

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## THE PROFESSOR

### *A Single Man*

The real importance about [George] is loneliness. What I was really working for was, of course, a picture of middle age. That was the central thing in the book.

— Christopher Isherwood.

Early in the summer of 1960, as Isherwood's biographer Jonathan Fryer reports, Isherwood accepted the offer of a guest professorship in English at Los Angeles State College and the University of California at Santa Barbara. The experience of teaching was rewarding. Within two months of starting his career as a professor Isherwood thought of writing a new novel in which he would incorporate his penchant for teaching. The plot of the novel evidently revolved around an English professor who happens to meet the female protagonist, the mother of one of his students. The novel was to be called *An English Woman*. But, by the close of 1963, Isherwood wrote a second draft of the novel and made a few modifications on the earlier one. The focus shifted from the English woman to the professor, now called George, turned the earlier son into Kenny and concentrated on 'a single day (early in December 1962) in the life of a middle-aged English man who lives in this town (California), teaches at a local college and is queer' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 249). This is how *An English Woman* evolved into *A Single Man*. Ostensibly, then, the novel becomes a study of middle-aged loneliness and alienation. Thus Isherwood wrote to Edward Upward : 'Behind it I glimpse something quite a new approach to middle age'; and 'was fundamentally' he also wrote to the Beesleys 'about me, at my present age, living right here in the Canyon, but under rather different circumstances' (quoted in Finney : 1979, 248-49).

Published a year later, in 1964, *A Single Man* marks, for Isherwood, a bold departure in both content and technique. In the earlier novels the artist was concerned with defining his identity as an individual, in the later works

he determined how that identity could be realized through contact with others. So, the novels written after conversion, beginning with *Prater Violet* right up to *Down There on a Visit*, are explorations whether one can merge his self with the needs of others. In *A Single Man* the emphasis shifts from the artist's concern over self to those who follow him, to the budding learners who obtain instructions from him. The protagonist is no longer preoccupied with discovering his self, with 'Who am I?', but with imparting his followers what he discovers, with letting people know what he is or 'Who I am?' Therefore, instead of being instructed, as he was by Bergmann in *Prater Violet*, the protagonist himself does the job of instruction. Isherwood's argument is that man needs to teach, not because people require to learn, not because he seeks to solidify his identity by teaching, but because only through teaching is he able to display what he has managed to learn in his life; because he is what he has learnt plus what he lets others know about him. This desire to impart knowledge rather than to discover it adds, surely, a new dimension to the artist's prolonged search for the self.

Technically, *A Single Man* marks off from the preceding novels by abandoning the namesake narrator in favour of a third-person one. Complacent as he feels with his own self, Isherwood makes use of the third-person narrator who invites the reader to examine the life of a middle-aged homosexual lecturer, George. The narrator is all-knowing and charged with authority, always moves with the protagonist and passes comments on the protagonist's actions, thoughts and the kind of life he leads. The narrative technique as such invites us to share George's feelings and never allows us to detach those feelings from Isherwood's. Isherwood thus never distances himself from his protagonist nor from the readers. He does display his interest in self, even more than he was wont to do earlier, but without jeopardising the balance between presentation and authorial intention. The detached narrator, therefore, involves us with the hero on the one hand, and on the other, presents the hero in a detached light, providing us with a detailed account of George's life from his awakening to his consciousness of the whole day on through his intimations of universal connection in terms of Isherwood's Vedantic beliefs concerning Atman and Brahman.

In *A Single Man* Isherwood presents a day in the life of George, a middle-aged homosexual and professor of English at a college in California. George's homosexuality and pathetic mourning for Jim, his lover, who died in a car accident, only intensify his very state of loneliness. Isherwood has suggested, on several occasions, through the book's major images, that middle age implies loneliness. But George's loneliness is not merely the result of his middle age but of his homosexuality too. Isherwood made his protagonist not only middle-aged but also homosexual in order that his novel might be an exclusive study of alienation. George, then, in the novel, by being both middle-aged and homosexual, living as he did apart from others, becomes a potential metaphor of loneliness, and as Paul Piazza says, 'his distorted life a Giacometti study in personal distance, the void in which men suffer remote from their fellows' (1978, 153).

Within a few pages of opening his novel Isherwood presents George as delivering in the class his lecture on Aldous Huxley's novel *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. The class in which George teaches is typical, consisting of scholars, both male and female, from different nationalities and age-groups: 'With an infuriating sheep obstinacy, they love to huddle together confronting their teachers from behind a barricade of empty seats' (*A Single Man*, 44). Among the students there are Ross Dreyer, a scholarly American young man with special curiosity about literary problems, sister Maria who belongs to a teaching order, middle-aged Mrs. Netta Torres, with motherly feeling for George and also Kenneth Potter (Kenny) who tends to do the opposite of what most people do. However, when George refers to Huxley's novel and concentrates on the mythological allusion contained in the title of the novel, he is crossed by a student named Dreyer. But he avoids Dreyer's question and tells the class : 'But before we go any further, you've got to make up your minds what this novel is about' (*A Single Man*, 54). George dislikes discussing typical questions without experiencing the real pleasure of literature. Thus he revolts at the student's crossing. He believes that 'as for the minority, who have cultivated the about approach until it has become second nature, who dream of writing an about book of their own day, on Faulkner, James or Conrad, proving definitely that all previous about books

on that subject are about nothing' (*A Single Man*, 54). But the students pay no heed to him and start making offensive remarks against Huxley. One of them speaks 'about mescaline and lysergic acid, implying that Mr. Huxley is next door to being a dope addict (*A Single Man*, 56). George tries to control his students but fails to hide the fact that Mr. Huxley used to make experiments with drugs like mescaline and LSD, not for fun but with a certain end in view.

The lecture on Huxley, however, ends more or less as a seminar in which the political rather than the literary aspect of Huxley's novel is discussed. But George's urge for producing creative literature, his tendency to approach literature aesthetically to experience its marvels are hardly appreciated by the students. So 'George hates them, hates their basic indifference as they drain quickly out of the room' (*A Single Man*, 60-61). George is utterly flabbergasted at the prevalent system of education and calls the college a modern factory : 'When the factory is fully operational, it will be able to process twenty thousand graduates' (*A Single Man*, 33). The system of education was, according to George, dehydrated of any motivation or real end in view. George's description of the college as a 'modern factory' and its students as mere 'raw material' show Isherwood's old hatred of the mechanical process of education due to which the students are spoonfed with measured quantities of knowledge. One may recall, in this connection, the fact-oriented, utilitarian system of education conducted by Gradgrind in Dickens's novel *Hard Times*. Gradgrind, as Dickens portrays, used to look upon the students as mere 'vessels' to be filled with 'facts' and never allowed them to exercise freely their finer emotions and imaginations. Similarly, as George observes, the students are never propelled by any urge to contribute something original, and the lecture is deemed to be a 'public utility'. George also deplors the lack of personal contact between teachers and taught. The students never worry about the personal life of their professor; he were, as if, really a 'machine' only some parts of which are useful to them : 'They do not 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' (*A Single Man*, 41). The feeling that the students do not care him only aggravates George's sense of loneliness and ultimately turns him into a cynic.

To George's pinching sense of loneliness was added the agony of the loss of Jim, his homosexual friend, who died in a car accident. The spirit of Jim, who is dead and gone, seems to be hovering over the entire novel just as the spirit of Richard Vernon haunts the life of his wife in *The Memorial*. The repetition of the words 'Jim is dead. Is dead' seems to be echoing Lily's 'But Robert isn't here. He's dead'.

Isherwood's *A Single Man*, thus, turns to be a manifesto of loneliness, an epic tale, as it were, of man's essential separateness and alienation. Apart from George's, the novel also relates the story of two other women, both George's friends, locked in their own selves. One of them is Charlotte, a divorced wife, who brought up her only son all alone, in the course of which she experienced a lot of hurdles due to the absence of the father. That son has, however, left her for his girl friend. George occasionally visits her, stays to have drink, recapturing memories of Jim together, since she always acted as an intermediary between them. Another woman called Doris was also involved. She was with Jim at the time of accident.

Jim did not survive, and after his death, Doris is turned into 'a withered flesh'. When George visits dying Doris in the hospital, he finds her a little more than a 'skeleton' but experiences a rekindling of something vital in himself as she was a link to Jim. In the past, George hated both Jim and Doris as they eloped to Mexico, leaving him alone; but the hatred, ironically, tied them closely. Now the tie is broken. On visiting Doris, George recovers the memories of Jim and feels 'life-energy' surging softly back through him. The recapitulation puts him in touch with Jim in life and makes him aware of his physical cravings. George cannot forget the memories of Jim who had no 'substitute' in his life. As the only confidant and sympathiser of the lonely man Jim signified life to George. But now that he is dead, he can no longer play that part and George tells himself that Jim should be rejected as a symbol of the past. George thus wafts in the vast wave of seclusion, refusing to recognise any contact either with Jim or any of his neighbours.

George, therefore, accepts the loss of Jim and finds him anew when he understands that life with Jim has taught him the meaning of life itself. George learns what the Isherwood of *Prater Violet* only sensed. To the earlier

protagonist, the lovers were not important, it was 'the warm naked embrace' that was important. 'But this is not enough; there is still the pain of hunger beneath everything' (*Prater Violet*, 124). And the hunger resulted, invariably, from the experience of sex without commitment and love. George is, however, more mature. He understands that he and Jim shared commitment and that it is the state of sharing with Jim that was important, not Jim by himself and also that it was their love that heightened experience and made life worthwhile. George learns from his past life with Jim that sharing of self or attachment with other individuals accounts for the real significance of life. This is what George feels impelled to convey to his student Kenny. Mere accumulation of experience is not important; what George feels is that he must communicate what he has learnt from his experience of life.

It is significant, therefore, that Isherwood aptly makes his protagonist a professor. The choice as such mirrors Isherwood's own contemporary role and allows him to make didactic and instructive comments about his own experiences. It is equally important, then, for George to connect with Kenny, his student, as he wants him to understand the significance of his experience of 'being together'. The emphasis, thus, shifts from discovering to communicating. The relation between George and Kenny is an important event to which the later action of the novel builds, because the dialogue between them is not a mere conversation but a means in which one experiences the need of sharing, of 'being together'. In a beech bar George and Kenny meet and drink together. Their verbal intercourse approaches the symbolic dialogue. George cannot imagine such a relationship with a woman nor with a man of his own age. However, being bored by the whole conversation Kenny abruptly proposes George to swim in the ocean. George accepts the proposal. As they swim, the moment is jubilant. Isherwood turns this moment of swimming into a mystical experience, symbolizing both George's and Kenny's mergings with the Greater Consciousness, for which both yearn and from which both learn. Immersed in the water of the ocean George feels a thrill of ecstasy all over his body. Then a prodigious wave, apocalyptic in nature and climactic as death, swallows the 'single man' into a Greater Being. Isherwood's imagery suggests that George is completely given

over to Being Itself, though he is personally unconscious of it. George's immersion in phosphorous is reminiscent of the scene of boat-capsizing at the end of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*; both images suggest the mystical experience of unification with the Higher Being, all distinctions and barriers being obliterated.

After the end of the midnight escapade Kenny drags George out of the ocean. In a drinking bout George convinces Kenny why he wants him, why he seeks to continue his dialogue with him. George insists that Kenny must find out for himself what George knows, for George is like a book that must be read in order to discover its contents. A book cannot read itself to any one. It is Kenny's duty, then, to read and find out what this man called George contains, what he is about. Kenny must know what George knows and George is what George knows, what he has learnt from his experiences with Jim, Doris and Charlotte. Everything that we do and experience becomes part of us and the only way experience can be communicated is for someone to experience us as we are. We do not learn through instructions. We learn through sharing. What Kenny finally learns, or what George knows, or the fact that Isherwood seeks to drive home is that love is experience and experience is life. The most important sharing is love and love is the most potential means of merging one's self with the vast wave of humanity.

*A Single Man* concentrates on a single day in the life of George, and makes an in-depth study of this individual as a constellation of impulses and sense-perceptions. Underlying the attempt there is the elementary Vedantic presupposition, as Isherwood points out in *Ramkrishna and His Disciples* (1965) that the everyday conception of the self is an illusion, *Maya*, and the world made on it is equally impermanent. Throughout the day, George, as we have seen, shows his commitment to the world of *Maya*. The very nature of his personality is an 'illusion', deceptive, changing several times as he changes one role after another. Sometimes he is 'Uncle George', sometimes, as at San Thomas College, 'a severed head carried into the classroom. Again, his performance varies from 'the hummy harmonies' of his opening speech to that of 'the voice of the judge' only to become 'an attendant at a Carnival

booth'. One may find, therefore, Georges 'personality' fragmented into innumerable and incoherent selves. So, George's body is assembled before the bathroom mirror to confront the image of his own Karma, to see what a 'mess' it performed during its fifty-eight years, to see the multiplicity of past selves 'preserved like fossils', now always in fear of 'being rushed' to the inevitable extinction.

The novel begins with the beginning of George's day. For the first two pages the hero remains anonymous and impersonal referred to as 'it'. When George wakes up, he becomes part of the flux of time. 'Waking up begins with saying 'am' and 'now'. That which has awaked then lies for a while, staring up at the ceilings and down into itself until it has recognized 'I' and therefore deduced I am, I am now' (*A Single Man*, 44). Isherwood's narrative method mirrors the circular journey of George's day : from unconsciousness to self-awareness and then to the loss of personhood, the Vedantist ideal. George's waking up symbolizes his return to ego-consciousness, to the flux of time, and the moment he gets back his ego-consciousness, he has premonition that 'it' will come. 'it' means death. The fear of death overpowers him when he is committed to his ego-consciousness — to the obstinate belief that 'I am, I am now'. But George and the world, the world of *Maya*, that he embraces are products of Brahman and he is also unconsciously a part of the Reality. Isherwood thus near the end of the novel introduces a marvellous image which establishes George's relation to the Greater Reality which the Hindus call Brahman. George is likened to the rock-pool and the Greater Reality to the ocean. The rock-pool retains its separate identity at the low tide but merges with the ocean at a high tide and is left separate when it ebbs once more. Isherwood converts the image into a rich religious parable : 'And just as the waters of the ocean come flooding darkening over the pools; so over George and the others in sleep come the water of that other ocean; that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars' (*A Single Man*, 155-56).

Isherwood's image of rock-pool and the ocean has another suggestion,

which presupposes his Vedantic belief that man's ego is fragile and temporary construct, afraid of impending death. We fear death because we fail to merge with the Universal Consciousness, which is Brahman, by transcending our ego-consciousness and by withdrawing ourselves from the flux of time. The Katha Upanishad says: 'Whatever is here, that is there, whatever is there, that is here. He who does not believe in this presence of the same Brahman as also there, after death gets death alone' (*The Principal Upanishads*, 634). In other words, one who ceases to be his own self and thereby becomes part of the Greater Reality, death never means total annihilation. Isherwood justifies this Vedantic truth with a scientific proposition that only the material part of the body dies and the rest disperses. When the novel opens, George is a part of the flux, confined to his individual ego, saying 'am' and 'now'. Next he enters the space 'here' and more specifically 'at home'. The sharp contrast between 'home' suggesting the individual consciousness at the outset of the novel and 'homeless' signifying universal consciousness, which comes after the corporeal frame of the body, the living organism, ceases to exist. The analogy of the 'ocean' and the 'rock-pool', therefore, points to the universal and individual consciousness as part of each other and may offer a spiritual solution to the most momentous problem of modern man — the problem of isolation and fear of death. The all-engulfing consciousness is God and the particular consciousness of every single man is God Immanent. According to the Hindu philosophy of Vedantism, God, the Transcendent and God, the Immanent are one and knowing Him man transcends the fear of death,

As George's 'day' gradually declines, the novel turns to its inevitable end. And as Isherwood begins to complete the circle, George resumes dialogue within, and the final action of the novel turns to George's monodrama. In a question-answer format, similar to Bloom and Stephen's post-brothel dialogue in *Ulysses*, George reviews his day, his whole life, as it were. He resolves that he will find another Jim. Turned as he is to a Greater Consciousness as the 'rock-pool' image suggests, George now possesses what he sought for in Jim, what he seeks for in Kenny. Now what he obtains enables him to satisfy 'the hunger beneath' and 'gives him kinship' as Paul Piazza says, 'with

Isherwood's saint' (1978,156). So, both *Prater Violet* and *A Single Man* conclude with a Vedantist epiphany. However, extending his analogy of the 'rock-pool' Isherwood prepares for George's death by describing the mysterious dying of the rock-pool creatures. In the dark full flood, some of the creatures are lifted from the pools to drift far out over the deep waters, never to return again. Centring the reader's attention back on George's body, Isherwood uses the image of the ship and its crew and describes George's dying in medical terminology. When George's cortex and brain-stem become out of order in the blackout, throttled out of their oxygen, the lungs go dead, their power-line cut. The great ship of George's body founders and then there prevails 'total blackness'. Evidently, then, Isherwood graphically traces the gradual necrosis of George's body. His spirit can no longer associate with what lies on the bed. It must, at long last, merge with the Greater Consciousness, which George has searched for throughout the day, his life, and which Isherwood has tried to demonstrate throughout the novel. So, 'in death, George is no longer the single man" as Piazza concludes, 'who is George? Isherwood's Everyman' (1978,161).

To conclude, *A Single Man*, is a proclamation of the meaning of life. It teaches the lesson that integration and love are the sum and substance of life. It answers questions raised earlier by the namesake narrator in *Prater Violet* : 'What makes you go on living?' and re-affirms the namesake narrator's realization in *Down There on a Visit* : 'What's really important is is... "love" '. Technically, *A Single Man* appears atypical in that it shows the ground that Isherwood has broken by abandoning the namesake narrator of the earlier novels. But though the novel disperses with the namesake narrator, in reality it presents an objectified connection between narrator and the protagonist. In his mature years, Isherwood realised that instead of directly contemplating his own problems, he must move beyond self to attempt a more universal statement. The narrative technique of *A Single Man* evinces, therefore, a logical outgrowth and development of Isherwood. In his next and last novel, *A Meeting by the River* Isherwood explores further the meaning of life and turns the theme of integration and connection into that of universal brotherhood in Vedantic terminology.