Otherness and Exclusion in *A Single Man*
Reading Christopher Isherwood from the Perspective of Queer Theory

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Abstract

Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* is set in California in the early 1960s and follows a day in the life of the gay protagonist George, who finds it necessary to keep his sexuality hidden due to the widespread intolerance of homosexuals. The purpose of this essay is to examine how Isherwood draws parallels between different misfit groups to shed light on the situation of homosexuals at a time when homosexual acts were still illegal in California. The essay will consider not only the more familiar correlation between discrimination against homosexuals and ethnic minorities, but also the alienation from heteronormative society that can affect individuals of all genders and sexualities. Using the ideas of queer theory and intersectionality, I will compare the similarities between George’s situation as a gay man and that of his ethnically diverse college students and of his friend, the divorcée Charlotte, and the exclusion from society which they all experience in one way or another.
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1. Introduction
Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) was born in Cheshire, England, to a gentry family from which he sought to break free for his entire life. His first novel, *All the Conspirators*, was published in 1928. The following year he dropped out of medical school and moved to Berlin. As a gay man, Isherwood must indeed have found the “homosexual capital of Europe” (Parker 168) appealing, but his recurring escapes from Britain also come across as a rebellion against his class (419), his family and society in general (178) – “Mother and Motherland”, as he put it himself (qtd. in Parker 418) – no doubt, in part, because of their objections to his sexuality, but also because of his strained relationship with his mother and her concerns about his career choices (178).¹

In 1933, after Hitler had come to power and the situation for homosexuals worsened, Isherwood left Berlin. After many travels, he moved to America in 1939 to avoid the imminent war. Having stayed a few months in New York, he eventually settled in California and became an American citizen in 1946.

Isherwood’s novel *A Single Man* (1964) focuses on a day in the life of the gay, middle-aged college professor George, who is grieving the death of his partner Jim. Although homosexuality was becoming increasingly accepted, national reforms to legalise homosexual acts were impossible in the United States at the time of publication (Smith xii-xiii), making it difficult for homosexuals both to live openly and write openly about their experiences. Throughout the book, George struggles with his alienation from and hatred of heteronormative society.

Perhaps as a consequence of the difficulties of writing openly about homosexuality, Isherwood includes other minority and misfit groups to describe the situation of a gay man in 1960s California. The aim of this essay is to explore in what ways this is done. Looking at the parallels between George and his ethnically diverse college students and the divorcee Charlotte, I will argue that Isherwood uses these characters and their situations to help tell the story. There is also an interesting tension in the text between the ways in which George feels excluded from society and the ways in which he might actually be seen as choosing exclusion himself. On the one hand, he feels badly treated and left out by people representing heteronormative society, such as his neighbours (Gonzalez 766-67). On the other hand, however, he seems to choose this exclusion himself, for example by turning down the invitation to Jim’s funeral. His hatred of society and the concept of minority aggression will also be discussed.

¹ All biographical facts are drawn from Parker’s *Isherwood: A Life*. 
In this essay, *A Single Man* will be interpreted from the perspective of queer theory, which seeks to put into question the binary oppositions of sex, gender and sexuality according to which everybody is expected to identify with one of two options (Carroll 6). Therefore, I will begin the background section by discussing some of the ideas that have defined this field. Due to my focus on parallels between various forms of discrimination, I will also touch upon the notion of intersectionality. This concept can be used as an analytical tool with which to view various social inequalities (relating to gender, class, religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc.) as interlacing issues that all affect each other (Collins and Bilge 11-12). Additionally, the historical circumstances of homosexuals in the 1960s will be included to contextualise both the situation of Isherwood when he wrote the novel and that of his protagonist.

While some of the previous research on *A Single Man* deals with the religious themes of the work and its connections to the fact that Isherwood practiced Vedanta, much of what has been written focuses on the various aspects of the gay and queer themes in the novel. Both Bristow and Gonzalez note a tendency to interpret the text as an anticipation of the forthcoming gay liberation of the late 1960s, but dismiss this notion (Bristow 146; Gonzalez 758). Bristow maintains that rather than looking ahead in time, Isherwood lets his protagonist “[mourn] the past” and “the heyday of the queer life” (146) that he and Jim once enjoyed together (146-47). Gonzalez, on the other hand, asserts that Isherwood offers an “alternative to the politics of identity” (776) that the gay liberation movement has been advocating since the end of the 60s. Instead of protecting his own interests as a gay man who is discriminated against by society, George repeatedly chooses the approach of “queer impersonality and ascetic self-abnegation” (771), which, for instance, is illustrated by how he declines the invitation to Jim’s funeral.

Like many of the critical responses to the novel, the above mentioned articles also comment on the parallels between ethnic minorities and George as a metonymy for homosexuals in general. Although these parallels will be taken into consideration in this essay too, I will extend the discussion by including the aspect of similarities between other misfit groups as well, in this case the pariahs of heteronormativity. Questioning sex, gender and sexuality challenges heteronormative society and the illusion on which it appears to be built, and it is by interrogating heteronormativity that I will begin my argument. This examination is relevant as it ties in with the reasons for George’s exclusion from and hatred of the society in which he lives.
2. Background
Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” (qtd. in Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141). This is the idea that one is born with a sex (male or female) but that the gender (man or woman), which has been thought to be a natural, automatic implication of one’s sex, is in fact a cultural construction (Butler 141) and a performative act (33). Butler asserts that it is a misconception to think of drag as the impersonation or appropriation of a gender identity that in reality belongs to the opposite sex; this is a performance that everybody, regardless of sex, re-enacts. Gender, Butler writes, “is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 127, emphasis in original) and it is infinitely produced and reproduced into “compulsory heterosexual identities” (128). The effects of these performances are then misinterpreted as essential and original traits (127-28).

Monique Wittig takes this idea one step further, as she asserts that sex, too, is a construct, used to promote reproductive sexuality (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 143). While this notion can be a difficult one to grasp, what Wittig claims is that “‘sex’ is a political and cultural interpretation of the body” (Butler 144). That is, the categorisation of bodies, and more precisely that of certain physical features such as genitalia, is purely a repetitive use of language producing “reality-effects” (Butler 147) that are ultimately misinterpreted as factual, when these physical features, according to Wittig, are in fact as neutral and ‘insignificant’ as any other body part (Butler 145-47). Wittig’s assertion, therefore, is that the only reason to create a binary division of two sexes is “that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a natural gloss to the institution of heterosexuality”, and she therefore argues that there is in fact “no distinction between sex and gender” (Butler 143).

Heterosexuality is a key term here, as Wittig goes on to claim that a lesbian, by rejecting heterosexuality, cannot be defined as a woman, because ‘woman’ only exists in relation to her binary opposite ‘man’ (Butler 143-44), and “that relation, [Wittig] argues, is heterosexuality” (Butler 143). In fact, a lesbian, according to Wittig, “transcends the binary opposition between woman and man” and therefore “has no sex” (Butler 144).

Following these ideas, one may question whether a gay man would still be considered a man, in Wittig’s paradigm. Wittig’s answer is that while the category of ‘sex’ is oppressive to straight women, lesbians and homosexual men alike, ‘sex’ can only ever be female. ‘Man’ is considered the norm, “the universal person” (Butler 144). It therefore seems safe to assume that a man does not have to ‘qualify’ as a man in relation to a woman, the way that a woman qualifies as a woman in relation to a man, according to Wittig. The question remains, however, whether a
man would have to exist in relation to other men; whether men somehow reinforce each other as men.

Sedgwick’s idea of the erotic triangle is that men channel their desire towards women instead of each other out of “fear of male homosexuality” (Marcus 198). Looking at this concept, it would appear, then, that a gay man also falls short of something – even if according to Wittig this is not ‘lack of sex’. In the rivalry between two men over a woman, their relation to each other is almost as strong as their feelings towards the woman and they appear to show signs of admiration, love and desire for the other man (Sedgwick 21), a connection that Sedgwick calls male homosocial desire (25). The inclusion of women in the equation is essentially the only thing that differentiates the homosocial from the homosexual. These conditions, according to Sedgwick, are the very definition of heterosexuality (Marcus 198), and thus, the gay man seems inevitably left out.

Sedgwick asserts that patriarchy does not require homophobia to exist and to function, whereas it does require heterosexuality. She here exemplifies how, in the patriarchal society of classical Greece, sexual relationships between older men and their disciples were common and accepted, although they were of an educational nature and only temporary. However, I would argue that the gay man, although still defined as ‘man’, is nevertheless excluded from patriarchy, which, according to Sedgwick, is fundamentally reliant on heterosexuality. She also mentions Gayle Rubin’s assertion that the mechanisms behind the oppression of homosexuals are the same as those behind the oppression of women (3-4).

Oppression ties into Althusser’s ideas of ideology and interpellation, according to which individuals are interpellated by ideology as subjects (44). While obeying ideology may appear to be volitional, Althusser claims that the only act of ‘free’ will that the subject performs is to “submit to a higher authority” (56). Any subject who does not follow the “rituals” (Althusser 55) prescribed by the ruling ideology risks facing some form of punishment in use to ensure the production and reproduction of this ideology (23-24). In a society where homosexuality is frowned upon and homosexual acts are illegal, diverting behaviour will have consequences. Heteronormativity is the necessary model to conform to and something that cannot be questioned.

Heteronormativity does not restrict itself merely to sexuality and sexual acts, but extends to other parts of society too (Carroll 7-8), such as gender, family and race for instance (Sedgwick 3-4). The “hierarchical nature of the heterosexual/homosexual binary” (Carroll 6) and the “immense … power” of heteronormativity (1), although dependent on homosexuality to define and defend itself (6), affect both those not conforming to heterosexuality and those, primarily
women, who “do not conform to familial, marital or reproductive norms” (1). The absence of homophobia in a patriarchal society would significantly alter “its economic and political structures” (Sedwick 4).

Sex and gender and the idea that these exist on a binary scale could be said to be as arbitrary a perception as the division of people and their qualities and worth based on their ethnicity, religion or political views. The thought that the heterosexual man is the norm and that woman, and everything else deviant, is the ‘other’, correlates to the attitude that anything other than white and European is strange and abnormal.

The impact that this arbitrary discrimination and heteronormative society have on people connects to the concept of intersectionality. Rather than looking at oppression through “single-focus lenses” (Collins and Bilge 12) and viewing different kinds of discrimination as individual problems, an intersectional approach instead regards them as overlapping axes that cannot be viewed as separate from each other (11-13). Collins and Bilge exemplify this by pointing at the situation of African American women in the 1960s and 70s. Because various equal rights movements failed to recognise more than one issue, they consequently failed to recognise these women’s particular circumstances. One individual movement may have been concerned with race, gender or class, but disregarded the intersecting aspects of discrimination that these women faced due to them being “simultaneously black and female and workers” (Collins and Bilge 12, emphasis in original). This ties in with the various forms of discrimination related to sexuality, religion, age, gender, nonconformativity, ethnicity and race that the characters in A Single Man face, both in terms of the parallels between groups and of individual characters belonging to more than one discriminated group. Evidently, patriarchal and heteronormative society offers very narrow frames within which to live, but nevertheless remains intact, despite the progress made during the 20th century.

By the end of World War II, male homosexuality was increasingly discussed in society, and an array of theories regarding its causes flourished (Woods 257). The media, in both the United States and Britain, although “increasingly willing to speak of homosexuality”, only did so when this ‘abnormality’ could be used to prove the pending decay that it, allegedly, would inevitably bring about (Woods 294). Due to the dominant attitudes, a large variety of homosexual stereotypes, often portraying homosexuality as perverse, evil or decadent, were at hand for contemporary writers (257). However, in the 1950s, as homosexual men started becoming more visible in society, their presence consequently began to affect the stories that were being told. For example, many writers began to experiment with representations of homosexual characters. Woods cites as examples authors such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes.
(289), as well as the slightly earlier characters of Sebastian Flyte and Anthony Blanche (the latter being openly gay, the former implicitly so) in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* from 1945 (258-62).

Classified as a mental disorder in the 1950s (CNN Library), the status of homosexuality was a matter of state law in the United States (Smith xiii). While the majority of homosexuals in the country were still unable to be open about their sexual orientation by the mid-1900s, many began to turn towards larger cities like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Philadelphia (Escoffier 52-53), where lesbian and gay communities were openly forming (60). Attempts were frequently made to close down gay venues (57) and police raids were common during the 1950s and 60s. One of these raids, aimed at the Stonewall Inn in New York City in June 1969, sparked an outrage among queers and what has since been known as the Stonewall riots became the starting point of the gay liberation movement in the country (Smith xiii).² Influenced by the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 60s, other “identity-based politics” such as the women’s movement and the Chicano movement began to pick up speed too (Escoffier 192).

Although *A Single Man* takes place in the comparatively liberal city of Los Angeles, with its “multiplicity and lack of homogeneity” (Smith xix), the reality of its protagonist is still years away from the progress brought about after the riots. Illinois was the first state to decriminalise homosexuality in 1961 (George 109), but it was not until 1976 that homosexual acts became legal in California (Tayrien 439-40). Set in 1962, *A Single Man* depicts a life that is largely lived in the closet.

According to Woods, looking at the works of some 20th-century gay authors such as Christopher Isherwood, society’s progressive changes in attitudes towards homosexuality can be traced. Woods points at Isherwood’s 1935 novel *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, where the author felt it necessary to make the narrator, his alter ego William Bradshaw, “sexless” (337). Allowing him to be gay, Isherwood felt, would be too conspicuous and distracting for readers and would risk alienating them. Making the protagonist heterosexual, on the other hand, would be “as shameful as pretending to be heterosexual, himself” (qtd. in Woods 337). Four years later, in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), he is somewhat more candid (Woods 336-37). Comparing this semi-autobiographical novel to his much later memoir *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), however, it is evident that Isherwood was still much more restricted in the former. Reflecting on the choices which he made in *Goodbye to Berlin*, Isherwood admits in the memoir to

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² See definition of the term ‘queer’ on page 7.
tweaking descriptions of his real-life boyfriend and adding a more negative tone, so as not to “[give] himself away” (Woods 337-38). There are hints in the novel at the character Christopher’s homosexuality, but it is never explicitly stated (350).

In A Single Man, the “most explicitly gay-affirmative of its author’s novels” (345), the protagonist George is openly portrayed as gay. But while his sexual orientation is not concealed from the reader, only a select few of the people around George are aware of it. Colleagues and neighbours may suspect it, but he is unable to confide in them. This creates a vivid picture of what living as a gay man must have been like at the time.

Finally, a few concluding words on the term ‘queer’ are appropriate. The term’s initial meaning includes words such as odd, singular, open to suspicion, sick and ill. Since the 1920s, the meaning has expanded into a derogatory term for homosexuals, connected to the word’s original definitions. This is how it is used by Isherwood’s protagonist, as he imagines his neighbours trying to define him. In the last 30 years, however, the word has been appropriated by the gay community and others (Bennett and Royle 216-17) and has now become an umbrella term for “lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender” (Marcus 196, emphasis in original), which is how it is used in this essay unless included to express the opinions of a character. The term suggests the fluidity and complexity of sexual identity and therefore does not exclusively limit itself to ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, although it is often used synonymously for ‘gay’ and/or ‘lesbian’ (196). This new definition of ‘queer’, in the words of Bennett and Royle, “challenges all gender and sexual essentialism (217).

3. The Ethnically Diverse Students
As soon as George arrives at San Tomas State College in the morning, he reflects on the ethnical diversity of the students studying there, who include “Negroes, Mexicans, Jews, Japanese, Chinese, Latins, Slavs, Nordics” (Isherwood 47). During his lecture on Aldous Huxley’s After Many a Summer Dies the Swan, when the Jewish student Myron Hirsch interprets a statement in the book as being anti-Semitic, a discussion on minorities ensues (69). Here, Isherwood makes it evident how everyone reads the novel, and understands the world, from their own point of view, depending on their position in society:

Sir, here on page seventy-nine, Mr Propter says the stupidest text in the Bible is ‘they hated me without a cause.’ Does he mean by that the Nazis were right to hate the Jews? Is Huxley antisemitic? (69)
As the lecture proceeds, George maintains that “no one ever hates without a cause” (70), but rather that, however imaginary it may be, there is always reason for the hate – usually the perception of a threat. Minorities, he asserts, are “only thought of as minorities when [they] constitute some kind of threat to the majority” (70). Moving on from the Jews, he decides to exemplify his claims with another minority group – “one that isn’t organized and doesn’t have any committees to defend it” (70) – and fixes his eyes on the student Wally Bryant “with a deep shining look that says, I am with you, little minority-sister” (70). Without explicitly stating anything, this makes it evident that George suspects Wally of being gay too and, as Gonzalez suggests, that he wishes to draw parallels between homosexuals and other minority groups (767).

Even though George is keen on pointing out these parallels and the fact that they all experience similar prejudice and discrimination based on arbitrary reasons, he is reluctant to completely ignore all differences that may exist between groups. It is a “state of liberal hysteria” to “kid yourself you honestly cannot see any difference between a Negro and a Swede” (Isherwood 71), he claims. He immediately regrets his decision not to specifically refer to his students, to “say ‘between Estelle Oxford and Buddy Sorensen’” instead (71), as he vainly wishes everybody would start laughing and “embrace, and the kingdom of heaven would begin, right here in classroom 278” (71). Exactly what this utopia would bring about is never made clear, but it can be assumed that it would involve greater acceptance between groups (Gonzalez 767) – without pretending to ignore obvious differences.

Later, in the bar with his student Kenny Potter, George enjoys the conversation they are having largely due to the fact that he believes that it is based on polarity – “in this case, Youth and Age” (Isherwood 154). Kenny appears to agree, as he says “If you and I are no different, what do we have to give each other?” (158). This idea can of course be applied to all differences: age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and while it ignores the aspect of enjoying someone’s company because of things one may have in common, it ties into George’s dream of unity. There is, however, a problem, George argues:

A minority has its own kind of aggression. It absolutely dares the majority to attack it. It hates the majority – not without a cause, I grant you. It even hates the other minorities, because all minorities are in competition: each one proclaims that its sufferings are the worst and its wrongs are the blackest. (72)
This minority aggression, which Gonzalez notes and which George himself possesses (768), will be discussed later in this essay. The minority competition, on the other hand, is to some extent evident in the classroom scene, potentially preventing this kingdom of heaven that George wishes for, and he is a part of it himself.

Wearily George defines Myron as “that indefatigable heckler of the goyim” (Isherwood 69), implying that he is used to Myron interrupting his classes.³ Myron is seemingly keen on pointing out injustices wherever he can find them, something that George is clearly tired of – he is even, in Bristow’s words, “[l]oath to engage with Jewish oppression” (161). While it is of course possible that Myron is far too categorical in his analyses, George appears to forget the fact that Myron will inevitably interpret the world in relation to the difficulties he faces in life as a Jew. It can be assumed that George, too, would be quick to recognise any injustices targeted towards himself as a homosexual. This correlates with George’s assertion regarding competing minorities. He does not seem to fully take into account the “sufferings” of Myron, since he is so focused on his own.

Another aspect that may prevent utopia is the unnecessary awareness of difference and the fact that George himself, perhaps unknowingly, puts a certain amount of weight on other people’s identities. Even though he likes his black student Estelle Oxford, he also worries that she suspects him “of all kinds of subtle discrimination” (Isherwood 62). This simultaneously makes him both resentful towards her and wanting to be extra kind and helpful to her (63), a behaviour that seems to comment on how a person, no matter how open-minded and inclusive they are, is inevitably affected by the prevalent attitudes in their society. This connects to Althusser’s notions of ideology and interpellation. Ideology in this particular instance prescribes that people of certain ethnicities and races do not have the same rights or worth as others, which evidently affects George even though he does not entirely agree with it.

George does not want to discriminate against anyone, but is at the same time highly aware of the differences between himself and Estelle. Despite the fact that he objects to ignoring differences, his consciousness of Estelle’s ethnicity seems counterproductive to his aims towards greater acceptance. Although belonging to a minority himself in his homosexuality, George does of course also belong to a white, male majority and is clearly not immune to generalising ideas. His thoughts about Estelle to some extent reflect Mrs Strunk’s wish to display an open mind, which will be further discussed in the fifth section of my essay.

³ ‘Goyim’ is a somewhat derogatory term for non-Jewish people (OED).
Another student who experiences alienation is Lois, Kenny’s friend. Kenny tells George about her conflicted feelings about America; how, on the one hand, she was born there, but how, on the other, she and her family were sent to an internment camp during World War II solely for being Japanese. She is determined never to marry a Caucasian and intends to move to Japan, even though she is not familiar with the place (168). This is another link between George and his students’ experiences, which is in line with Parker’s assertion that Isherwood thought of the inclusion of a Japanese character as a connection to George’s own foreignness, being British in the United States. Like Lois, George is standing with his feet in two continents, having to choose between staying in a country where he does not feel fully at home or go back to a country that he no longer knows (Parker 707-08).

4. The Divorcee Charlotte
George’s friendship with Charlotte is complicated. He thinks of her as one of his best friends (Isherwood 123), while at the same time being bothered by her and finding her possessive (30). Although it should be noted that their friendship is not a one-sided one – Charlotte has comforted George in his grief after Jim, the way she now needs him to comfort her (126) – George often finds himself unwilling to deal with Charlotte’s “crises” (31), suggesting that her phone calls and invitations in times of need are recurring.

Charlotte’s bouts of depression appear to arise from issues concerning Buddy and Fred, her ex-husband and son. She expresses guilt over the split with Buddy and seems to believe that it has had a negative effect on their son, who grew up without his father. However, her melancholia does not appear to be a matter of envy for Buddy’s new life and marriage, with no job and three children (125-27), or of still having feelings for him. On the contrary, she indicates that she feels she gave up herself for him and now wants to break free (121). Her regret concerning their unsuccessful marriage is rather a suggestion that she feels like she has failed in her role as a wife and mother in a society that “glorifies femininity and sanctifies motherhood” (Bristow 159).

The guilt she feels for being unable to give Fred a happy family upbringing undeniably makes her feel like a bad mother, which is enhanced by the fact that Fred “wants a complete break” from her (124). Despite still being underage, he has gone to live with his girlfriend Loretta and her family and Charlotte is evidently displeased (124-125), perhaps because Fred has chosen Loretta – or even Loretta’s mother – over her. Although Charlotte did marry and have a baby, she has not managed to carry out her task as a woman, since not only her husband
but also her son reject her. She is not needed and has therefore failed to fulfil her duty as a
woman.

Charlotte’s desire to be needed, which she now wants George to satisfy, is also apparent as
she contemplates moving back to England (38). The fact that she does not take into account that
she would leave George behind could be seen as a conscious attempt to fish for his objections.
Her eagerness to take care of him after Jim’s death (126-27) further suggests her need to be
needed, as well as her not wanting him to go home in the evening (144). It could even be argued
that she senses his occasional reluctance to see her, making her even more desperate and intense.
This behaviour indicates that she feels lonely, not wanted or needed, and wants George to
contradict her, to show that he needs her. Clearly, she is desperately trying to conform to the
expectations of a nurturing woman even when she no longer has a child to care for.

A woman, Charlotte seems to feel, ought to be motherly and caring, but also sexually
appealing to men. However mutual the decision was to divorce, she has not managed to remarry,
which ultimately means that she has been rejected as a woman. Despite being perfectly aware
of George’s sexuality, it is stated that she has tried to kiss him on several occasions (145),
perhaps seeking confirmation of her desirability. Although she is only in her mid-forties a
suggested deteriorating health (120-22) is further prohibiting the expected feminine appeal.
Having her son distancing himself from her, bereaving her of her role as carer too, is the last
straw. Essentially, Charlotte has been deprived of her womanhood and does not fit into
heteronormative society any longer.

Heterosexuality, according to Carroll, is an institution that affects not only “non-
heterosexual identities” but also others who do not conform to heteronormativity, for instance
in regards to marriage and reproduction (1). Adrienne Rich further asserts that motherhood, too,
should be considered a “political institution” (qtd. in Carroll 2-3, emphasis in original). Despite
having given birth to a child, Charlotte is bereft of her motherhood when her son deserts her.
Although not a spinster in the true sense of the word, it is essentially what she has become: an
unmarried, childless, ageing woman. The stereotypical characteristics of this figure, who is
“nominally heterosexual, but outside the structures of family and marriage” (Carroll 14), reveal
the negative connotations that the concept of the spinster has: a person that is “socially marginal,
emotionally suspect and sexually repressed” (15).

Although they are both British and may have similar experiences of not fitting in in their
new country, it is the fact that they are misfits within the narrow frames of heteronormativity
that most strongly connects Charlotte and George. In his minority aggression and misogyny,
which will be elaborated on in the next section, George despises society’s focus on femininity
and maternity and the fact that it favours heterosexuality, marriage and reproduction (Bristow 159). These notions may at first glance appear to be far from Charlotte’s concern. However, despite being both a mother and heterosexual, she is also negatively affected by them as she is unable to conform to society’s, and, consequently, to her own, expectations on her as a woman. Even though George appears to be unaware of this mutual alienation, it ultimately ties them together. The two characters’ very different experiences connect to the ideas of intersectionality in that George is unable to conform to the expected role of a heterosexual man and Charlotte to that of a motherly and marriageable woman. Their intersecting roads consequently unite them in the exclusion from heteronormativity.

5. Feeling Excluded and Choosing Exclusion

The parallels between different nonconforming groups are, as has been shown above, numerous, as are the ways in which George personally feels excluded. The most prominent reason for his exclusion is his alienation from heteronormative society, primarily represented by his neighbours and most specifically by the Strunk family. Sitting by his bathroom window, he critically watches the Strunks’ young boy Benny go berserk with a hammer on the street outside and Mrs Strunk, “the proud mother of this creature” (Isherwood 23), mildly disciplining him. It is evident that George does not understand them. Although it could be argued that this is a mere depiction of generational differences and their different needs and objectives, with the children’s play bothering George while Mrs Strunk “never hear[s] the noise children make – just as long as it’s a happy noise” (24, emphasis in original), it soon becomes apparent that there are other oppositions between the two camps. From his house, George observes the heteronormative hours of the day pass by, not without a touch of disapproval.

The day begins with “the Mother’s Hour” (23) and “the power of motherhood” (24), when the mothers show off their parenting skills to each other until the afternoon, when the school day is over and “the masculine hour of ball-playing” (24) can commence as the older children come home. This is when the boys occupy the street with confidence, “tramp[ing] flowers” (25) and forcing cars to wait “without even a thought of apology” (25). Meanwhile, the girls sit quietly on the porches, vainly admiring the boys and hoping for their attention, but “[t]he only boys who will talk to them now are soft-spoken and gentle, like the doctor’s pretty sissy son” (25). Then begins the men’s hour, when the fathers return from work and require peace and quiet (23-25).
Here, everyone – apart from the doctor’s son – neatly complies with the performative rules of gender identity. Butler calls this a “compulsory performance” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 130, emphasis in original) which, should it be ignored, can result in “ostracism, punishment, and violence” (130). This connects to Althusser’s notions of ideology and interpellation, where ‘good’ subjects ‘voluntarily’ obey the, to some extent unspoken, rules, whereas ‘bad’ subjects, who divert from the prescribed pattern of behaviour, risk facing punishment (55). The subjects of ideology essentially become pre-set robots without the ability, or courage, to behave otherwise – in this case to behave against the customs of heteronormativity.

According to these implicit rules, George is a bad subject and does therefore not fit in. The exclusion is further indicated by the fact that his observations come across as seen from the eyes of an outsider, someone who does not belong with the others. This is additionally, more explicitly, supported by the descriptions of the weekend dinner parties that the neighbours throw for each other. Not only is George never invited, but as the nights proceed and the men get drunker and drunker, he also discerns fear in their voices: fear “of what they know is somewhere in the darkness around them …, the unspeakable that insists … on speaking its name” – the queer (Isherwood 26-27).

To what extent this really is the neighbours’ attitudes towards George or if these are just his imaginations and assumptions is difficult to say. Although it can be assumed that he is able to hear much of what the neighbours say when they barbecue in their gardens (26), it is also indicated in the text that George “supposes” and “feels sure” (27). Nevertheless, the feeling of exclusion is palpable.

Mrs Strunk, who, according to George, “is trained in the new tolerance” (27) and nurtures an interest for psychology, has a more open-minded approach to homosexuals than her husband, as she, George imagines, offers one explanation after the other and maintains that the misfit should “be pitied, not blamed” (28). After all, there are, allegedly, indications that therapy may help (27-28). She even surprises George when she nervously invites him over for a drink one day. George, being otherwise engaged, asks for a rain check, a proposal which makes Mrs Strunk hesitate. This particular evening, she and her husband happen to be home alone; the next day, however, they have friends coming over. Having George there too, does not seem to be a feasible option: “they might notice something queer about me, and you’d feel ashamed, George thinks, okay, okay” (116). The use of the word ‘queer’, here, signals George’s suspicion of his neighbours regarding him as strange and peculiar – due to his homosexuality. By primarily using the word in its original sense, the derogatory connotations are at the same time implied.
The behaviour that Mrs Strunk displays towards George to some degree ties in with George’s behaviour towards Estelle Oxford. He is of course very much aware of Estelle’s dark skin, but wants her to know that it does not matter to him, potentially making his well-meaning gestures become exaggerated, while at the same time worrying that she will judge him for any little mistake that he might make (62-63). Mrs Strunk, on her part, does not seem to understand homosexuality, but wishes at the same time to be modern and inclusive. However, these attempts come to nothing when she reveals, or so George believes at least, her fears of introducing George to her friends (116). They both fail to look beyond the differences and completely free themselves of society’s attitudes towards minorities, and instead end up adopting some of these attitudes themselves.

As a consequence of the prevailing views on homosexuals, for instance exemplified by a newspaper editor who believes that “the existing laws against [sex deviates] … are far too lenient” (36), George cannot share any details about his life with the people around him. Regarding his colleagues he contemplates whether or not they may be aware of his homosexuality, concluding that they probably are but that his feelings are of no interest to them (51), and even though his neighbours knew Jim when he lived with George, he has not told them that Jim is now dead (28). Evidently, he is unable to show them who he really is and appears to lead a very lonely life.

George’s perception of being excluded is further enhanced by his fear of growing old. On his way to work, he enters the freeway and enjoys the drive. Freeways, to him, represent his ability to fit in: “he can still cope with them … [and] the fact that he can still cope proves his claim to be a functioning member of society” (33). Being a functioning member of society does perhaps symbolise the fact that he is no different than anybody else, despite his sexuality. The addition of the sentence “He can still get by” (33, emphasis in original), however, indicates an aspect of not being a burden, of being able to take care of himself – of not being old. Old, he asserts, “has become nearly as dirty a word as ‘kike’ or ‘nigger’” (34), revealing just how bad and discriminatory he perceives the prevailing attitudes towards ageing to be and, therefore, suggesting another group he is afraid of belonging to. He is clearly affected by these ideas and has perhaps even adopted some of them himself. His worries about ageing, and ultimately death, is exhibited in his fear of “being rushed” into death (11), his discomfort visiting Jim’s former lover, the dying Doris, at the hospital (94-102) and his vanity at the gym, where he scrutinises his ageing body and notes, not without a certain amount of content, that it is evident that “he hasn’t given up” (105-06, emphasis in original). He prefers to be a member of the “marvellous minority … [of] The Living” (103).
Another aspect of George’s alienation is his Englishness. There seem to be instances when his origins are seen as questionable and suspicious (58) as well as those when he has learnt to use them to his advantage (118). Nevertheless, they make him different. Arriving at college in the morning, he knows he stands out, he feels “foreign” (57). Smith suggests that “gayness could, ideally, be seen as just another form of otherness, analogous in many ways to the protagonist’s ‘Englishness’” (xix). This connects to the parallels in the text between various minorities and misfits, not necessarily because George is discriminated for being English, but because it makes him noticeably different from the majority.

This sensation of not fitting in appears to foster a desire to conform in George, which ties in with Butler’s ideas of performativity. Getting dressed in the morning (Isherwood 11) and applying the “psychological make-up for the role he must play” (41) is necessary in order to behave in the expected way. He is performing, rather than expressing his true self and feelings. Covering up his sorrow, which he can share with only a few people (Bristow 146), and keeping up the facade of a functioning, carefree human being is essentially covering up who he really is. He cannot share his identity, and therefore not his grief either.

The reason George feels foreign around his students is principally connected to the way he dresses. While his students wear sneakers and jeans or shorts, George is formally and strictly attired in a dark suit and tie – “the only tie in the room” (Isherwood 57). It is possible that he has chosen this outfit to distance himself from his students and acquire respect, or that his choice in clothes reflects the time and culture that he comes from, but it can also be argued that it is used to give him an air of austerity and hide his true feelings. In fact, it is not until the evening before visiting Charlotte, one of few who truly knows him, that George changes into more informal clothing (115). Perhaps he feels like he can relax and be himself around Charlotte, whereas he needs to keep up appearances, both of being a respectful professor and, especially, of being untroubled, at work.

The wish to blend in is evident also in George’s relief to get by on his own on the freeway and to be independent and healthy, as are his frequent visits to the gym where he maintains his looks, ultimately symbolising youth. Additionally, he displays this desire to fit in in a conversation with his colleagues, where he refers to America as ‘us’ and Europe as ‘them’ (90-92). Having lived in America for a long time, it is likely that he feels at home there, but this may also be a way of trying to belong, by distancing himself from his motherland.

While George to some extent tries to fit in and feels left out by those who do not think he does, there are also times when he appears to be actively choosing exclusion and isolation. The minority aggression that he talks about to his class is very much present in himself (Gonzalez
768) as he distances himself from the majority through his brutal fantasies against people who have done him and other gays wrong (Isherwood 38-40); essentially members of heteronormative society, like the newspaper editor (Gonzalez 770). It seems as if George views the world in terms of enemies and allies. His allies are other minorities, like the black and Mexican people whose houses he passes on his way to work: “he would never find himself yelling at their children, because these people are not The Enemy” (Isherwood 41-42). Mrs Strunk, however, is “on enemy territory” when she comes to invite him for a drink (116), and he appears to regard women in general with aversion (Bristow 158).

He is repulsed by Doris’ body, not only because it is dying, but also because it is female (158-59). He harbours a great hostility towards “the female prerogative” to “claim [its] biological rights” (Isherwood 96), that is to claim Jim, which he feels that Doris has done. This does of course, once again, come back to heteronormativity and Doris’ right to Jim in the eyes of “[t]he Church and the Law and the State” (96). In reality, however, George projects his anger at Jim, for having an affair with Doris, onto Doris and, more broadly, onto “Woman the Enemy” (96). The rage he feels actually stems from the frustration of having society denying his and Jim’s love for each other.

Another example of George’s misogyny is his generalising thoughts about women. Enjoying the conversation with Kenny, he tells himself that although it is about the impersonal and therefore, according to him, requires polarity, he would never be able to have this conversation with a woman, the polar opposite to him as a man. Women are incapable of talking about anything other than the personal, he believes (154). He even refers to “a mere bit of irrelevant feminine musing” (129) in regards to something Charlotte says, suggesting that women are unable to take part in deeper, theoretical conversations. As much as he is upset by people’s narrow-minded generalisations about homosexuals – for example the newspaper editor’s claim that all gay people “without exception … have syphilis” (36) – he is himself guilty of categorising and judging people.

As a consequence of the alienation that George experiences, he appears to knowingly estrange himself even further. His house is symbolically isolated from the other houses in the neighbourhood that “face the street frontally, wide-open, in apt contrast to the sideways privacy of George’s lair” (24), and it is thought of both by George and the neighbours’ children as “secret-looking” (21). In fact, the reason why he and Jim bought it in the first place was because it was like “being on our own island” (20), perhaps allowing them to keep their relationship private, whereas the other families on the street conform to the norm and therefore have nothing to hide.
George does, however, seem to actively choose this isolation “with increasing violence” (21) after Jim’s death, taking on the role of a monster and scaring off the children, playing the role which he believes, but cannot know, that the others expect of him (21). Although Mrs Strunk, who “dutifully scolds her children from time to time” for bothering George (21), appears to be ever so slightly pleased “that Benny … now refers to [George] as ‘That Man’” (21), it can also be argued that George creates this persona for himself because he does not want the others to like him. Perhaps he somehow wants to be rejected and feel sorry for himself. This is further supported by the fact that he turns down the invitation to Jim’s funeral with a “curt No, thank you” (126). Whereas Gonzalez maintains that this is a “self-effacing refusal” in line with the ascetic choices that George makes throughout the novel (771), I would argue that this behaviour suggests that he prefers to wallow in his own misery instead of accepting the “small honorary share in the sacred family grief” (Isherwood 126). If he can’t have it all and if people can’t accept him the way he is, he will have nothing.

Nonetheless, left on his own with only a few close friends, George seems to have found a sanctuary at the gym. He thinks of the place as an “easygoing physical democracy” (109) where no one is “inquisitive” (109), “[v]anity … is taken for granted” (109) and titles are dropped. It is a place of equality, with no hierarchies, and, unlike his neighbours, “[n]o one is perfect and no one pretends to be” (109). Bristow asserts that George’s enjoyment at the gym is connected to the fact there are no women present, another example of his misogyny (159). However, I would argue that some of George’s condescending thoughts about women, at least in regards to Doris, are yet another way in which the minority aggression manifests itself within him, rather than any actual hatred towards women, which Bristow suggests (158). The reason why he feels at ease at the gym is, in my opinion, because he is allowed to be himself there, without the suspicious and judging looks that he is used to. Additionally, he enjoys his post work-out bliss, a state of complete rest and of not having “to hate anyone at all” (Isherwood 110). This, too, seems to depict a kind of utopia that George dreams of. He feels fairly treated and becomes a happier person.

In reality, however, this utopia seems far away and George is a rather lonely figure. “I don’t see how anyone can pretend to be interested in a novel when he doesn’t even stop to ask himself what its title means”, he says to his class (63) – and the title A Single Man does indeed suggest loneliness. George, the single man, is single in numerous aspects. Firstly, he is alone – both in the grief after Jim and because Jim is dead. Secondly, living in a suburban area, he stands out as a ‘single specimen’ among his nuclear family neighbours, both in being unmarried and childless and, especially, in not fitting into the heteronormative society that his neighbours
represent. Other aspects of his otherness, such as growing old and being British, contribute to this feeling. Thirdly, he does not fit in because he chooses not to. A similar interpretation is offered by Parker, who asserts that it was Isherwood’s belief that a gay man bereft of his partner was the epitome of a single, isolated person, whose grief was not recognised by society (714).

6. Conclusion
In his novel, Christopher Isherwood draws strong parallels between the discrimination against, and the alienation of, various minorities and misfit groups. George’s experience is similar to that of his students in the sense that they both belong to discriminated minorities, and to that of Charlotte because they are both misfits in heteronormative society. Despite the many connections to other marginalised groups, Isherwood clearly shows that although his protagonist experiences a lot of prejudice, he is in fact fairly prejudiced himself.

Historically, many parallels between groups can also be seen, as the liberation movements of many oppressed groups grew strong during the 1960s – for instance the gay liberation, the civil rights movement and the women’s liberation movement. As Smith suggests, George’s being English in the United States correlates to his alienation because of being gay, which, as this dissertation claims, further correlates to the situation of ethnic minorities in the novel, most prominently represented by the college students.

Aside from the discrimination that George personally experiences, the injustices towards ethnic minorities appear to be the ones that he is the most aware of, and although he does seem to feel some sort of kinship with ethnically marginalised people, even considering them potential allies, he is not able to fully see all parallels. He dismisses Myron Hirsch’s repeated calls for attention to anti-Semitism, although he himself is just as likely to recognise homophobic behaviour in an instant. Additionally, he appears to be unable to behave normally and inclusively around Estelle Oxford, even if that presumably is all she wants and, ultimately, the kind of treatment that he would wish to be met with by society too.

The character of Charlotte shows the judgement that women, and particularly women who do not conform to what is expected of them as women, experience. A woman, according to the rules of society, is supposed to be nurturing and caring as well as sexually desirable. Being rejected by both her ex-husband and her son, and as a consequence no longer feeling neither needed nor desired, has made Charlotte depressed and she turns to George for comfort and affirmation. However, her vigorous attempts at making contact seem to annoy George, and he does not appear to be able to fully recognise what Charlotte is going through or the parallels to
his own feelings of exclusion and rejection. They both feel alienated from heteronormative society, George because he is gay and Charlotte because she has ‘failed’ as a woman.

George’s generalising thoughts about women and his apparent belief that they are frivolous and incapable of meaningful conversation add to the discrimination that women face and indicate a degree of misogyny on George’s part. His disgust for the female body further supports this, although it could also be argued that this disgust originates, at least in part, from his frustration and anger at being excluded and not being able to claim his love for Jim, because society refuses to accept them.

Although for obvious reasons, George himself harbours a great deal of hatred. The hostility that he is met with from society understandably transforms into his own minority aggression, but while this is primarily targeted towards heteronormative society and overt homophobes, he is still not completely aware of the connections between his own situation and that of other misfits and therefore unable to change the way he acts towards others. On the one hand, he is upset by people who reject him on the basis of his sexuality, but on the other, he is himself guilty of generalising, racist and misogynist behaviour.

The title of the novel is closely connected to the exclusion and alienation that George experiences; he is alone and different, single, on many different levels, both because society rejects him and because he chooses to isolate himself as a consequence of that rejection. He does not conform to heteronormative society and the feeling of not fitting in, solely on the basis of his identity, is all too real. When the worst thing happens, he is unable to publically share his sorrow and must put on a mask, hiding both himself and his feelings.

Despite the difficulties of writing about homosexuality, Isherwood explicitly lets his protagonist be homosexual and manages at the same time to point at the difficulties a gay person faced in the early 1960s. Too much is at stake for George to be completely honest about his sexuality. By making parallels to other marginalised groups, Isherwood strengthens the impact the text makes on the reader. He makes it evident how arbitrary discrimination is and how many people are affected in various ways, while simultaneously reminding the reader that we all are guilty of generalising and discriminating behaviour and thoughts.
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