Chapter Nine

Public Memory of Christopher Isherwood’s Novel, A Single Man

Communication Ethics, Social Differences, and Alterity in Media Portrayals of Homosexuality

Lester C. Olson

“For the homosexual, as long as he lives under the heterosexual dictatorship, the act of love must be, to some extent, an act of defiance, a political act.” Christopher Isherwood wrote his observation concerning homosexual love and contemporary U.S. politics on a stray paper scrap, which he found again while checking his page proofs for Christopher and His Kind (published in 1976). Isherwood might have had in mind a commonplace problem for minorities facing tyrannical majorities within ostensibly democratic cultures. His observation serves as an epigram for this chapter, encapsulating as it does his concerns about the political predicament that homosexual men, however diverse, must negotiate in dealing with the politics of public heterosexuality. Here I use the expression public heterosexuality, not to refer to any particular individuals invested in a specific sexual predilection, but rather, more fundamentally, to an inherited ideology, which, through public representations, undergirds immodest claims to inhabiting, enacting, or constituting a better way of life than others. I considered the expression hegemonic heterosexuality instead as a means of negotiating patterns of defensiveness by readers who are heterosexual and who view themselves as exceptions to the problematic ideology. Yet I wanted to keep public in the expression to foreground the factor of facades as opposed to practices in private settings. A vital feature of Isherwood’s powerful 1964 novel is his lancing of such
superior pretensions with wit, wry humor, and, at times, grace, by mirroring them symbolically in the homosexual character of George, who sometimes mischievously reverses them against his interlocutors.

George's character is suffused with what Joan Didion describes in her classic 1961 essay "On Self-Respect" as a "certain toughness, a kind of moral verve." Self-respect should not be confused with convictions concerning one's own merits nor even self-esteem. Rather, self-respect, as Didion describes it, entails a mindfulness of one's frailties and limitations as well as strengths and potential. "People with self-respect have the courage of their mistakes," she explains, adding that "they display what was once called character." Didion notes, "The dismal fact is that self-respect has nothing to do with the approval of others—who are, after all, deceived easily enough; has nothing to do with reputation, which, as Rhett Butler told Scarlett O'Hara, is something people with courage can do without." Didion summarizes, "To have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent." On the other hand, Didion observes, "If we do not respect ourselves, we are . . . forced to despise those who have so few resources as to consort with us, so little perception as to remain blind to our fatal weaknesses." During the 1960s and 1970s, a self-respecting homosexual would have been an oxymoron or a performative contradiction to most readers because of commonplace stigmas attending homosexuality—stigmas imposed by religion as sinful, by legal systems as criminal, and by psychological institutions as pathological. This central oxymoron animates George's transgressions against public heterosexuality.

Today, in 2013, at least thirty-five years after Isherwood wrote that memorable line on a paper scrap, possibly to be tossed away, his naming of a "heterosexual dictatorship" could still be considered an accurate characterization of the predominant political circumstances confronting gay men in the United States, where I have written this chapter concerning Isherwood's original novel, A Single Man (published in 1964), a theatrical performance of it (produced in 1990), and Tom Ford's film ostensibly "based on" it (produced in 2009). The contours of heterosexism and homophobia have changed during the intervening decades, most notably with regard to state-level legislation concerning both nondiscrimination and bias crime laws as well as an increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage. In 1964, there were no such laws anywhere in the United States for homosexuals. Only as recently as 2009 has the federal government enacted bias crime laws, however, and it has yet to enact nondiscrimination laws in employment. These political circumstances make precarious the lives of homosexuals. Isherwood's approach in the novel was not merely a reaction pressing back against the heterosexual dictatorship, but rather a firm, gentle affirmation of the homo-
sexual's life despite it. The overall spirit of the work is to assert a homosexual presence in a life-affirming way despite oppressive, hostile conditions.

In this chapter, I must risk offending public heterosexuality as an inherited hegemonic ideology with all of its diversity, while endeavoring to explicate the powerful rhetoric of Isherwood's brilliant novel because it exposes, ridicules, and mock this ideology with wry, sardonic, and merciless humor. In other words, I must negotiate recurring rhetorical problems of communicating about an acknowledged literary masterpiece in gay history and culture under the watchful eyes, or surveillance, of the very ideology that Isherwood confronted via his novel at a time when its contours were even more severe than they are today, however still oppressive and sadistically cruel. So I should mention the capacity of public heterosexuality to project its own hostility onto gay authors in ways that can trivialize the work, as exemplified by one contemporaneous reviewer’s shallow commentary that Isherwood's portrait of the Strunks demonstrates his dislike of people, even though George eventually demonstrates a model of compassion for Mrs. Strunk, so apparently lacking in her self-serving performances toward him. So permit me to ask, as a gay scholar living under this “heterosexual dictatorship,” whose disgraceful misrepresentations of homosexuals in film was extensively documented in The Celluloid Closet in 1987, what does it mean when an apparently well-intentioned homosexual filmmaker does our enemies' work for them by reproducing damaging stereotypes and other contours of heterosexism and homophobia? Who profits in what specific ways from the film ostensibly based on A Single Man?

Although the popular 2009 film version of A Single Man suggests that it was based on the original 1964 novel with the same title by Christopher Isherwood, the film, almost a half century later, does consequential symbolic violence to Isherwood's achievement in the novel in ways that constitute a false and potentially harmful memory of it. While I do not doubt that the filmmaker presented his work as an homage to Isherwood's novel, such rhetorical recognition is what makes the film's symbolic violence, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, appear legitimate, however insidious on inspection. Specifically, the film introduces invidious stereotypes of homosexual men that do not appear anywhere in the novel and that Isherwood was careful to avoid in his literary works, as exemplified by A Single Man. Arguably, it was precisely Isherwood's endeavor to portray a life-affirming homosexuality that diminished his novel's appeal to popular audiences beyond a diverse gay readership, who have tended to recognize his novel as a brilliant literary achievement, as indeed it is. It could be argued, moreover, that the film detracts from Isherwood's artistic legacy in a way that falsely represents his work and defames his literary sensibility. Yet the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation recognized the film with a national award. The recurring homage by homosexuals makes the symbolic violence, which consequential-
ly appears honorific, especially harmful as a rhetorically constructed public memory and commodity. This chapter draws on my personal experiences of the 1964 novel, a 1990 theatrical performance, and the 2009 film to consider the communication ethics of media representations, social differences, and alterity. In the process, the chapter contemplates how the allure of aesthetics and freedom of artistic license can collide with a responsible ethic of accurate representations of Isherwood’s novel and its portrayal of members of a minority culture. Andrew Holleran and Ben Walters have each detailed numerous discrepancies between the novel and the film. My concerns here center primarily on revisions of three kinds during adaptation of the novel into a film: George’s altered character, the transformed narrative action introducing a loaded gun and George’s suicidal impulses, and, above all, a pervasive shift in perspective from a comic to a tragic frame, in Kenneth Burke’s sense, in which the comic frame presumes that humankind is mistaken rather than deliberately cruel, oppressive, or evil. As Anne Demo explains, “The comic frame privileges audiences by providing a unique vantage point from which to see the inaccuracies of a situation.” While developing my arguments, the chapter will consider a 1990 theatrical performance of the novel because the performance illustrates some potential resources that could have been employed in the film’s adaptation but were not, much to its detriment. The problems that arise in the film are not simply a result of the different medium, but rather specific decisions made during adaptation, even though films address public audiences in communal spaces in ways that differ from novels and even DVDs, which can be viewed in relatively private settings and personal relationships.

As a critic of Isherwood’s A Single Man, I will identify some specific qualities that make it a masterpiece to a diverse gay readership, despite its having been received in disdainful ways by apparently heterosexual reviewers at the time of its 1964 publication and later. Yet, in the same commentary, I will also underscore why Tom Ford’s 2009 version of A Single Man in film is disatisfying to me in that it distorts salient features of Isherwood’s literary achievement to the extent that it could defame the author, however inadvertently, in the process of offering an homage to him. People who have seen the film, but have not read the novel, are invariably surprised to learn that there is no gun in the novel. They are further astonished to learn that the central character’s actions are not the sustained working through of a prospective suicide in progress. Both the gun and the contemplation of suicide, however central to the film, cannot be found anywhere in the novel. There is, then, the irony of the film having garnered considerable renewed attention to Isherwood’s literary achievement and having literally raised the value of the his works (my signed first editions are now worth upwards of half a grand), while deflecting attention from precisely the qualities that made the original novel seem so necessarily to explore George’s fate in the film.

It is now time to assess the various work, which has not been the unproduced novel, but has become itsresp. the authors account. The basic comedy is in comic the omniscience:covers to the process George’s of the other comedic:laughable:has been mentioned and reviewed elsewhere in comedic:many kinds of:showing mode monsters:characters question:why they may must appear:George’s writing invites reading from which they are not prepared-scenarios that target descriptive:for:responses in a manner appears:It is now time to answer over the shortcomings in open-ended predominate in film which invites response of his disparity:insured:response to literature in a conscious insight:listing
naturally constructed public
of the 1964 novel, a 1990
sider the communication
and alterity. In the pro-
esthetics and freedom of f
accurate representations
rs of a minority culture, led
uous discrepancies here center primarily on
vel into a film: George’s
roducing a loaded gun
vasive shift in perspec-
ske’s sense, in which the
rather than deliberately
“The comic frame privi-
from which to see the
arguments, the chapter
ovel because the perfor-
d have been employed in
ent. The problems that
rent medium, but rather
ugh films address public
 from novels and even
ings and personal rela-
I identify some specific
 readership, despite its
ly heterosexual review
in the same commentary,
 of A Single Man in film
s of Isherwood’s literary
thor, however inadvert-
people who have seen the
prised to learn that there
to learn that the central
rough of a prospective
ion of suicide, however
ovel. There is, then, the
ewed attention to Isher-
raised the value of his
wards of half a grand),
as that made the original
ovel so extraordinary. Placing these works in juxtaposition enables me to
explore critically qualities that make for an exemplary novel and a deplorable
film.

It is possible to use each of these three artistic works intertextually to
assess the others, not simply to size up which of them is the better artistic
work, which Colin MacCabe has dismissed as an “intellectually dull and
unproductive question” in cinema studies. Instead, more importantly, it
becomes possible to discern why or, in other words, to identify what factors
account for their relative value and strengths. In this chapter, I suggest that
a basic change in the audience’s vantage was a key to altering the novel’s
comic frame in the film, while the theatrical production’s earlier use of
omniscient voiceovers preserved it. In the film, viewers need more voice-
overs to represent the limited omniscient narrator’s commentary and to ac-
cess George’s rich inner life and rebellious perceptiveness, his resilience, his
other-centeredness, and, above all, his delightfully wicked humor regarding
laughable public heterosexuality. In the novel, George recognizes that he has
been made monstrous by public heterosexuality, which he contests, mirrors,
and reverses via various rhetorical maneuvers, even as he takes some pleasure in
certain heterosexuals’ exaggerated fears of him: “Among many other
kinds of monster,” George says, “they are afraid of little me” (27). Regard-
ning monster making, Edward J. Ingebritsen asks, “How does one make a
monster, and why?” Then, Ingebritsen notes astutely, “The more interesting
question, then, is not who the monsters are but what sorts of social work do
they make possible?” To these two sensible questions, I would add, What
might society look like from a monster’s perspective, were the monster, as in
George’s case, aware of society’s misuses for him? Isherwood’s novel
invites readers to explore this last question and to inhabit George’s standpoint,
from which they can experience alterity. Whether diverse readers are well
prepared to do so depends, in part, on whether they have likewise been the
targets of such social misuses as others or whether they have been the bene-
ciaries of such misuses. In the latter case, how might public heterosexual
ality respond to having a social mirror held up to reveal how its monstrous face
appears to subordinated others?

It is not a matter of my asserting a naïve realism to celebrate the novel
over the film, however much the novel’s verisimilitude may have resonated
in open-ended ways with the lived experiences of its oppressed, yet diverse,
predominantly homosexual readership during the 1960s and 1970s. The nov-
el invites readers to identify with George’s character to inhabit vicariously
his disruptive insights concerning his oppression and apparently amicable
insurrection against it. Isherwood was aware of a rhetorical constructedness
to literary works, however much they might represent lives with fidelity and
insight. And it is not a matter of my producing a disquisition systematically
listing discrepancies and correspondences among these works. Instead, I
want to center on the rhetoricity of each work by noticing how key revisions during adaptation of the novel into a film constructed a fundamentally different set of rhetorical appeals to active audiences. Isherwood’s novel was not written to please public heterosexuality, but rather to embarrass it for its necessarily-deliberate cruelties and foibles, much to the pleasure of its predominantly homosexual readership. In contrast, the film was directed more broadly to a diffuse audience whose members are called upon regardless of sexuality to engage “a love story” across consequential social differences as somehow universal to humankind. To be sure, certain components of the original novel do this, too, dealing as all these works do with aging, mortality, anger, love, and compassion.

To explore the rhetoricity of these works, I focus primarily on their communicative relationships to diverse audiences by asking, for example, What specific rhetorical techniques do these works employ to play on their audiences’ sensibilities? How do each of these works position their audiences as spectators, witnesses to, and vicarious participants in the narrative action? What sorts of potential critical responses, attitudes, and personal engagements—both thoughtful and affective—do these works endeavor to elicit from diverse audiences? Let me begin with my experience of the novel as a brilliant literary achievement before turning to a theatrical rendition and then the recent film to explore how differences among them could warrant my concerns about the film’s retrograde politics and its exploitation of a usable past, however exceptional the acting by Colin Firth, Matthew Goode, and Nicholas Hoult and however beautiful the cinematography. In the conclusion, I speculate on how to interpret the recent revisionist uses of the novel as public memory by moving beyond a simple factor of profit, which surely mattered for addressing a broad range of contemporary audiences, to contemplate the film’s specific cultural, ideological treatment of a misusable past. Why, I wonder, do so many contemporary commentaries from gay, lesbian, and queer viewers applaud the 2009 film, given what I will argue are its serious failings vis-à-vis the 1964 novel?

**ISHERWOOD’S NOVEL, A SINGLE MAN**

I first encountered Isherwood’s novel, *A Single Man*, twenty years after its initial 1964 publication in London and New York. So, I cannot render an account of how, as a reader, I experienced it at the time of its initial release in 1964. I would have been nine years old, ancient though I now appear to my students. However, in late winter 1984, while I was a graduate student, I read Isherwood’s novel for the first time on a flight returning from a research trip to London. As Isherwood’s biographer, Peter Parker, explains, “George,” the central character, is “a single man in the legal sense that he is unmarried, in
icing how key revisions to the fundamental differences in the novel's original narrative were directed more at the pleasure of its pre-film version. The novel's perspective, regardless of whether the social differences are tain components of the do with aging, mortality, and personal engagements and personal engagements endeavor to facilitate the novel's presentation as a detailed examination of gender and narrative action.

Matthew Goode, and other literary critics have used the novel as a platform for their own interpretations. Their work is often used to support the author's position within the larger local community, and to suggest the novel's thematic importance. The novel positions George and his partner within the larger local community, and yet deliberately apart from it, their modest home connected literally, and the couple metaphorically, to the neighborhood by only a rickety bridge. This location is symbolically fitting inasmuch as they participate in their community as different, without belonging. The limited omniscient narrator notes, “This is a tightly planned little house. [George] often feels protected by its smallness; there is hardly room enough here to feel lonely” (12). After Jim’s untimely death, George deflects neighbors’ polite inquiries about him with ease, explaining in one cogent sentence: “They are inquisitive but quite inquisitive, really” (29). Such are the privileges of public heterosexuality, to be inquisitive about others. “Shaggy with ivy and dark and secret-looking,” the same house was “just the lair you’d choose for a mean old storybook monster” (20–21).

My initial experience of Isherwood’s novel resembled that of David Garnes, who apparently did read A Single Man near the date of its initial 1964 release. Decades later in 2000, Garnes generalized, “If I were in the present the books that have mattered most to me, Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man would figure near the top. When I first read the novel many years ago, its influence on me was enormous because of the matter-of-fact, positive presentation of the main character’s homosexuality.” Garnes amplified, “What I remembered more than anything about A Single Man, however, was that Isherwood had created in this novel an intelligent character whose homosexuality was presented in a natural and life-affirming way. I had never read a book quite like A Single Man.” Neither had I.

In 2004, gay author Edmund White recognized A Single Man as Isherwood’s “masterpiece” and the “foundling text of modern gay literature” in the Times Literary Supplement, an assessment he repeated verbatim a half decade later in the New York Times Book Review. White acknowledged, “The story is almost banal but the observations of society and of the protagonist’s psychology are cool and funny in the best Isherwood manner.” Carolyn G. Heilbrun has represented A Single Man as a “comic masterpiece” and
“a triumphant use of the homosexual theme.”

John Lehmann noted in his 1987 memoirs that *A Single Man* “has been very much praised, and is thought by many to be Christopher’s masterpiece.” According to Lehmann’s memoirs, he wrote a letter to Isherwood in 1964 to commend his novel by commenting, “You’re funny in a new way, a sour, sardonic, merciless way, and it seems to me just to suit the person you’ve become.” Isherwood considered *A Single Man* “the best thing I have ever written. This was the only time when I succeeded, very nearly, in saying exactly what I wanted to say.”

In 2010 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, James J. Berg and Chris Freeman remarked, “In his 1964 masterpiece *A Single Man*, the protagonist, George, is an intelligent, heartbroken, somewhat cynical mouthpiece for Isherwood. In the new film adaptation, as portrayed by Colin Firth, George plays the same function for the first-time writer/director Tom Ford.” Yet it bears noticing that Isherwood and Ford addressed themselves to very different audiences via the novel and film respectively. Berg and Freeman continue, “George, like Isherwood, is appalled by the tyrannical majorities of the world, what Isherwood called ‘the Enemy.’ Among these enemies are George’s straight-laced neighbors and their obnoxious children; local and national politicians; and even those at the college, which is ‘a clean modern factory, brick and glass and big windows, already three-quarters built.’

Even though Isherwood drew on his own experiences in his novels through characters that he usually named Chris, or Christopher, Isherwood distinguished himself from George. In a 1970 interview, for instance, Isherwood stressed that he did not explore George in *A Single Man* in an autobiographical manner: “It’s extremely unwise to identify me too much with George,” mainly because George is “a person of enormous stoicism, and his kind of stoicism is quite foreign to my nature.” Yet Isherwood later acknowledged some specific autobiographical correspondences in a 1973 interview by Winston Leyland, especially with regard to teaching in California college settings: “The things I make George say in the classroom are the things that I would say.”

There is an authorial identification with and investment in George at a circumspect distance. More than a few critics have suggested that tensions in Isherwood’s relationship with his intimate partner, Don Bachardy, and “being forced to imagine living alone forever” was a “triggering” factor behind writing *A Single Man*.

As for Lehmann’s list of humorous devices in the novel, his memoir mentioned, for one illustration, “I think that anyone who has been through the experience of teaching English literature at an American college will find the description of a class on an Aldous Huxley novel uncannily life-like and indeed humorous in just the right quiet way.” The sustained classroom scene and dialog furthered Isherwood’s exploration of what it means to deal with aging and the prospect of death via the classical story of Tithonus, a handsome young man who, after the request by his lover, Eos, to stay forever young, became old and decrepit in mere moments. Isherwood considered *A Single Man* “the best thing I have ever written. This was the only time when I succeeded, very nearly, in saying exactly what I wanted to say.”

In 2010 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, James J. Berg and Chris Freeman remarked, “In his 1964 masterpiece *A Single Man*, the protagonist, George, is an intelligent, heartbroken, somewhat cynical mouthpiece for Isherwood. In the new film adaptation, as portrayed by Colin Firth, George plays the same function for the first-time writer/director Tom Ford.” Yet it bears noticing that Isherwood and Ford addressed themselves to very different audiences via the novel and film respectively. Berg and Freeman continue, “George, like Isherwood, is appalled by the tyrannical majorities of the world, what Isherwood called ‘the Enemy.’ Among these enemies are George’s straight-laced neighbors and their obnoxious children; local and national politicians; and even those at the college, which is ‘a clean modern factory, brick and glass and big windows, already three-quarters built.’

Even though Isherwood drew on his own experiences in his novels through characters that he usually named Chris, or Christopher, Isherwood distinguished himself from George. In a 1970 interview, for instance, Isherwood stressed that he did not explore George in *A Single Man* in an autobiographical manner: “It’s extremely unwise to identify me too much with George,” mainly because George is “a person of enormous stoicism, and his kind of stoicism is quite foreign to my nature.” Yet Isherwood later acknowledged some specific autobiographical correspondences in a 1973 interview by Winston Leyland, especially with regard to teaching in California college settings: “The things I make George say in the classroom are the things that I would say.”

There is an authorial identification with and investment in George at a circumspect distance. More than a few critics have suggested that tensions in Isherwood’s relationship with his intimate partner, Don Bachardy, and “being forced to imagine living alone forever” was a “triggering” factor behind writing *A Single Man*.

As for Lehmann’s list of humorous devices in the novel, his memoir mentioned, for one illustration, “I think that anyone who has been through the experience of teaching English literature at an American college will find the description of a class on an Aldous Huxley novel uncannily life-like and indeed humorous in just the right quiet way.” The sustained classroom scene and dialog furthered Isherwood’s exploration of what it means to deal with aging and the prospect of death via the classical story of Tithonus, a handsome young man who, after the request by his lover, Eos, to stay forever young, became old and decrepit in mere moments. Isherwood considered *A Single Man* “the best thing I have ever written. This was the only time when I succeeded, very nearly, in saying exactly what I wanted to say.”

In 2010 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, James J. Berg and Chris Freeman remarked, “In his 1964 masterpiece *A Single Man*, the protagonist, George, is an intelligent, heartbroken, somewhat cynical mouthpiece for Isherwood. In the new film adaptation, as portrayed by Colin Firth, George plays the same function for the first-time writer/director Tom Ford.” Yet it bears noticing that Isherwood and Ford addressed themselves to very different audiences via the novel and film respectively. Berg and Freeman continue, “George, like Isherwood, is appalled by the tyrannical majorities of the world, what Isherwood called ‘the Enemy.’ Among these enemies are George’s straight-laced neighbors and their obnoxious children; local and national politicians; and even those at the college, which is ‘a clean modern factory, brick and glass and big windows, already three-quarters built.’

Even though Isherwood drew on his own experiences in his novels through characters that he usually named Chris, or Christopher, Isherwood distinguished himself from George. In a 1970 interview, for instance, Isherwood stressed that he did not explore George in *A Single Man* in an autobiographical manner: “It’s extremely unwise to identify me too much with George,” mainly because George is “a person of enormous stoicism, and his kind of stoicism is quite foreign to my nature.” Yet Isherwood later acknowledged some specific autobiographical correspondences in a 1973 interview by Winston Leyland, especially with regard to teaching in California college settings: “The things I make George say in the classroom are the things that I would say.”

There is an authorial identification with and investment in George at a circumspect distance. More than a few critics have suggested that tensions in Isherwood’s relationship with his intimate partner, Don Bachardy, and “being forced to imagine living alone forever” was a “triggering” factor behind writing *A Single Man*.

As for Lehmann’s list of humorous devices in the novel, his memoir mentioned, for one illustration, “I think that anyone who has been through the experience of teaching English literature at an American college will find the description of a class on an Aldous Huxley novel uncannily life-like and indeed humorous in just the right quiet way.” The sustained classroom scene and dialog furthered Isherwood’s exploration of what it means to deal with aging and the prospect of death via the classical story of Tithonus, a handsome young man who, after the request by his lover, Eos, to stay forever young, became old and decrepit in mere moments. Isherwood considered *A Single Man* “the best thing I have ever written. This was the only time when I succeeded, very nearly, in saying exactly what I wanted to say.”

In 2010 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, James J. Berg and Chris Freeman remarked, “In his 1964 masterpiece *A Single Man*, the protagonist, George, is an intelligent, heartbroken, somewhat cynical mouthpiece for Isherwood. In the new film adaptation, as portrayed by Colin Firth, George plays the same function for the first-time writer/director Tom Ford.” Yet it bears noticing that Isherwood and Ford addressed themselves to very different audiences via the novel and film respectively. Berg and Freeman continue, “George, like Isherwood, is appalled by the tyrannical majorities of the world, what Isherwood called ‘the Enemy.’ Among these enemies are George’s straight-laced neighbors and their obnoxious children; local and national politicians; and even those at the college, which is ‘a clean modern factory, brick and glass and big windows, already three-quarters built.’

Even though Isherwood drew on his own experiences in his novels through characters that he usually named Chris, or Christopher, Isherwood distinguished himself from George. In a 1970 interview, for instance, Isherwood stressed that he did not explore George in *A Single Man* in an autobiographical manner: “It’s extremely unwise to identify me too much with George,” mainly because George is “a person of enormous stoicism, and his kind of stoicism is quite foreign to my nature.” Yet Isherwood later acknowledged some specific autobiographical correspondences in a 1973 interview by Winston Leyland, especially with regard to teaching in California college settings: “The things I make George say in the classroom are the things that I would say.”

There is an authorial identification with and investment in George at a circumspect distance. More than a few critics have suggested that tensions in Isherwood’s relationship with his intimate partner, Don Bachardy, and “being forced to imagine living alone forever” was a “triggering” factor behind writing *A Single Man*.

As for Lehmann’s list of humorous devices in the novel, his memoir mentioned, for one illustration, “I think that anyone who has been through the experience of teaching English literature at an American college will find the description of a class on an Aldous Huxley novel uncannily life-like and indeed humorous in just the right quiet way.” The sustained classroom scene and dialog furthered Isherwood’s exploration of what it means to deal with aging and the prospect of death via the classical story of Tithonus, a handsome young man who, after the request by his lover, Eos, to stay forever young, became old and decrepit in mere moments. Isherwood considered *A Single Man* “the best thing I have ever written. This was the only time when I succeeded, very nearly, in saying exactly what I wanted to say.”
handsome mortal who was given immortality by Zeus in response to a request by a goddess who loved Tithonus. But Zeus did not give him eternal youth, because she forgot to request that (62–66). So Tithonus gradually "became a repulsively immortal old man" whose voice got "shriller and shriller, until suddenly one day he turned into a cicada" (65). Andrew Holleman explained that the classroom dialog is in the novel "because the issues the fable deals with—love, immortality, youth, old age—are the same ones played out in Isherwood's account of what is to come: the professor's last day on earth." But the novel progresses with the noteworthy difference that the novel dealt with homosexual love in the United States, not ancient Greece. So, before the class, George mused about his students' depersonalization of him in the modern educational factory: "They don't want to know about my feelings or my glands or anything below my neck. I could just as well be a severed head carried into the classroom to lecture to them from a dish" (51).

Although my experience of the novel paralleled Garnes's and although Isherwood's novel has routinely risen to the top of lists of great gay novels, as Berg and Freeman suggest, our engagements with it were not universal patterns for audiences' encounters with A Single Man. The reception under public heterosexuality was not appreciative. The Catholic Herald characterized the novel as "a horrible little book" in an assessment that I will discuss later in the chapter. Moreover, Richard Jacobs generalizes in The Penguin History of Literature that Isherwood's career illustrates "a paradigmatic retreat from the political to the personal" to trivialize his later novels, A Single Man among them. Jacobs continues, "A Single Man is notable for sexual candour [sic]. Beginning with a bowel movement and ending with a genital spasm... it may be candid but, if the novel is embarrassing, it is not for this candour [sic] but because of its manifest dislike of people, its governing impulse of a disgust that is a projected self-disgust." In response to Jacobs's assertions, James J. Berg observes that "A more dispassionate description of the novel's beginning and end would be that it starts with George waking and ends with his supposed death." In reply to Jacobs’s assertion that Isherwood’s “characters are stereotypically drawn” in A Single Man, which I experience as inaccurate, Berg replies simply that “he does not offer any evidence of his claim.”

Malcolm Bradbury likewise discussed A Single Man in The Modern British Novel, characterizing Isherwood’s novel as “a work of vivid present-tense neurosis, [it] is a tale of a historyless [sic] America and the portrait of a single man who cannot build a full identity and has chosen not to mature.” Berg precisely describes Bradbury’s account as “a homophbic reaction to the late Isherwood” and one based in discredited psychological theories concerning homosexuality as arrested development. An even more virulently homophobic assessment was penned by Richard G. Hubler in the Los An-
geles Times in 1964 with the demeaning title, “Disjointed Limp Wrist Saga.” Hubler uses words like “retchings” [sic] and “resentment” to describe George’s inner life and “perverted lebensraum” for his expectations. Hubler characterizes the “defense mechanism built up for the homosexual” as being “both feeble and disgusting.” He describes Isherwood’s literary stature as “virtually invisible” and his writing as “little more than competent.”

Experienced homosexuals might know that when public heterosexuality endeavors in such sustained, hostile ways to trivialize an author’s literary work, as did Jacobs, Bradbury, and Hubler, it is possible that the novel is doing something exceptionally well. Such hostile commentaries serve as a testament today to Isherwood’s courage. In Isherwood’s novel, George is projecting his precise perceptions of public heterosexuality’s self-serving delusions back onto the ideology, making its pervasive commonplaces and failings both evident and public, not his self-loathing. It could be argued perhaps that George evades genuine intimacy or friendship with his neighbors by not expressing his disagreeable views directly to them, unwilling to risk conflict. Instead, he carefully contains them beneath his generally stoic, amiable exterior and ironic detachment. George does not confront them via parrhesia by speaking his truth to their power. Rather, for survival, he only engages them with politeness while challenging them internally though a rich and self-sustaining inward life. In other words, an interpretation that George evades intimacy and enacts hypocrisy would be simplistic in underestimating the cruel power of the “heterosexual dictatorship” within which George has learned to live and survive, because direct confrontation more often than not results in homosexuals’ misuses of privilege and power to retreat behind a fragile facade of guilt, hurt feelings, and defensiveness, if not much worse.

It is tempting to suggest that A Single Man is powerful, in part, because it gives access to what could be considered one early 1960s homosexual man’s double consciousness, an expression first articulated by W. E. B. DuBois in The Souls of Black Folk in 1907 and thus usually associated specifically with the racial oppression of black people in the United States. Yet the idea of double consciousness has been developed and extended by many intellectuals from minority communities. “Double consciousness,” as James Darsey notes, “implies a complexity of vision, the necessity for members of subordinate subcultures always to know the rules of the dominant culture as well as of their subculture.” George’s thoughts shift between specific views that he ascribes to public heterosexuality and his own critical engagement with this ideology, between the public rules for civility and his annoyances because of them.

Alternatively, perhaps George’s sensibility might be called subjugated knowledge, an expression advanced by Michel Foucault, whose second sense of subjugated knowledge defines it as “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated:
naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scienticity.” He adds, “it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work.” Yet George’s inner knowledge is that of a homosexual professor, whose views as a college teacher are not disqualified, as evidenced by his lively classroom interactions with students. But his views as a homosexual could be dismissed inasmuch as they are not adapted to public heterosexuality—he is apologetic, rebellious, and spirited in his defiance.39 In this regard, there might be an odd, rough parallel with the life of Foucault, whose works are oftentimes celebrated and evoked critically as a result, in part, of his professorial prestige, usually without any mention of his homosexuality, which was surely a vital font for his rich insights. Yet Foucault made few public comments concerning his homosexuality, characterizing it euphemistically in public as “friendship as a way of life,” as in his 1981 interview.40

George’s stance is not so much passive alienation as it is an active disidentification from public heterosexuality,41 or an ongoing, internalized insurrection against it informed by his subordinated knowledge of public heterosexuality and its perils for himself and, laterally, for others who are similarly situated within the dictatorship. In other words, because Isherwood’s novel was addressed to a predominantly homosexual readership in the 1960s and 1970s, George’s inner life is not merely fulfilling an ego-function directed only to himself to sustain himself,42 as a sort of silent protest rhetoric. More fundamentally, through George’s character, Isherwood offered his audiences a perspective on political and social oppression that he shared with others within an oftentimes vilified, criminalized, and pathologized minority. In the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse homosexual readership was invited to participate vicariously in George’s comprehension of his oppressive situation, his skillful negotiation of it, and his anger.

A THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE OF A SINGLE MAN

A few years later, in late summer 1990, I was back in London for another research trip. I learned that A Single Man was being performed as a play at a theater located on the outskirts of London. As I used mass transit to travel to the performance in Greenwich Theatre at Croons Hill, London, I pondered how A Single Man could be staged, since so much of its potency depends on accessing George’s inner life, the privileged audience’s vantage so vital to the comic frame. According to Burke, “The comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness.”43 As Isherwood expressed it, the limited omniscient narrator’s voice is that of George’s “I, or by God. It
knows things about him which he does not know." Throughout the novel, this vantage provides the audience with access to George's resilient sensibility, especially his anger of a specific variety that is only possible for a man with confidence in his own intrinsic worth, or what Didion describes as "self-respect." 45

Part of what I love about George, in fact, is his anger suffused with his self-respect and his mindfulness of its perils. With incisive wit and merciless humor, he rants, he fumes, he seethes in response to heterosexism and the rampant consumer capitalism of his time (e.g., see 36–38, 83), and I love him for it. His outrage extends even to the college or university as a clean "modern factory." As another instance, a bemused George ponders a local newspaper editor's campaign against "sex deviants," like George: "They are everywhere, he says; you can't go into a bar any more, or a man's room, or a public library, without seeing hideous sights. And they all, without exception, have syphilis" (36). Today, of course, they would all have HIV-AIDS. George punctures inherited stereotypes that homosexual means diseased or pathological. In Isherwood's novel, a sustained target for laughter and wicked humor consists of the worries, fears, and delusions of public heterosexuality as projected onto homosexuals, not George.

Throughout the novel, George enacts in his musings varied symbolic reversals suggesting tacitly, in the process, that homosexuals can live moral and fulfilling and spiritual lives, 46 despite the perils of public heterosexuality's narcissism, superficiality, and psychological dysfunctions, which George notices sometimes with evident pleasure. In other words, George gives back to public heterosexuality for its ownership some demeaning stereotypes projected so routinely and ruthlessly onto homosexual men, recognized as scapegoats for public heterosexuality's failings. Isherwood understood something about the dominant group's capacity for authoritarian projection and its sometimes cruel misuses for others. Instead of characterizing such conduct as evil or sadistic, however, he eviscerated it with bemused insight and various symbolic reversals rendering the stereotypes not only ludicrous but also revelatory of the profoundly mistaken views he firmly ascribed to public heterosexuality. In a symbolic reversal, which mirrored public heterosexuality's tolerance of homosexuality, George reflects, "Not that one isn't broad-minded, of course; let them write about heterosexuality if they must, and let everyone read it who cares to. Just the same, it is a deadly bore and, to be frank, a wee bit distasteful" (85). Substitute the word homosexuality for heterosexuality in George's archly ironic thought and the expression becomes a familiar commonplace in liberal tolerance, which George mirrors to mock it. Such symbolic reversals of public heterosexuals' tolerant attitudes, in aside after delightfully naughty aside, endear George to a homosexual readership weary of heterosexism and homophobia. I will illustrate and support this claim concerning George's reversals and mirroring more
Throughout the novel, George’s resilient sensibilities only possible for a man, Didion describes as “self-sacrifice suffused with his incisive wit and merciless-to heterosexualism and the (36–38, 83), and I love him universality as a clean ‘modern’ George ponders a local newspaper George: “They are everywhere, or a men’s room, or a they all, without exception could all have HIV-AIDS. Sexual means diseased or target for laughter and elusions of public heterosexuality. Musings varied symbolic homosexuality can live moral is of public heterosexual dysfunctions, which. In other words, George nership some demeaning into homosexual men, rec falling. Isherwood underwrites for authoritarian pro In stead of characterizing secrated it with bemused the stereotypes not only mistaken views he firmly reversal, which mirrored ity, George reflects, “Not te about heterosexuality if that the same, it is a deadly substitute the word homoronic thought and the ex il tolerance, which George Ic heterosexuals’ tolerant endear George to a homophobia. I will illustrate rals and mirroring more thoroughly later in the chapter as they pertain to certain differences between the novel and the film.

In staging the novel, there was, moreover, the matter of the novel’s ambiguous conclusion. What if this were George’s last day of life? He might, as he dozes, experience a deadly blood clot. “Let us suppose this, merely,” the narrator requests while observing, “(The body on the bed is still snoring). This thing is wildly improbable” (185). As the novel was going through press editing, one of the publishers “thought that the ending should be more explicit does George die or not?” Yet this ambiguity precisely conveys what it means to George to live and love at fifty-eight years old, keenly aware of his mortality. As Chris Freeman has observed, Isherwood’s diaries at midlife during the 1960s comment on “how a person ages, fearing his own decrepitude as he watches so many of his friends suffer and die.” Isherwood’s novel deals with what his biographer has called “that most important of subjects: what it is to be alive.”

That subject of life becomes urgent for George after his younger life partner’s death. In the novel, despite the recent, untimely death, George embraces life. “I am alive, he says to himself. I am alive! And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite” (104).

The stage performance of A Single Man in 1990 was brilliant. A voiceover during the live performance represented the omniscient narrator and rendered George’s inner life, and the same technique made it possible to preserve the ambiguous conclusion. The performance captured, too, how mundane life as a homosexual couple can be—for example, by portraying George and his partner Jim jostling for space before the bathroom mirror in too small a room. These words from the novel were read by the omniscient voiceover while performers pantomime the deeds:

Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jostling, bumping against each other’s bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love—think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave, everywhere, behind them! (12)

While I was researching this chapter, I learned that Alec McCowen, who played George, viewed his performance as his coming out play and that his partner, Geoffrey Burridge, had died a few years earlier in 1987 from complications of AIDS.

As I sat in the theater after that performance, I experienced a poignant realization that, in my mid-thirties, I had for the first time in my life experienced a respectful play centering on a homosexual man’s life. George was not rendered in a way that reproduced any convenient, demeaning stereo-
types for homosexual men so commonplace in public life at that time and even now. I cannot express now how powerful—both upsetting and meaningful—that realization was for me. The audience does not laugh at George as clown-like or ineffectual (as in *Tea and Sympathy*, *Some Like It Hot*, *Vanishing Point*, or *Birdcage*). George is neither deranged nor psychologically dysfunctional (as in *Rebecca*, *Rope*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, or *A Beautiful Mind*). George is not isolated and almost totally without friendship (as in *Brokeback Mountain*). Nor does George tragically end his own life by suicide (as in *Advise and Consent*, *Victim*, or *The Children's Hour*). The ending of George's life is not a sadistically cruel murder in ways that are so formulaic and apparently gratifying to public heterosexuality, to judge from myriad films and novels that pander to the ideology (as in *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Walk on the Wild Side*, *The Detective*, *Freebie and the Bean*, and especially *Cruising*). George is neither hypersexualized and amoral (like Brian in *Queer as Folk*) nor nearly devoid of any evident sexuality (like Will in *Will & Grace*). The novel and the play both consist simply of one mundane day of George's life while he was grieving the loss of his partner, taking stock of what it means to face midlife suddenly alone, but with friends, and, ultimately, in moments, rekindling his capacity for renewed sexuality and possibly a new love.

Later, as I learned more about Isherwood's life and works, I came to appreciate that this firm refusal of familiar stereotypes was almost certainly deliberate on his part. In 1947, Isherwood wrote a letter to Gore Vidal criticizing the manuscript's conclusion of *The City and the Pillar*, written in 1946 and published in January 1948, for its tragic ending in which the homosexual character suffers greatly. The original version of Vidal's novel ends catastrophically with a homosexual murder of a former lover. Isherwood's entire December 19, 1947, letter to Vidal deserves to be read, but here I will note that Isherwood pressed firmly on the matter of the political ramifications of literary representations as "propaganda" and the potential harms from reproducing demeaning stereotypes of homosexuals to gratify mainstream audiences. Then, having endeavored to raise Vidal's consciousness concerning the disconcerting ramifications of his novel's formulaic conclusion, Isherwood asserts: "Homosexual relationships can be and frequently are happy. Men live together for years and make homes and share their lives and their work, just as heterosexuals do. This truth is particularly disturbing and shocking even to 'liberal' people, because it cuts across the romantic, tragic notion of a homosexual's fate." Having criticized Vidal's work, Isherwood adds, "I am really lecturing myself, because I, too, have been guilty of subscribing to the Tragic Homosexual myth in the past, and I am ashamed of it."

In light of this correspondence, it is noteworthy that Isherwood dedicated *A Single Man* to Vidal, which Vidal reciprocated later with a dedication to...
Isherwood in *Myra Breckenridge*. Moreover, Isherwood permitted Vidal to use another brief excerpt from the same letter's introduction as a favorable blurb for the dust jacket of Vidal's 1948 novel. Though I do not know whether Vidal replied to Isherwood's letter criticizing the conclusion, Vidal's biographer has suggested that "Isherwood, it seemed to Vidal, preferred propaganda to artistic integrity," a view that is difficult to reconcile with Vidal's apparent willingness to consider revising the novel's conclusion for its republication in London. It would be accurate that Isherwood used the term "propaganda" in his letter to Vidal to underscore the rhetoric of any literary work with ramifications for political and social issues of the day.

It was Isherwood, moreover, who, having been entrusted by E. M. Forester, the internationally acclaimed author of *A Room With a View*, *Howards End*, and *A Passage to India*, with reading an unpublished manuscript for *Maurice* in the 1930s, urged Forester to revise the conclusion, rather than put into circulation yet another tragic ending, this time one in which the lovers part company with no prospect of ever seeing one another again. Forester, in fact, revised the novel along the lines that Isherwood had urged so that the central characters left England for France in search of a better life. Though *Maurice* was not published until 1971, after Forester's death, "the impact of such a major writer" as Forester "authoring a gay romantic novel—and one with that rarity, a happy ending—is difficult to underestimate," observed Richard Canning. Of course, pandering instead to the dominant culture's demeaning and formulaic stereotypes by adapting his consciousness to public heterosexuality could have translated into greater fame, appreciation, and profitability for Isherwood among mainstream audiences. But, as a matter of self-respect, Isherwood refused such terms for success. Indeed, a key component of the power of *A Single Man* is that George's inner life is deliberately not adapted to pleasing public heterosexuality. Instead, he ridicules it with incisive humor suffused with richly warranted anger. No wonder Jacobs, Bradbury, and Hubler were bothered.

**THE FILM BASED ON A SINGLE MAN**

Isherwood's stance in 1947 bears remembering today because public recognition and success in exchange for pandering to the dominant culture's stereotypes is endemic even today, as exemplified, I believe, by the film ostensibly based on *A Single Man*. In general, film producers do have artistic latitude for creative engagement with literary works whenever they engage in adaptation, a word that, Colin MacCabe suggests, "refers to a film that relies for some of its material on a previous written work and the word differentiates such films from films produced from an original screenplay." With adaptations, filmmakers are not under an obligation to comply with every
detail of literature, as though fidelity or, more generally, being true to the spirit of the work, is of paramount importance. It is possible to consider each work for its own artistic merits, or lack thereof. However, if there is a departure from the literary work in the process of translating it into film as a medium with its distinctive resources (a process that Tom Gunning refers to as “textual transformations”), presumably it would be for the purpose of strengthening rather than diminishing a literary work’s achievement. Gunning details several components of this process of “textual transformations,” which I elide here in the interest of concentrating, above all, on character, narrative, and framing.

Filmgoers likewise have artistic latitude for appreciation of the producers’ sometimes disappointing efforts with great literature. Dudley Andrew observes, “Fidelity is the umbilical cord that nourishes the judgments of ordinary viewers as they comment on what are effectively aesthetic and moral values. . . . If we tuned in on these discussions, we might find ourselves listening to a vernacular version of comparative media semiotics.”60 As one such ordinary viewer, I was so dissatisfied with the film ostensibly based on A Single Man that, after the initial viewing, a hapless friend who had gone to see it with me found himself discussing it with me over dinner for more than an hour and a half. He thought the film was wonderful. In contrast, I recognized it as a travesty. So, our dialog was heartfelt and sustained. Though my friend is almost a decade older than me, he had not read Isherwood’s novel (despite my having made a gift to him of one of my few cherished hardback, first editions). So, I infer that part of the differences in our engagements with the film had to do with expectations for the film insofar as they were informed by having read the novel or not. But I do not believe that factor accounts entirely for the differences in our critical commentary on the film. Certainly, it is accurate that the acting in the film was exceptional, the cinematography was aesthetically pleasing, and the leading men were sensuous and handsome.

Yet both the character of George and the narrative were deeply disturbing as rendered in the film when juxtaposed with the novel. There is no reason to believe that George in the novel is in the closet, though he apparently is in the film. In the novel, George does not linger over a female secretary’s perfume appreciatively, as he does in the film. More important, George’s relationship to Charlotte, who goes by Charley, is friendship, not a frustrated heterosexual romance (as rendered at too much length in the film in ways that astute critics have accurately characterized as having “de-gayed” the novel). The film’s promotional materials—both the initial poster and the trailers—featured George’s relationship, not to Jim, but to Charley. Peter Knecht observes, “While the heterosexualized poster for Tom Ford’s not-so-heterosexual ‘A Single Man’ caused a wee stir last week, it seems the recently released trailer has just re-enforced those complaints.”61 Ben Walters
rally, being true to the
possible to consider each
ever, if there is a depar-
tiating it into film as a
Tom Gunning refers to
be for the purpose of
k’s achievement. Gun-
taxual transformations,”
t above, on character,
iation of the producers’
e. Dudley Andrew ob-
the judgments of ordi-
sly aesthetic and moral
e might find ourselves
semiotics.” 66 As one
film ostensibly based on
friend who had gone to
er dinner for more than
ul. In contrast, I recog-
I sustained. Though my
read Isherwood’s novel
cheshard, hardback,
our engagements with
sofar as they were in-
not believe that factor
mentary on the film.
is exceptional, the cine-
ing men were sensuous
were deeply disturb-
el. There is no reason to
ugh he apparently is in-
er a female secretary’s
re important, George’s
endship, not a frustrated
gth in the film in ways
having “de-gayed” the
is initial poster and the
, but to Charley. Peter
for Tom Ford’s not-so-
seek, it seems the re-
aints.” 64
whose review encapsulates several discrepancies between the novel and the
film, notes that “this is not Isherwood’s Charley, though it might be some-
thing like how she would fantasize about her life.” 62 Among other discrep-
ancies, Walters notes George’s palatial home (“a capacious modernist con-
struction, by the architect John Lautner”), which Andrew Holleran has likewise
described as a significant change: “In Isherwood’s novel, the house George
inhabits with Jim is so small two people cannot enter the kitchen side by side;
in the movie he lives in something out of Architectural Digest and drives a
beautiful Mercedes.” 63

In the novel, moreover, readers encounter George’s anger at the arrogant
narcissism that public heterosexuals sometimes bring to their interactions
with self-respecting homosexuals, exemplified by George’s neighbors, Mr.
and Mrs. Strunk, each of whom represents a different strand of liberal toler-
ance for the homosexual. Mr. Strunk, in George’s imaginings, “tries to nail
him down with a word. Queer, he doubtless growls. But, since this is after all
the year 1962, even he may be expected to add, I don’t give a damn what he
does just as long as he stays away from me” (27). After lingering over what
psychologists might make of such a remark, George mischievously savors “a
photograph” of a youthful Mr. Strunk in his football uniform, when he “used
to be what many would call a living doll” (27). In contrast, Mrs. Strunk’s
self-serving beneficence concerning what she views as his pitiable homo-
sexuality triggers George’s well warranted, yet bemused rage, intensified
and suffused by his grieving (see 27–29). As George sees it, “she is trained in
the new tolerance, the technique of annihilation by blandness. Out comes her
psychology book—bell and candle are no longer necessary” (27). George
incisively caricatures Mrs. Strunk’s affectation of acceptance, which is sel-
don more than a fragile facade: “Here we have the misfit, debared forever
from the best things in life, to be pitied, not blamed . . . it’s so sad; especially
when it happens, as let’s face it[,] it does, to truly worthwhile people, people
who might have had so much to offer” (28).

In the novel, George believes Mrs. Strunk to be a hypocrite, who elevates
her own worth by diminishing his. The reader has no available resources to
size up the accuracy of George’s perceptions, while in the film, in contrast,
he is so emotionally unstable that viewers are likely to align themselves with
her heartfelt concerns for his well-being. In the novel, George continues at
some length to inhabit a worldview that he ascribes to Mrs. Struck to mock
her liberal tolerance via his naughty ventriloquism of her: “Let us even go so
far as to say that this kind of relationship can sometimes be almost beauti-
ful—particularly if one of the parties is already dead, or, better yet, both”
(28). Ultimately, George muses defiantly, “Your exorcism has failed, dear
Mrs. Strunk. . . . The unspeakable is still here—right in your very midst”
(29). At least one book reviewer misunderstood Isherwood’s critique of Mr.
and Mrs. Strunk’s liberal tolerance. In a 1964 review by Sir Thomas Willes
Chitty under a pseudonym, Thomas Hinde, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the reviewer was so invested in liberalism that he not only missed Isherwood’s point but also aligned himself explicitly with such liberalism: “The heterosexual view of homosexual married couples, however tolerant, is something of a compound of amusement and pity.”64 In the film, viewers needed voiceovers to access George’s perceptiveness and wry mockery of laughable public heterosexuality with its artifice and selfish uses of others as props for their worth. None of this is easily available to the film’s viewers unless they remember the novel, having read it, and fill it in for themselves.

In Burkean terms, the novel remains firmly within a comic frame’s sensibility that humankind is mistaken, not evil, while the film careens toward a tragic frame. As Burke explained, the comic frame “is neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking—hence it provides the charitable attitude towards people that is required for the purposes of persuasion and cooperation.”65 In both the novel and the film, George ultimately shows compassion for Mrs. Strunk—not merely personally but also for the ideological inheritance reproduced through her (116). In the absence of George’s thoughts, however, the film diminishes the underlying factors that informed his earlier annoyances and the significance of his subsequent compassion. In other words, in the novel, Mrs. Strunk becomes emblematic of pitiable public heterosexuality in yet another symbolic reversal, which reflects her earlier attitudes back on her with a humane spirit.

Moreover, the film portrays an incoherent, narcissistic George who is so self-indulgent and wallowing in his excessively romantic grief that he contemplates suicide—apparently a favorite ending for homosexual characters in films made for mainstream audiences. George selects and lays out suitable attire for his funeral, including his tie, with instructions for a Windsor knot. Then he dramatically enacts taking a pistol to his head. It is a small detail perhaps, but headless corpses are seldom displayed in coffins, much less with fashionable ties. So the audience laughs at George’s incoherent cowardice as he fails to pull the trigger and continues to laugh as he poses with the gun, concealing himself within a sleeping bag on his bed, as though the bag would contain the carnage. No wonder Andrew Holleran’s friend, who attended the film with him, whispered impatiently, “Can’t he just die,” and Holleran admitted “hoping the gun would go off accidently” presumably to put the audience out of its misery.66

The film does worse than merely transform the novel’s rhetorical appeal into a retrograde politics replete with maudlin, demeaning stereotypes. The addition of numerous elements in the film depicting suicide by handgun does symbolic violence to George’s character and to Isherwood’s legacy as a novelist. It is unlikely that Isherwood would have conditioned the film’s use of stereotypes such as George’s emotional instability, excessive romanticism, and suicidal behavior for the central homosexual character. The closest Isher-
wood's novel came to such embarrassing nonsense was a single bemused sentence when George reflects on the hazards of dining alone, which, he worries, might be one more potentially fatal step toward an overdose of sleeping pills (113). In the novel, the only line concerning suicide has a bemused, humorous quality altogether absent from the film: seldom has dining alone seemed so "deadly dangerous" (113), an exaggeration with comedic effect. Since he was a pacifist who left Britain for the United States in the company of W. H. Auden at the outset of World War II, it is inconceivable that Isherwood would have welcomed the film's revisions in which George is packing heat.

In the novel, despite sorrow, George is other-centered and socially aware. He worries about an unretired professor's likely experience of retaliation, losing his job, for having disagreed with another tenured professor (84–86). George pays a visit to Doris who is dying at a nearby hospital; he devotes time for her, despite her having had a sexual liaison with Jim (96–102). He goes to the gym to exercise and experience camaraderie (105–9). At the gym, George reflects, "How delightful it is to be here. If only one could spend one's entire life in this state of easygoing physical democracy" (109). All these moments of sociability in the novel are excised in the film to portray a pitifully lonely old man devastated in the aftermath of loss, one who, as Kenny Potter concludes, needs a friend. In the novel, however, George has friends. In addition, the film introduces a hustler at the liquor store, a character that cannot be found anywhere in the novel, as if, for representations of homosexuals to be credible, we require a figure suggesting the demimonde.

At the same time, the erasure of George's justifiable outrage at his patronizing neighbor with her apparently phony friendship is disturbing in that this alteration and others along those lines transform George's character in fundamental ways. It is George's neighbor who, in his imaginings, wonders whether Jim was a "substitute" for real love (29), not Charlotte. It is inconceivable to me that George could have selected Charley to be a close friend had she held such silly views, which nonetheless spill out of her mouth in the film. In the novel, George is determined to deal with his grief and his life predicament with his self-respect intact, mindful of the oftentimes inane delusions that heterosexuals so routinely project during interactions with homosexuals. The presumably fake friendships that heterosexuals like George's neighbor enact are only one more part of the arsenal of ruthless dominance that suffuses heterosexism and, in its practical ramifications, is almost as virulent as overt hatred. So, in the novel, George does not inform his neighbors of Jim's death because their phony pity would have been unbearable (28). Yet, as the novel progresses, George musters compassion and acceptance for his neighbor and others like her (116), rising above their disdain for him by his own recognition of their human frailties and the errors in their psychology books. They are merely mistaken.
Sometimes high praise for gay novels can be discerned in assessments from hostile outlets. As cited earlier, the Catholic Herald characterized Isherwood's novel as a "horrible little book" that "would be less nauseous if the homosexuality of [George] were less taken for granted as part of a completely normal pattern—and 'normality' not so obviously regarded as something slightly devious." That observation encapsulates precisely yet another marvelous strength in the novel that is missing in the film. George muses on heterosexuality as being merely animalistic in a way that symbolically mirrors and reverses heterosexuals' arrogant presumptions of moral superiority. For instance, they buy suburban homes as "breeding grounds," and so their influx into the community damages the previously pleasant neighborhood in yet another symbolic reversal, mirroring the way that heterosexuals typically deplored the arrival of homosexuals next door as somehow detrimental to communal life (18–19). Although in life, homosexuals are regularly portrayed as animalistic, heterosexuals are animalistic in the novel. "So the toots appeared, litter after litter after litter" (19). Surely a part of the pleasure in the original novel was the wry mockery with which Isherwood lances the pretensions of public heterosexuality to an exclusive claim on living a morally rich or worthy or spiritual life based in specific sexual practices.

I wish these were the only demeaning stereotypes and examples of pandering to public heterosexuality via the film, but they are not. In the novel, for example, Jim's family in rural Ohio does indeed invite George to attend Jim's funeral, as, of course, any reputable farm family would have done for his friend. George declines the invitation, the caller "becoming a bit chilled by George's laconic Yes, I see, yes, his curt No, thank you, to the funeral invitation—deciding no doubt that this much talked of roommate hadn't been such a close friend after all" (126). In the film, instead, a family member discretely informs him of Jim's death and excludes him from Jim's funeral as only for "family." In the film, there is an unimaginative reproduction of urban stereotypes for misrepresenting rural culture as somehow less sophisticated or worthy than urban life. As a gay man who grew up among farmers of modest means, I found this change particularly offensive. But perhaps this is because I know farm men with eighth-grade educations whose ethical sophistication exceeds that of their ostensibly cosmopolitan urban counterparts.

This difference between the novel and film is consequential, in part, because in the novel George does not relate with any trust to public heterosexuality, having learned defensively to distrust it for its history of abusive and dictatorial habits. George wears his emotional armor well. This is not to condemn George's psychology as an individual, but rather more precisely the systemic impositions on it by public heterosexuality. Yet, one of the powerful features of both the novel and the film is George's relationship to Kenny, his student, with whom he has too much to drink, goes skinny-dipping in the
discerned in assessments characterized Isherwood's novel, A Single Man, as something precisely yet another manifestation of the film. George muses on the symbolic mirroring of moral superiority, and so their pleasant neighborhood, at heterosexuals typically somehow detrimental to homosexuals are regularly portrayed in the novel. "So the tots part of the pleasure in the Woodlances the pretention on living a morally rich actives."

es and examples of panhymy are not. In the novel, George to attend carefully would have done for r "becoming a bit chilled thank you, to the funeral of roommate hadn't been instead, a family member him from Jim's funeral as gnostic reproduction of is somehow less sophisticated grew up among farmers sensitive. But perhaps this ducations whose ethical nopolitan urban counter's consequential, in part, by trust to public hetero-cosmopolitanism or its history of abusive n. This is not to rather more precisely the Y. Yet, one of the power's relationship to Kenny, skinny-dipping in the ocean and is nearly pulled by an undertow into its depths, and, through it all, experiences a mutually flirtatious reawakening of his capacity for sexual desire and possibly love. George becomes momentarily vulnerable. These scenes in the film are among the most powerful and sensually portrayed, rendering both Kenny's apparently ready availability for sex and George's struggles with his temptations, which he restrains with evident reflection and sensitive effort. It is one of the few, well-rendered erotic moments in the film, made more powerful by the intricate interplay of tabooes, stemming from their roles as teacher and student, as well as the intergenerational chasm separating them, plus the nakedness and frank homosexual attraction.

CLOSING THOUGHTS ON GAY LITERATURE AS A MIS-USABLE PAST

In commenting on adaptations of literary works for films, Tom Gunning focuses on a practice that consists "precisely of claiming a relationship to a preexisting text, staking a claim or filiation to a specific work (or sometimes even works)," a practice that he provisionally calls "literary appropriation." Gunning suggests that "The primary question then becomes what does this film's appropriation of a literary text do: for the viewer, for the scholar, and perhaps most intriguingly, for the film-makers?" MacCabe generalizes, "The cinema promotes a new form of adaptation in which the relation to the source text is part of the appeal and the attraction of the film." Given the chasms of differences between the original novel by Christopher Isherwood and the film ostensibly based on A Single Man, what does the claim of affiliation between the novel do for the film's producers, viewers, and scholars?

Surely one simple part of an answer is that the film capitalizes on the justly deserved fame of the novel and its author's literary reputation in order to deliver up an audience of consumers already aware of the literary achievement. But I imagine that the contemporary viewers' relationships to the novel and author via the film is much more complicated than this simple economic relationship might suggest, however fundamental exploiting the past in this commercial regard doubtless was for the film's producers. A lot of contemporary viewers, it seems, have never read the novel. So they experience it primarily through the film. In this regard, the film has the value of raising awareness of the novel and increasing the commodity value of Isherwood and his legacy. The economic value of my cherished hardback first editions has soared, especially my autographed copies. Andrew comments, "A film based on a prominent novel will do more than cite the author; it will graphically feature that famous name so as to let its aura spread to envelop the other names listed, underwriting the production by association."
Yet another simple answer, in part, was suggested by a commentator on the New York Times review of the film, who remarks, "No doubt a phalanx of gays are flocking here to award this movie 5 stars ... but this thunderous cavalcade of emotional 5 stars seems to indicate to me more 'relief' that there are relatable gay events in this movie (to a rather starved minority) rather than the inherent quality of the movie itself."71 In this view, enthusiasm for the film is simply a byproduct of the relatively few films available for a public keenly interested in works featuring a gay theme, a public anxious to embrace almost any effort. I am reminded of Joan Oxenburg's commentary in a documentary version of The Celluloid Closet that, referring to the gay and lesbian community, "we are pathetically starved for images of ourselves."72

Another, deeper answer might reside in considerations of history, culture, and what is sometimes termed a "usable past," an expression coined by Michael Kammen to underscore representations of the past as constructed for uses in the present.73 Beyond the profit motive in addressing a captive audience, what might be at stake in present uses of the past, appropriating a novel, A Single Man, for a film with the same title? Another commentator on a New York Times film review ascribed a perspective to "Corinne Goldenberg" who "is disappointed in another period piece that fails to relate to a contemporary audience, stating: Why must we torture ourselves with depressing accounts of closeted homosexuals, inevitably doomed to a fate of death and destruction?"74 To this apt question, with which I agree, I would add that this specific, depressing account of a "period piece" introduced the closet and the definite death into a 1964 novel wherein neither can be found. Instead, there was a poignant, ambiguous ending at a moment of George going to sleep after the professor had experienced a capacity for rekindled love and sexuality and renewed hope (see 181–82). Closer to the mark regarding a "period piece" is another comment in the same review that the film was "singularly overrated" and "nowhere close to Isherwood's devastating novel. However, [it] looks pretty."75

In two separate interviews with Tom Ford and Julianne Moore after the public criticism over having "de-gayed" the film, both the film director and the actress, who played Charley, commented relatively defensively that they had sought to universalize a love story, in part to give the film appeal beyond gay viewers who constitute only a niche market. After underscoring industry standards that limit what a trailer can depict for cinema and still be widely distributed, Ford affirmed, "I'm perfectly proud of the fact that I'm gay. I don't define myself by my sexuality. For me, this is not a gay movie, this is not a straight movie. This is a movie about love."76 But this alteration is precisely the problem. As one consequence of universalizing a love story, the film shifts attention, from the systemic predicament that George consciously engages as formidable to him as a self-respecting homosexual, to a focus, instead, upon the romantic interaction and the resultant emotional journey. It is as if every integrated, non-dualistic perspective was the threshold of a deeply personal but isolated experience, a personal unification of the individual with a particularity, a unity with a particularity, a religious commitment.

Moreover, the novel's primary novels, such as The Skin of Our Teeth and Vampi,77 and film,78 such as the one in 1964, which was virtually unwritten, are not only general and uplifting but also inscrutable to the broader audience. The poor judgment is an attempt to be accurate and to appeal to the audience.

As suggestions on productions utilizing materials such as the novel, one for the film might be,, "Lesbian" rather than when talking about the author's identity. This is the film that the audience should not be read as a statement in terms of its technical ability.

The film is not about gay men, but about personal love. This is the film that the audience should not be read as a statement in terms of its technical ability. This is the film that the audience should not be read as a statement in terms of its technical ability.
instead, on his merely personal, individual crisis. Even the beauty of the scenic cinematography mitigates George’s recognition of his bleak predicament, specifically as a homosexual, though it is possible that the contrast heights differences between his emotional state and the landscape.

It is as though the film decapitated the novel by reducing George to his handsome surfaces and exciting most of his interior life. The filmmaker’s endeavor to universalize a love story is consequently more vulnerable than was the novel to Richard Jacobs’s criticism about making the political merely personal. It should be acknowledged that Isherwood was also somewhat concerned that his novel not be treated simply as a gay novel. But rather than universalize it, he sought to shape the novel to represent a life predicament of minorities within an ostensibly democratic culture, whose practical politics with a tyranny of the majority were de facto dictatorships for racial minorities, Jews, and homosexuals. It is precisely that position, as severely oppressed, that the film’s universalization of a love story erases, to its detriment.

More generally, what does it mean today that so many of the finest gay novels, not only Isherwood’s A Single Man but also James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room and E. M. Forester’s Maurice, were written before Stonewall in 1968, which is routinely represented in queer histories today as the watershed moment in gay liberation struggles? How could it be even remotely plausible that a watershed of sea-changing proportions could have happened only after such landmark literary achievements? Does this observation suggest anything about atemporality as well as the virtual absence of a historical and cultural sensibility among recent generations? Might viewers be susceptible to misrepresentations of a past because educational systems have done a poor job of familiarizing people of diverse sexualities with an inclusive and accurate history—not only of literature, but of diverse lives? Would faulting the audiences be simplistic and misplaced criticism?

As a possibly related matter, why has there been—with the few exceptions usually written by gay men of my generation or the one before mine—such a general outpouring of enthusiasm within diverse queer communities for the film “based on” A Single Man? What does it mean that the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation has recognized the film with an award, when the film may well detract from the reputation of an accomplished gay author? Should self-respecting gay men and our apparent allies applaud a film that, as I have suggested, may have done our enemies’ work for them? Should we applaud a film that has transformed a brilliant literary achievement in 1964 into a series of demeaning stereotypes and formulaic narrative techniques almost fifty years later in 2009?

These are difficult, unpleasant questions to consider even briefly—because I believe enthusiasm for the film may reveal something disconcerting about public memory loss and what, in a playful rephrasing of a now popular
expression, might be termed a mis-usable past? Does the film evidence a resurgence of entrenched self-loathing among queers (à la late-1960s Boys in the Band), in which exaggerated fears of isolation, loneliness, and a suicidal impulse seem credible, provided, of course, that it is projected safely into the past in a way that diminishes the courage, tenacity, and resilience of homosexual men in the 1960s? Does enthusiasm for the film evidence ageism within queer communities in which younger is somehow better, against all odds, even if the contours of heterosexism and homophobia have shifted in large part because of a valor that Isherwood and his contemporaries practiced at a time when they were condemned by religion, legal systems, and psychological institutions, however oppressive political circumstances remain? At the same time that the film mis-ascribes to an accomplished gay author a retrograde politics, which reproduces invidious stereotypes and narratives that Isherwood would never have employed in 1964, and he actively criticized in the manuscripts of Vidal and Forester, the recent film ironically—and pathetically—is responsible for reproducing those retrograde politics and damaging stereotypes in the present, for profit, while projecting them into a revisionist past, a past in which, in reality, courage, humor, and a comic frame were essential for survival with one’s self-respect intact. Let us ponder what that may mean, not only for communication ethics, social differences, and alterity, but also for gay men and our allies today.

NOTES

This chapter is dedicated to William Santee.

Excerpts from A Single Man by Christopher Isherwood © 1964, Christopher Isherwood. Used with permission.

1. Christopher Isherwood, as quoted in Peter Parker, Isherwood: A Life Revealed (New York: Random House, 2004), 693. The earliest reference that I have found to Isherwood’s published use of the expression, “the heterosexual dictatorship,” was in Christopher Isherwood, Kathleen and Frank (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 380: “Despite the humiliations of living under a heterosexual dictatorship and the fury he has often felt against it, Christopher has never regretted being as he is. He is now quite certain that heterosexuality wouldn’t have suited him; it would have fatally cramped his style.” In a 1973 interview, Isherwood commented on the ramifications of his writing Kathleen and Frank for his own “coming out” and quoted this passage in an interview published in James J. Berg and Chris Freeman, Conversations with Christopher Isherwood (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 109. On the Dick Cavett Show in 1977, Isherwood expressed a preference for the terms homosexual, gay, and queer, rather than gay, affirming, “I believe in using the words thrown at us by our enemies.” Quoted in Tanya English, ed., Cue: Greenwich Theatre (Croons Hill, London: n.d. [1990]), issue 139. Out of a measure of deference to his wishes, I have used the term homosexual at many junctures in this essay, except when I am quoting another author, referring to myself, or dealing with a much later historical moment referencing the past (e.g., gay novels, gay history and culture, etc.). The term queer has changed so much over the decades in academic literature as to be misleading for the 1960s and 1970s. So I have seldom used the term here, although I am sympathetic to certain of its political uses in academic writings and settings.


11. I touch on this critical practice in Lester C. Olson, “Concerning Judgment in Criticism of Rhetoric,” *Review of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2012): 251–56, though analogs can be drawn among works that are not adaptations, as is the case in the instance of the novel and film based on *A Single Man*.


Despite the humiliations of ‘it against it, Christopher I

sexual wouldn’t have suited

Isherwood commented on 'coming out' and quoted this 'reman, Conversations with, 2001), 109. On the Dick
terms homosexual, fog, and

and brown at us by our enemies.”


used the term homosexual at

 referring to myself, or

e.g., gay novels, gay history

ecades in academic literature

ed the term here, although 1

and settings.