

## 44-Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*: A work of art produced in the afternoon of an author's life

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### Abstract

Beginning his early literary career as an author who nurtured his fiction with personal facts and experiences, many of Christopher Isherwood's novels focus on constructing an identity and discovering himself not only as an adult but also as an author. He is one of those unique authors whose gradual transformation from late adolescence to young and middle adulthood can be clearly observed since he portrays different stages of his life in fiction. His critically acclaimed novel *A Single Man*, which reflects "the afternoon of his life;" is a poetic portrayal of Isherwood's confrontation with ageing and death anxiety. Written during the early 1960s, stormy relationship with his partner Don Bachardy, the fight against cancer of two of his close friends' (Charles Laughton and Aldous Huxley) and his own health problems surely contributed the formation of *A Single Man*. The purpose of this study is to unveil how Isherwood's midlife crisis nurtured his creativity in producing this work of fiction. From a theoretical point of view, this paper, draws from literary gerontology and 'the Lifecourse Perspective' which is a theoretical framework in social gerontology. Examining the works of authors like Isherwood, who speaks directly from his own experience, reveals how literature and gerontology intersect. It is clear that as an aiding discipline, fiction provides a key which can unlock the inner world of ageing individuals and help in understanding them.

**Keywords:** Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*, ageing, literary gerontology

## Christopher Isherwood - *Tek Başına Bir Adam*: Hayatın sonbaharında yaratılan bir sanat eseri

### Öz

Edebiyat kariyerine, kurgusunu kişisel gerçekler ve deneyimlerle besleyen bir yazar olarak başlayan Christopher Isherwood'un romanlarının çoğu, bir kimlik oluşturmaya ve kendini yalnızca bir yetişkin olarak değil, aynı zamanda bir yazar olarak keşfetmeye odaklanır. Hayatının farklı evrelerini kurguyla anlattığı için, geç ergenlik döneminden, genç ve orta yetişkinliğe kademeli geçişi açıkça gözlemlenebilen eşsiz yazarlardan biridir. "Hayatının sonbaharını" yansıtan, eleştirmenlerce beğenilen romanı *Tek Başına Bir Adam*, Isherwood'un yaşlanma ve ölüm kaygısıyla yüzleşmesinin şiirsel bir tasviridir. 1960'ların başlarında yazılan, hayat arkadaşı Don Bachardy ile fırtınalı ilişkisi, yakın iki arkadaşının (Charles Laughton ve Aldous Huxley) kanserle mücadelesi ve kendi sağlık sorunları, kesinlikle *Tek Başına Bir Adam*'in oluşumuna katkı sağlamıştır bu çalışmanın amacı Isherwood'un orta yaş krizinin, bu romanı kurgularken yaratıcılığını nasıl beslediğini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Teorik olarak bu çalışma, edebi gerontolojiden ve sosyal gerontolojinin teorik

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çerçevesini oluşturan 'Yaşam Boyu Perspektifi'nden yararlanmaktadır. Doğrudan kendi deneyimlerinden söz eden Isherwood gibi yazarların eserlerini incelemek, edebiyat ve gerontolojinin nasıl kesiştiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Yardımcı bir disiplin olarak kurgunun, yaşlanan bireylerin iç dünyasının kilidini açabilecek ve onları anlamaya yardımcı olabilecek bir anahtar olduğu açıktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Christopher Isherwood, *Tek Başına Bir Adam*, yaşlanmak, edebi gerontoloji

I am asking you to get into the habit of considering books in this way — of listening to the voice of the author, his tone of voice, and thus getting to know his literary personality — Which is different from his actual personality. Sometimes there is a big difference. Some authors come to us ornately masked. Others more or less without makeup, even.

Christopher Isherwood

(qtd. in Berg, 2007, p.245)

Christopher Isherwood is one of those authors who produced fiction 'without make up.' As a person whose motive for writing was to speak about his own experiences (Berg, 2007, p.42), a keen reader of Isherwood knows that his fiction grew out of his personal life. He argues that "... art really begins with the question of my own experience, and what am I going to turn it into? What does it mean and what is it all about? I suppose that I write in order to find out what my life means and who I am. ..." (Berg, 2007, pp.53-54) As he stated, the act of writing was a way to know himself better. Isherwood's fiction depends heavily on his experiences. Starting from his first novels, *All the Conspirators* (1928), *The Memorial* (1932) and *Lions and Shadows* (1938) (semi-autobiographical) he portrays young characters who are unable to fit into society and are involved in great struggle to be independent individuals, free of family expectations and pressures. However, the moment he stepped in Berlin in 1928, he realized how psychologically and sexually repressed he had been in England. In an interview, dated 1973, he described the years he spent in Berlin with these words "I was young and full of life and tremendously happy to be away from all the restraints which England represented above all, to feel completely free sexually." (Nixon 2007) Berlin definitely provided enough material to improve his fiction artistically, but at the same time he began to make meaning out of his life by acting out his sexual identity. His years in Berlin resulted in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) both of which contributed to his literary career and popularity.

Personality psychologist Dan P. McAdams states "Life stories contain accounts of high points, low points, turning points and other emotionally charged events" (Fingerman et. al 2011 p.596) and these negative and positive events contribute to individual life story telling. As for Isherwood's life, the capture of his first longtime lover, Heinz Neddenmayer by the Gestapo was a clearly a turning point event that emotionally devastated Isherwood. This was the second loss that he had to go through after his father's death in the First World War. In 1933, when Hitler became the new Chancellor of Germany in a letter written to Stephen Spender, Isherwood ironically observes that "As you will have seen, we are having a new government, with Charlie Chaplin and Father Christmas in the ministry. All words fail." (1976, p.119) On February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building was set on fire probably by the Nazis, though they accused communists of having done it. Thousands of people were arrested. Isherwood, who had already seen the other side of the coin, writes that "Charlie Chaplin' had ceased to be funny. (1976, p.120) As the Nazis became more and more powerful, many homosexuals and Jews began to be arrested. Berlin was no longer the same city where "... at last he was being brought face to face with his tribe. (Isherwood, 1976, p.16) Isherwood had already decided not to sacrifice his sexuality. In *Christopher and His Kind*, he states "My will is to live according to my nature, and to

find a place where I can be what I am..." (1976, p.12) The political chaos in Germany, Hitler's coming to power, the arrests of homosexuals by the Nazis surely contributed to his decision to go to America in 1939. On his way to America, he was desperately in need of something to hold on to. He knew that he had to find a purpose and unity in life and reconstruct a new "Christopher Isherwood" persona. This is the reason why he noted in his diary as "I must be anonymous until I discover a new self here, an American me." (Isherwood, 2001, p.4) Although it took years to get over his artistic and spiritual struggles, *A Single Man* (1964) is a special novel in which he finally presented a blend of the artistic, sexual and spiritual American self that he had woven through the years. Portraying a single day in the life of a middle-aged, gay professor who is mourning for his long-time partner was undoubtedly an outcome of the artistic and sexual self that he solidified freely in America.

To understand the process that prepared Isherwood in creating a *A Single Man*, it would be better to take a look at various incidents of his life. First of all, he came to America with the idea that "His public personality would function more freely, more successfully than it could ever have functioned in London." (Isherwood, 1976, p 337) Because he believed that "his obligations wouldn't be the same in the States. He wouldn't be a member of a group. He could express himself freely as an individual" (Isherwood,1976, p 337) America provided Isherwood more than he was looking for. Realizing that how much he hated war, he became a pacifist. Through Gerald Heard he learned a pacifist way of life and what his role would be in the time of war. When he witnessed Heard's daily meditations, he met Vedanta philosophy and Swami Prabhavananda who played a key role in Isherwood's spiritual self-exploration and transformation. Isherwood himself acknowledges Swami's role by saying that Isherwood had once been "an atheist, a liberal, a supporter of the Popular Front and an advocate of armed resistance to fascism, in Spain and everywhere," but now he was transformed into another man who found himself "unable to disbelieve" in the Swami's belief in God. (Isherwood 1966, p.97)

Vedanta is "the search for Self-knowledge as well as the search for God." (Vedanta Society 2016) As Brian Hodgkinson indicates in *The Essence of Vedanta*, Vedanta depends on the "recognition of unity and "the oneness of spirit." (Hodgkinson 2006, p.12) In Vedanta, God is in our hearts and it is called "Atman" or "the Divine Self." In 1945, Isherwood wrote an introduction for the book Vedanta for the Western World. He describes the main principles of Vedanta as "First, that Man's real nature is divine. Second, that the aim of human life is to realize this divine nature. Third, that all religions are essential in agreement." (Isherwood 2005, p.1) He emphasizes that we are beings who are deeply involved with worldly worries. As long as we are unable to get rid of these worries we cannot reach the Atman (GOD). He turns inward to find the Atman in his nature. He asks "How am I to realize this nature?" As Isherwood became more familiar with the principles of Vedanta, he found the chance to put the theory into practice. In his letter to Cyril Connolly, he emphasized the importance of Vedanta in his life by saying that it "offers me personally a solution and a way of life which I desperately needed and which seems to work and within which I can imagine living the rest of my life with a feeling of purpose and lack of despair." (Bucknell 2011, p. 366)

Another factor which solidified Isherwood's belief in Vedanta was Swami's approach to his sexuality. Though he did not remember his exact words, he asked an important question to Swami: "Can I lead a spiritual life as long as I'm having a sexual relationship with a young man?" (Isherwood 2001, p. 25) As a man who had vowed not to deny his homosexuality before he sailed for America, the answer to this question was crucial. Swami's answer to this question was:

You must try to see him as the young Lord Krishna.” Krishna is regarded as an avatar- “one of the incarnations of this thing who are believed to be born on earth from time to time, and that Krishna is described as having been extraordinarily beautiful in his youth. (Isherwood 2001, p. 25)

Isherwood was certainly not expecting such a tolerant and understanding answer from the Swami. In *My Guru and His Disciple*, he writes that he was convinced to be his pupil because the Swami “... hadn’t shown the least shadow of distaste on hearing me admit to my homosexuality... From that moment on, I began to understand that the Swami did not think in terms of sins, as most Christians do.” (Isherwood 2001, p. 26) He gradually became a sincere believer in Vedanta, and he began to adopt a Vedic perspective in his novels such as *Prater Violet* and *The World in the Evening*. Vedanta nurtured Isherwood’s artistic identity as a novelist. The guru and disciple relationship between the director Friedrich Bergmann and Christopher in *Prater Violet* and between Stephen and Elizabeth in *The World in the Evening* provide readers enough evidence to observe the effects of Vedanta on character portrayals. As for his sexual identity, Isherwood becomes more comfortable in incorporating “the ‘unspeakable’ into art” (Woodhouse, 1998, p.26). Vedanta contributed Isherwood’s unapologetic and firm stance in *A Single Man*. In a country where homosexuality was considered a mental disorder until 1973, portraying a homosexual character in a heteronormative world was an act of courage.

*A Single Man* is a polyphonic novel, in which one can hear different tunes played by its author. The novel has been analyzed from the perspectives of various theories in literary criticism. While Lisa M. Schwerdt (1989) approaches the novel from its difference in terms of its content and narrative technique, James J. Berg and Chris Freeman (2010) offer a multiculturalist and multiethnic perspective. Apart from the scholars like Victor Marsh (2010) who read the text as religious novel in terms of the author’s relation with Vedanta, Jill E Anderson (2011) evaluated the novel from Queer Ecological perspective while Jamie Harker focuses on Isherwood’s queer identity in *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America* (2013) However, this paper aims to listen to the voice of a 58-year-old Christopher Isherwood who was concerned with the ending of his life’s journey. During one of his lectures, given at Los Angeles City College on May 2, 1962 he was occupied with one question: “how far and in what manner does the novel grow out of the novelist’s personal experience of life?” (qtd. in Berg 2007, p.241) He reveals that his work is “founded on direct experience. ...We all have the impulse to examine our experience – what is happening to us, and hence, what we are. Because what is happening to us is what we are.” (2007, p.241) Isherwood remained true to this motto and made meaning out of his experiences.

*A Single Man* is Isherwood’s literary response to ageing. When Isherwood came to America, fame and popularity were not the only realities in his baggage. He was also carrying a personal fear of losing loved ones and traces of a rooted grief and vulnerability to loneliness. The 1950s was a decade that prepared Isherwood to turn all his fears and anxieties into fiction. His diary entries provide enough material to observe emotional ups and downs, the nature of his relationship with his partner Don Bachardy, along with physical inadequacies and health issues. As Bachardy was becoming the center of Isherwood’s life, Isherwood came to feel dissatisfied with his physical appearance, complaining about putting on weight and looking older than he did in past years. However, a more serious and unpleasant surprise was ahead when he discovered a tumor on the lower side of his abdomen in 1957. The feeling of life’s finitude led him not only to fear death but also to fear losing Don Bachardy. The early 1960s was a period when he had to endure many physical and emotional instabilities as he was witnessing his own ageing and the struggle of two of his close friends’ -Charles Laughton and Aldous Huxley- against cancer.

All this edged Isherwood into a creative process. According to geriatric psychiatrist Gene D. Cohen, when people are getting older, they become more involved in their psychological life. "This awareness can be an asset in a creative and artistic sense by allowing people to draw upon new potential as they age." (Cohen, 2006, p.8) In the late 50s and early 60s, confronting ageing provided Isherwood a similar awareness. The purpose of this study is to read *A Single Man* as Isherwood's creative expression of ageing. The crisis of growing old along with personal anxieties and vulnerabilities resulted in Isherwood's most famous and well-known novel after *Goodbye to Berlin*. Isherwood successfully portrays the self of an ageing man furnishing him with his own fears of losing a loved one and an anxiety of death. Since literary gerontology deals with literary representations of ageing, reading *A Single Man* from this perspective can show us a way to the bridge of literature with gerontology. In the first part of this article, an overview of literary gerontology and the Lifecourse perspective in social gerontology will be briefly touched upon alongside with Isherwood's life story. Since his narrative depends on the incidents and experiences that he had gone through in real life, knowing some of the personal moments and milestone events in particular places, at a particular period becomes a key component in understanding the formation of the novel. In the second part, the pattern of death and life in *A Single Man* will be explored with specific references from the novel.

### Gerontology and Isherwood's life story

My glass shall not persuade me I am old / So long as youth and thou are of one date;  
But when in thee time's furrows I behold, / Then look I death my days should expiate.

("Shakespeare's Sonnet", 2020)

Since growing old is an inextricable fact of human life, it has been a subject matter for any kind of literary work. Right now, at this minute thousands of people in the world might be looking in a mirror as Shakespeare did in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and feeling dissatisfied with what they see. With its various portrayals of old age and its challenges, literature helps gerontology in understanding what it means to grow old. Various scholars and authors have developed and contributed the term 'literary gerontology' which can be briefly described as representation of ageing in fiction. In 1990, scholar and author, Steven Weiland described gerontology as "a hospitable" discipline to the humanities. (Weiland, 1990, p. 435) Similarly, in the same year, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown became the harbinger as well as the pioneer of literary gerontology; describing it as a "sub-specialty in literary studies." (Wyatt-Brown, 1990, p.300) She outlines the framework of literary gerontology within five categories:

(1) analyses of literary attitudes towards aging; (2) humanistic approaches to literature and aging; (3) psychoanalytic explorations of literary works and their authors; (4) applications of gerontological theories about autobiography, life review, and midlife transitions; and (5) psychoanalytically informed studies of the creative process." (Wyatt-Brown, 1990, p.300)

As Wyatt Brown states above, in their analysis of a literary work, scholars can approach a text in accordance with these different categories. In *Stories of Ageing* Mike Hepworth encapsulates the heart of the matter by treating fiction as "an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society." (Hepworth, 2000) Similarly, Thomas R. Cole, and Michelle Sierpina argue that literary critics have two tasks to fulfill in this area: "to demonstrate literature's contribution to understanding aging and the impact of aging on the life and work of creative writers." (Cole & Sierpina, 2007, Chapter 12, p.249)

Is ageing a disruptor when it comes to producing a work of fiction? Does the ability to write a new novel or a poem have an expiration date in old age? Particularly in fiction, though also in fine arts such as music, painting or sculpture, many outstanding examples can be found to prove the fact that ageing is a driving force in creating a work of art. According to Martin S. Lindauer “imaginative and other high order cognitive abilities need not decline or be lost with increasing age. They can continue into old age and many even flower” (Lindauer, 1998, p. 247). When Michelangelo died at the age of 89, he was working on his last work, *The Rondanini Pietà*. Paul Cézanne was so unsuccessful in his 40s that, he became a subject for a book called *L'Œuvre* (The Masterpiece) written by his best friend Émile Zola. But Cézanne never stopped painting and he produced his best works in his fifties and sixties. When William Butler Yeats wrote *Sailing to Byzantium*, he was 60 years old. After having a heart attack and a stroke, the American poet, William Carlos Williams, who was also a pediatrician, published his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* when he was 79 years old. History is filled with artists who continued to produce in old age. As for Isherwood’s case, growing older stimulated his creativity positively. On October 31, 1963, he writes in his diary that he is happy with *A Single Man*’s progress. “I am almost certain that it is my masterpiece; by which I mean my most effective, coherent statement, artwork, whatever you want to call it.” (qtd. in Bucknell, 2010, p. 291) Isherwood’s satisfaction with the novel was the result of reflecting the challenges and dilemmas of his life.

In her book, *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams*, Kathleen Woodward asserts that the central conclusion of her work “is that a new way of thinking (and thus being in the world), a new mode of cognition, may emerge in old age.” (Woodward 1980 p.xii) Also it has been noted that since old age contributes to one’s self confidence and frees individuals from social constraints, it affects creativity positively. (Hooymann et al., 2015) In *Research on Creativity and Ageing*, Gene D. Cohen identifies four development phases in the second half of life. They are: Midlife Reevaluation, Liberation, Summing Up and Encore. He observes that in one’s early 40s and late 50s, the individual feels a “powerful desire to create meaning in life.” Since the individual confronts the finitude of life for the first time in these years, this leads them to uncover their creativity. (Cohen, 2006, p.8) In the Liberation phase, which lies between the mid-50s and mid-70s, individuals feel free in reflecting their thoughts. Particularly, after retirement, they experience a sort of liberation in trying something new. In Isherwood’s case, a blend of the Midlife Reevaluation, and Liberation phases go hand in hand in his creative process. Naturally, it is impossible to talk about such a thing as retirement for Isherwood because the act of writing had always been an instrument to find meaning in life. However, it is true that in his mid-40s, he felt first signs of deterioration in his physical and psychological health. When he was 45 years old, his diary entries clearly show that he began to experience the physical challenges of midlife which was also affecting his state of mind. On November 8, 1949, he wrote in his diary that he felt:

... sick, stupid, middle-aged, impotent. I have just got to make an effort, and not wail and weep. I bore myself beyond tears... I must take my boredom and impotence and cram myself full of them until I gag and vomit up all this poison. (Bucknell 2011, p.415)

On December 14, 1949, he complained that he was unable to write because of hyper-tension:

... there is hyper-tension, worse, I think, I have ever experienced. And so I fail to write. I put it off and put it off, and I do nothing about getting a job... I am lazy and dreamy and lecherous. I hate being alone... I don’t believe in myself or my future and all my ‘reputation’ is just a delayed-action mechanism which only impresses the very young. (Bucknell 2011, p.419)

As Rudi G. J. Westendorp and Thomas B. L. Kirkwood note "Ageing is a continuous process, starting early and developing gradually, instead of being a distinct phase that begins in middle to late life." (Westendorp & Kirkwood, 2007, Chapter 2, p. 20) Isherwood was not only confronting the biological challenges of ageing but was also in the middle of a serious writer's block.

After settling in America, apart from a travel diary and a pamphlet about Vedanta, he struggled to produce anything with a literary value but he kept writing in his diaries. There was a nine-year interval between his first novel, produced in America, *Prater Violet* (1945) and *The World in the Evening* which was published in 1954. *The World in the Evening* is one of the most neglected yet poignant of Isherwood's novels. I believe that this is the novel that paved Isherwood's way for *A Single Man* because he finally offers a complete blend of his artistic, sexual and spiritual identities because after *All The Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial* (1932) he left the "Christopher" persona aside, he felt free to creatively depict a bisexual character, Stephen Monk and his journey towards psychological and moral growth. For the first time in his novels, Isherwood mixes epistolary technique with flashbacks and so that each chapter fulfills its purpose to understand Stephen Monk's spiritual and moral transformation.

Before covering *A Single Man*, another critically acclaimed product of the Liberation Phase in detail, it is necessary to draw from Margaret Morganroth Gullette who is an internationally known scholar in age studies. In *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, she enriches literary gerontology with a concept called 'the midlife progress novel.' Also, in *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* she draws attention to the devastating effects of ageism and focuses on the need to emphasize a positive narrative about old age. She aptly states "Whatever happens in the body, and even if nothing happens in the body, aging is a narrative. Each of us tells her own story." (Gullet, 2011, p.5). Although he abolishes his 'Christopher Isherwood' persona in *The World in the Evening*, readers who are familiar with his fiction will recognize the fact that Isherwood is telling his own story in *A Single Man*. By depicting an ageing hero and focusing on the psychological and physical frailties of the protagonist in detail, Isherwood projects his personal crisis in growing old. At this point referring to "the Lifecourse Perspective" which is a theoretical framework in social gerontology, can help to understand how various incidents created lifelong effects and consequences in Isherwood's life.

In *Aging and the Life Course -An Introduction to Social Gerontology*, Jill Quadagno describes the lifecourse perspective as "the interaction of historical events, individual decisions and opportunities, and the effect of early life experiences in determining later life outcomes." (Quadagno, 2018, p.47) As Robert Frost implies in his famous poem 'The Road Not Taken', the path you choose, whether the less traveled or the more trafficked one, will shape the course of your life. What you experience along that road or what decisions you make directly affect your life's trajectory. In Isherwood's case, the road to Berlin in 1929 was a journey to freedom and liberation that resulted in maturity, self-growth and revelation in terms of his artistic and sexual identity. To understand the present conditions of ageing individuals "the major social and psychological forces that have operated throughout the course of their lives" should be taken into account. (Johnson et al., 2005, p.14). Researchers who adopt this perspective should also evaluate on how a certain time period affects the ageing process and the conditions of ageing individuals.

In order to understand the differences between age groups, gerontological research focuses on the influence of historical events on individuals. Social gerontologists use the term 'cohort' to classify individuals who are exposed to same incidents within the same period of time. In studying ageing

there are various “cohort differences.” (Quadagno, 2018, p.29) For example in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the first birth cohort is “The swing generation born between 1900 and 1927” (Quadagno, 2018, p.29) ‘Birth cohort’ refers to group of people who were born in the same year and went through same historical incidents. For this reason, they share similar experiences, manners, behaviors, fears and constraints. This is also called a “cohort effect.” As a member of the Swing cohort, Isherwood, who was born in 1904, had to experience two world wars. The obvious cohort effect of these wars on Isherwood was his inability to cope with the losses. In the First World War, with the death of his father Frank Isherwood who was a Captain in the British army, he lost the possibility of a shared future with him. There had been a special bond between the two. It was Frank Isherwood who introduced stories into his son’s life. He was a good story teller who “charmed his son with imaginative tales and drew cartoons for him” (Fryer, 1993, p. 9) In the Afterword to his memoir, *Kathleen and Frank*, he states that after his father’s death “being a sacred Orphan” (Isherwood 1971, p.502) and the effort to be a son worthy of his father give rise to feelings of inferiority which never left him during his adolescence. On the other hand, lacking a father figure caused his mother Kathleen’s excessive pressure on her sons. Gradually too much mothering and control began to suffocate Isherwood. They were in a continuous conflict which resulted Isherwood’s intentional and planned dismissal from Cambridge and finally his journey to Berlin.

As Isherwood points out, he belonged to the Angry Young Men Generation of the 1930s. In the preface to *All the Conspirators*, he depicts his generation as the Angry Young Men, because they are angry with British society, “their dullness, snobbery, complacency, apathy.” (Isherwood 1966, p. 92) In her essay “The Leaning Tower”, Virginia Woolf observes that writers like “Day Lewis, Auden, Spender, Isherwood, Louis MacNeice” were writing in a chaotic world:

When they looked at human life what did they see? Everywhere change; everywhere revolution. In Germany, in Russia, in Italy, in Spain, all the old hedges were being rooted up; all the old towers were being thrown to the ground. ... The whole of civilisation, of society, was changing. ... Who can wonder if they have been incapable of giving us great poems, great plays, great novels? They had nothing settled to look at; nothing peaceful to remember; nothing certain to come.” (Woolf, 2015)

Social gerontologist Jon Hendricks maintains that a life course perspective is about ‘examining changes.’ These changes might be ‘biological, developmental or historical’ but they bring about certain transformations in an individual’s life. Hendricks also notes that since humans are emotional beings, they ‘impose meaning on’ change. “In a manner of speaking, under optimal circumstances, we reinvent ourselves with each transition as transformed meanings take shape.” (Hendricks, 2012 p. 226) When it is evaluated from the Lifecourse perspective in social gerontology, Isherwood’s life in Berlin caused a reinvention in both his artistic and sexual identity. The interpersonal relations he had in Berlin, the incidents he had gone through especially during the rising nationalistic and anti-Semitic period of the 1930s and the sexual freedom and diversity of the city provided him with the raw material to construct a new self.

The second loss that Isherwood struggled to cope with came about because of the Second World War. During the time he spent in Berlin, as he himself points out in *Christopher and His Kind*, for the first time in his life, he found a chance to meet “his tribe.” The homosexual desires he had had to suppress in England were ready to be unleashed among the dozens of gay bars in Berlin. In an interview, dated 1973, he commented on the years he spent in Berlin with these words “I was young and full of life and tremendously happy to be away from all the restraints which England represented above all, to feel completely free sexually.” (qtd. in Nixon, 2007) In other words Berlin gave him the freedom while he

was constructing his sexual identity. In 1932, Isherwood met his first longtime lover, Heinz Neddemayer. As Isherwood states in his Berlin memoir, *Christopher and His Kind*, the two spent the next seven years running away from Germany and its political chaos, which ended with Heinz's capture by the Gestapo and the couple's heartbreaking separation. As another world war was taking his lover away, Isherwood was emotionally and psychologically devastated. After Heinz's capture, he wrote that "I felt like a house in which one room, the biggest, is locked up." (Isherwood, 2015, p 282)

Isherwood's diary entries show that when he came to America in 1939, he had various relationships but meeting his longtime partner, Don Bachardy, at a party in 1953 changed everything. He was 48 years old at that time and finding love in 'the afternoon of his life' was not something that he was expecting. As his whole life began to revolve around Don, the fear of losing him brought back his nightmares once again.

but I did feel awed by the emotional intensity of our relationship, right from its beginning: the strange sense of a fated, mutual discovery. I knew that, this time, I had really committed myself. Don might leave me, but I couldn't possibly leave him, unless he ceased to need me. This sense of a responsibility which was almost fatherly made me anxious but full of joy. (Isherwood, 2001, p. 209)

Although the couple remained together until Isherwood's death, they had many ups and downs in their relationship. Particularly in the period when Isherwood began writing the *Single Man*, the couple had to navigate through some serious crises. As Katherine Bucknell points out in the introduction to *The Sixties: Diaries Volume Two 1960-1969*, Don Bachardy was "struggling to find his way forward as an artist," but was "trapped by Isherwood's confidence, Isherwood's fame, Isherwood's bossiness." (Bucknell, 2011, p.xiii) On his 58th birthday, what Isherwood wrote in his diary shows that he was clearly afraid of losing Don:

Do I hate Don? Only the selfish part of me hates him, for rocking the boat. When I go beyond that, I feel real compassion, because he is suffering terribly. I still don't know if he really wants to leave me, or what. And I don't think he knows. (Bucknell, 2011, p.xvi)

In a letter written to his friend Edward Upward, he says "Melancholia is the occupational disease of us oldies." (Fryer 1993, p. 200) He was having a very hard time, trying to carry on a relationship with a man whom he put at the center of his life and at the same time trying to face the fact that he was getting older. One of the remarkable things about this letter is that Isherwood predicted what he would soon go through, as if he were some sort of seer. He wrote "It isn't really the finished novel that matters but something that happens to [you] while you are writing it." (Fryer, 1993, p. p.200) Actually *A Single Man* is an outcome of what happened to Isherwood, in certain period of his life.

### ***A Single Man***

In my opinion, *A Single Man* is like a gloomy 'what if?' scenario. What if Don leaves me? What if I get cancer? What if I die early and leave Don behind? Isherwood's course of life in the late 1950s and the early 1960s caused him to develop personal worries and fears. His diary entries prove that his mind was preoccupied with losing Don and death anxiety. On March 1, 1955, he wrote in his diary that he felt "dissatisfied" with himself:

Fattish (I weigh nearly 150) and pouchy faced, I look much older than I did two to three years ago... I look like a toad, or a man who is being slowly poisoned to death. My mind is dull, and my spirit is blunted. This, of course, makes me bad for Don. (Bucknell, 2011, p.477).

On August 8, 1955, his realization that his life was more than half over made him feel a sense of closure and maybe a concern for mortality.

In the night, quite often now, I wake- not with the horrors, but calmly and lucidly. Then I know certain things clearly- it is almost as if they belonged to another order of reality: that I shall die one day- that much of my life has been wasted- that the life of spirit is the only valid occupation- that I really care for Don- ( Bucknell, 2011, p.519)

In *The Social Context of Ageing*, Christina R Victor observes that within human physiological development, as individuals move from “maturity into ‘later life’” they experience physical and psychological changes and she classifies these changes as “true age effects” ( Victor, 2005, p.43) In *A Single Man*, by depicting an ageing hero and focusing in detail on physical and psychological frailties of George, Isherwood is actually projecting his personal crisis of growing old, his fear of losing his significant other and his death anxiety.

The Death and Life pattern in *A Single Man* evokes Gustav Klimt’s painting, “Death and Life.” On the left side of the painting, Klimt paints Death, made up of a skull and a dark robe. The skull is grinning and looking at Life on the right side of the canvas. Klimt depicts Life as a colorful portrayal of women, a baby, a muscular man and an older woman. As Death watches them insidiously, the living creatures are holding on to Life, unaware of the existence of Death. The novel follows a similar pattern, beginning with an awakening scene in which Isherwood poetically portrays a living creature gaining consciousness as he slowly transforms from ‘it’ to ‘I’ to ‘he.’ Then, Life begins when he has breakfast, drives to campus where he teaches a literature class, interacts with students but suddenly Death comes again when ‘he’ visits a woman named Doris who is dying from cancer. After that, as “...life-energy surges hotly through him” (Isherwood, 2010 p.82) he goes to the gym, does his shopping, has dinner with his friend and, in the middle of the night, swims naked in the ocean. As he and the readers are almost ready to forget Death, it comes in his sleep, attacks his coronary artery and stops his heart. The novel which begins with an awakening from a half-death scene, ends with a real one.

There are various critical scenes that reveal Isherwood’s fear of growing old and his death anxiety. As mentioned earlier, the novel begins with a notable paragraph about the awakening process of a living creature. Since sleep is a process when your soul leaves your body, it is like a half death. Isherwood describes a creature and refers to it as ‘it’ at first. The transition from ‘it’ to ‘I’ begins as the soul comes back to its body. This gives the reader a clue about the general tone of the novel, because it is obvious that this ‘it’ does not have the energy and desire to start living. Moreover, it regards “every now” as a burden and a reminder of the past:

Waking up begins with saying am and now. That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognized I, and therefrom deduced I am, I am now. ... But now isn’t simply now. Now is also a cold reminder, one whole day later than yesterday, one year later than last year. Every now is labelled with its date, rendering all past nows obsolete ... (Isherwood, 2010, p.1)

For the first two pages, reluctance and lack of vitality dominate the atmosphere, even though ‘it’ gets out of the bed. In the scene where ‘it’ stares into mirror for a long time, Isherwood conjures a beautiful description of an ageing face:

Here is what it has done to itself, here is the mess it has somehow managed to get itself into, during its fifty-eight years; expressed in terms of a dull, harassed stare, a coarsened nose, a mouth dragged down by the corners into a grimace as if at the sourness of its own toxins, cheeks sagging from their anchors of muscle, a throat hanging limp in tiny wrinkled folds. (Isherwood, 2010, p.2)

The scene above is reminiscent of a similar diary entry by Isherwood, dated July 20, 1960:

I look at my body, with its wrinkles and slackness of the skin and other imperfections which can never be set right anymore now. It is wearing out, tiring, getting ready, whether I like it or not, to die. I am getting ready to die. All very well to say I am not my body and even believe this- still, it is parting. All very well to say that my whole life has been dying and saying goodbye to the past; this will be different. Even if it is quite painless, it will be different. And there is saying goodbye to Don. Nobody who has ever loved anyone as I love Don can seriously pretend that that won't be painful. (qtd. in Bucknell 2011, p. 885)

Feeling insecure about his physical attractiveness, he also worries about Don. As Jesus Ramirez-Valles observes in *Queer Aging* "Our contemporary images of old age are dominated by a fear of aging, and this does not exclude gay men. In our white, middle- class context, aging and dying are dreaded." (Ramirez-Valles, 2016 p.25) While Isherwood was judging himself severely, he was also exposing how vulnerable he was at that period of his life.

Death continues to dominate the novel as 'it' stares into mirror, what he sees is the face of a 'dying creature.' Actually, Isherwood portrays the whole life course of a creature by depicting its face like canvas with many strokes on it.

Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face- the face of a child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man-all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us-we have died- what is there to be afraid of? (Isherwood, 2010, p.2)

When Isherwood began writing *A Single Man*, he was 58 years old. So, one can think that it was natural for an author like Isherwood to portray the biological signs of ageing that he was experiencing. However, a few years before the creation of the novel, he had had to confront the inevitable a few times. On February 12, 1957, he discovered a tumor on the lower side of his abdomen. As he writes in *My Guru and His Disciple*, this was his first "cancer scare" (Isherwood 2001, p. 224). He mentions that it wasn't there the previous night ago and he was shocked at how it grew so rapidly in one night. He had to undergo an operation. Since he was a believer of Vedanta, he had already internalized the Vedic approach to death and talked to his guru about it. He wrote that he believed in Swami's beliefs about death, however, he also adds "But there is one problem which he doesn't have- the extra pain I would feel in parting from Don..." (Isherwood 2001, p.224) So his worries were principally over a feeling that he had been familiar with since childhood: the fear of losing a loved one. As Gerben J. Westerhof and Emmanuelle Tulle point out "Health status is indeed found to be one of the strongest predictors of subjective age, proving that as soon as individuals are experiencing worse health, it becomes more difficult for them to dissociate themselves from old age." (Westerhof & Tulle, 2007, Chapter 11, p.251) A few more incidents prevented Isherwood from dissociating himself from ageing. His diary entries in the summer of 1960 reveal that he was complaining about the severe pain in his knee and back. The deaths of two of his friends' - Charles Laughton in 1962, and Aldous Huxley in 1963 - from cancer emotionally devastated him. In 1963, he himself faced death in a car accident, where he broke his rib. He also dealt with a serious sore throat which triggered one of the worst fears in his life: throat cancer. It was in precisely this atmosphere that he continued to write *A Single Man*.

On the third page as it gradually transforms itself to George, Isherwood reveals the source of the reluctance and grief.

Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small place, 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... bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love. ... It is there he stops short and knows, with a sick newness, almost as though it were for the first time: Jim is dead. Is dead." (Isherwood, 2010, p.4)

In my opinion this paragraph clearly reflects the state of mind that Isherwood was in. Isherwood depicts life here, a life shared with the person you love, ordinary activities that you engage in with someone together. Suddenly George shocks the reader with a basic sentence, 'Jim is dead.' The second emphasis is intentionally on the auxiliary to consolidate the sudden and unexpected inevitable. Clearly, the fear of losing Don Bachardy is linked with Jim's death. Jim's absence, in other words, the fact that he is dead is reminded to the reader. Even in the supermarket, among the shelves full of bottles, cartoons and cans, George remembers the meals he cooked with Jim, suddenly filled with anger, he reacts by saying "Damn all food. Damn all life" (Isherwood, 2010, p.72)

As George steps into his class in San Tomas State College, (which was inspired by the period when he became a visiting professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara) Isherwood pumps oxygen to George's lungs by making him engage in a vital and passionate discussion with his students about Aldous Huxley's "After Many a Summer Dies the Swan." Death imposes itself again in the scene where George visits Doris in the hospital "where she is absorbed in the business of dying." (Isherwood, 2010, p.76) In a way, this scene implies George's desire to confront death. Since Jim and Doris had a little affair that once drove George crazy, visiting the dying Doris is also a kind of closing of an unfinished business. However, seeing Doris in a hospital bed makes him think "we are on the same road, I shall follow you soon" (Isherwood, 2010, p.77) While his hate for Doris disappears, a part of Jim is also diminished:

'that the very last traces of the Doris who tried to take Jim from him have vanished from this shriveled mannequin, and, with them, the last of his hate. For he hated Jim too, nearly as much as her, while they were away together in Mexico. That has been the bond between him and Doris. And now it is broken. And one more bit of Jim is lost to him forever' (Isherwood, 2010, p.81)

As he leaves hospital, death recedes. George's mood changes again as he realizes that he is capable of enjoying life again:

I'm alive, he says to himself, I am alive. And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite. How good to be in a body- even this old beat-up carcass- that still has warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh. (Isherwood, 2010, p.82)

The presence of Life is also portrayed in the scene where George meets his student Kenny at a bar. Before their flirtatious conversation leads them to swim naked in the ocean in the middle of the night, Death comes again. Since the novel was written during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Isherwood also depicts Americans' confrontation of death. George tells Kenny that he is 'stuck with the future'

'I guess we are. What' left of it. There may not be much, with all these rockets--'

'Death.'

'Death?'

'That's what I said.'

'Come again, Sir. I don't get you.'

'I said Death. I said, do you think about Death a lot?'

'Why, no. Hardly at all. Why?'

'The Future—That's where Death is.' (Isherwood, 2010, p.127)

Ironically Isherwood foreshadows the fact Death is in the near future, a few pages on. Death first shows itself during the scene where they swim in the ocean. Intentionally, Isherwood uses the ocean metaphor which harbors Life since it symbolizes purification and regeneration, and Death with the unpredictability of water and waves. George feels "cleaner, freer, less." (132) until suddenly a great wave picks him up and turns him over and over. As Kenny drags George out, George feels alive as Kenny's body touches his. When they go to George's house, he feels "excited, amused and alive" (135) His rebirth in the ocean and Kenny's existence makes George to think "Jim is in the Past, now. He is of no use to George, anymore... It is Now that he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live." (p.148-149) But in the final scene, while George is sleeping, Death throws him, as well the reader a curve ball, and Isherwood portrays the experience of dying process:

Let us then suppose that, at that same instant deep down in one of the major branches of George's coronary artery, an unimaginably gradual process began. Somehow no doctors can tell us exactly why- the inner lining begins to become roughened. And, one by one, on the roughened surface of the smooth endothelium, ions of calcium, carried by the bloodstream, begin to be deposited. ... Let us suppose this, merely. ... Very well – let us suppose that this is the night, and the hour, and the appointed minute. Now – ... Cortex and brain- stem are murdered in the blackout... Throttled out of its oxygen, the heart clenches and stops. The lungs go dead, their power-line cut. (Isherwood, 2010, pp.151-152)

Clearly, the scene fulfills Isherwood's worries, anxieties about growing old and death, but also it can be interpreted as his way of overcoming these thoughts. Since Isherwood was a believer of Vedanta philosophy, as his biographer Brian Finney points out, through George's death, Isherwood introduces "a marvelously controlled image which explicitly establishes George's relation to the greater Reality which the Hindus call Brahman." (Finney, 1979, p. 253) Isherwood ends the novel with a surprising ending. On the one hand, Isherwood puts an end to George's grief by giving him a peaceful death in accordance with the principles of Vedanta, on the other hand it is a projection of Isherwood's own dying process as the way he imagined.

## Conclusion

... Why not write what one experiences, from day to day? ... Why invent when life is so prodigious?...  
Write, live what happens: Life is too sacred for invention...

Christopher Isherwood

(qtd. in Berg, 2007, p.45-46)

Poets and fiction writers' lives follow a different trajectory when it comes to creativity- especially those who like, Christopher Isherwood, use life as raw material in their work, produce meaning out of their experiences. They portray happiness, joy, love, sadness, anger, sorrow, fear and many other different colors of life. As human beings, we need stories to understand life. We need to know that somewhere in different parts of the world, at different times, somebody feels or felt a similar feeling, a similar pain. Literature provides a permanent solidarity among human beings, so as to understand each other better and to empathize with one another. Growing old is not only about how many pills one takes or what biological frailties one has. It is also about one's mental health. It can certainly carry with its psychological consequences, such as depression and anxiety, but at these very moments, literature can act as a lifebelt, preventing ageing individuals from floating in despair, and can heal their souls against

the frailties of the body. Reading fiction to understand the experience of ageing can be a healthy medium for coping with the numerous problems of growing old.

As human beings we must be resilient to survive but when it comes to ageing, we are all unaccustomed to its physical and mental turbulence. As an author who narrates the main phases of his life through fiction, Christopher Isherwood experienced a turbulence in his fifties. His various physical problems, the fear of losing his partner, Don Bachardy, his never-ending cancer worries, and two of his friends' deaths from cancer resulted in a psychological distress and death anxiety. Isherwood's coping mechanism and his way of building resilience was writing fiction. All the vulnerabilities in his life nurtured his creativity. Isherwood did not create a character like George out of the blue. Beginning from his late 40s he gathered the raw material for George unintentionally. As growing older gave meaning to his life, a certain episode of his life course, nurtured the process of creating *A Single Man*.

Since this study aims to present Isherwood's personal account of ageing, his diaries, memoirs, and semi-autobiographical works have been used to illuminate this paper with a view to discern the mood of an ageing author in creating *A Single Man*. Margaret Morganroth Gullette's statement that "aging is a narrative" is valid for Isherwood. His anxieties and fears are an important part of the self-defining life story that he constructed as he was growing older. By revealing these anxieties, worries and psychology of the ageing Isherwood, this study demonstrated how the protagonist, George's emotions, and way of thinking in *A Single Man* are aligned with Isherwood's own. Through his midlife years, Isherwood created a new understanding of himself in the light of the physical and psychological changes he was experiencing. He became more introspective as he aged. This is the reason why in *A Single Man*, he provides us with a more nuanced protagonist as compared to his previous ones. As a discipline, literary gerontology provides a deep understanding of ageing and focuses on how a particular novel or poem depicts the experience of growing old, I believe that such personal narratives are valuable in identifying the real emotions and feelings of the authors. It is of course impossible to ignore all of the biological and physical aspects of ageing, but literary gerontology goes deep into the ageing individual's heart and mind to reveal what lies buried within.

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