More in “It” than in I: Isherwood's Vision of Queer Identity

“But the worst of it is, we now run into another liberal heresy. Because the persecuting majority is vile, says the liberal, therefore the persecuted minority must be stainlessly pure.”

–Christopher Isherwood, A Single Man, 1964

In Christopher Isherwood's A Single Man, the title character, George, spurred by a remark regarding anti-Semitism, delivers a impromptu lecture on minority politics to his literature class, in which he critiques the neoliberal misconception of the “toothless” minority. George here acts as Isherwood's mouthpiece in a novel that argues broadly against the identity politics that began to develop during the mid-20th century surrounding queer and other minority culture(s). This same critique permeates Isherwood's other literary works as well as his own diaries and letters. Through these texts, Isherwood constructs a particular, revolutionary vision of queerness, centered around the idea of queerness as self-annihilation rather than cohesive identity. Ultimately, however, Isherwood's ideas do not follow him into the postmodern gay liberation era, during which homosexuality becomes its own distinct minority identity.

I intend to try and piece together Isherwood's vision from his mid-to-late 20th century body of work, particularly from within his A Single Man and The World in the Evening. Consistent between these two novels is the idea of an “other,” a unified entity beyond carnal existence, to which all humans, on a spiritual level, belong. Isherwood saw the category of human as existing uncomfortably between the spiritual and the “animal,” the full realization of
the instinctive desires of the flesh. This profound model of human consciousness acts as a framework for Isherwood's ideas regarding queer culture and activism: social stratification that results from emphasizing homosexuality as a separate minority identity conflicts with Isherwood's belief that everyone is interconnected on an immaterial level. Whereas his contemporary and close friend E.M. Forster turned back toward the greenwood as a necessary queer hideaway, Isherwood saw queerness as a pervasive force that could inflict change in tandem with existing society without fashioning itself as a minority identity. In *The World in the Evening*, he envisions a society in which queerness is not only ubiquitous, but also less turbulent than the heteronormative relationships Stephen recalls throughout his own narrative. The society is recognizable as the war-era society Isherwood himself experienced, yet through its representation of day-to-day life, it is subtly queered in a way unusual for his time.

Having examined Isherwood's ideas, I would like to consider the political climate during which they were formed as well as that of today and trace the divergence between his vision of queerness and contemporary visions of queer identity. As an author writing before and after the Stonewall era, Isherwood is often perceived by contemporary critics as having within later works switched his focus to gay liberation: his literature, with respect to the American queer movement, came out of the closet. I want to challenge this notion by recovering the radical politics of his pre-Stonewall writing and tracking Isherwood's departure from both heteronormative society and the mainstream gay liberation movement.
Bibliography

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* The World in the Evening


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**Secondary Sources:**


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