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**REPRESENTATION OF DEPRESSION IN
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S *A SINGLE MAN*
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

Literary works have depicted depression for centuries, but often the symptoms depicted are restricted to those of melancholy or suicidal ideation. Depictions of other aspects of the disorder are less common, and thus might not be known to all readers. The present thesis aimed to analyze how depression is represented in Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man*, with specific focus on the symptoms of apathy, dissociation, and performativity.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, an empirical analysis of the novel, and a conclusion.

The introduction provides context for the novel and defines the terms used for analysis (apathy, dissociation, performativity).

The literature review summarizes previous studies and analyses of the novel, and gives a brief overview of depictions of depression in literature. Studies on the novel's spiritual aspects and on its 2010 film adaptation were excluded.

The empirical part of the thesis provides an analysis of key moments in the novel through close reading. The analysis explores how apathy, dissociation, and performativity as symptoms of depression are represented.

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) was an Anglo-American novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and diarist. As he was a gay man himself, much of his work is about queer identities and their place in the contemporary world. Isherwood taught several courses on English literature at California State University in the 1950s and 1960s, and he and his partner Don Bachardy fast became a well-known couple in the Southern Californian society. Isherwood first spoke openly about his sexuality in 1972, after which he became a vocal participant in the gay liberation movement.

Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man*, one of Isherwood's most famous works, describes a day in the life of a middle-aged English professor living in 1960s Los Angeles. This seemingly dull premise is executed with irreverent care, aided by the candid detail of the protagonist being a gay man mourning his late partner. The novel was published in the midst of the rise of what is now known as LGBTQ+ activism, such as the homophile movement, and only five years before the Stonewall riots of 1969. Thus, the novel's unapologetic portrayal of the life of a gay man in a heteronormative and hostile society stands out even half a century later. *A Single Man* is particularly notable for portraying a queer character as an ordinary human being, rather than someone defined by their sexuality. In addition, the novel does not conform to the trope of the "tragic queer", which to this day is common in literature and other media. The "tragic queer", often called "bury your gays", is a literary trope used in narrative works with same-gender couples, and dictates that one or both of the queer characters "must die or otherwise be destroyed" in the narrative (Hulan 2017: 17).

Although *A Single Man* has been widely studied (e.g., in Bergman 2004, Bristow 1999, Gehlawat 2013), many of the previous analyses have been of its queerness, and not of the protagonist's mental health independent of his queerness. Furthermore, while there are

countless queer novels that represent symptoms of depression such as melancholy or pessimism, and just as many analytical studies of these depictions, some of the symptoms portrayed in *A Single Man* – apathy, dissociation, performance of normativity – are much less often spoken of, and instead often conflated with melancholy. Although the novel also depicts other aspects or symptoms of depression, such as irritability and a diminished capability to concentrate or make trivial decisions (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 155), the three symptoms addressed in this thesis were chosen because of their significance in the work, as well as due to the author’s personal experience with depression.

Depictions of depression in literature tend to focus on visible and easily identifiable “active” extremes such as melancholy and self-harm, often employing them as narrative conflicts, whereas the more “passive” aspects of depression like apathy and dissociation are less conspicuous, and thus more difficult to portray. The impassively paralyzing and debilitating effects of inaction stemming from apathy are often overlooked and underrepresented in literature. Therefore, highlighting and analyzing works of literature that do endeavor to represent the seemingly invisible symptoms of depression is key to a better understanding of representations of the disorder and the various ways in which it can manifest. In turn, a deeper knowledge of representations of depression can improve future literary works and analyses of them.

In the context of this study, apathy is defined as a state of affectlessness and complete lack of emotions about or interest in something, which in depression can further develop into a state of listlessness or torpor (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 607). Dissociation is the disruption of consciousness and behavior, resulting in detachment from immediate surroundings and reality, and in more severe cases, from physical and emotional experiences (not to be confused with a loss of reality, i.e. psychosis) (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 291-292). A distinction should be made here between common, transient

dissociation, such as daydreaming or highway hypnosis, and severe dissociation caused by trauma or stress, which can manifest as clinical disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2018). This study uses the term ‘dissociation’ to refer to the latter. Performativity is the ritualistic and “stylized repetition of acts” which are compelled by social expectations and norms, but are incongruous with one’s inner nature, leading to a socially and discursively constructed identity (Butler 1988: 519-520, Muñoz 2006: 675-680). Although Butler employs the term in the context of gender, it can also be applied in the context of depression, where a person also performs social normativity by controlling their emotions and feelings.

The aim of this paper is to study how depression is represented in *A Single Man*, and more specifically, how seemingly passive symptoms of depression such as apathy, dissociation, and performativity are represented in the novel. The first chapter provides a brief overview of previous literature on *A Single Man* to summarize common interpretations of the novel. A summary of relevant studies and essays on depictions of depression in literature, and depictions of affects in queer literature, is also given. The second chapter provides a close reading of the novel in the context of the protagonist’s depression by identifying depictions of apathy, dissociation, and performativity in the novel.

I LITERATURE REVIEW: PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON A *SINGLE MAN* AND DEPRESSION IN LITERATURE

Due to its novel approach to a complex and often-taboo subject matter, *A Single Man* has been a subject of numerous studies since its publication. In this literature review, analyses and studies from the past two decades are explored due to the limited availability of earlier studies. Studies on the novel's religious or spiritual aspects and on its 2010 film adaptation were excluded. To investigate how depression as a disorder and negative affects have been depicted in literature in general, essays and books on depression from the viewpoint of cultural and queer studies are summarized.

Most studies analyze the novel through the lens of the gay liberation movement, or focus on the protagonist's mental state as related to or caused by his queerness. Several writers consider *A Single Man* an invaluable contribution to the gay liberation movement, and as foreshadowing or even pioneering the international queer activism of the late 1960s. Edmund White, as quoted by David Bergman, claimed that *A Single Man* was "one of the first and best novels of the modern gay liberation movement" (Bergman 2004: 60). Claude Summers (Isherwood et al 2007: xiii) claims that "the minority consciousness of homosexuals and their oppression are crucial themes" in the novel, and further suggests that Isherwood's depiction of homosexuals as simply one "tribe" of many is a political statement aimed to "lessen the stigma against homosexuality".

Joseph Bristow (1999: 145-146), however, challenges the view of Summers and Katherine Bucknell that, in *A Single Man*, Isherwood had "at last discovered a liberating means of coming out in his fiction as a gay man depicting sexual injustice". He instead posits that applying this post-Stonewall "gay-liberation perspective" (146) can lead to misrepresentation of Isherwood's historical importance as an author. Rather, what made the novel controversial at the time of its publication was its depiction of "the normality of

homosexuality” (Brookes 2008: 47), without relying on aggressively non-heteronormative stereotypes, which often function on the assumption of a divergence from conventional models of masculinity and femininity in all queer characters and relationships (46-47).

Seemingly in agreement with this criticism is Robert Ferro, who listed Isherwood as an influential gay author because he leans on his own realistic experiences, “rather than [on] stereotyped representation” (Bergman 2004: 61). Bergman (62) concurs with this view by presenting the novel’s protagonist as both an amalgamation of gay stereotypes and as a rejection of them, as if playing with “the requirements of the gay novel” (63). This is further supported by Bergman’s description of pre-Stonewall gay novels: “[t]he gay novel before Stonewall tried to create sympathy for homosexuality by depicting gay males as ‘sad young men’” (50). *A Single Man* simultaneously plays into these stereotypes, and rebuffs them.

In contrast, Octavio R. Gonzalez (2013: 758) argues that *A Single Man* does indeed qualify as a work of “literary-cultural gay activism” as Summers and Bucknell suggest, and that it does so intentionally. While Gonzalez mirrors Bergman and Ferro’s views that *A Single Man* is contrary to the contemporary gay stereotypes, and a “nonconformist minoritarian” representation of queer identities (776), he simultaneously contradicts this claim and suggests that much of the protagonist’s characterization is, in fact, inherently queer. In this, he is again in agreement with Summers, who believes that “[h]omosexuality is the characteristic that most pervasively defines George’s life” (Summers 1980: 111).

No studies specifically on the representation of depression in the novel were found, and none mention depression as a disorder explicitly. Some studies do mention or even focus on the analysis of certain symptoms of depression (Gehlawat 2013, Hongo 2015), but do not explicitly link these symptoms to the clinical disorder, or to other symptoms evident in the novel.

Gonzalez (2013), for one, insists that *A Single Man* is a projection of Isherwood's own "ascetic ideal of impersonality" and claims it to be "a queer ideal" (760). He attributes the protagonist's dissociative and performative actions to Isherwood subconsciously describing his own "quintessential queer ethos" (776), rather than to a conscious attempt at writing a depressed character. One could argue that while "impersonality", to borrow Gonzalez' term for dissociation and performativity (760-761), is certainly a key element in *A Single Man*, it is far from the prescribed "ideal" or "ethos" of the novel or its protagonist.

Akira Hongo (2015: 39) writes of the various "personas" of the protagonist, and suggests that Isherwood rejects the "idea that there is the [singular] identity of a person", instead letting his characters take on a different role in each situation. This assortment of "personas" can certainly be associated with the acts of performativity and dissociation, which are common symptoms of depression. Monika Gehlawat writes of the protagonist's "negative singularity" (Gehlawat 2013: 352) and emotional isolation; she studies his sudden shifts from apathy to "performative behavior" (360) and finds his actions simultaneously "hyper-conscious" and "programmatically" (359). While Gehlawat does not openly attribute the instances of apathy and performativity to anything past grief, combined with societal and emotional alienation, she does not dismiss the possibility of the protagonist's depressed state, either.

The number of academic sources on the literary representation of depression as a disorder, rather than an emotion, is limited, but some sources summarizing its history were found. In general, these sources agree that literature – both queer and otherwise – typically depicts the state of depression through melancholy or malaise, and other symptoms of depression are represented much less often.

Ann Cvetkovich (2012) describes in length how depression and related symptoms have been portrayed in literature through history. Starting with a fourth century AD guide

for monastic life, Cvetkovich analyzes how acedia and modern medical depression have often been dichotomized in literature despite their striking similarities (Cvetkovich 2012: 85-90). Acedia, commonly seen as pure apathy and inertia, is also characterized by strong negative feelings, resulting in a seemingly contradictory state of “[a]ctivity and inactivity – restlessness and sleep” (86). Although this bears a marked resemblance to descriptions of contemporary depression, acedia tends to be dismissed due to its basis in spirituality and religion (86-88).

Furthermore, Cvetkovich criticizes the dismissal of acedia over the more prevalent term of melancholy, which unlike the former is often seen as Romanticist and positive, and as an acceptably secular alternative to the spiritual acedia (89, 105-111). Cvetkovich believes melancholy to also be a more simplistic term, conveying sadness and contemplation without the accompanying restlessness and affectivity of acedia, which is considered “too negative and too religious” (89). Cvetkovich’s comparison of acedia and melancholy exemplifies how depression is frequently depicted through just melancholy, and not by combining a number of different symptoms, leading to a more one-dimensional model of depression.

Finally, Cvetkovich links acts of performance art both in literature and in life as a form of acedia-fueled performativity, in that they are defined by their “repetition and intentional framing” (112) with focus on the act of ‘doing’ itself. She describes both as being in turn idle and restless, apathetic and dissociatively performative. Cvetkovich specifically compares the repetitive manual labor of acedious fourth-century monks to works of contemporary performance art, such as Linda Montano’s year-long performance of wearing only monochromatic clothing (112-113). This comparison emphasizes the strong physical impact acedia can have on those affected by it, ultimately resulting in a “breakdown in functionality” (113), further illustrating its similarity to contemporary depression.

Sara Ahmed gives an overview of how emotions have been depicted in queer literature in the last few decades (Ahmed 2010). She emphasizes that in mid-20th century, when *A Single Man* was published, queer fiction could often only be published if it had an unhappy ending, as to avoid “promoting” queerness (Ahmed 2010: 88). Thus, the trope of the tragic queer became a way of “overcoming censorship” (88), allowing queer authors to write for queer audiences, the mere existence of such literature overpowering its unhappy ending.

Ahmed also defines four categories of portrayals of queer (un)happiness in fiction. The first category of “just happiness”, in which queer characters are happy and carefree, as if to protest the assumption that all queer lives are unhappy lives (90-95). The second includes portrayals “causing unhappiness”, where one half of the “happy queer couple” is always unhappy due to social exclusion (95-106). The third covers the “happy queers” who assimilate with the conventional heteronormative world, trying to approximate straight happiness (107-114). And lastly, the least common category of those are the “happily queer” (115), who are so “in the face of a world that’s unhappy with queer lives” (118). The latter seems most applicable to *A Single Man*, which somewhat explains the post-Stonewall interpretations of the novel as an active embodiment of queer liberation. Although the protagonist himself is not necessarily happy, his unapologetic queerness, and acceptance of it, can be relieving and uplifting to queer audiences. Indeed, to quote Ahmed (2004: 162), “queer feelings are not simply about the space of negativity”, and not all queer stories are fated to tragedy.

In conclusion, most previous analyses of *A Single Man* have been from the perspective of homosexuality, or more generally from that of queerness. Moreover, similarly to many other queer novels and their analyses, previous studies of *A Single Man* largely focus on the protagonist’s mental state as related to his queerness, often with the

presumption of cause-and-effect. However, these analyses often overlook the fact that the novel does not focus on homosexuality as the protagonist's one defining feature, nor does it conform to the common trope of the "tragic queer" despite dealing with the rather tragic issues of depression and grief. In addition, many works of literature, and thus also studies on them, tend to only analyze the more commonplace symptoms of depression, such as general melancholy.

To diversify the literary analysis of *A Single Man*, the depiction of the protagonist's mental health independent of his queerness will be examined further in the following section of this thesis, with special attention to the novel's portrayal of symptoms of depression that are less often spoken of, such as apathy, dissociation, and performativity.

II ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF DEPRESSION IN A SINGLE MAN

The opening scene of *A Single Man* is an abrupt drop, a plunge into the novel and into the life of our protagonist, George. Already on the first few pages the reader gets an intense look into George's state of mind, his (or *its*, for a time, as it takes time for the identity of *George* to be constructed) emotions, feelings – apathetic resignation and acceptance, anxiety and grief, and performativity as an act of comfort. The novel opens with a stark example of the dissociative and performative acts that shape the narrative, showing George's dissociation from *here* and *now*, and from *self*:

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 recognised *I*, and therefrom deduced *I am, I am now*. *Here* comes next, and is at least negatively reassuring; because *here*, this morning, is where it had expected to find itself; what's called *at home*. (Isherwood 2010: 1)

This dissociation of mind and body is accompanied almost inherently by debilitating anxiety: “Fear tweaks the vagus nerve. A sickish shrinking from what waits, somewhere out there, dead ahead” (1); even the most candid of things, such as waking up in one's own home as expected, is steeped in dread: the *here* becomes “negatively reassuring”, the *now* a “cold reminder” of what has passed and what awaits. The use of a clinical term, ‘vagus nerve’, works to further distance the reader from the protagonist's experience; the idiom ‘dead ahead’, the first of many death-related expressions in the novel, intensifies the feeling of foreboding and unease.

While the mind is still occupied with holding itself together, the body takes over. The language becomes near-clinical, distant and detached, everyday bodily functions described through an impersonal viewpoint, likening the protagonist – still *it* – to an animal in captivity, a “biological exhibit” (Summers 1980: 109) observed for entertainment, rather than a human being. The comparison of the protagonist's facial expression to that of a “desperately tired swimmer or runner” diminishes his individuality to that of a faceless and

nameless being fighting for survival (Isherwood 2010: 2). For now, he is all but a “live dying creature” working on autopilot as if despite itself: “The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative.” (2). The use of ‘we’ again confirms the sense that both the impassive narrator and the reader are mere spectators, not fully involved or truly invested in the life of the creature observed.

The creature thus begins the slow act of consciously building the self, or *a* self, from *it* to *he*. The self is constructed on and through deliberate performative acts, put together for the sake of those around: “[i]ts behaviour must be acceptable to them” (2). There is relief in this performativity, in having things to do and be, social expectations working as a support system, providing a basic shell to hide behind and to build upon: “Obediently, it washes, shaves, brushes its hair; for it accepts its responsibilities to the others. It is even glad that it has its place among them. It knows what is expected of it. It knows its name. It is called George.” (3)

Only then, as *it* becomes *he*, is the reader provided with the name of the protagonist; but even then the sense of distance persists. George, as we now know him, is still only a “three-quarters-human thing” that has not quite found his place in the physical world, has not yet become “the whole George they demand and are prepared to recognise” (3). It becomes clear that dissociation from self and performative actions are not unique to the one day the reader is privy to; this morning creature is evidently well-practiced in creating a “mimicry” of the George others expect, able to copy the mannerisms to a near perfection.

Apathy

The opening chapter sets the tone for the rest of the novel with its underlying feeling of disquiet and unease, in large part due to its impersonal and even flat affect. While moments of dissociation and performativity can be easier to discern, it is this undercurrent

of apathy that truly distances the reader from George's experience and emotions – or the lack thereof. The observational style of the narration expertly and effectively creates a strong sense of detachment from the protagonist, and is further intensified by George's self-awareness of his own detachment from self and life:

But who says I have to be brave? George asks. Who depends on me, now? Who cares? We're getting maudlin, he says, /.../. (90)

As apathy is difficult to portray due to its very definition, it is perhaps most evident in its absence. Throughout the novel, glimpses of George's stronger emotions are rare, and almost always negative – as if only anger and pain are strong enough to break through the wall of apathy. It is important to note that most of these outbursts of strong emotion are related to George's late partner, Jim; be it in the form of an enraged rant on the freeway, a physical spasm of pain on the re-realization of his passing, or a tangentially related tirade on minority discrimination in the classroom. These outbursts, when vocalized, often leave him embarrassed and humiliated at his lack of control, “ashamed of his roarings because they aren't play-acting” (11), confused by his own ardor and passion:

By this time, George no longer knows what he has proved or disproved, whose side, if any, he is arguing on, or indeed exactly what he is talking about. And yet these sentences have blurted themselves out of his mouth with genuine passion. He has meant every one of them, be they sense or nonsense. (54-55)

The few instances of relaxation or contentment are fleeting, quick to dissipate into anxiety and sadness despite George's best efforts to prolong them, to replicate happy moments from the past: “But, this afternoon, George can feel nothing of that long-ago excitement and awe; something is wrong, from the start” (88). In an attempt to stave off the “overpowering sloth of sadness” (90), he seeks the company of a friend, instantly becoming “flush with joy” upon confirming a meet-up (91); just a few lines later, the joy disappears and anxiety arises again.

But he is so utterly perverse that his mood begins to change again before he has even finished unloading his purchases into the car. Do I really want to see her? he asks himself; and then, what in the world made me do that? (91)

Alongside the stronger spikes of negative thoughts and feelings, George's narrative is abound with constant irony and vaguely aimed irritation: at himself, at his neighbors, at coworkers, at politicians. The never-ending internal surges of annoyance seem to seldom have true feelings behind them, as if anger and resentment are simply the easiest emotions to access and evoke.

But does George really hate all these people? Aren't they themselves merely an excuse for hating? What *is* George's hate, then? A stimulant – nothing more; though very bad for him, no doubt. (26)

The quick and dramatical fluctuation of emotions is also visible in the narrative flow in a wider sense, as lengths of both sentences and chapters vary substantially. In moments of emotionality, sentences are longer, and employ both adjectives and suppositional verbs more often; apathy, then, is evident in shorter and objective, fact-focused sentences. Affect is most difficult to ascertain during dialogues, which are largely void of reporting clauses, and becomes clearer only with the aid of increased punctuation – ellipses and exclamation marks in particular – and the variable lengths of paragraphs.

Dissociation

One of the most notable aspects of Isherwood's depiction of dissociation in *A Single Man* is the subtle distinction made between the common inattention of daydreaming, akin to 'zoning out', and purely involuntary dissociation. At first glance, the former seems to occur in the freeway scene, where George deliberately moves his focus from his commute to more internal thoughts (22). Upon a closer look, however, this too proves to be a case of uncontrolled dissociation close to depersonalization: rather than George simply relying on muscle memory and long experience in driving the same stretch of freeway, he knowingly gives over control of his body to what he calls an "impassive, anonymous chauffeur-figure" (22). Indeed, as he enters the freeway, George's movements are not only put on autopilot while he consciously multitasks, switching focus between driving and other thoughts and

back again – his entire posture and facial expression changes completely. “We see the face relax, the shoulders unhunch themselves, the body ease itself back into the seat.” (21). Directly after, we see the separation of self happen: George’s face tenses while the rest of him remains relaxed, a contrast which brings forth the morning thought of a “creature” working on automatic.

More and more, it appears to separate itself, to become a separate entity; an impassive anonymous chauffeur-figure with little will or individuality of its own, the very embodiment of muscular coordination, lack of anxiety, tactful silence, driving its master to work. (22)

As the chauffeur takes care of the body’s commute to work, the mind is free to wander. Just as George’s drifting mind slowly reunited with his body through his morning routine, the opposite now happens, and the automatism of the chauffeur allows George’s mind to float off once more: “/.../ he is becoming less and less aware of externals; /.../ He has gone deep down inside himself” (22). And so he has; while George internally goes on in a rage-fuelled, violent fantasy about dismantling a high-rise and unleashing terror on anyone even vaguely related to his lover’s death, his body remains calm, in control. The only sign of any inner turmoil is a sole spasm of the face, a grinding of teeth (24, 26).

When George returns to his body, and to the freeway, he is not slightly startled like someone who had ‘zoned out’ and relied on muscle memory for a short drive – he is shocked, made uneasy by how far the chauffeur had taken him. Moreover, George is disturbed and frightened by how this creature he had voluntarily given himself over to, this chauffeur-figure with supposedly no thoughts of its own, has started to grow stronger: will it take over more of George’s life, and no longer be contained to this stretch of the freeway? (26)

In what is fast becoming a habit, George refuses to focus on this ominous outlook as if to stave off the consequent anxiety, instead finding shelter in performativity once more. George is now a *they*, a multiple containing several known and unknown selves, readying themselves to again put on the role of the “George they have named and will recognise” (26-27). As George arrives at the campus, he grows excited, ready for “the play to begin” (29).

He starts his work-day by re-establishing the role of George through the “circumstantial evidence” of a parking card under George’s name (28), and by making his stage entrance with a greeting to “his public”, his colleagues, in the way expected of the George they know.

He is all actor now; an actor on his way up from the dressing-room, hastening through the backstage world of props and lamps and stagehands to make his entrance. A veteran, calm and assured, he pauses for a moment in the doorway of the office and then, boldly, clearly, with the subtly modulated British intonation which his public demands of him, speaks his opening line, ‘Good morning!’ (29-30)

Entering the school cafeteria, George appears lost for a moment, unsure of when or where his next performance, the next scene of this particular play, will take place, eager to be put to use in his newly built role: “Now that he is a public utility, the property of STSC, he is impatient to be used. He hates to see even one minute of himself being wasted” (34).

Soon enough, he is approached by a colleague, and the two engage in small talk as they walk towards their classrooms. In the middle of the conversation, George gets distracted by two young men playing tennis, going on an extensive internal monologue about the men’s bodies, gameplay, their prospective futures (37). In a rare display of true excitement, George thanks these “young animals” for their beauty, and for making life “less hateful” (38). Then, despite concentrating on anything but, George finds himself still speaking and taking part in the discussion with his colleague, his “talking head” having taken over (38). Mirroring the earlier freeway scene, George is discomfited by the extent of this other creature’s control in a moment when it was uninvited and unexpected. Just as the chauffeur figure from before, talking-head has its own purpose, its own time and place for replacing George, in giving him a reprieve in dull moments of drunken interactions. This sudden day-time appearance of the creature, when George should be in full control of himself, and of any creature within, makes George uneasy, anxious – paranoid that the talking head and the chauffeur will take over without George’s input and remove him from the stage entirely:

But *here*, in broad daylight, during campus-hours, when George should be onstage every second, in full control of his performance! Can it be that talking-head and the chauffeur are in league? *Are they maybe planning a merger?* (38-39)

Performativity

Although the opening chapter of George's building of the self, and the scene of him arriving at work as "all actor now" (29) are perhaps the most vivid demonstrations of performativity, the novel is abundant with smaller displays of it. In nearly every scene, there are comparisons of George to an actor playing a role, and so what would otherwise seem as insignificant expressions and idioms are made vital to the narrative voice by their sheer number. Arriving at the college, George "rapidly puts on the psychological makeup for this role he must play" (27); refers to his entrance to the classroom as a "subtly contrived, outrageously theatrical effect" (40); admits himself as able to "play the British eccentric" thanks to his status (66). Describing his home as a lair, George reflects that he's found himself playing the role of a "mean old story-book monster" (10) for the neighbourhood children, and admits it to be "play-acting" (11).

Along with the more subtle instances of performative acts, many of which could be dismissed for social performances, there are moments in the novel where George's performativity is deliberately taken apart and unveiled to be play-acting, and not fully sincere, independent behavior. The most direct of these moments comes after a brief scene of social interaction – a friendly argument about symbolic differences in American and European motels – that leaves George with his "engines cut out", his bout of energy quick to come and just as quick to leave. Overwhelmed and exhausted, the narrative voice dispassionately compares George to a circus performer, a trapeze artist done with his magic act, free to flee the spotlight to the exit; free to stop acting, to be unnoticed and unknown: "[n]obody applauds him any more. Very few spare him a single glance." (72). Just as performativity is a comfort and escape for George, it is, as all performances are, tiresome; George is all of a sudden older, slower, almost relaxed if not for the fatigue weighing him

down. This, like other discomforts and hurts of George, is accepted as a part of his everyday life, even seen as a form of rest.

The impersonal approach to George's body in the opening pages of the novel is reflected in the closing ones (148-152). Yet while the clinically detached language is recalled, the anxiety and performativity of the morning is absent; despite the matter-of-fact description of a body slowly shutting down for sleep, or perhaps for something more permanent, there is at last a sense of peace and calm in the narration. The actions of George's settling body are as automatic as those which forced him into wakefulness in the morning, but they are no longer born out of the frantic necessity for control that came with dissociation and forced performativity. Rather than a desperate and uncontrollable defensive act by George's brain, the dissociation in the narrative end is something other, more natural; perhaps something spiritual, perhaps simply the process of falling into a deep sleep – one last act of apathy and resignation.

As George's consciousness enters the realm of possibilities and fantasies as he falls asleep, so too does the narrative voice. The narration here, though still detached, is interspersed with repeated hypotheticals: *just let us suppose, maybe, perhaps* (151). This use of uncertain language implies that the end of the novel – and thus the end of George – might be nothing but hypothetical as well. It is a marked difference from the apathetic and dispassionate narrative tone of the rest of the novel, signifying a glimmer of hope for George; or perhaps it is simply the narrator's final nod of acknowledgement to the audience.

The ending of the novel can, of course, be seen as the end of George's life as well, as "one by one, the lights go out and there is total blackness" (152). Although the final paragraphs are prefaced by the abovementioned suppositions, the novel's last lines are a true return to the clinical, apathetic tone of the opening, referring to the protagonist as "the non-entity we called George", as an *it* rather than a *he*:

And if some part of the non-entity we call George has indeed been absent at this moment of terminal shock, away out there on the deep waters, then it will return to find itself homeless. For it can associate no longer with what lies here, unsnoring, on the bed. This is now cousin to the garbage in the container on the back porch. Both will have to be carted away and disposed of, before too long. (152)

Rather than treat this as a hopeless finale to an oft-bleak story, however, I propose a somewhat lighter reading. While death is seen as an inevitable throughout the novel, it is never truly feared, instead accepted as a part of life, of existing – be it George’s own, or that of others. In the final pages, before his body shuts down, George accepts the death of his partner, Jim, and makes a resolution to move on, to continue living, and to find another Jim: “George clings only to Now. It is Now that he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live –” (149). Instead of reading this as a fruitless realization made moments before death, this too can be interpreted through hypotheticals. As the reader is only provided with the description of one day of George’s life, it is quite possible that the ending – drunken resolutions and all – is also part of his everyday life, just as commonplace as the creatures of dissociation and the performances of normalcy. While an overnight change in disposition and behavior would perhaps be too fantastical, too out of character, the novel could be read as a loop of sorts – with George waking the next day, putting itself together from a collection of creatures, and moving on in life in the same detached way he had so far.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to study the representation of depression in Christopher Isherwood's novel *A Single Man*, with specific focus on the analysis of oft underrepresented symptoms of apathy, dissociation, and performativity. In the literature review chapter, it was found that most previous studies of the novel were written on or about the issue of homosexuality, or that of queerness in general. Studies that analyzed the protagonist's depressive state of mind did so by relating it to his sexuality, and largely focused on his states of melancholy and of being queer as inherently intertwined. Studies on literary representations of depression revealed that the disorder is more often depicted through general melancholy, while other symptoms are seldom represented.

Through a close reading of the novel, it was found that of the three symptoms in focus, *A Single Man* depicts apathy the least conspicuously. Nevertheless, apathy is evident in the undercurrent of detached, flat affect and the narrative tone of impersonal observation. Apathy in the novel is most obvious when absent, such as during the protagonist's outbursts of negative emotion. The fast and intense fluctuation of the protagonist's emotional state between affectlessness and negative restlessness is notably similar to the concept of *acedia* (Cvetkovich 2012: 85-86).

Representations of dissociation are perhaps the most easily discernible in the novel, as there are several occasions of the protagonist detaching from his immediate surroundings almost to the point of depersonalization. The different dissociative states are personified and named by the protagonist, who plainly fears and questions the "creatures'" control over his daily life. Although Hongo (2015: 39) refers to the protagonist's different "personas", their interpretation is more reminiscent of conscious acts of social performance, and less so of the extensive dissociative states displayed in the novel.

Performativity is put into focus early on in the novel and is tangible throughout the entire narrative of *A Single Man*. The building of the self described in the very opening scene is startlingly effective in its simplicity, revealing performative acts to be vital to not only preserving a sense of normalcy in the protagonist's day-to-day life, but to his very identity itself. His deliberate and practiced performative behavior is deeply ingrained, going far beyond simple social performance. Gehlawat's description of the protagonist's actions as concurrently "programmatically" and "hyper-conscious" is accurate indeed (Gehlawat 2013: 359), and to a considerable extent applies also to the narrative in general. On several occasions, the 'play-acting' is made doubly elaborate with comparisons of the protagonist's behavior to that of an actor on stage.

In conclusion, this study found that apathy, dissociation, and performativity are clearly evident in *A Single Man*, and that representations of them are interconnected and reliant on each other. The detachment of apathy works as the basis for moments of dissociation and performativity, and the three are thus intrinsically connected in the narrative. The protagonist's constant acts of performativity require a deep sense of self-awareness and self-detachment, which stem from and are exacerbated by apathy and dissociation. In turn, moments of dissociation can intensify because of the apathetic idleness underlying the entire narration. The interconnectedness of the various affects and symptoms of depression represented in the novel, and their impact on both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, perfectly illustrates the complexity of the human condition.

Although this paper analyzed some aspects of depression represented in *A Single Man*, more extensive studies could certainly be written on other symptoms implied in the novel. Furthermore, the cultural archive of affects would benefit greatly from future analyses of the novel from the perspective of affect theory.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Stella Loodus

Representation of Depression in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* Depressiooni kujutamine Christopher Isherwoodi romaanis *A Single Man*

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv:

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö analüüsib depressiooni kujutamist Christopher Isherwoodi romaanis "A Single Man", keskendudes täpsemalt apaatialle, dissotsiatsioonile ja performatiivsusele. Töö peamine eesmärk on välja selgitada, kuidas eelmainitud depressiooni aspektid teoses avalduvad, ning analüüsida romaani peategelase depressiooni iseseisvana tema seksuaalsusest.

Bakalaureusetöö jaguneb neljaks osaks: sissejuhatus, kirjanduse ülevaade, romaani analüüs, ja kokkuvõte. Sissejuhatuses on esindatud teose "A Single Man" taust ja selle olulisus uurimuses. Samuti on sissejuhatuses defineeritud teemakohased mõisted "apaatia", "dissotsiatsioon" ja "performatiivsus". Kirjanduse ülevaade annab ülevaate romaani varasematest uurimustest ja analüüsides, ning võtab lühidalt kokku depressiooni kujutamise ajaloo ilukirjanduses. Romaani analüüs põhineb teose lähilugemisel ning vaatleb lähemalt apaatsuse, dissotsiatsiooni ja performatiivsuse kujutamist teoses.

Bakalaureusetöö kokkuvõtteks võib öelda, et Isherwoodi teoses "A Single Man" on efektselt kujutatud depressiooni aspekte, mis ilukirjanduses tihti melanhoolia või suitsiidse käitumisega ühte sulanduvad. Apaatia, dissotsiatsiooni ja performatiivsuse kujutused romaanis on üksteisega tihedalt seotud, ning demonstreerivad mõjusalt peategelase kompleksust.

Märksõnad:

ameerika kirjandus, inglise kirjandus, depressioon, Christopher Isherwood, A Single Man

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