *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys* argues that “Sasha breaks two social expectations [...] that women should not drink strong drinks (she likes Pernod), and that they shouldn’t drink alone” (70). By breaking these social conventions, although they might be destructive, she is demonstrating the actions of a modern woman.

While Sasha seemingly exemplifies the actions of a modern woman by walking the streets of Paris by herself, her unconstrained position in the city is fragile. To show how complex the tension between the liberation and oppression present in the character of Sasha is, I will refer to the debate about the presence and possibility of the *flâneuse* as a motif in literature. Janet Wolff in her essay “The Invisible Flâneuse, Women and the Literature of Modernity” describes the *flâneur* as a male character which is free to stroll around the city streets, observing others, being observed, but never to be interacted with. Wolff declares that “[...] even by the late nineteenth century, women could not go alone to a café in Paris or a restaurant in London” (41). As a woman strolling around the Parisian streets in 1937, Sasha typifies the newfound liberation of women, in being able to step outside the confines of the domestic sphere out into the streets of the city. Wolff asserts that it is impossible to speak of a *flâneuse* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because women did not have the same freedom as men as a result of the sexual divisions. Rhys’s portrayal of Sasha shows that even in the 1930s women’s position in the city streets were still fragile. Women are objects of the male gaze, which limits their freedom of movement. Eldfried Dreyer and Estelle McDowall in “Imagining the Flâneur as a Woman” claim that women do not have the same freedom as men because of “[...] the intricate connection women have with consumerism, specifically by being an object as well as a subject of consumerism” (30). Women are observed by the *flâneur*, which turns them into items to be consumed by him. “Women and images of women are objects of desire due to their implicit association with commodification, where consumer products are the objects of desire in the city” (Dreyer and McDowall 33-34). Women are linked to consumption in commodity culture, not just as objects of men’s gaze, but as agents responsible for the family’s shopping.

In the following passage Sasha is explored as a potential *flâneuse*:

I am not at all sad as I walk back to the hotel [...] I can only marvel at the effect this place has on me. I expect it is because the drink is so much better. No, I am not sad, but by the time I get to the Boulevard St Michel I am feeling tired. I have walked along here so often, feeling tired.... Here is the fountain with the beautiful prancing horses. There is a tabac where I can have a drink near the next statue, the quinine statue. Just then two men come up from behind and walk along on either side of me.  
(Rhys 39)

Sasha is able to engage in fleeting moments of *flânerie*, walking by herself, absorbing the city, contemplating how she feels without being observed. But because she is a woman, she is only able to enjoy this freedom for a brief period since she is an object in men's eyes, as revealed in the two men making contact with her. A male *flâneur* being accosted by a prostitute is different to that of a woman being approached by men. The *flâneur*'s position as a subject does not waver as easily as that of a woman. For the woman this approach becomes an intrusion which turns her into an object. She remembers "[...] walking along in a dream, a haze, when a man came up and spoke to me. This is unhoped-for. It's also quite unwanted" (Rhys 72). Thus Sasha's independent and liberated state is fragile and exposed in the city streets, where she at times becomes an object consumed by male eyes. Nonetheless, the novel presents brief passages where she is able to escape the constraints of being a female object, and is able to observe others anonymously, without restriction, in a manner similar to the *flâneur*. Sitting by the pond in the Luxembourg Gardens, Sasha appears as a subject, not constrained by her self-criticism:

Old people pass and shabby women, and every now and again a gay-looking one, painted, in a big fur coat. A man goes by, strutting like a cock, wheeling a big pram. He is buttoned up very tightly into a black overcoat, his scarf carefully arranged under

a blue chin. Then another man, who looks almost exactly like him, playing with a little girl who can only just walk. (Rhys 46)

Even if it would be difficult to characterize Sasha as a *flâneuse* there are occasions when she is able to put herself into the position of a subject. In these moments she looks outside herself, looks outside of her repression by self-criticism and looks at others with the observing eye of a *flâneur*. However, this position is fragile and is often interfered with, by herself or others.

As discussed above, Sasha's liberated state in city street is fragile. At the cinema, however, which Armstrong lists as one of the new "prosthetic" technologies, Sasha seems to find a shelter from the oppressive intrusions of the city. However, this technology influences her in other ways, as in her view on relationships between men and women.

At four o'clock next afternoon I am in a cinema on the Champs-Élysées, according to programme. Laughing heartily in the right places. It's a very good show and I see it through twice [...] Paris is looking very nice tonight... You are looking very nice tonight, my beautiful, my darling, and oh what a bitch you can be! But you didn't kill me after all, did you? (Rhys 15)

Sasha speaks of Paris in a similar manner to that of a past lover. It is evident that her past visits to Paris have left their marks, which is shown in her constant reminiscences of events, people and relationships when met by specific places in Paris. In the passage above, the influence of the movie-industry is noticeable in her choice of language. But as a single woman in the 1930s, the cinema was one of the few places where she could fully enjoy herself, a place of refuge from the public's gaze.

Another instance where we find traces from the movie- industry is when she mentions her "film-mind", while thinking about René. She seems to air, at least in fragments, her real thoughts about him. In her use of the term "film-mind" she exposes the impact this industry

may have had. Some of the aspects of her consciousness revealed to us suggest a melodrama that is typically to be found in Hollywood movies: “But as long as he is alive and near me I am not unhappy. If he were to die I should kill myself” (Rhys 147). Her view on sexual and emotional relationships seems to stem from her frequent visits to the cinema.

As a result of her being a single, middle-aged woman that appears to be rich she attracts people like Serge the painter, who wants to use her to make a profit by selling her a painting. Sasha assumes that René is only interested in her money, and she appears to find this reversal of roles amusing (Le Gallez 128). Sasha is used to be the one having to depend on money from men, and now these men seem to rely on her. With regards to Sasha’s relationship with René, it is evident that she tries to make him of less importance to her, because she does not want to admit to herself how much she cares for him. His name is explicitly told only once in the novel, other than that he is consistently called “the gigolo”. In this, another kind of oppression is unveiled: her objectification of him. She tries to create a distance between the two of them, and does not believe him to be genuine in his pursuit of her. However, he is able to release her from her bleak state and feel elated:

I have my arms around him and I begin to laugh, because I am so happy. I stand there hugging him, so terribly happy. Now everything is in my arms on this dark landing - love, youth, spring, happiness, everything I thought I had lost. I was a fool, wasn’t I? to think all that was finished for me. How could it be finished? (Rhys 148)

When she is about to go meet him, she declares: “No, I won’t do a thing, not a thing. A little pride, a little dignity in the end, in the name of God. I won’t even put on the stockings I bought this afternoon. I won’t do a thing - not a thing. I will not grimace and posture before these people any longer” (Rhys 128). Thus, René seems to have helped her into a more liberated and joyous state of mind.

When we finally begin to believe that Sasha will find her way out of her bleakness, however, the ending of the novel leaves us shocked. Rather than act in accordance with her desire for him, she succumbs to the haunting, skeleton-like figure of her neighbor, the *commis voyageur*, with “his mean eyes flickering” (Rhys 159). The *commis voyageur* is first presented to us as “the ghost of the landing [...] thin as a skeleton. He has a bird-like face and sunken, dark eyes with a peculiar expression, cringing, ingratiating, knowing” (Rhys 13). After he tries to enter her room for the first time, Sasha describes her feeling: “Frightened as hell. A nightmare feeling” (Rhys 31). Sasha imagines him to be a commercial traveller because of his “long, pointed, patent- leather shoes, very cracked” (Rhys 28). As a commercial traveller he embodies the less glamorous part, the ‘cheap end’ of the world of commodities. His presence in the novel is in part a comment on what Sasha turns René into: an example of commoditized sexuality, where human relations turn into exchange relations.

The two male characters exhibit a fascinating element of conjointment, although they never meet. When Sasha expects to open the door to one of them, it is usually the other who appears. Veronica Marie Gregg in *Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination* sees the *commis* as “[...] a distorted mirror image of the man she says is a gigolo” (157). There is a tension between the two where it is possible to see René as her positive male counterpart who incarnates her more joyous past and the hope for a better future, whereas the *commis* with his abhorrent appearance represents her possible daunting future. Gregg notes: “The textual strategy makes a connection between the gigolo and the man in the dressing gown and adumbrates ironically the end of the novel” (157). However, another connection is visible between Sasha and René. In her book *Jean Rhys*, Carol Ann Howells maintains that “[...] both of them [are] marginalised social figures and in a sense mirror images of each other” (97). Several critics have noticed the analogous element of the two characters. René could be seen as Sasha’s male counterpart, where both of them have relied on others and used their

bodies for profit in a sexual exchange. During their last meeting they acknowledge to each other the pain both have suffered throughout their lives, where René shows Sasha his scar and tells her that he knows that she has been wounded too. However, the repulsive and deplorable *commis* could be seen as her future. Carole Angier in *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* sees the *commis* as the possible “[...] nightmare vision of her future self, mad and mean, the ghost of the cheap hotel” (400). In the drama between the three of them her inherent battle is exposed: “[...] between her own past and future, her own sanity and madness” (Angier 400).

The ending of the novel has a shocking effect which has puzzled critics and led to numerous analyses. Sasha, after callously discarding René finds out that he did not take the money she offered. His intentions were genuine, and she is left crying. One of the causes as to why she rejects his advances in the end, might be Enno’s belittlement of her sexual performances in the past. She thinks to herself: “(But supposing you were disappointed in me.)” (Rhys 134), and she says to René that it would be “[...] a whole lot of waste of time” (Rhys 153). At first she is joyous then her cynical voice rises and dismisses him. In her drunken state she battles with herself and two voices appear. She wants to tell him not to “[...] listen, that’s not me speaking. Don’t listen. Nothing to do with me - I swear it....” (Rhys 153). She announced earlier when he asked her if she wants him that “‘Of course, I do’” (Rhys 143). However, when her desire awakens: “My mouth hurts, my breasts hurt, because it hurts, when you have been dead, to come alive....” (Rhys 153), she is unable to give herself to him. My contention is that the voice that dismisses him, the voice that subjects him by using his assumed profession against him, is the voice which reveals her oppression. Earlier she revealed to René the oppression she has experienced throughout her life: “‘What happened to you, what happened?’ he says. ‘Something bad must’ve happened to make you like this.’ ‘One thing? It wasn’t one thing. It took years. It was a slow process’” (Rhys 146).

The voice that rejects him disappears after another drink, and “She has gone. I am alone” (Rhys 157). The voice that expresses her emotional desire for bonding urges him to come back. While she urges René to return in her mind, the one who enters is the haunting *commis*. She gives her body to the man she has described as frightening, skeleton-like and, significantly, “the ghost of the landing”. As discussed earlier in the passage where she gives the mirror a hostile voice, the mirror says: “Would you believe me that, of all the faces I see, I remember each one, that I keep a ghost to throw back at each one” (Rhys 142). Thus, the ghost captured by the mirror, by Sasha’s self-repression influenced by the impossible ‘perfect’ body portrayed in advertisement is linked to the *commis* and the self-abasement she succumbs to in the end by giving herself to him. The *commis* is not only an example of her miserable future, but the debasement she has gone through her whole life as a woman in a patriarchal system influenced by commodity culture and her past relations with men. Thus this ending leaves her unable to break out from her somber past, but leads her into further abjection. She looks “[...] straight into his eyes and despise[s] another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time...” (Rhys 159). The repetition of “[...] for the last time. For the last time....”, seems to signify a demise of some kind. In my analysis this is the death of the Sasha who seldom, but sometimes, experiences happiness and an escape from her self-criticism through her relations with the charismatic René. Thomas F. Staley in *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* asserts that by this ending Rhys “gives vision [...] to the utterly narrow and restricted choice a woman has in this world” (98).

I would argue that by this ending, Sasha descends into abhorrence by surrendering to the repulsive *commis*. There is a sense of entrapment in this ending, where the tension present in the character of Sasha is never to be resolved. Sasha alluded to this entrapment before the ending by announcing: “You are walking along a road peacefully. You trip. You fall into blackness. That’s the past - or perhaps the future. And you know that there is no past, no

future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly, slowly, but always the same” (Rhys 144).



# *Goodbye to Berlin*

## The Myth of Liberation

This novel by Christopher Isherwood, first published in 1939 is set in the beginning of the 1930s in Berlin during the liberal Weimar Republic. *Goodbye to Berlin* is a collection of six stories, but I will refer to it as a novel as this term is generally used in the criticism. The time and setting of the novel is critical to gaining an understanding of the characters presented by Isherwood. Claude J. Summers explains in his book *Christopher Isherwood* that *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935), which are often seen as companion-novels, “[...] evoke a mythic Berlin of sexual and political freedom only to acknowledge the artificiality of myth in the harsh light of reality” (17). Valentine Cunningham in *British Writers of the Thirties*, on the other hand, seems to accept the reality of the myth when he describes Berlin in the 1930 as “[...] the place to be: for artistic progressivism, but also because there sunshine and cocaine and sex, especially homosex, were up until Hitler’s intervention in 1933 so freely available” (347). Cunningham further contends that “Berlin was a mythic Sodom, and a sodomites’ mythic nirvana” (347). Emig Rainer in his article “Transgressive Travels: Homosexuality, Class, Politics and the Lure of Germany in 1930s Writing” additionally asserts that Germany, for the British writers residing there, among other alluring traits, “[...] represented some kind of libidinous homosexual nirvana” (48), maintaining that Berlin’s reputation was one of a “[...] morally dubious ground - for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike” (48). Because of this freedom Berlin was attractive to individuals living outside of social conventions, an experience which will be examined more closely in this chapter.

The sexual experimentation and openness in Berlin is already evident in the first page of Isherwood's novel, suggesting its attraction for the expatriates Sally, Christopher and Peter in the novel:

The electric sign is switched on over the night-bell of the little hotel by the corner, where you can hire a room by the hour. And soon the whistling will begin. Young men are calling their girls. Standing down there in the cold, they whistle up at the lighted windows of warm rooms where the beds are already turned down for the night. They want to be let in. (Isherwood 9)

In *Goodbye to Berlin*, many of the sexual and personal liberation projects of the time are portrayed. Breaking with conventions, several of Isherwood's characters live on the margins of society, and the city of Berlin was the place to do this. Here one would be met with less judgement for these actions than elsewhere. However, the tensions between traditional and modern values are exhibited through the various characters, as we see them struggle to find their identity. The novel exhibits the new opportunities for liberation, but also their limitations. The same tension is present in the city itself, where traditional and modern values collide in the changing metropolis. This chapter will investigate to what degree the novel portrays Berlin's liberation scene as genuine and how projects of liberation take different turns for the male and female characters in the novel.

Berlin is portrayed throughout the novel as a site for experimentation and subverting traditional conventions. In the following passage the city's nightlife is depicted as playful, elegant, theatrical and decadent. However, there is still an underlying sense of bleakness, artificiality and destructiveness.

There were three attractive well-dressed girls sitting at the bar: the one nearest to me was particularly elegant, she had quite a cosmopolitan air. But during a lull in the

conversation, I caught fragments of her talk with the other barman. She spoke a broad Berlin-dialect. She was tired and bored; her mouth dropped [...] The door opened. Two men and two women came in [...] Here, unmistakably, was Money. In an instant the Troika was transformed [...] the three-man orchestra struck briskly. The girls at the bar turned on their stools and smiling a not-too-direct invitation [sic]. The gigolos advanced to them as if to complete strangers, bowed formally, and asked, in cultured tones, for the pleasure of a dance [...] With absurd, solicitous gravity, the dancers performed their intricate evolutions, showing in their every movement a consciousness of the part they were playing. (Isherwood 23-24)

Regardless of the performance in progress, the representatives of “Money”, sit “[...] without a glance at the night-life they had called into being; while their women sat silent, looking neglected, puzzled, uncomfortable, and very bored” (Isherwood 25). The ‘mythic Berlin’ is here presented as something artificial, an act put on by the prostitutes and gigolos, for the representatives of the establishment. This act was probably a necessity because of the economic situation at the time.

The subversive potential of Berlin’s subcultures is examined in depictions of its transvestite barscene where camp elements are at the forefront. Susan Sontag argues in “Notes on ‘Camp’” that “[...] the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (275). Here, however, not only are men dressed as women, but the theatricality, artificiality and depressing aspects of these bars are prominent, suggesting the tension and conflicting aspects involved. When the narrator and Fritz go on a “farewell visit” to the Salomé before the probable “Berlin clean-up” it is seemingly the end of an era of subverting conventions and theatricality:

It wasn't even genuine, he told me. The management run it entirely for the benefit of provincial sightseers. The Salomé turned out to be very expensive and even more depressing than I had imagined. A few stage lesbians and some young men with plucked eyebrows lounged at the bar, uttering occasional raucous guffaws and treble hoots - supposed, apparently, to represent the laughter of the damned. The whole premises are painted gold and inferno-red – crimson plush inches thick, and vast gilded mirrors [...] We went out half-way through the cabaret performance, after a young man in a spangled crinoline and jewelled breast-caps had painfully but successfully executed three splits. (Isherwood 237-38)

When Fritz and Christopher leave the Salomé, they encounter a group of Americans asking “‘what’s on here?’ ‘Men dressed as women,’ Fritz grinned” (Isherwood 238). The leader of the group seems shocked and disbelieving at this. “‘Men dressed as *women*? As *women*, hey? Do you mean they’re *queer*?’” (Isherwood 238). He then asks if Christopher is queer, which he affirms. First it seems as though the American is going to hit him, but he changes his mind and rushes into the Salomé. This disbelief and its succeeding reaction show the provocativeness of this kind of establishment, at least for foreigners or people from more rural areas. In addition to such venues, gay bars were widespread in Berlin from the 1920s. Rainer Emig contends that “[...] towards the late 1920s gay parties and dances had taken over the largest venues in the city. Gay life in Berlin in late 1920s was hardly a subculture” (49). In the passage above the lesbians and men with plucked eyebrows, presumably homosexuals, are laughing the laughter of the damned, signifying the end of the era when these ‘deviants’ could be openly encountered in Berlin.

Sally Bowles, one of the novel’s “sexual outcasts” as Brian Finney (148) characterizes her, is also one of Isherwood’s most famous characters, made iconic by the play *I am a Camera*, the musical *Cabaret* and subsequent film adaptations. Sally wants to portray herself as

a liberated sexual adventurer to the people surrounding her, but as some critics have noted, is partly unsuccessful. She flaunts her sexual partners, seemingly in an attempt to shock. Antony Shuttleworth in "In a Populous City: Isherwood in the Thirties" contends that "[...] Sally only pretends to be a sexual adventurer, a pretense that unsuccessfully disguises her identity as a young middle-class woman" (158). Sally asks Christopher after telling him about her new lover "Do I shock you when I talk like that?" to which he answers:

'Not in the least [...] Well then, if you want to know, it rather bores me [...] I only meant that when you talk like that it's really just nervousness. You're naturally rather shy with strangers, I think: so you've got into this trick of trying to bounce them into approving or disapproving of you, violently.' (Isherwood 47)

He maintains that regardless of her desire to be seen as some sort of courtesan, she will always be the middle-class daughter of Mr and Mrs Jackson-Bowles. Moreover, as opposed to her liberal sexual morals, she takes a rather traditional view on the relationship between men and women:

'You must remember I'm a woman, Christopher. All women like men to be strong and decided and following out their careers. A woman wants to be motherly to a man and protect his weak side, but he must have a strong side too, which she can respect. If you ever care for a woman, I don't advise you to let her see that you've got no ambition.'

(Isherwood 82-83)

Furthermore, Sally seeks to use her attractive body and youth as commodities to ease her way into the movie industry. Despite numerous attempts at this, she finds herself unsuccessful. After her performance at the Lady Windermere the narrator comments: "For a would-be-demi-mondaine, 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 rather preferred a chat

with the barman” (Isherwood 39). Her inability to use her youthful attractive body as capital is manifested throughout her story. Her affair with Klaus leaves her pregnant, in need of an abortion, subsequently paid for by the wealthy American Clive. He promises her a contract, but flees before completing his promise. Moreover, she is swindled by a 16 year old Pole, a mentally unstable con-artist posing as an American in the film-industry.

As suggested above, Sally is portrayed by the narrator as rather naïve. The critic Alan Wilde in *Christopher Isherwood* recognises that the central “[...] images that cluster around Sally suggest her childlikeness; and it is this quality - her essential innocence - along with the resilience that enables her to start again after each successive failure (and Sally fails everywhere and in everything) that makes her so appealing” (70). Furthermore, Wilde claims that the characters of Sally and Otto have an “animal mindset” which makes them “[...] pre-eminently adaptable, those who, being generally free from worry, anxiety, and guilt, feel very much at home in their worlds” (69). Wilde is probably partly right in observing this, but I will argue that the character of Sally has more complexities to her than this would suggest. When Klaus leaves her for a new girl who understands his mind, she comments sarcastically: “That’s a new one on me [...] ‘I’ve never suspected the boy of having a mind at all’ (Isherwood 57). Moreover, she knows just how to infuriate Christopher. By criticising his ambition and writing, she hurts his vanity to the point that he reluctantly realises that he himself is “a bit of a sham anyway” (Isherwood 85). These realisations do not fit with the image of her as naïve and childlike. However, some accounts might lead in that direction, as when she is swindled by the Polish boy which Christopher says “[...] couldn’t deceive a baby” (Isherwood 87), and in her delight from the letter for Klaus which the narrator finds “egotistical and a bit patronizing” (Isherwood 55). Wilde also claims Sally to be free from guilt, but when Christopher returns from his vacation to find her in better lodgings and with different friends: she does seem to feel guilt, as she avoids his eyes throughout the entire

conversation. Her naiveté thus appears as a part of her act, because she thinks men would rather prefer a naïve woman to one that is too insightful.

Linda Mizejewski in *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle and the Makings of Sally Bowles* notes that “Sally Bowles’s attractiveness [...] is the currency for meals and - she hopes - her entrance into show business” (58), as when she exclaims that the man she is about to go meet “[...] wants me to be his mistress, but I’ve told him I’m damned if I will till he’s paid all my debts. Why are men always such beasts?” (Isherwood 36). Sally clearly understands that sex can become an article of exchange. She tells the narrator about an “awful old Jew” who is:

‘[...] always promising me to get a contract; but he only wants to sleep with me, the old swine. I think the men in this country are awful. They’ve none of them got any money, and they expect you to let them seduce you if they give you a box of chocolates.’ (Isherwood 45)

Further, her successive failed romantic connections, with the exception of Klaus, are all aimed at achieving something. She deludes herself into believing she has feelings for the men. First it is Klaus where she exclaims “‘I’m most terribly in love with him’”, but then modifies herself “‘At least, I think I am’” (Isherwood 52). Then she meets Clive, whom she professes to adore. The narrator explains: “She was intensely earnest in believing this. It was like a dogma in a newly adopted creed: Sally adores Clive” (Isherwood 64). Stephen Wade in *Christopher Isherwood* argues that Sally is “[...] lost in her own amorality of self-delusion” and that she is “the hetaira, restricting sexuality to commerce” (52). Wade maintains that “[...] her promiscuity is a form of life she leads without an affectional motive: sensuality and ambition are her motives” (53). I agree that she uses her sexuality as an object of exchange, but I disagree with Wade in that she lives without any affectional motive. My reading of Sally

is that she conveys the impression of wanting to find a true affectionate relationship, but finds herself unable to. As to why she is unable to form a lasting romantic connection with a man, I would argue that this is rooted in her view on her attractive body as a commodity. Sally perceptively observes that:

‘But seriously, I believe I’m a sort of Ideal Woman, if you know what I mean. I’m the sort of woman who can take men away from their wives, but I could never keep anybody for long. And that’s because I’m the type which every man imagines he wants, until he gets me; and then he finds he doesn’t really, after all.’ (Isherwood 67-68)

While Sally portrays herself as a modern woman, she is still constrained by society’s norms with regards to the proper sexual conduct for a woman. In addition, the men she meets all seem to view her as a sexual object, which may lead her to believe that this is what all men will see her as.

Her notion of herself as nothing but a sexual commodity, culminates at the end of the “Sally Bowles” section, where it is implied that she has turned to prostitution. When Christopher returns from his vacation at Ruegen Island to find her in better lodgings, he seems to imply that she has resorted to actual prostitution. He asks: “‘Got a new boyfriend?’ But Sally ignored my grin. She lit a cigarette with a faint expression of distaste. ‘I’ve got to see a man on business,’ she said briefly” (Isherwood 78). She explains she might be going to Frankfurt, but when he asks if she has a job opportunity there she answers: “‘No. Not exactly.’ Sally’s voice was brief, dismissing this subject” (Isherwood 78). Moreover, she tells him that she will not try to get any film work until the autumn, to which Christopher retorts “‘[...] you seem to be moving in financial circles, nowadays – ‘” (Isherwood 79).

The cinema, where Sally one day hopes to find a profession, is one of the technologies Tim Armstrong points to as offering prosthetic rectification for a fictitious bodily deficiency. However, what occurs when Sally and Christopher are at the cinema is somewhat different. Their ironic gaze on the romantic film illusion allows Sally to attain a perspective on her own romantic illusions:

We went to a little cinema in the Bülowstrasse, where they were showing a film about a girl who sacrificed her stage career for the sake of a Great Love, Home and Children. We laughed so much that we had to leave before the end. 'I feel ever so much better now,' said Sally, as we were coming away. 'I'm glad.' 'Perhaps after all, I can't have been properly in love with him... What do you think?' 'It's rather difficult for me to say.' 'I've often thought I was in love with a man, and then I found I wasn't. But this time,' Sally's voice was regretful, 'I really did feel *sure* about it... And now, somehow, everything seems to have got a bit confused....' (Isherwood 58-59)

Linda Mizejewski is probably right when she notes that as "Outsiders to the middle-class codes of family and romance, these characters recognize the terms of the trajectory [of the plot] as Pure Ideology and can reverse the melodrama into comedy" (77). Shuttleworth, on the contrary, sees this as Sally being more than capable of "[...] mistaking fantasy for reality" (159) in a similar manner to Wilde's view of her as childlike and naive. I would argue that Mizejewski's contention is more correct, seeing that Sally is able to recognise some of her own ideas as "crazy" (Isherwood 73). Further, she is able to laugh at the romance plot of the movie, since compared to her own experiences, she can reveal the cliché as absurd.

What is startling about the portrayal of Sally Bowles, the seemingly modern, sexually liberated woman, is the artifice and theatricality surrounding her. The narrator often notes how she "poses" and how she seems to put on an act in front of people. Even her utterances

are so extreme they sound like something from the theatre. She would laugh “a silvery stage-laugh” (Isherwood 35). He also indicates how she “[...] said things like this very seriously and evidently believed she meant them” (Isherwood 61). Shuttleworth comments on her “exaggeration, theatricality and self-invention” (157), which some critics like Mizejewski have linked to the camp element evident in the character. Susan Sontag maintains that camp persons “contain a large element of artifice” and that camp favours a “relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms” (279), which can be related to Sally’s exaggerated character. An example of this is when “Sally told some really startling lies, which she obviously for the moment half-believed” (Isherwood 50). Another example is when she telephones a friend:

‘Hilloo,’ she cooed, pursing her brilliant cherry lips as though she was going to kiss the mouthpiece: ‘Ist dass Du, mein Liebling?’ Her mouth opened in a fatuously sweet smile. Fritz and I sat watching her, like a performance at the theatre. (Isherwood 35)

Aside from her theatricality, how Sally comes across to others is of great importance to her. Armstrong’s claim that the female body was focused on its display and visibility applies to the character of Sally Bowles as much as it did to Sasha Jansen. Sally is described as posing: “[...] she curled herself up delicately on the sofa like a cat, and, opening her bag, felt for a cigarette. But hardly was the pose complete before she’d jumped to her feet again” (Isherwood 40). Furthermore, her self-consciousness, despite her attractiveness is exposed by the narrator:

She was really beautiful, with her little dark head, big eyes, and finely arched nose - and so absurdly conscious of all these features. There she lay, as complacently feminine as a turtle-dove, with her poised self-conscious head and daintily arranged hands. (Isherwood 40)

Sally, in a similar manner to Sasha, is depicted as nervously conscious of her looks. She is often shown “retouch[ing] her lips and eyebrows” (Isherwood 37). When she gets into the habit of drinking as heavily as Clive, the narrator observes her eyes looking like they were boiled and that every day “[...] the layer of make-up on her face seemed to get thicker” (Isherwood 62). When complimented on her looks, she smiles her “pleased, dreamy, *self-conscious* smile” (Isherwood 77: emphasis added). In contrast to this, she has an “[...] air of not caring a curse what people thought of her” and a “take-it-or-leave-it grin on her face” on stage at the Lady Windermere (Isherwood 38). Sally is introduced to Natalia in the last passage she appears in. Afterwards Christopher confronts her about her adulterous talk. She retorts: ““People have got to take me as I am”” (Isherwood 202), which implies a personal maturation and a more liberated mental state.

In her attire there is always a startling element, something that makes her stand out, such as her “page-boy’s hat” or her emerald green fingernails. This boldness is not only a sign of individuality or originality, but an indication of her as a somewhat liberated woman. She dares to step outside the norms of fashion, to the extent that: “Everybody stared at Sally, in her canary yellow beret and shabby fur coat” (Isherwood 60). The narrator mentions surprising elements in her outfits such as “[...] a little white collar and white cuffs. They produced a kind of theatrically chaste effect, like a nun in a grand opera” (Isherwood 40). If these features may be connected to her theatricality and campness, they may also allude to her liberated state. Considering that she can choose or create her own identity, there is an underlying liberation present, a break from the Victorian conventions, a freedom which women had not been entitled to in the past.

Another break with traditional conventions is when Sally undergoes an illegal abortion after her affair with Klaus, which was a controversial and debated issue at the time. The legalisation of abortions was a part of the project of liberating women’s sexuality. A woman’s

sexuality is more contingent than a man's because of the corporeal and material realities of a pregnancy. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Sally bargains the doctor's price to get a few new nightdresses. Brian Finney may be correct in claiming: "Her abortion, which should have linked her to the images of disease and death that attach themselves to the remaining representatives of a dying society, leaves her virtually untouched, the most ephemeral member of the lost" (149). However, as Christopher leaves Berlin after the abortion, the reader is not told exactly how she endured the subsequent weeks. She tells the nurses that the father is Christopher, because she doesn't want to be "[...] looked down on and pitied as the poor betrayed girl who gets abandoned by her lover" (Isherwood 71), which is the reality of the situation. After the abortion Sally's theatricality, but also her insight is evident when she exclaims how marvellous it would be to be a mother and how she would put the baby to bed and then go out "[...] and make love to filthy old men to get the money to pay for its food and clothes" (Isherwood 73). This indicates the destructive economic reality of such a situation. Stephen Wade comments that when the "[...] pregnancy has to be fully realized, she keeps the reality at a distance by self-dramatization" (53). Nevertheless, she does understand her absurdity when she admits that these are "crazy ideas". "Having babies makes you feel awfully primitive, like a sort of wild animal or something, defending its young. Only trouble is, I haven't any young to defend" (Isherwood 73-74). Although her utterances may be theatrical, there is a pain and vulnerability present, as well as a degree of insight into the situation.

Frl. Kost, another lodger at Frl. Schroeder's likewise found herself in unfortunate circumstances. Frl. Schroeder recites the story in a casual manner, implying that although the operation was illegal, it was a rather trivial matter:

'Why, Herr Issyvoo, do you know what she used to be? A servant girl! And then she got to be on intimate terms with her employer and one fine day, of course, she found

herself in certain circumstances... And when that little difficulty was removed, she had to go trot-trot...' (Isherwood 17-18)

This passage aptly shows not only the unsurprising action of having "the difficulty removed". The story portrays the tragedy of such situations, where Frl. Kost's 'difficulty' forced her into prostitution. This seems to be implied in Sally's story as well.

While one might argue that Sally's life as a modern, liberated woman is more than a pose, her liberated state appears to be somewhat destructive, leaving her unable to find happiness. Additionally, her idea of self-worth seems to be rooted in men viewing her as a sexual object. All her efforts fail, and she has no close relationships, except from the one with the narrator, which also comes to an end.

The Jewess Natalia from the Landauer family is the other prominent female figure in the novel, juxtaposed to Sally. She claims that she wants to be freed from the constraints of the traditional female role. Natalia exclaims to Christopher:

'If I want,' added Natalia earnestly, 'I shall go away with the man I love and I shall live with him; even if we cannot become married it will not matter. Then I must be able to do all for myself, you understand? It is not enough to say: I have my Arbitur, I have my degree at university. He will answer: 'Please, where is my dinner?'

(Isherwood 182)

While she says she would live with a man she was not married to, she thinks about learning how to cook for her man, which is expected in a traditional patriarchal relationship. This juxtaposition between her ostensibly modern values and remnants of traditional values is additionally visualized through her views on women changing partners:

'Do not misunderstand me, please. I do not admire the women who is going always from one man to another - that is all so,' Natalia made a gesture of distaste, 'so degenerated, I find.' 'You don't think women should be allowed to change their minds?' 'I do not know. I do not understand such questions... But it is degenerated.'

(Isherwood 183)

This illustrates the dividedness in her view on the role of gender relations and how women should act. Wilde contends that she may be the most ambiguous character in the novel (75). She seemingly wants women to be free from constraint and wants herself to be seen as a modern woman, but finds sexual liberation degenerated. Christopher maintains that she even "[...] avoided all contacts, direct or indirect" (Isherwood 183). In her unwillingness to touch Christopher lies another constraint that is never explained.

Natalia and Sally are the only prominent young female characters in the novel. In the last section of the novel, the narrator introduces them to each other as an "experiment" (Isherwood 200). He appears to know beforehand how disastrous the meeting would be, because of their contrasting personalities. Natalia is described as trying to look older, and had put on a hat as an "unconscious parody of Sally's page-boy cap" (Isherwood 200).

During the rest of the interview I suffered mental pins and needles. Natalia hardly spoke at all. Sally prattled in her murderous German, making what she imagined to be light general conversation, chiefly about the English film industry. But as every anecdote involved explaining that somebody was someone else's mistress, that this one drank and that one took drugs, this didn't make the atmosphere any more agreeable. I found myself getting increasingly annoyed with both of them - with Sally for her endless silly and pornographic talk; with Natalia for being such a prude.

(Isherwood 201-02)

The passage above shows the dichotomy in the two young female characters in the novel. By juxtaposing these two characters, their personalities become hyperbolic. Christopher reveals them as 'adulterous' and 'prudish' by comparison, signifying the two exaggerated ways of perceiving women.

Other characters portrayed as living on the margins of society in the novel, are the bisexual male working-class Otto Nowak and the homosexual middle-class Peter Wilkinson. Claude J. Summers comments that "[...] the aggressive heterosexuality of 'Sally Bowles' is juxtaposed to the spoiled homosexual idyll of 'On Ruegen Island'" (30). Peter and Otto's relationship is never overtly specified as a homosexual one. However, it is implied to the reader, as they share a room, Peter is often depicted as jealous and he says that when he first met Otto, he thought they would live together for the rest of their lives (Isherwood 123). Peter probably ventured to Berlin to live out his homosexual nature in a more liberal environment than back in England. Rainer Emig claims that in addition to "the liberal attitudes towards homosexuality", the opportunity to come closer to the working classes was an alluring trait of Germany to foreigners (52). Jonathan Fryer claims in "Sexuality in Isherwood" that the British upper and middle classes of the thirties "[...] have often manifested a tendency to be sexually attracted by those from the 'lower orders', who are seen to be free of the trappings of civilisation or refinement" (348), which reflects Peter's attraction to Otto. Furthermore, Fryer contends that Otto, a character of bisexual features, "[...] is a good example of those lads who drifted into what is essentially male prostitution as the economically sensible thing to do in times of great unemployment" (348). Rainer Emig seems to agree with this: "Unemployed heterosexual, working-class boys featured strongly in [gay life in Berlin], and were not averse to same-sex escapades, provided their middle-class customers paid the bill" (49).

It is possible to view Otto as a complimentary figure to Sally, where they both are described as attractive and as using their bodies as 'commodities'. It is clear from the

relationship with Peter that Otto uses his flexible sexuality to gain assets. Peter says that nothing will ever change, “Unless, of course, I stop giving him money” (Isherwood 122), and he has told Christopher that he pays Otto ten marks a day to keep him company. Furthermore, “[...] Peter has been talked into ordering Otto a new suit, which will cost a hundred and eighty, as well as a pair of shoes, a dressing-gown, and a hat. In return for this outlay, Otto has volunteered to break off his relations with the teacher” (Isherwood 119). Alan Wilde contends that Otto is: “A sexual sponger, indiscriminately prostituting himself to women and men” (70). While Peter tries unsuccessfully to dominate Otto, the relationship is clearly mutually exploiting. Peter is able to use Otto, as he is a victim of his financial situation, and Otto exploits Peter to obtain money and gifts. Otto’s rather lax sexual norms show the more destructive aspects of a liberated sexuality, which does not stem from an aspiration to break with repressive conventions, but grows out of financial necessity. After Otto leaves Peter at Ruegen Island, he finds a divorcee to sponge on. He receives a new suit from her, and tells Christopher that he is now seeing a lot of her, since “Her uncle’s left her some money. Perhaps, in the spring, we’ll get married” (Isherwood 165)

Another feature that connects Otto with Sally is the theatricality present in the characters. Peter Thomas in “‘Camp’ and Politics in Isherwood’s Fiction” claims that Otto is “[...] self-consciously playing the role of a boyish charmer, whose posing quickly degenerates into shallow narcissism“(127). When Christopher visits the Nowaks, Otto is described as performing when he sees him:

‘Why, it’s Christoph!’ Otto, as usual, had begun acting at once. His face was slowly illuminated by a sunrise of extreme joy. His cheeks dimpled with smiles. He sprang forward, throwing one arm around my neck, wringing my hand: ‘Christoph, you old soul, where have you been hiding all this time?’ (Isherwood 131)

The entire Nowak family, except from the Nazi Lothar is portrayed as theatrical, however Otto is the most exaggerated. “‘But, mother!’ Otto ran into the kitchen, took her around the waist and began kissing her: ‘Poor little Mummy, little Mutti, little Muttchen,’ he crooned, in tones of the most mawkish solicitude” (Isherwood 134-35).

Otto is also trying to show off his body at its best, in a manner similar to Sally. “He began to run along the beach [...] very gracefully, displaying his figure to the best possible advantage” (Isherwood 118). When Christopher moves in with the Nowaks, after breakfast Otto would “[...] strip off his pyjamas and do exercises, shadow-box or stand on his head. He flexed his muscles for my admiration” (Isherwood 142). Moreover, he is as careful as Sally in his choice of clothes, where choosing a tie “[...] took him half an hour at least to choose one of them and to knot it to his satisfaction” (Isherwood 148). However, Christopher comments on Otto’s new brown suit as “[...] vulgar beyond words; so where his lilac spats and his pointed yellow shoes” (Isherwood 167)

Stephen Wade sees Otto as a representative of “[...] the self lost without the capacity to love or without relationships in a capitalist society where one is a kind of commodity” (55). His mother clearly knows that the money he gives her comes from something amoral, as she exclaims: “‘Why, if he [Christopher] knew where that twenty marks came from - and plenty more besides - he’d disdain to stay in the same house with you another minute; and quite right too!’” (Isherwood 135-36).

As mentioned earlier, Wilde comments on Sally’s and Otto’s shared “animal mindset”, where he views them as adaptable, free from worry, anxiety and guilt arguing that as Sally and Otto sense less, they also suffer less (69). The narrator continuously comments on Otto’s animalistic traits: “Like many very animal people, he has considerable instinctive powers of healing - when he chooses to use them” (Isherwood 107). Furthermore, he moves “[...]”

fluidly, effortlessly; his gestures have the savage, unconscious grace of a cruel, elegant animal” (Isherwood 101). He is also “naturally and healthily selfish, like an animal” (Isherwood 112), and even utters “cries of animal triumph” (Isherwood 155). Otto’s behaviour needs to be put in the context of his economic condition. As a working-class man without employment, his best chance at survival might well be to act selfishly and exploit others.

Contrary to Wilde’s view of Otto as “free from worry” and anxiety, in my reading of this character he clearly suffers mental distress and a fear of death. Wilde is probably right in observing: “If, then, Otto is an animal, he is a sick animal” (71). When Christopher comes to live with the Nowaks, Otto tells him of a hallucination that frightens him deeply, where he sees a great, black hand approaching him. He believes that the next time he sees it, he will die. He even cuts his wrist, in a desperate moment of self-pity. He exclaims: “‘What does it matter, Christoph? I’m no good... What’ll become of me, do you suppose, when I’m older?’” (Isherwood 162). If Otto looks to his parents to see what will become of him, it is a depressing sight. Frau Nowak is suffering from a severe case of tuberculosis, while his father seems to be an alcoholic, both fates connected to their poverty.

Both Otto and Sally are assigned somewhat grotesque and slightly ridiculous features by the narrator, signifying the destructiveness of their sexual natures. Sally’s hands are depicted as “much stained from cigarette-smoking and as dirty as a little girl’s” (Isherwood 34-35), and later as “[...] nervous, veined and very thin - the hands of a middle-aged woman. The green finger-nails seemed not to belong to them at all; to have settled on them by chance - like hard, bright, ugly little beetles” (Isherwood 43). Otto, in his fight with Peter, is described as “really hideous, positively deformed with malice” (Isherwood 112). On one occasion the narrator laughs at Otto “[...] squatting there on the bed, so animally alive that his

talk of death seemed ludicrous, like a description of a funeral by a painted clown” (Isherwood 144).

All these stories show various characters playing out their lives on what is ostensibly a scene of liberation, but which is shown to have a dark underside of economic necessity and exploitation: The bisexual prostitute Otto, the promiscuous Sally and the prudish Natalia, as the narrator characterizes her. The characters of Sally and Otto reveal differing aspects of the liberation project. They reveal liberation to be different depending on gender, class and economic situation. Otto does not seem to pursue liberation, but needs to use his body as a source of income. Sally, in a similar manner, tries to use her body to gain access to the movie-industry. However, Sally would survive financially without this, because she is an English middle-class woman with fairly wealthy parents. Sally seems to seek liberation, to exemplify the new, modern woman, but is unable to find happiness. This, and the fact that Otto is concerned with survival, not liberation, puts the liberation scene in the novel in a rather bleak and ironic light. Both Sally and Otto are described as “acting” their personalities. They are both isolated from human relationships and exhibit an element of destructiveness when it comes to their sexual natures. Significantly it is only the “prudish” Natalia who is able to escape and find happiness in the novel. At Bernard’s party, which Christopher declares as “the dress-rehearsal of a disaster” where everyone is “ultimately doomed” (Isherwood 219), Natalia is in love, studying art and living in Paris.

## Disciplining Physical Culture

The previous subsection discussed the personal and sexual liberation projects in the characters of Sally and Otto, and the representation of Berlin as a ‘mythic’ site for liberation. This subsection, however, will examine the novel’s portrayal of various examples of the physical culture movements, as discussed in the introductory chapter, and their utopian search for liberation. Moreover, it will explore the appropriation of these by other organizations and the overall concern about disciplining and cultivating the body to achieve the desired perfection. The focus will remain on Otto, but will also explore some ideological positions represented in the novel: the Nazi ideology in the doctor, the Communist’s pathfinder-group, and middle-class ideology through Peter’s public school upbringing. This subsection will explore the tension between liberation and suppression in the various characters in *Goodbye to Berlin* through examining the effect of physical culture movements and the possible oppressive elements latent in it and in political organizations.

Liberation was always in tension with the constraining and potentially repressive, aspect of physical culture. Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky assert in the introduction to *Physical Culture, Power, and the Body* that “[...] physical culture appears to be a free, autonomous activity incorporating the body in ways that are personally enriching. But [...] it is simultaneously a site of constraints and contestation” (9). In a similar manner Hau, as already noted, contends that many Germans “[...] scrutinized and disciplined their bodies in the utopian search for perfect health and beauty” (1). To gain control over their bodies and to make it more beautiful, forms of physical discipline became important, especially for the men. Further, Hau argues that people:

[...] attempted to regain a sense of agency and assert control over their lives by means of bodily discipline and other health measures; and men in particular hoped that

healthy living and natural therapies would increase their physical fitness and mental performance levels. (Hau 3)

Cultivation of the body became an alternative source of social esteem outside of the traditional education system and the professional sphere, because a fit body was supposed to correlate with high morality (Hau 4). The historian George L. Mosse in *The Image of Man* contends that a fit body was the indicator of a moral masculine character (162). This view is developed in *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany*, where Michael Hau asserts: “Life reformers agreed that physical beauty was the expression of perfect health and morality and that people should strive to achieve the ideals of physical beauty that were propagated in the contemporary medical and life reform literature” (44). There was an accepted conjunction of the masculine healthy fit body modelled on the Greek ideals, and a strong character and force of will (Mosse 162). These ideals from the Greeks had already been applied by the turn-of-the-century “popular hygienic literature” which:

[...] presented an aesthetized version of the ideal human body, as regular physicians and life reformers alike espoused the bodily norms of Greek and Roman antiquity. Regarding beauty as the expression of healthy and normal organic functioning and ugliness as a sign of disease, they offered gender-specific representations of the ideal: statues of Hercules and Apollo embodied the masculine ideals of beauty and strength, and Venus gave form to the feminine ideal. (Hau 33)

The cultivation as well as the discipline of the body reached its zenith in Fascism, as Mosse points out: “The rise of modern masculinity had always centered on the cultivation of the human body, a hallmark of the modern as over against earlier ideals of masculinity, and this concern also reached its climax in fascism” (160). Mosse maintains that physical exercise was critical in producing the Fascist man, because Fascism, like the ideology of the health

reformers, acknowledged the sentiment that a healthy, beautiful and muscular body was the sign of a manly spirit (162). Moreover, Mosse contends that Communists, in a similar manner, promoted an “aggressive, powerful masculinity” and that the German Communist was expected to promote the image of a “disciplined fighter” (126-27). This implies a connection between the Fascist and Communist views of the body.

As scholars have shown, the ostensibly liberating intentions of the Weimar body culture were appropriated and to some extent fed into the construction of the Fascist state (McDonald 63). Ian McDonald asserts that prior to the mid 1930s the German Fascists’ main aspiration was to form the German people “[...] into ideal fascist citizens and soldiers” (60). To engage the mass population the German Nazi Party adopted features from the Weimar era’s abundant physical culture movement (McDonald 63). The National Socialists also modelled the physical education programmes for the young on the development of sports and the physical culture movement, which had been focused on “body experience” and “fitness sports” (McDonald 60). Moreover, after the Italian model of sports and physical exercise, the Nazis adopted a centralized sports system. However, some of these were inherited from the Weimar era of physical culture:

They embraced high performance sport without reservation, employing the latest coaching techniques, technology, sports medicine, and engaged in sports selection procedures and developed sports schools, building on an efficiently organized sporting system inherited from the Weimar Republic. (McDonald 66)

In addition to these measures, the Nazis adopted some of the organized activities first introduced by the physical culture movement, such as public dance performances. However, the content was now different. Thus, “The centrepiece of a festival of gymnastics in Nuremburg in 1929 was a production involving 66,000 working men and women in a

spectacular drama of a proletarian storm troop” which set out to free people, socially, politically, intellectually or otherwise, from their bondage (McDonald 63). The Nazis, however, applied such performances as a part of spectacular illustrations of Nazi ideology.

In addition to these convictions about the cultivation of the body and the correlating performances adopted by the Nazis, the Hitler Youth Movement came into being in the 1930s and expanded quickly. “The most common activities in Hitler Youth involved pre-military forms of training, such as camping and trekking, with war games played out complete with the rituals of a real military camp” (McDonald 67). Sports were used not only as a means to make people ready for combat, but additionally to promote a sense of community. Mosse asserts that in Germany Nazi educators promoted sports because they enhanced a “[...] manly joy in life that derived from true comradeship” and that model male comradeship was the basis of a strong state (161).

Sports, and other elements of the physical culture movements, such as bodily ideals present in Germany in the 1930s are portrayed in *Goodbye to Berlin* through the various characters. Isherwood’s novel shows the means and rhetoric used by the reformers, and the appropriation of these by political parties. Further, it explores the diversity of the ostensibly liberating features of the physical culture movement, and as we shall see, how they were intercepted by the rise of the Nazi regime. The novel ironizes and caricatures some of the characters in a project of uncovering the negative aspects of body culture. Christopher’s story of Berlin as a mythic haven for the liberated, the lost, the outcasts and the doomed, ends in bleakness and corporeal repression.

Some elements adopted from the physical culture movement by the Nazis in the Hitler Youth Movement mentioned above, are present in the passage where Christopher and Peter are shown talking to two Nazi boys from Baabe:

They [told] us about their field-exercises and military games. ‘You’re preparing for war,’ says Peter indignantly [...] ‘Excuse me,’ one of the boys contradicts, ‘that’s quite wrong. The Führer does not want war. Our programme stands for peace, with honour. All the same....’ he adds wistfully, his face lightening up, ‘war can be fine you know! Think of the ancient Greeks!’ ‘The ancient Greeks,’ I object, ‘didn’t use poison gas.’ The boys are quite scornful of this quibble. One of them answers loftily, ‘That’s a purely technical question.’ (Isherwood 121-22)

Through the narrator’s ironic stance, this passage shows the Nazi boy’s delusional eagerness but also their reluctance to be confronted with the possible reality of the situation. The distorted yearning for war is further satirised in the later section “A Berlin Diary: Winter 1932-3” where a drunk Nazi exclaims: “‘Blood must flow!’”, to which his girlfriend reassures him “‘But, *of course*, it’s going to flow, darling [...] the Leader’s promised that in our programme” (Isherwood 245). The depiction of Hitler’s later rhetoric accentuates the Nazi party’s atrocious development.

The young Nazi’s parallel between the glorified ancient Greeks and the Nazi movement’s use of bodies in war in the passage above, is further satirised by Christopher’s comment. As Mosse argues, the Nazi movement applied the Greek ideals of the body in their vision of the masculine man. “The nude male body reflecting the classical ideal of beauty became [...] an important National Socialist symbol” (Mosse 160). Hitler wrote with “unbridled enthusiasm for manly beauty” in *Mein Kampf* “[...] that the Greek ideal of beauty is immortal because it combined the most glorious bodily beauty with a sparkling spirit and a noble soul” (Mosse 161).

Another political association Christopher encounters and satirizes is represented by the Communists and their pathfinder group. Christopher visits the pathfinder group where all the

boys are “[...] in a state of heroic semi-nudity, wearing the shortest of shorts and the thinnest of shirts or singlets, although the weather is so cold” (Isherwood 245). This emphasis on displaying the body seems to be not only an element in Fascist organisations, but also in the Communist wing, which shows that the physical culture movement left its mark in other political areas. They showed Christopher pictures of the Communist boys “[...] all taken with the camera tilted upwards, from beneath, so that they look like epic giants, in profile against enormous clouds” (Isherwood 244). This attention to their appearances as majestic and heroic along with the fact that Christopher is able to determine the devices used, satirizes the whole rhetoric used by the organization. Christopher is also shown their magazine with “[...] articles on hunting, tracking, and preparing food – all written in super-enthusiastic style, with a curious underlying note of hysteria, as though the actions described were a part of a religious or erotic ritual” (Isherwood 244-45). Christopher does not only actively satirise the rhetoric used in their magazine, but this passage furthermore shows an implied connection to the physical culturist’s accentuation of a relation to nature through the activities portrayed. However, the “hunting” and “tracking” can also be related to skills needed as soldiers.

The Communist Rudi airs a rather dismissive view of women, when Christopher asks him if there are any girls in his pathfinder group:

‘Women are no good,’ he told me bitterly. ‘They spoil everything. They haven’t got the spirit of adventure. Men understand each other much better when they’re alone together. Uncle Peter (that’s our Scoutmaster) says women should stay at home and mend socks. That’s all they’re fit for!’ (Isherwood 241)

To this Christopher asks if Uncle Peter is a Communist, which Rudi affirms. Christopher then adds: “I think perhaps I was mixing him up with somebody else...” (Isherwood 241). This ironic description of a rather inimical attitude towards women reveals a typical homo-social

organization. Christopher's comment further makes the connection to the Fascist view of a woman's place in the domestic sphere, analogising the Communist view and Nazi view. In Nazism "[...] women and children had their predetermined place in family life, and the man as activist was filled with a dynamic that, in service of a higher cause, could not easily be confined to the home" (Mosse 167). This was how Nazism resolved the tension between commitment to the family and to the cause, which "[...] subordinat[ed] women and children to the dominance of the man" (Mosse 167). This correlates with Armstrong's claim that women could be liberated to some extent by male body reformers, but not to the degree that their role as guardians for the future generation is at risk (110), which further points to the shared constraining view of women in both political associations and health reform movements.

As an illustration of the impact of the physical culture movements in Germany at the time, the healthy, animally alive Otto Nowak is portrayed in the novel. As mentioned earlier, Michael Hau claims that for people without higher education "[...] the cultivated body became an alternative source of social distinction" (33). This observation may apply to the character of Otto, a working-class German, who is rigorously trying to improve parts of his body through arduous exercise. However, Otto's application of these ideals is divergent from the norms promoted. Christopher comments that "Otto was outrageously conceited. Peter [had] bought him a chest-expander, and, with this, he exercises solemnly at all hours of the day" (Isherwood 101). Moreover, Otto is described as looking absurd:

Otto certainly has a superb pair of shoulders and chest for a boy of his age - but his body is nevertheless somehow slightly ridiculous. The beautiful ripe lines of the torso taper away too suddenly to his rather absurd little buttocks and spindly, immature legs. And these struggles with the chest-expander are daily making him more and more top-heavy. (Isherwood 101-02)

Otto's body is not altogether the epitome of masculinity with his "absurd little buttocks and spindly, immature legs", making his body seem rather distorted and unnatural, a "degenerate type", as the Nazi doctor reasons. His body building exercise is not motivated by the idea of producing or reproducing as advocated at the time. This places him to some extent outside the norms provided by health reformers who wanted to build able bodies fit for work and as predecessors for future generations. His motive is probably connected to his view of his body as an object of exchange, which needs to be shown at its best, as he prostitutes himself to both men and women. Furthermore, by ridiculing Otto's muscular shoulders, the narrator implies a disdain towards the assumed conflation between morality and the 'perfect' body.

The Nazi doctor embodies the ideas about a perfect reproductive body as he considers Otto a "bad degenerate type" with a "criminal head" (Isherwood 114-15), probably because of Otto's sexuality and his bodily deviance. The doctor's proposed remedy is to put him into a labour camp. To this Christopher asks ironically: "And what are you going to do with them when you've got them there? You say that they can't be altered, anyhow, so I suppose you'd keep them locked up for the rest of their lives?" (Isherwood 114). The doctor does not reply, but "[...] laughed delightedly, as though this were a joke against himself which he could, nevertheless, appreciate" (Isherwood 114). The doctor is described as "[...] a little fair-haired man with ferrety blue eyes and a small moustache" (Isherwood 109). By ridiculing and making the doctor similar to a caricature of the antagonistic Nazi, with both his conceited utterances and his physical appearance, the narrator criticizes both the ideals promoted by health reformers and Nazism.

Christopher continues to castigate the doctor when he connects the homosexual or bisexual's health with their sexuality:

‘I understand them. Every week, one or two such boys come to my clinic, and I must operate on them for adenoids, or mastoid, or poisoned tonsils. So, you see, I know them through and through!’ ‘I should have thought it would be more accurate to say you know their throats and ears.’ Perhaps my German wasn’t quite equal to rendering the sense of this last remark. At all events the doctor ignored it completely. ‘I know this type of boy very well,’ he repeated. ‘It is a bad degenerate type. You cannot make anything out of these boys. Their tonsils are almost invariably diseased.’ (Isherwood 114-15)

Since the boys engage in amoral conduct, they will somehow be connected with disease, as expressed in the passage. This indicates the Fascist view of a conflation between health and morality, which is again deflated by Christopher’s sarcastic comment and by the Doctor’s unconcealed disregard for Christopher’s corrections. Furthermore, the doctor visibly tries to discipline the boys whilst they are playing at the beach:

[...] at once [he] took command, assigning to us the places where we were to stand. He was very firm about this - instantly ordering me back when I attempted to edge a little nearer, so as not to have such a long distance to throw. Then it appeared that Peter was throwing in quite the wrong way: the little doctor stopped the game in order to demonstrate this. Peter was amused at first, and then rather annoyed. He retorted with considerable rudeness, but the doctor’s skin wasn’t pierced. ‘You hold yourself so stiff,’ he explained, smiling. ‘That is an error. You try again, and I will keep my hand on your shoulder-blade to see whether you really relax... No. Again you do not!’ He seemed delighted, as if this failure of Peter’s were a special triumph for his own methods of teaching. (Isherwood 109)

In this passage, the Doctor's aim to discipline is evident, as he both tries to order Christopher and to correct Peter's throwing ability. Since Peter is homosexual, this "disciplining" takes on another level of significance when the doctor seems pleased to find himself unable to correct him, which again points to his remark: "You cannot make anything out of these boys" (Isherwood 115). The passage shows both the Nazi ideal of disciplining bodies, and their inability to do so. As noted earlier, the doctor would like to put those unable to alter into labour camps. Mosse contends that discipline was paramount in Fascism (162). In agreement with this the doctor announces: "What people need is discipline, self-control. I can tell you this as a doctor. I know it from my own experience" (Isherwood 111).

Peter's recollections from his childhood add to the image of a physically frail body and damaged psyche produced by a middle-class upbringing and the mental and corporeal discipline of the British public-school system. Through the doctor's remarks on Peter's unsuccessful physical accomplishments and his own recollections of his childhood, Peter appears to be seeking not only sexual liberation in Berlin, but additionally a healthier lifestyle. This conviction seems appropriate to Peter's upbringing, during which he "[...] with his mother's encouragement, developed heart trouble" (Isherwood 102) and he frequently suffered from nervous break-downs before examinations. He suffered from nervous twitches, had trouble with his left eye and a rash on his thigh. These experiences of failing health and a distant family have left their mark on Peter, as Christopher comments: "Peter will be sitting at the table, hunched up, his downward-curving mouth lined with childhood fears: a perfect case-picture of his twisted, expensive upbringing" (Isherwood 107). Christopher's comment and Peter's recollections add to the image of the British middle-class' public school education aimed at producing useful subjects. Peter explains that he was never really able to fit in at Oxford, where he somehow "[...] 'always struck the wrong note'" (Isherwood 103). He never became the intended healthy 'product' of this institution.

Peter explains to Christopher that he went to Berlin for a cheaper analyst than the one he had in Britain. Psycho-therapies, as Michael Hau asserts, was one of the new elements in life reform movements (1). Nonetheless, Peter's experiences with therapy is ridiculed, as he reminisces about his first analyst: the "[...] orthodox Freudian with a sleepy, ill-tempered voice and very large feet [...] that was quite uninterested in anything except Chinese art" (Isherwood 105-06). Thereafter Peter finds another analyst, a white-haired Finnish lady whom he frequently told lies that he later admitted to. He left her after two years, and the analysis was never completed. The novel suggests other reasons for Peter seeking refuge in Berlin, not only could he practice his sexuality more freely, also it seems as though he adheres to the convictions of the health reformers. Christopher describes Peter and Otto while they are playing at the beach:

Throughout the long, hot morning, he never sat still for a moment. He and Otto swam, dug, wrestled, ran races or played with a rubber football, up and down the sands. Peter is skinny, but wiry. In his games with Otto, he holds his own, it seems, only by an immense, furious effort of will. It is Peter's will against Otto's body. Otto is his whole body; Peter is only his head. Otto moves fluidly, effortlessly; his gestures have the savage, unconscious grace of a cruel, elegant animal. Peter drives himself about, lashing his stiff, ungraceful body with the whip of his merciless will. (Isherwood 101)

The juxtaposition between the elegant animalistic working-class Otto and the stiff, ungraceful middle-class Peter creates a hyperbolic contrast between the two. Wilde sees Peter as "[...] the neurotic intellectual of the 1930's", maintaining that he is "[...] another of Isherwood's versions of the Truly Weak Man" (71). I would argue that these rigorous activities show him trying to cure himself of a traumatic middle-class upbringing and the rather frail institutionalized subject he has become.

While Peter, Otto and Christopher are vacationing at Ruegen Island, they encounter the inmates of a holiday home for children from the Hamburg slums. “The children sing as they march - patriotic songs about the Homeland - in voices as shrill as birds” (Isherwood 117). On the beach where they swim, sun-bathe and play games, which are some of the activities promoted by physical culture, they encounter bodies associated with nationalism and the Nazi movement. This signifies the connection between the two, and the imminent threat of the latter. At the beach, “Many of the forts are also decorated with the Nazi swastika” (Isherwood 110). Christopher comments: “The other morning I saw a child of about five years old, stark naked, marching along all by himself with a swastika flag over his shoulder and singing ‘Deutschland über alles’” (Isherwood 110). In this passage, the criticism made by Christopher of disciplining subjects is increased by the subject being an innocent child.

In the last section of *Goodbye to Berlin*, “A Berlin Diary”, Christopher travels to a reformatory, where one of his students, Herr Brink is a master. Herr Brink is ironically depicted as a “[...] small, broad-shouldered man, with the chin, dead-looking fair hair, mild eyes, and bulging, over-heavy forehead of the German intellectual. He wears sandals and an open-necked shirt” (Isherwood 242). By Christopher’s physical description of him, he is implied to be a bohemian, and a health reformer, but is ironically the master of a reformatory aimed at disciplining children and young delinquents. Christopher finds Herr Brink giving physical instruction to mentally deficient children:

With a certain melancholy pride, he pointed out the various cases: one little boy was suffering from hereditary syphilis - he had a fearful squint; another, the child of elderly drunkards, couldn’t stop laughing. They clambered about the wall-bars like monkeys, laughing and chattering, seemingly quite happy. (Isherwood 242)

In this passage the belief in eugenics manifests itself, as the ‘monkey’ children are all products of their ‘degenerate’ parents. The reformatory is fenceless and Christopher is told that the boys hardly ever run away, to which Christopher asks: “‘But isn’t there a kind of natural instinct for freedom?’” (Isherwood 242). Herr Brink responds that “[...] the boys soon lose it. The system helps them to lose it” (Isherwood 242). The headmaster’s comment that they soon lose the instinct for freedom is a clear parallel to the end of the ‘mythic’ Berlin as a site for freedom, experimentation and breaking with conventions and an anticipation of the oppressive totalitarian regime to come.

Considering that two of the main characters portrayed in this novel, in addition to the narrator, are expatriates from Britain, there is an implicit critique of Britain, in particular British middle-class conventions, as well as the critique of Berlin already explored. It is implied that the promiscuous Sally and homosexual Peter would be met with more hostility in Britain, and have been compelled to go to the experimental Berlin to live out their personal aspirations. The critique of Berlin itself correlates with the destructiveness of the individual’s pursuit of sexual and personal liberation in the characters of Otto, Peter and Sally. On the surface it looks as if they are liberated where they show a rejection of traditional conventions and exploration of sexual liberation. Nonetheless, in the context the novel portrays, marked by contradictions, suppressive remnants of the past and imminent repressive measures, their pursuits are left unfulfilled.

Aimed at liberating bodies, the physical culture movements are shown as perpetuating repressive elements, such as gender conventions, the emphasis on beauty and the need for discipline in order to achieve the ideal body. This restraint correlates with the limitations of personal and sexual liberation expressed in the characters. The novel portrays a rather bleak and destructive exploration of both sexual liberation and the seemingly liberating physical culture movement. However, the novel appears to critique not merely the physical culture

movements, but additionally the other ideologies connected to corporeal repression: the Communists, middle-class ideology exemplified by the British public-school education and the Nazis. Through the devices used by the narrator, the caricature and satire emerges as a critique of the various characters connected to them, where they are all portrayed as rather inane. Thus it seems to be a part of the novel's project to critique the extreme, totalitarian movements and the discipline they imposed, on both the extreme Right and Left. While the narrative might be accused of reducing the seriousness of these controlling movements, as their descriptions are filled with derisive satire, I would argue that through the later sections where their members are persecuted, the severity of the situation is materialized. Additionally, the narrator appears to accept the gravity when the Jewish Bernard Landauer shows him a menacing hate-letter: "The Nazis may write as schoolboys, but they're capable of anything. That's why they're so dangerous. People laugh at them, right up to the last moment..." (Isherwood 221).

The narrator might use irony as a device to detach himself from the political turmoil he encounters in Berlin. He already claimed his objectivity and detachment from what he depicts by the famous phrase: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking" (Isherwood 9). However, throughout this analysis I have pointed to his excessive use of irony and other intentionally derisive devices where he has made the other characters play out as caricatures, a rhetoric which seems at cross-purposes with the stated aim of being objective and detached.

Regardless of the satire emphasised above, the movements are all implicitly criticised as participants in the suppression of bodies, where they seek to discipline bodies into compliant subjects. The novel sets out to reveal these as detrimental to their subjects. None of the associations or movements portrayed are successful in achieving the perfect, yet natural, healthy and exemplary bodies they set out to improve: instead they are all incorporated in a

systematic suppression of bodies. Nonetheless, compared to Nazism, the others are portrayed as rather innocuous. Given the narrative time spent on depictions of the violent oppression from the Nazis depicted in the novel, as well as Christopher's concern for his gay, Jewish and Communist friends which are some of the ill-fated victims in the novel, the oppressive Nazi force is the one which is the greatest threat to liberation. In choosing main characters who are the a part of the doomed minority with regards to ethnicity, political beliefs or sexuality, the novel sets out to portray Berlin as the desired site for freedom, but also how these had to succumb to the quelling Nazi force.

The ending of *Goodbye to Berlin*, where Christopher leaves Berlin is significant to the differing projects of liberation the novel portrays. The last section of the novel, "A Berlin Diary: Winter 1932-3", is bleak, filled with short sections describing how subjects were turned into disciplined objects of the Nazi oppressing force, or persecuted because of their political beliefs or race, and how the public have been desensitized to these appalling atrocities. Christopher exclaims: "Berlin is a skeleton which aches in the cold: it is my own skeleton aching" (Isherwood 230). This declaration implies that Berlin as a site for various projects of liberation is now left void and damaged, as is the narrator and his friends' pursuit of this freedom. Now that the Berlin he knew, or thinks he knew is extinct, and his fellow Britons have left, he too departs. There is no hope left, unless you acclimatise yourself, like Frl. Schroeder. In his closing observations, "[...] the city, which glowed so brightly and invitingly in the night sky above the plains, is cold and cruel and dead. Its warmth is an illusion, a mirage of the winter desert" (Isherwood 231). The 'mythic' Berlin's attraction for expatriates as a site for liberation and progressiveness is something artificial, a "mirage", which is finally left extinct.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the tensions between corporeal liberation and suppression which can be seen to play themselves out in *Good Morning*, *Midnight* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, and to relate these to contemporary perceptions and debates with regard to the body. The novels have been read in the context of the ostensibly liberal climate of the time, exploring how an overall aspiration to achieve more liberated modes of life come into conflict with remnants of repressive conventions but also with new constraints, stemming from the demands and pressures of commodity culture as well as the rise of new oppressive ideologies.

The female characters explored in this study have shown both traces of liberation and repression in differing ways. They seem to seek liberation, however, there are still factors constraining this objective. Both central female characters discussed, Sasha and Sally, are constrained by their present and previous relations with men. Additionally, they share other constraints, such as commodity culture's prevailing norms of the 'perfect' body. The characters explored in this thesis all seem to be self-consciously preoccupied with how they can improve their bodies and with how others perceive them. Commodity culture's goal to promote the body as 'lacking' seems to have been achieved in these portrayals. Both Sasha and Sally also appear to view themselves, willingly or not, as bodies with a certain capital, as sexual objects in a patriarchal society. This shows liberation from conventional constraints as having particular importance for women, but also the precarious and contingent situation women find themselves in.

The central female characters discussed struggle with their sexual liberation, suffering from failed romantic relationships and their status as objects. Furthermore, Sally, Sasha and Otto are all described as posing, involved in a project of displaying their bodies to their best advantage, as the sexual 'commodities' they themselves and society perceive them. All

characters discussed somehow embody the destructive aspects of sexual liberation as they drift into some type of prostitution. Where Sasha engages in a mild form of prostitution, Sally is implied to have become a prostitute and Otto explicitly prostitutes himself to both men and women. Peter pays Otto for his company, therefore he is also a part of the destructive pattern of sexual exchange for profit. The novels depict a bleak underside of economic necessity and exploitation, where seemingly the financial situation has been shown as paramount in the construction of the characters' independent and liberated state.

All characters discussed in the two novels seem to aspire to a more liberated and joyful mode of life, trying to subvert conventions from the past and embrace the new opportunities that seem to come with modern, metropolitan life. However, they are all portrayed as struggling. None finds lasting happiness, either they leave the scene or we are not told what happens. This implies a situation of entrapment, in which they are still subjected to repressive measures which they are unable to fully free themselves of.

A critique of the modern era, with its capitalist commodity culture, the ideal of 'the perfect body', the physical culture movements and ideologies centred on 'new', 'reformed' bodies is apparent in the texts at hand. Both physical culture movements and political organizations are shown as casting women in an inferior role. The female characters also seem to adhere to the aesthetic norms promoted at the time of how women should look and act, and employing the prosthetic technologies they are led to believe they need, which shows the repressive measures of commodity culture.

In their depictions of the tension between suppression and liberation of the body through the portrayal of the characters of their novels, Jean Rhys and Christopher Isherwood employ different narrative strategies to illuminate corporeal debates in the chaotic interwar

era. Both novels are episodic in style, moving between different time frames, reflecting the complexities and lack of an overall perspective of the time.

Rhys' first person narrator demonstrates a painful and sincere self-understanding, without the ironic distancing found in *Goodbye to Berlin*. Through Sasha's eyes, where she recounts experiences and events as she remembers them, the reader is compelled to empathize with the struggles she has gone through. Her story has an underlying sense of tragedy and great sadness, despite her bleak and somewhat satirical perspective on life. Nonetheless, her self-understanding comes to nothing, as she gives into her self-repression and declines into further abjection.

Isherwood, on the other hand, employs a narration where he claims an explicit aim to be objective, but through satire he insidiously implies a critique of society. He guides the reader behind the façade, and reveals the construction of decadence and liberation in Berlin as somewhat artificial. *Goodbye to Berlin* is constructed as a notebook of observations and memories resembling a diary format, in a project of indicating the novel's observations as authentic. Pericles Lewis claims that Isherwood was influenced by the German trend where film and photography were featured to reveal reality and that this "*neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity or New Matter-of-Factness) [...] used some modernist techniques but emphasized the depiction of social problems" (219). Furthermore, this was a general trend: "The concern with objective, and sometimes satirical, representation of social life became widespread in European literature by the 1930s", Isherwood's claim to be a camera may be seen in this context: "[...] the passivity of the writer was closely linked to the documentary urge to record a rapidly disintegrating reality" (Lewis 219). Despite Isherwood's 'objective' and documentary approach, he depicts what is behind the 'picture', or the façade, in a project of revealing the social problems and the tensions the body was implicated in.

By choosing to juxtapose these novels, I would argue that because of the differences in narrative technique, this study has been able to show a nuanced perspective on the tension between liberation and suppression of the body portrayed in interwar literature. In discussing Sasha, as a first person narrator and protagonist, I have explored a more emotive in-depth perspective on the struggles of being a liberated, single and middle-aged woman in the metropolis and the oppressive influences she encounters. My discussion of *Goodbye to Berlin* with its ‘distanced and objective’, but still satirically critical narrator, has revealed a more multifaceted insight into several characters’ pursuit of liberation. In unique ways the narratives reveal the external processes, captured by the narrator’s ‘lens’, of various characters in *Goodbye to Berlin* and the more subjective interior process of Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, and the pursuit of liberation they share. While they employ different narrative techniques, they seem to share the same goal: to unveil liberation as a current and complex issue complicated by a range of intervening factors in the interwar era.

To gain a greater understanding of debates concerning the body in interwar literature, the scope of this study could have been broadened to discern further perspectives. A study comparing the essay *Three Guineas* (1938) by Virginia Woolf with its critique of the patriarchal society, the disciplining of bodies by the use of uniforms celebrating ceremonial culture and the discussion of how the female body was regulated could be an interesting analogue illuminating the issues discussed. Another possible analogue could be to contrast the novels studied with D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920) and his negotiations of corporeal liberation set in a more rural environment. This comparison could possibly question the importance of the metropolis as a factor in projects of liberation. Hemingway’s implicit critique of the modern, sexually liberated woman in the portrayal of Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) could also provide as an interesting comparison to Sasha and Sally.

Moreover, it would be interesting to extend the themes and questions explored by this study to contemporary literary works. A comparative analysis of a work from the present-day capitalist society with a female protagonist situated in the metropolis juxtaposed to Sasha would serve as an interesting topic. Furthermore, the health reform movements from the interwar era compared to the advancement of the present-day emphasis on health, beauty and cultivation of the body explored in literary works would serve as an engaging field of study.

This thesis has shown the tension between corporeal liberation and suppression as a prominent issue in *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Goodbye to Berlin*. Rhys' and Isherwood's portrayals of the interwar era have revealed different aspects and perspectives of this tension, but no resolution. In different ways both novels end in a type of entrapment. As the main focus of this study has been on the female characters, I will bring the discussion to a close with one of Sasha's observations of the precarious and confined situation women find themselves in. Filled with the irony of her situation, Sasha exclaims: "God, it's funny, being a woman!" (Rhys 87).

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