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Humanities and Theology

# Reminiscence in Layers

A Study in Characterization

in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*

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## **Abstract**

Christopher Isherwood's story, *A Single Man*, follows George Falconer who is in mourning for his life-partner Jim, who tragically died in a road accident. The novel depicts George's determination to carry on and to experience the unexpected pleasures of life despite what he has gone through. The reader is allowed into George's life for twenty four hours, where he is approached by loss, alienation and enlightenment laced with many contrastive emotions, personal values, humor and reminiscence. This essay will argue for George's identity that consists of multiple selves. It look more closely at the aspect of these selves, the complexity of George's personality and personal values as well as changes of his personality due to outside influences, mood and occurrences during the day.

Keywords: Multiple Selves, Reminiscence, Alienation, Social Influence.

Word Quantity: 123

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## Introduction

If you could be invisible for one day and follow a person around, watch them when they are alone, their intimate moments and their interactions with friends and colleagues, you would gain a privileged insight into that person's identity. If they also let you take part in their inner world, their thoughts and their sometimes brutally truthful opinions that they would not share with anyone other than themselves, you might even say that you fully knew them. In Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* from 1964, George Falconer, a British college professor living in California has just lost his lover and life-partner Jim in a road accident. The reader is allowed to follow George for one day, a quite ordinary and uneventful day which, through Isherwood's ability to describe and observe becomes captivating. His narrative layout can be compared to a paper doll garland, that when you fold it out, shows a row of silhouettes of a person, exactly the same as the first one. They all have the same shape and are designed to look the same, though can be colored or otherwise altered to differ from each other. George possesses a number of these layers and they are difficult to separate from each other in some cases as they ultimately belong to one person. Even so, there are three main layers that stand in contrast to each other. These are the phenomena that will function as structure for this essay. The protagonist in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* is written with a layering effect of three selves that together portray the complexity and depth of his true being.

This essay will look more closely at the aspects of multiple selves. The selves can be thought of as dolls in the paper garland. The self that is the most prominent is the first doll of the garland, the doll that is used as a silhouette. George's selves seem to constantly fight each other in order to be the first, the most prominent self. They are somehow also intertwined and are sometimes difficult to distinguish and to separate from each other. Firstly, there will be a discussion of George's embodied self, the part of him that shows no nuance of emotion, reflection or opinion. Secondly, the discussion will focus on the emotional self, George's self that functions as a counterpart to the embodied self, the part of him that is in contact with his values, his speech and his personality. It works in contrast to the embodied self and at times it even tries to overpower the embodied self. Thirdly, a discussion will be made about George's selves in interaction, and under the influence of others, primarily the two supporting characters Charlotte and Kenny, which are, apart from George, the most prominent characters in the story.

Christopher Isherwood, born in 1904 in Cheshire, England, is an Anglo-American writer who settled in America after World War II. Having written a range of novels that depict male homosexuality in a liberal and natural way, the plots are often analyzed as they carry great value for the fight for equal rights and freedom of expression and speech. His work is considered important to the sexual liberation movement. Additionally, he has a way of presenting his protagonists in a multi-layered fashion. Depending on who is present or who is interacting with the character, they show a range of different facets and traits. Without becoming too intricate, the plots and descriptive segments of the stories are of great depth and show just how complex a person can be.

### **The It, the Cortex and the Embodied Self**

The complexity of George is stressed strongly early on. The first part of him that wakes up in the morning is the self that is recognized as the embodied self. This is the layer of George that controls his physical functions. Everything that his body is made of: muscles, bones, nerves, hair, teeth and heart, are all controlled by a part of the brain that the narrator calls the cortex. *The Oxford Companion to the Body* explains the cortex as “[t]he thin outer cloak of grey matter that covers the external surface of the cerebral hemispheres”, it is the part of the brain that primarily controls voluntary muscle movements (Blakemore, Jennett). The cortex in the novel is depicted as being connected to one of his selves, the embodied self. The cortex has complete control over George’s body at the times when the embodied self is the most prominent one. The first example of this is found in the very beginning of the novel:

Waking up begins with saying *am* and *now*. That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down to itself until it has recognized *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 1, emphasis in original)

The description of how the soul or the spirit of a human being turns from being unconscious in a sleeping and seemingly lifeless body, to waking up, discovering and recognizing itself and finally becoming one with the body starts already in the second sentence and continues to take new shapes throughout the book. A few paragraphs into the book, the thing that at this point identifies itself as “it” is slowly trying to find its way back to the conscious world, in order to function as a human being. At this moment, this embodied self is controlled by the cortex. It deals purely with activities related to the physical body; hair that needs to be brushed or shaved off, muscles that need to stretch, physical feelings such as arthritic joints

and the pressure of a full bladder. “It”, which is sometimes also synonymously referred to as “the body”, shows that it has not yet connected to the center of the abstract parts of a human, emotions, thoughts and traits, that later on will be defined as the emotional self. Finally, “it” finds itself standing in front of the bathroom mirror, trying to identify itself. It flickers through old versions of itself that lies there, versions within the face like sheets of paper on top of each other, no longer alive: “the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man” (2). The cortex tells the “it” what is expected of it, what it must do to become a whole person and what it must do in order to be accepted by others as “him”. This becomes a reminder of what “it” is: “[i]t knows its name. It is called George” (3).

The mirror in this scene is a significant tangible object that helps the character to turn into, and register itself. In *Images and Reflections of the Spiritual Self*, Mario Faraone takes note of this and mentions several other examples of characters and mirrors placed in Isherwood’s work. In *A Single Man*, the “it” that is living inside George becomes the full-fledged self, where the two layers of the embodied self and the emotional self meet, with help from the mirror. Faraone calls these layers “the I-reflections” and makes parallels to the philosophic Hindu religion of Vedanta, which Isherwood was introduced to, and began to practice when he moved to America in 1939. According to Isherwood himself, the fundamental principle of Vedanta is when the person who is practicing the religion, with help from a religious guide called a “Swami”, reaches a higher consciousness of the two natures of human and divine, and discovers that they are co-existential. Faraone means that with this theory in mind we can say that we are all reflections of God and that the mirror does not exist without its reflection and in turn, the reflection does not either exist without a mirror (308). In the same way the “it”, the embodied self, is a co-existential part together with the emotional self and both make up what is called George. Even though they are not always conscious or parallel as layers, one can not exist without the other and it is only together that they become a person.

The physical activities that are described in the book seem to be particularly prominent when the “it” is more prominent in relation to the emotional self. However, the two of these states meet in subtle moments, described as spasms in the pylorus, the region between the stomach and the small intestines; and in the vagus nerve, the longest cranial nerve in the body which runs through the head, neck, chest and abdomen. They happen in relation to his first thought of the morning of Jim. Before the moment in front of the mirror, when he was not yet “he” but merely “it”, one of these spasms occurs, but it is not made clear

what he feels in that moment since the two layers are not yet conjoined. It was the cortex that was in control and not the mind, the of the brain that handles the emotions. He did not convey that Jim was even in his thoughts. Maybe he was, but those thoughts had not surfaced since the emotional self was not yet truly conscious. George finds himself in this state often enough to know how to act in order not to make others notice it: “its voice’s mimicry of their George is nearly perfect. Even Charlotte is taken in by it. Only two or three times has she sensed something uncanny, and asked, ‘Geo – are you *all right?*’” (3, emphasis in original). At this point he is aware of himself being incomplete, not yet an intact being. Feeling like a three-quarter of a human being he works to make it seem like there is nothing missing.

Sometimes the two selves lose contact. When George is on the freeway on his way to work, the emotional and the embodied selves seem to fall apart, as if to emphasize their differences and their eternal struggle to live in the same body. After a moment of stress where he is going through what he calls ‘merging traffic’, a ramp up to the freeway where in the crossing between the lanes, traffic is particularly busy, he relaxes his whole body, the embodied self is taking over the steering wheel and the pedals. Driving is something that the cortex can do without the rest of the brain: “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). His ability to mentally wander off strengthens the parting of the two selves.

George has a tendency to become distracted in different situations so frequently that he has managed to come up with a way to get around it without offending anyone. When George is arriving at the university he is more connected to his emotional self than he was in the morning in front of the mirror. He is still somewhat detached, lost in thoughts and not paying attention to the world around him. This trait may have developed in relation to his grief but can also be a trait of his own personality. There is a scene where two men are playing tennis on campus as George walks by with a student called Russ Dreyer. George rather likes Dreyer and they usually have conversations outside the class room. Dreyer talks about his wife and George wonders if Dreyer knows about him and his preference. He thinks they all know at the university, but that they do not want to know and therefore do not talk about it. All they care about is his knowledge: “They don’t want to know about my feelings or my glands or anything below my neck. I could just as well be a severed head, carried into the classroom to lecture to them from a dish” (35). The details about a professor’s personal life is



of no use or interest to either his students or colleagues. George feels that his body, his physical appearance has nothing to do with his job at the university as the only thing they have use for is his mind.

Additionally, it points to a poignant social gap between him and them, that they do not know about his suffering and neither do they care. Without Jim, he obviously feels lonely, which here is clearly depicted. He starts to watch the tennis players as Dreyer asks him about his opinion on an article he has read. George's head starts talking and answering Dreyer's question, although the only thing that is revealed to the narratee is what is happening in George's mind as he watches the tennis players; how they are different, what they look like, how they make him feel. After a few minutes, Dreyer wakes him up from his almost hypnotized state and wonders what he really means and George realizes he has been talking this entire time, but with no recollection of what he has said. This action of talking without meaning the words or even being aware of the words that are coming out of his mouth points to the fact that the embodied self and the emotional self sometimes loses contact. The cortex steering the head and the mouth talking, does not reveal for George nor for the narratee what is happening. Later on, George reveals that he knows that this has happened before. The narrator is not so much an omniscient narrator as an external narrator, with a direct link to George's different selves. An omniscient narrator gives, as the name implies, an insight into everything that is relevant to the story, which is not the case in *A Single Man*. The reason why the term external narrator is more applicable is because it only reveals information that can be found within George. This includes the information that George himself is not aware of, parts of his embodied self and his subconscious for example. Sometimes when the embodied self is the more prominent self, George's thoughts is not conveyed as clearly, or even at all as in this example. This is where the narrator takes over to make the story comprehensible. The usage of an external narrator is not made to give an omniscient narration, but to take over the telling of the story when George's head is elsewhere, and his cortex thinks itself superior and sufficient.

The last and maybe most important part where the embodied self is in charge, is in the very last moments of George's life, before he suffers from a heart attack. As he falls asleep, the emotional self naturally becomes unconscious. When fully asleep, one does not express opinions or feelings and does not make decisions. However, the physical self is now on automatic mode and the cortex is no longer shouting any orders to the body. What is talking here is the innermost core of George, what can be identified as his subconscious. The voice of

the subconscious is once again functioning as the external narrator of the novel since it has no voice of its own, just like in the scene with the bathroom mirror. It is the decision-maker that not even George is aware of but has a silent power over all the decisions that both the embodied and the emotional self makes during his time awake. This subconscious self can be argued to be a part of the embodied self as there is no emotion put in it. There is nothing that is nuanced by what kind of day he is having or if he is alone or if someone is talking to him. The voice of the subconscious self is frank and reasonable: “Meanwhile, here we have this body known as George’s body, asleep on this bed and snoring quite loud. The dampness of the ocean air affects its sinuses; and anyhow it snores extra loud after drinking” (149). It reminds us of the voice in the first moments of the book when George is waking up in the morning. It is without nuance or emotion, it only registers the situation.

The subconscious self is now completely in charge of the body, it is fast asleep and incapable of any kind of emotional activity. The only thing the narrator reveals is the actions controlled by the cortex. It is drowsing, barely conscious, just enough to make the heart keep on pulsating. And in this state, the subconscious part of George starts to question the existence of itself. “But *is* all of George altogether present here?” (149, emphasis in original) It takes up a metaphor that is the narrator’s metaphor of death. By the coast there is a lava reef that can be reached when the tide is out where there are several rock pools. Each pool is different and if they are given names, it emphasizes their similarity to people. They can all be thought of as individual entities or bodies; they all contain their own water, the waters of consciousness, the same kind of consciousness that was discussed in the bathroom scene and its connections to Vedanta. In the water there are millions of organisms that can be thought of as secrets, different types of greed, intuitions and anxieties. They have to coexist within the walls of the pool. But as soon as the tide comes, which here is death, it flushes out the life and the organisms inside and left is an empty rock pool.

And if some part of the non-entity we called 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)

What is described here can be seen as not only a metaphor of death, but one of reincarnation. The water as a metaphor for the soul, is emptied out of the rock pool and out in the ocean.

With the next tide it may find itself within another rock pool. The subject of reincarnation is summed up as follows: “[w]hen a person dies, the only “death” is that of the physical body...when we attain God-realization...the Self gives up its identification with the body and mind, and regains its native freedom, perfection and bliss” (The Vedanta Society of Southern California). This can once again be traced back to Isherwood’s Vedantic values that can be seen in different parts of the novel which highlights the embodied self and its importance for the story.

### **George, the Mind and the Emotional Self**

The layer that constantly tries to overpower the embodied self, the emotional part of George, is featured frequently in the novel. This emotional self controls everything that is chemically produced in George’s brain: his emotions, opinions and values, as opposed to the more mechanical activity that the embodied self takes care of. It is the counterpart of the embodied self in the sense that in the moments when it is more prominent than the embodied self, it overpowers not only George, but the narrator brings the narratee to George’s deepest thoughts, to a place where no one of the people in George’s life would be able to enter. When this occurs, the narration surrounds only George’s thoughts and the outer world does not matter for the story.

The emotional self feeds off of George’s past but pushes him forward, almost forcing him to keep on trying despite the vivid and sometimes painful reminiscing about the time when Jim was alive that George goes through. It is most prominent at times when George is alone and when he is thinking about his past. The first time this occurs in the day is right after the emotional self has become conscious in the morning. George walks into the kitchen and immediately gets thrown into reminiscence; “This is a tightly planned little house. He often feels protected by its smallness; there is hardly room enough here to feel lonely” (3). He is thinking about how difficult it was to fit two men cooking food in a room as small as this, or to share the bathroom mirror or even to meet in the door that is built much too small. His thoughts about Jim are mostly warm memories that are only combined with, or producers of any bad feelings once the embodied self announces itself present. George is thinking about how wonderful the past with Jim was and suddenly the body is sending him a cold reminder of his loved one’s death in the form of the pylorus spasms.

When he is in the bathroom, he experiences a similar occurrence to the talking-head scene with Russ Dreyer at the university. This time it is between his emotional self, his memories and the book he is reading, one by Ruskin. Simultaneously as he reads, he is

thinking about when he and Jim bought this house. His mind wanders quickly and for a long time about the street, the neighbors and their children, about the state the house was in and the sagging bridge leading up to it. He thinks about one neighboring family in particular, the Strunks. George likes the wife, Mrs Strunk, but only in the sense that he appreciates that she is trying to be friendly. She tries to invite him over on occasion and he thinks that she pities him for living alone. Her pity and her attempts to save George from solitude only makes him feel even more lonely and all the more estranged from the ideal picture of the nuclear family, which he has never felt any connection to. She invites him over for dinner that same evening, when George is on his way over to Charlotte's, and when George suggests that he could come the next night, she explains that she will be having friends over but does not explain why George could, or should not join them. But George knows it has to do with him. Mrs Strunk's friends might notice what he is and she would feel ashamed: "Meanwhile, Ruskin has completely lost his wig. [Ruskin:] 'Taste is the ONLY morality! George cuts him off in mid-sentence by closing the book. Still sitting on the john, George looks out of the window'" (11, emphasis in original). For quite a while the bathroom and Ruskin are long gone and it is not until the narrator shakes both George and the narratee awake with a reminder of where the story really takes place that it becomes clear that it is a flashback inside George's mind. This is the talking-head phenomenon seen from another perspective, where Ruskin's voice is excluded from the narration and replaced with George's emotional self, reminiscing.

In one scene, George is on his way to the hospital to visit Doris, who was with Jim when he died. Doris was the woman who once had an affair with Jim and tried to take Jim away from George and there is an underlying hatred of Doris during the whole visit. She embodies the only things that George could never give Jim: "I am Doris. I am Woman. I am Bitch-Mother Nature. The Church and the Law and the State exist to support me. I claim my biological rights. I demand Jim" (75). Not only is she a woman, with all the physical traits that George does not possess, she is also a weapon that society could use to take Jim away from him. The society does already disapprove of Jim being with George and this is enhanced in Doris' presence, she functions as a symbol for the discrimination against George and his homosexuality. However, when he sees her lying there, something within George softens. He hated her for getting between him and Jim, but he never wished anything like this to happen: "Not because George wouldn't be capable of such fiendishness; but because Doris, then, was infinitely more than Doris, was Woman the Enemy, claiming Jim for herself. No use of destroying Doris, or ten thousand Dorises, as long as Woman triumphs" (75). That

it was Doris who committed this is not George's problem, but rather the simplicity of her offering Jim what George could not and that Jim succumbed.

Jill E. Anderson discusses an important aspect of the novel, the interpretation of what George means by the Enemy. The concept of breeders is frequent. Breeders is a term set by Isherwood himself in his novel *Down There on a Visit*. They are in short, the nuclear family, heterosexual families and their children (55). George sees these breeders as the Others, the Enemy. Doris is not actively a breeder, but she possesses all the necessities to become one and that is enough for George to feel threatened by her. Doris is weak and when the visit is over and they say goodbye, George gets an uncanny feeling that she was saying goodbye for the last time. Something in her voice made him feel like he should fix a last memory of her in his mind. As he walks away, he feels nothing but that another piece of Jim is lost to him, the piece that Doris once took. Even though he is filled with hatred for what happened, he does visit Doris in the hospital, as if the part that is left of her is affiliated with Jim and therefore makes it worth it. He expresses hate and revulsion for Doris the Woman, but realizes the importance to visit her, if only for the part of Jim left in Doris.

Although George is mournful and angry about what has happened to Jim, there is a strong will to live within him. This will gets an upsurge when he has left the hospital. Knowing that he is amongst the The Living is even stronger after such a close encounter with death that he experienced by Doris' bed. "*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!" (82, emphasis in original). Although these thoughts emphasize his body being alive, which would imply that it is his embodied self expressing this, it fills him with a will to live. His embodied self is not capable of these kind of nuanced feelings. He feels like a survivor, he has outlived Jim and will outlive Doris. This feeling remains when he walks into the locker room of the gym. The embodied self was brought down by the fact that he still considered himself overweight earlier that morning, but now, when the emotional self is prominent, as George looks at his body in the mirror he feels young and strong. Apart from the other men his age in the room, he feels as if he has not yet given up. He looks at himself in the mirror and sees the reflection of a boy, but old: "despite his wrinkles, his slipped flesh, his greying hair...you catch occasional glimpses of a ghostly someone else, soft-faced, boyish, pretty. The combination is bizarre...but it is there" (83). This is the second time that he looks at himself in the mirror that day and he sees the layers of himself the same way he did that morning.

This time, however, it is with a more positive reaction to it than the comparison of the past to dead fossils. He describes it himself as vanity, which may be because of the upswing in his mood.

When George in the afternoon walks out of the gym again, the lack of spasms and painful memories are noted by both George and the narrator. He feels no displeasure or pain and the anger and hatred of the world is gone. The endorphins released from the exercise together with the rather pleasant experience of visiting at the gym may have helped to disperse some of the grief, if only for a short while. George decides to take a walk up in the hills, a place he finds thrilling because it is foreign to him as an Englishman. All the exotic animals and vegetation in the Californian desert function as a source of energy to him and it is invigorating to visit. A flicker of survival can be felt through the choice of words describing George in this moment that is contradictory to the attitude he has had earlier of just managing to get through the day. But quite quickly after arriving at the top of the hills George feels that something is wrong. It does not give him the same sense of relaxation and it takes him a few moments to realize that it is because buildings are being built up here, the area is getting suburban. He drove up to the hills to escape the city but finds it creeping closer towards him, infiltrating his secret hiding places. The city and the society symbolize things that are inflicting negativity in George's life. It was a truck that hit Jim's car. His life was taken by someone that was a part of this city even though George secretly feels that everyone is somehow responsible:

All are, in the last analysis, responsible for Jim's death; their words, their thoughts, their whole way of life willed it, even though they never knew he existed. But, when George gets in as deep as this, Jim hardly matters anymore. Jim is nothing, now, but an excuse for hating three quarters of the population of America. (26)

The society was also at fault for the discrimination that George and other homosexuals are exposed to. This is expressed in George's thoughts earlier in the day when he is on the freeway on his way to the university. He is thinking about an article in the newspaper that talks about The Sex Deviates, referring to homosexuals. At first George finds it amusing to read something so hateful, how peculiar it is that some people have that opinion of him. Then his view on this clouds up and he becomes angry. He fantasizes about keeping hostages and killing those who express a dislike of his kind. This is another part of the group of society which George refers to as the Enemy.

The spasms are an important symbol. They reoccur later in the novel a few times. They arise when Jim is on George's mind and they are a product of his anger towards Jim's death. Physical pain is sent from the cortex but almost as if it was originally with orders from the emotional self in the form of a memory. When he walks home from his friend Charlotte's house in the evening after having dinner with her, a few different factors come into play that makes the emotional self less prominent to the embodied self. It is dark outside and George is quite drunk, his emotional self becomes numb and dreamy and he makes mechanical actions. He starts running towards the ocean, and the emotional self, that is trying to reach the surface and take over and make sense of the action, has no idea why the body has decided to go elsewhere. He decides to go to the bar down by the beach and there he meets Kenny, a student of his that he met and lectured for earlier that day. A while later they find themselves in George's house. They sit and talk for a while and the topic of Jim comes up, although he is not mentioned by name. Kenny asks if George lives all by himself, not even with a pet and George becomes defensive and aggressive, because this is a part of his life that he does not speak of:

The poor old guy doesn't have anything to love, he thinks Kenny is thinking... 'Of course, it's different when there's two of you. We often used to agree that neither one of us would want to keep on the animals if the other wasn't there - '...George has just gulped down a quarter of his scotch, to drown out a spasm which started when he started talking about Jim and the animals. (135-36)

Jim and George used to have pets and when Kenny unknowingly points out that none of them are in George's life anymore it becomes too much for him and he grows cross. After the aggressive outburst in front of Kenny, George is surprised but defensive over his reaction which points to the fact that that it was an subconscious reaction. The fact that George is at this point extremely intoxicated may also play a role. An emotional spark is lit and escapes the filter that the superego puts up against the self. This filter that, for example, stops you from making certain inappropriate actions or utterings. This does in turn spark the physical spasms that start to bother him.

George's emotional self is portrayed in yet another way when he is with Kenny in his house later that night. His drunkenness makes his ears buzz and he can not hear if Kenny is keeping up with their conversation. George slips further inside himself and starts to answer his self's own questions and thoughts. Although he asks Kenny the questions, the narrator

does not tell us whether Kenny answers or if he is much too intoxicated himself. George is turning rude and the emotional self fades somewhat as the alcohol gets a grip on him. He maintains nothing but a monologue at this point. His thoughts about Kenny does now come out in an unpolished, naked truth.

George's last moments of awareness, before he falls asleep, differs slightly from the pattern that has been seen earlier; the prominence of the selves in different situations. Seconds before the alcohol finally takes over his mind and causes him to lose consciousness completely, George only remembers Kenny's smile and the loud buzzing in his ears. This is a direct combination of the emotional self, that notices the smile that is "refracted... into rainbows of light" (144) and the embodied self that slowly takes over with the buzzing in George's ears that is "the roar of Niagara" (145). The embodied self takes over and turns on the automatic mode, sleep. When George wakes up again he finds himself in bed in his pajamas and that Kenny has left the house. Here, the embodied self starts to dominate, just as it did the last time he woke up: "[n]ight, still. Dark. Warm. Bed. *Am in bed!*...Clicks on the bedside lamp. His hand does this; arm in sleeve; pyjama sleeve. *Am in pyjamas!* Why? How?" (145, emphasis in original) The narrator's language is with few words and no pronouns that make George's thoughts sound primitive. His senses are numb, he feels nothing, the emotional self is once again not conscious. He describes the way he sees his own arm clicking on the bedside lamp, as if disconnected to the brain, or merely only connected to the cortex. He climbs out of bed to go to the bathroom but does not look into the bathroom mirror this time. It can be assumed that it is because of the state his senses are in, the emotional self is at this point not trying to dominate the embodied self, but merely deal with George's physical needs, which is to empty his bladder to be able to fall back to sleep again.

### **George and His Selves in Interaction with Others**

George has two contrastive selves within himself. However, there are also variations between how he interacts with others. To this, there are two main versions of himself that are mentioned the most in the novel, George with Charlotte and George with Kenny. In a way, Charlotte is the polar opposite of Kenny in terms of what George knows about them and what it is in them that he interacts with that brings out different qualities in him. Charlotte is his oldest friend. She is from England like him and they both share the feeling of sometimes feeling alienated. When George feels like a foreigner in California, Charlotte can understand him. She does, however, think that she understands him in every aspect, which is false: "he agrees, smiling and thinking what an absurd and universally-accepted bit of nonsense it is,



that your best friends must necessarily be the ones who best understand you” (98). She is younger than George but still in her mid-life and in a completely different place in life than Kenny, for example. She is a comfort for George, but comfort is not what he is seeking. This is why he is occasionally irritated with her. When she calls him in the morning he suspects that she wants him to come and listen to her talking about difficult things that have happened, her failed marriage mostly. George becomes irritated because he knows what she really wants the moment he has answered the phone and he knows she will not say it straightforwardly. “He isn’t in the mood for one of her crises” (18).

George’s lust for life proves to be much stronger than expected. Whilst he is feeling a crisis of Charlotte’s is brewing and that she is just waiting for a good moment to open up the conversation, he in turn experiences a plain happiness, ‘la felicidad’ as he calls it. Eventually, after having spilled out her feelings, she starts to cry:

George moves closer to her on the couch, puts one arm around her, squeezes her sobbing plumpness gently, without speaking. He is not cold; he is not unmoved. He is truly sorry for Charley and this mess – and yet – la felicidad remains intact; he is very much at his ease. (100)

He is determined to enjoy himself tonight, no matter the outcome of Charlotte’s state of mind. This reaction can seem cold at first, but as mentioned, Charlotte has these crises quite often. A fatigue and restlessness starts to grow within George when he feels that it might happen again, this is also one of the reasons why he wants to escape the Past, or rather not bring it up again. The repetition of past happenings, bad things in particular, is not something he wants to experience. Telling Charlotte that “[t]he Past is just something that’s over” (113) is an example of how he wants to forget about it, and does not approve of her determination to go back and repeat it.

Kenny, on the other hand, embodies what George finds fascinating, enjoyable and exciting. He is not necessarily seeking it but gets a feeling of satisfaction when he interacts with Kenny. This is not exclusively because Kenny is young, although it adds to the thrill of being with him: “Kenny Potter sits in the front row because he’s what’s nowadays called crazy, meaning only that he tends to do the opposite of what most people do; not on principle, however, and certainly not out of aggressiveness” (43). Kenny symbolizes the Future for George. He is young and intriguing, partly because of the fact that he is considered crazy. It does not become clear exactly how George feels about Kenny until later in the novel where

they are both intoxicated: It is clear from the beginning, however, that George does not feel that there is anything wrong with having feelings for Kenny.

His theory about Kenny being some sort of genius may not be entirely wrong. A few times in the novel, though in different contexts and assumedly with different meanings the phrase “He gets it” comes up. There is an underlying and almost uncanny notion with George that Kenny understands something that no one else does, or even, that George thought only he thought about. What seems to trigger this notion is Kenny’s laugh:

Sometimes when George makes a joke and Kenny laughs his deep rather wild laugh, George feels he is being laughed with. At other times, when the laugh comes a fraction of a moment late, George gets a spooky impression that Kenny is laughing not at the joke but at the whole situation; the educational system of this country and all the economic and political and psychological forces which have brought them into this classroom together. At such times, George suspects Kenny of understanding the innermost meaning of life; of being, in fact, some kind of a genius. (Though you would certainly never guess this from his term papers.) (43-44)

It is one of the occasions where Kenny is laughing where it makes a symbolic imprint on George. It is fascinating for George to think that Kenny actually is a genius, but that the thought has never entered the mind of Kenny himself, which therefore does not exist as a theory for him. When George makes another joke after the lecture, Kenny seems to be laughing much longer than one would laugh who wanted to be polite, or even appropriate if he actually did find the joke funny. The smiles they are exchanging make George feel as if between them there are feelings of understanding and a joined connection that is rooted in his emotional self. If the story was not exclusively told through the eyes of George, the narratee may find a similar feeling within Kenny that is rooted in his emotional self as well. In the scene at the bar, both of them are drunk, George more so than Kenny. George tries to figure out what is happening chemically between them. It is like a dialogue, although the content of the dialogue is not of importance. It has to do with the relationship the two have with each other. According to George, to achieve this magnetic feeling, you have to somehow be polar opposites. In this case, it is Youth and Age: “There the two of them sit, smiling at each other – oh, far more than that – fairly beaming with mutual insight” (125). George wonders if Kenny would understand this if he told him about it and he has the faintest apprehension that he does.

Kenny asks if George wants to go swimming. George accepts, and in order to get down to the beach they have to drop down an eight foot fall. As Kenny helps George down, their bodies touch for the first time and to George it seems that due to this, “[t]he electric field of the dialogue is broken” (131). From that moment on, George perceives their relationship as different, it is no longer just symbolic or emotional, it is physical. The development of their relationship progresses further when they are in the water. George gets caught in a particularly large wave and tries frantically to get his head above the surface. Kenny comes to his rescue and drags him up on the beach, with his hands under George’s armpits, dries him off and puts his hand around George’s shoulders to support him back home.

The Now is one of the two first things the embodied self registers when it wakes up in the beginning of the novel. When George’s subconscious is speaking, in one of the last parts of the novel, it takes up the importance of the Now once more: “Damn the Future. Let Kenny and the kids have it. Let Charley keep the Past. 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). George is fixated with the thought of staying in the Now. The Now is in America, it is where he found Jim. It is also where he lost Jim, which has now sent Jim back to the Past. George feels that maybe he can find another Jim in the Present, this is why he wants to stay there. This collides with Charlotte’s determination to cling to the Past. The Past is in England, where she and George lived before the Present, before Jim and America. It also collides with Kenny and the Future. George does not want to experience the Future any more than he wants to revisit the past. The balance between the familiarity of Charlotte’s Past and the exciting and new Future of Kenny’s is where George wants to be. It is yet another example of George’s determination to carry on and to not give up.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has looked into the many different components of the character of George Falconer. Some of them visible to people around him, others visible only to him, and through the narrator and therefore also to the narratee. By doing close-reading and careful studies of both the literal meaning and the significance of Isherwood’s words; and also mapping out the different narrative components, a separation can be made between George Falconer’s three primary selves. The two contrastive selves, the embodied and the emotional self, together with the third self, which is a combination of those mentioned above, under the influence at others’ presence, take form in different ways. In retrospect it is an incredibly large amount of

different fluctuations between the selves within George that is depicted, when knowing that the story takes place during only twenty four hours. This makes a valid point on the aspect of the complexity of people, physically, mentally and emotionally. It has also shown evidence of the complexity of the relations between the selves and their different strengths and weaknesses in different situations, as well as their constant struggle against each other.

The aim of this essay was to make a deeper analysis of the three main layers of selves of George and to prove the distinction between them. The battle between the selves was the most obvious occurrence. The first section about George's embodied self proved that it is, naturally, as strongest when the emotional self is weakened by something, for example sleep, sadness, anger or alcohol intoxication; but also when the emotional self is distracted or in a way just not interested in being the more prominent of the two. The emotional self, in turn, proved to get prominent especially at the university and in interaction with intellectuals similar to George, where it can be concluded that he enjoys the mental stimulation he receives from his profession. The last aspect of this essay, George's selves in interaction with others, proved that the two strongest personalities that were interacting with George during the day were polar opposites and influenced him in opposite ways that created a greatly versatile depiction of George. He shows a whole range of personality components during this period of twenty four hours which has proved that George has in fact an immensely vast self.

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