

## **Impact of war – A study of Christopher Isherwood’s Goodbye to Berlin**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper examines Christopher Isherwood’s depiction of Berlin, the capital city of Germany and the desperate existence of the characters in his novel Goodbye to Berlin, when Hitler was rising to power after the World War I. The author has described how the World War has impacted Berlin’s social, political and economic status thereby causing social disintegration, making the characters confront and forcing the characters into moral collapse.*

### **Key words**

*War, Nazism, Berlin, destruction, riots, illegal, predicament.*

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Date of Submission: 24-07-2023

Date of acceptance: 06-08-2023

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Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood, an Anglo-American novelist, playwright, autobiographer, screen writer and diarist was born on 26th August 1904 in England. Having born in a well educated and wealthy family, Isherwood had his college education as a history scholar in a college in Cambridge and began writing novels soon after leaving Cambridge. His famous novels include *All the Conspirators*, *The Memorial* and *A Single Man*. He wrote a verse drama, *The Ascent of F6*. His plays include *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *On the Frontier*, *Lions and Shadows* and *I Am a Camera*. In his works, he deals with the themes of middle class human attitude towards life, human experiences, the impact of war on life and social, political pressure on the life of individuals. When Isherwood’s school friend, W.H. Auden was doing his post-graduation in Berlin, Isherwood visited him in 1929 and spent a few days in the city. Later he moved there in the same year and he lived in Berlin between 1929 and 1933 during which he gained an outsider’s view on the decay of Weimer Republic and the rise of Nazism. His musical named *Cabaret* and his novels like *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, *The Last of Mr. Norris* and *Goodbye to Berlin* portrayed the lives of expatriates in Berlin. Many of his works have been adapted into films. The coming of World War II had a profound effect on him and it brought a different attitude in Isherwood’s works. It also made him to change his domicile. He became the citizen of the United States in 1939 and started writing for Hollywood films. His post war novels demonstrated his style of fictional autobiography. He wrote autobiographical works like *Kathleen and Frank* and a biography named *Christopher and His Kind*. He turned towards pacifism and Indian Vedanta which resulted to his works on Vedanta and translations like *Bhagavad-Gita*. He died of a disease in 1904 in California.

War brings catastrophic destruction of cities, economy and political institutions. Isherwood’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) is a tremendous portrayal of the rise of Nazism in Germany and its devastating socio-political situations in pre-World War II. Isherwood, as a narrator recounted his experiences in the capital city of Germany at the backdrop of declining Republic and rising Nazism. *Goodbye to Berlin* has a series of six chapters and each chapter focuses on one main character, a particular location, family and some anecdotes providing more or less a continuous narrative. The novel is a historical artifact which consists of factual events in the author’s life when he lived in Berlin as a British expatriate in waning period of Weimer’s time. Isherwood throws light on the desolate, reckless, illegal lives of people in the city and pictures their struggles during the turbulent time.

Isherwood has poignantly narrated the relationships he had with the characters and acquaintances from marginalized to privileged. He had witnessed poverty, unemployment and the threat of violence all over the city. With his panache for story telling Isherwood has brought a powerful depiction of the despair of the citizens of pre-Hitlerian Berlin. George Orwell, an English novelist and critic had acclaimed that the novel has "brilliant sketches of a society in decay". Isherwood explored the nightclubs and slums in Berlin and he bewailed the situation of the city during 1930s. He stated that the poverty stricken Berlin had been:

“... a real city in which human beings were suffering the miseries of political violence and near-starvation. The “wickedness” of Berlin's night-life was of the most pitiful kind; the kisses and embraces, as always, had price-tags attached to them.... As for the 'monsters', they were quite ordinary human beings prosaically engaged in getting their living through illegal methods. The only genuine monster was the young foreigner who passed gaily through these scenes of desolation, misinterpreting them to suit his childish fantasy”(Fryer146-47).

Isherwood has precisely documented the diminishing social status of Berlin and its denizens by declaring “I am the camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking”(Isherwood 11). Isherwood describes the evening time of the city as “At eight o'clock in the evening... Young men are calling their girls. Standing down there in the cold, they whistle up at the lighted windows of warm room where the beds are already turned down for the night” (11). His landlady Frl. Schroeder, who had fallen from her status due to the social and political uncertainty, has felt that “Twenty years ago, if anyone had told me to scrub my own floors, I'd have slapped his face for him. But you get used to it. You can get used to anything” (13). The powerful status the pre-World War was shaken and the transformed social structure of Berlin has been portrayed comprehensively through the other characters who lead their lives as bartenders, cabaret singers, and prostitutes hopelessly sticking to the joys of the moment. The landlady revealed Frl Kost as a prostitute, “But after all, what else can you expect from a woman of that sort, a common prostitute!” (17)

Isherwood has the talent of rendering the characters in a mixture of ingenuousness and debauchery. The needs for money lead the characters to a desperate predicament. Sally Bowles was portrayed as a young, middle-class, dissipated character. Despite her young age she behaved like an older, bossy sister and friend to Isherwood. She came to Berlin in search of a job as a singer or a dancer. But she could only be singer in bar. She had many affairs and she never regretted or felt shy about getting into affairs.

“That's the man I slept with last night,” she announced. He makes love marvellously. He's an absolute genius at business and he's terribly rich –’ She came and sat down on the sofa beside Fritz, sinking back into the cushions with a sigh. ‘Give me some coffee, will you, darling? I'm simply dying of thirst’ (32)

She aborted a child and accepted a marriage proposal of a 16 year old boy. These incidents revealed that she was pushed towards moral slackness. She explained her predicament to Isherwood as “This job at the Lady Windermere only lasts another week. ... 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” (40).

Isherwood explained the situation of the gay couple, Peter and Otto as they struggle through psychological dilemma at the backdrop of Nazi aggression. These two characters were portrayed as jealous and flirtatious in nature. The working class families like the Nowaks were leading a disastrous life. Isherwood had to stay with Otto Nowak's family and described them as poor, sentimental, and ignorant. They suffered hardships and got into sudden rages due to their everyday circumstances.

In various places of the novel, Isherwood made reference to the political atmosphere of Berlin which was growing worse day by day.

“One night in October 1930, about a month after the Elections, there was a big row on the Leipzigerstrasse. Gangs of Nazi roughs turned out to demonstrate against the Jews. They manhandled some dark-haired, large-nosed pedestrians, and smashed the windows of all the Jewish shops. The incident was not, in itself, very remarkable, there were no deaths, very little shooting, not more than a couple of dozen arrests. I remember it only because it was my first introduction to Berlin politics”. (142)

The wealthy, Jewish family of Natalia Landauer, who live in comfortable villas have suffered the threat of violence. Landauer's departmental store was one of the Jewish shops which got smashed by the Nazi demonstration. Isherwood has brought out the grim realities in the lives of all the characters and the crumbling status of the city. The political conflicts, racial tensions and the growing intolerance have led to the decline of Berlin. Isherwood described the increasing political demonstrations, the eruption of riots and destruction of Jewish properties. At the end of the book the people in Berlin were getting acclimatized to the social and political climate of the city. The victory of the Nazi's had finally led to Isherwood's departure from Berlin.

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