

Gay Identity in Isherwood's fiction

BY LOUIE CREW

Christopher Isherwood said in his *Gay Sunshine* interview in 1973 that he did not officially come out as a Gay professional until the writing of *Kathleen and Frank* (1971). He said that he wished he had come out earlier, in the *Berlin Stories*. Noting that artistic "balance" therein demanded his not making Christopher thus "too remarkable," Isherwood added: "But I must also frankly say that I would have been embarrassed, then, to create a homosexual character and give him my own name" (*Gay Sunshine*, no. 19 [Sept.-Oct. 1973], p. 1). In spite of the many gay people in his novels, Isherwood is still able to say: "I would very much like to write a novel about gay life itself, but it's terribly hard to do so. I have never written much about homosexual relationships — just some references to them in *The World in the Evening* and *A Single Man* — although I myself have lived much of my life in a series of long relationships" (*Gay Sunshine*, p. 2).

In view of Isherwood's stance thus described, it would be unfair, it seems to me, for his work, even when explicitly about gay people, to be viewed as either comprehensively or primarily political. It may well be that gay subjects in Isherwood are all the more real and all the more forceful as a political indictment precisely because they were not primarily sociologically or politically conceived.

BARO 36269-5195



CHRISTOPHER · ISHERWOOD

Arnie Kantrowitz says in his article "Homosexuals and Literature":

We [gays] weren't about to tell artists what subjects to explore or what stances to take, but we were about to hold them morally responsible for the effects of their works on our lives.

(*College English*, 36:3 [Nov. 1974], 328)

As only one gay reader applying Kantrowitz's measure to Isherwood's use of gay identity in his writing, I give Isherwood a fairly high score for at least three reasons.

First, Isherwood squarely faces the reality of gay oppression, even when he must move dangerously close to his own notion of propaganda to give it its due in fiction. In his review of *Grapes of Wrath*, Isherwood accused Steinbeck of "personal, school-masterish intrusions upon the reader."

Novels inevitably reflect contemporary conditions. But here the distinction appears. In a successful work of art, the "propaganda" ... has been completely digested, it forms part of the latent content, its conclusions are left to the conscience and judgments of the reader.

(Originally in *Kenyon Review*, 1969. Here as reprinted in *Exhumations*, Simon and Schuster, 1966, 22)

However, I dare say that few gay readers of *The Single Man* can read George's elaborate toilet or highway fantasies about nongays without hearing Isherwood intrude [and thankfully so!] to teach us how much more effectively to tell the nongay world to get off our backs:

But your book is wrong, Mrs. Strunk, says George, when it tells you that Jim is the substitute I found for a real son, a real kid brother, a real husband, a real wife. Jim wasn't a substitute for anything. And there is no substitute for Jim, if you'll forgive my saying so, anywhere.

Your exorcism has failed, dear Mrs. Strunk, says George, squatting on the toilet and peeping forth from his lair to watch her emptying the dustbag of her vacuum cleaner into the trash can. The unspeakable is still here — right in your very midst.

(*The Single Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1964, 29)

George is the persecuted gay who, rather than fight back, turns his hostility in on himself and "wins" only in such fantasies.

Then, that newspaper editor [who has started a campaign against sex deviates], George thinks, how funny to kidnap him and the staff-writers responsible for the sex-deviate articles — and maybe also the police chief, and the head of the vice squad, and those ministers who endorsed the campaign from their pulpits — and take them all to a secret underground movie studio, where, after a little persuasion — no doubt just showing them the red hot pokers and pincers would be quite sufficient — they would perform every possible sexual act, in pairs and in groups, with a display of the utmost enjoyment. The film would then be developed and prints of it would be rushed...

(*The Single Man*, 38)

The fantasy reads like a prophecy of current gay zaps, but in George's version, he gets none of the spoils. Isherwood says of George in the *Gay Sunshine* interview: "He defies fate. He fights with bared teeth up to the last moment." But George never really bares those teeth at the newspaper editor or at Mrs. Strunk. It is Isherwood who does that.

Isherwood has admitted to similar political juggling of his material elsewhere, in the *Berlin Stories*:

I couldn't resist posing as someone who had been deeply concerned with the fate of Germany right from the day of my arrival. That simply wasn't true. To begin with, I was both indifferent and ignorant. And even as late as 1932, I find that I wrote to my Mother and spelt Hitler's name wrong!

(*Gay Sunshine*, 2)

A second major reason that I find Isherwood's use of gay identity having a positive effect on me as a gay reader is the fact that he always records gay affection with openness, ease, and understanding. Whether complex, as in the surprise of Olly at his own prurience responding to Patrick's narration of the affair with Tommy, or whether simple, as in George's steady monitoring and categorizing of the sexual value of every male he passes in his long last day, homosexual rapport in Isherwood's fiction occurs naturally without

much conscious choice – i.e., the way we gays perceive our sexuality happening, but not the way in most nongay literature we are told to view our “deviant, unnatural choices.” Isherwood knows well the first gay lesson, viz., that erection is beautifully involuntary.

Isherwood said in *Gay Sunshine*: “I suppose my own role as a gay is to try to get people out of their closets” (p.3). If not in his new political sense, in a deeply personal sense, Isherwood has been on the side of coming out, sexually and in every other way, in all of his writing. He says at the conclusion of “Mr. Lancaster”:

I think I see now that Mr. Lancaster’s invitation to me was his last attempt to re-establish relations with the outside world. But of course it was too late. If my visit had any decisive effect on him, it can only have been to show him what it was that prevented him from having any close contact with anybody. He had lived too long inside his sound box, listening to his own reverberations, his epic song of himself. He didn’t need me.

(*Down There on a Visit*, Simon and Schuster, 1962, 57)

In gay terms, sexual liberation inevitably means the gay person’s acceptance of her/his sexuality as a part of one’s integrity, one’s wholeness. With young Stephen Spender in Germany, Isherwood similarly played the liberator role, if with only slightly more success:

In gay terms, sexual liberation inevitably means the gay person’s acceptance of her/his sexuality as a part of one’s integrity, one’s wholeness. With young Stephen Spender in Germany, Isherwood similarly played the liberator role, if with only slightly more success:

[Spender] decided that I was the healer who was going to lead him out of his puritan captivity into the promised libido-land. When we are young, we love to cast our friends in these great symbolic roles; and I can’t deny that I threw myself into the character with enormous enthusiasm.

(*Exhumations*, 60-61)

Isherwood and his fictional counterparts Christopher, George, Olly, Patrick . . . regularly learn the hard way that persons resist vicarious liberation, even when offered by the gentlest of quakers or swamis.

Furthermore, for Isherwood, in better relationships people do not divide easily into the leader and the led. “What I value in a relationship is constant tension, in the sense of never being under the illusion that the one understands the other person” (*Gay Sunshine*, 2). If isolation is the price of reality, then so be it. When Christopher goes to visit his addict friend Paul, he registers his interest in Paul’s state by being willing to smoke with him:

At this, Paul threw back his head and roared with laughter. “Oh, darling Chrissikins! If you only knew how funny you are! Or a dozen pipes, for that matter! You’re exactly like a tourist who thinks he can take in the whole of Rome in one day. You know, you really are a tourist, to your bones. I bet you’re always sending post cards with ‘Down here on a visit’ on them. That’s the story of your life....”

(*Down There on a Visit*, 315-316)

Interestingly Paul did recover from his addiction, but only after novelist Isherwood gets the would-be omniscient Christopher out of the scene. Even at the end of *Meeting By The River*, such rapprochement as the two brothers have achieved has by no means given each the knowledge he sought of the other; the prevailing tensions are more welcomed than resolved.

It seems to me that Isherwood treats gay sexual identity with high seriousness by holding gay people, like any others, responsible for the hells of our own making. While Isherwood does not deny oppression over which we have no control, he plays very heavily upon the choices that gay individuals are given. He makes it clear that Patrick could have divorced and joined Tom. Olly could have left the monastery and discovered energy reserves in his mortified ego. Mr. Lancaster could have come out of his shell to relate to Christopher at least as well as the chicken hawk Herr Parrot-Shark. Christopher could have taken the drug trip to addiction with Paul. In each of these situations Isherwood lets us know that these combinations are in the deck, but he respectfully avoids mandating which cards *ought* to be played.

A third reason that Isherwood’s treatment of gay sexual identity has a good effect on me is that he takes a new look at gay sexual stereotypes. He includes chicken hawks,

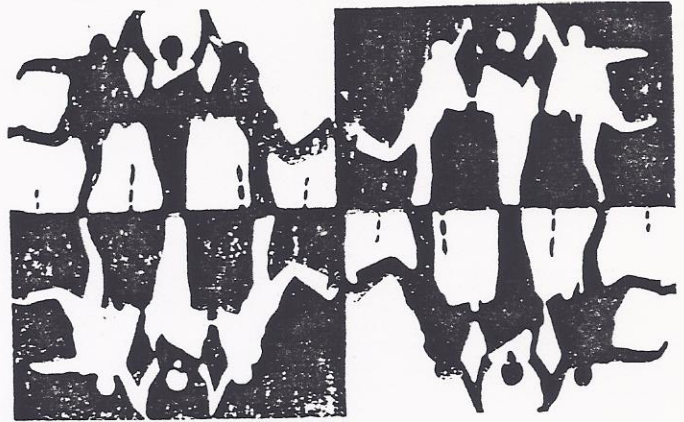
lots of cockteases (especially of the young Prussian variety), many cruising butches, occasional closet femmes, and even a few Miss Things; but even veteran sissies have to be alert to see ourselves given more flesh and spirit on his pages than sometimes we allow ourselves in life. Part of Isherwood's re-Vision of stereotypes occurs through his minimal and highly selective use of gay language (only non-users call it slang), even in talking about settings in which it would be appropriate. I must admit I miss in his work some of the innovative verbal skills of gay people, suggested here only with occasional *honey's*, *darling's*, or in a very rare gay metaphor, such as in his punch line to the poem "On His Queerness": "And [I] am not even sorry that I know nothing/About fish" (*Exhumations*, 8). Still, Isherwood never allows any gay person in his work to be subsumed under a glib label or a superficial bit of role-playing.

Of course, the ruse of grading an artist is presumptuous. Isherwood's honesty with gay oppression, with gay sexuality, and with gay individuality is its own recommendation and reward.

 This paper was originally read at the Modern Languages Association Seminar 93, December 1974.

LESBIAN CONNECTION

FREE TO LESBIANS



A nationwide forum of news and ideas by, for and about lesbians.

Ambitious Amazons, PO Box 811,
 East Lansing, MI 48823

GPU NEWS

AUGUST 1977
 75c

LEZZIE
 TOMMY
 AUNTIE QUEER DYKE
 BITCH
 FAGGOT!
 COCK
 Sissy
 SUCKER
 DRAG
 BULLDYKE
 GAY
 Queen
 MARY

THE LANGUAGE OF OPPRESSION

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

Mail to: GPU NEWS
 P.O. Box 92203
 Milwaukee, WI 53202

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

All copies are mailed in a sealed manila envelope.

Rates:
 Domestic \$7 one year, \$12 two years
 (Outside U.S.A. add \$1 per year)

Now in our Seventh Year!

National News * Local News * Feature Articles * Poetry
 Fiction * Cartoons * Reviews * Classified Ads * Directory