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Interwoven: Grief, Humanity, and Daily Routine in *A Single Man*

How does the death of a loved one impact a human being? Does grief continually pervade one's daily life as an ever-present ghost in the shadows, or does grief ebb and flow? Christopher Isherwood begins *A Single Man* after George's partner, Jim, has passed away; a clear picture of their life together, as well as the circumstances of Jim's death, elude the reader throughout the entire novel. Nonetheless, Isherwood explores these age-old questions and buries his answers between the lines, making the reader feel the full impact of George's loss even by the end of the first scene. "Waking up begins with saying am and now," he begins (1), thrusting the reader into an ordinary routine that grows increasingly unfamiliar. By examining the link between this daily ritual and grief, Isherwood demonstrates how the loss of personal connection numbs the human being, stripping away his humanity and leaving behind an unrecognizable un-human entity in its wake.

The novel begins with the morning's daily ritual: waking up. However, as the scene unfolds, the reader becomes more and more aware of *something* discontorting the ordinary routine. Detached and indifferent, the narration utilizes technical (and unusual) diction as Isherwood notes "the vagus nerve," "the cortex," and "the pylorus" (1). The prose pauses on each body part, from the brain to the fingers, but forgoes adding any emotion or sentimentality. While it doesn't hesitate to mention the "arthritic thumbs" and "spasm[ing]" left knee, it doesn't

spare space for anything else (1). Surely, George has a feature he is most proud of, or bruises from living a long, eventful life. Surely, he must harbor some strong emotion towards his ailing body. However, these stories do not surface; instead, Isherwood treats the reader to an almost clinical view of the main character, making the reader “build” an image of George as one would build and connect the parts of a machine. Moreover, the consistent usage of the pronoun “it,” rather than the pronoun “him,” helps solidify George as an emotionless entity. While George’s outward appearance matches that of a human, this technical and unsentimental introduction makes him come across as “un-human” and robotic.

Once Isherwood finishes describing George, “over the entire intercommunication-system, is issued the first general order of the day: UP” (1). The cortex becomes the body’s controller, bringing to mind a robot controllable by remote, not a human being. Each following sentence reads like a concise line of code, commanding the obedient body “to wash, to shave, to brush its hair” (1). As when Isherwood darted from body part to body part in the first few paragraphs, he similarly commands action after action; the reader does not gain any insight into how George moves throughout this routine, nor does she get a view into its thoughts. It’s as if she is observing a stone-faced being, with nothing (not even a twitch of an eyebrow) betraying its emotions. Filled with obligatory words such as “has to” and “must be,” the scene illustrates George’s attempt to fit “into the world of the other people” yet neglects to include why he differs so much from the rest of the world (1). All the reader knows is this: it is outnumbered in a world of “others,” with no other choice but to comply. If it considers human beings as “others,” then is it an outcast or an advanced machine? Without access to George’s thoughts, the reader cannot

decide. As more and more of George's potential humanity slips away, one question lurks in the back of the reader's mind: who is George?

Once George "has gotten dressed, it has become he" and George transforms into "more or less" a human being (2). The obligation to integrate into society has transformed this machine into a human being, thus answering the reader's question. Now, emotions (such as "lonely" and "protected") start dotting the page, and George is no longer unfeeling (2). However, he is still not fully human--he is only a "three-quarters-human thing" (2). What is George like when he is *fully* human? Isherwood answers this question by suddenly shifting the scene to a hypothetical situation. Here, active verbs ("jogging, jostling, bumping") and evocative adjectives ("sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently") bombard the reader (2). Short yet vivid, these words stand in sharp contrast to the technical words from before, and each comma acts as a brushstroke, incessantly painting a more and more vibrant picture. The scene quivers with life, so unlike the introductory snapshot of George. As the simple diction and syntax flows with the high energy of life and rushes the reader to the end of the paragraph, Isherwood abruptly trips her with just one sentence: "Jim is dead" (2). The added emphasis, "Is dead," stops the reader completely, and the reason for George's lack of emotion becomes clear.

Immediately after George remembers that Jim has passed away, "he stands quite still, silent, or at most uttering a brief animal grunt" (2). The quietness and stillness here can resemble that of an animal when startled; this "deer in the headlights" can only manage "a brief animal grunt," as George is too consumed by a "spasm" of grief to do anything else. The words in this brief paragraph contain only emotions that animals can feel; though it would not be surprising, given the situation, nowhere does the phrase "fear of impending death" appear. Only "painful"

and “relief” register in George’s mind, just as an animal would only understand the pain of a wound and the certainty of having escaped the jaws of a predator (2). However, both an animal and the current George do not share the same philosophical musings or worries over death that humans can indulge in. Indeed, Isherwood even notes that this “morning [spasm]” cannot be “treated sentimentally” (2). Sentimentality and nostalgia for a better and simpler past, though very human, cannot help. Therefore, the sparse emotions that scatter the page are raw, visceral, and animalistic--George reacts like an animal. Moreover, the syntax is short and the diction, action-driven, much like the code-like syntax and diction which dominated the waking-up scene. Though George and Jim “talked about everything...including death, of course,” these complex thoughts are now non-existent (3). Once confronted with the subject of their discussions, George de-evolves, resembling the simple one-track mind of an animal. Evidently, another form the grieving “un-human” entity can take is that of an animal.

Isherwood further shows the link between grief and its impact on daily rituals by providing a clear contrast between the George who wakes up alone and the George wakes up around others. In one instance, George has drifted off to sleep while listening to longtime acquaintance Charlotte fret over the loss of her own partner; when he “shakes himself awake” to a wholly different topic, he thinks, “Can he have dozed off for a couple of seconds?” and lands in his very human thought processes (48). Instead of focusing on individual body parts or simple, emotionless actions, Isherwood focuses on the distinct human experience of accidentally falling asleep while someone else drones on and on. The slow and strange transition from un-human to human does not occur every time George wakes up; personal connection stops the deconstruction

of this daily ritual. Waking up with others pushes George's existing personal connections to the fore, and the grief from losing one personal connection is temporarily forgotten.

Additionally, the action of "waking up with others" does not have to be literal; it can be metaphorical as well. In another scene, George "blinks" himself awake (64). Similar to before, George's thoughts immediately sound human; as he tries to remember how long it has been since he fell asleep, he thinks, "Half an hour – an hour, later – not long, anyway –" (64). The em-dashes interrupt each phrase of the sentence, just as each thought interrupts the previous; throughout the scene, the reader jumps from thought to thought, as discombobulated as the main character. "Night, still. Dark. Warm. Bed. Am in bed!" Isherwood writes, and each thought leads the reader to fill in the details of the room (64). Though the next sentences consist solely of actions, thus mimicking the first scene's structure, they serve a completely different purpose. Before, the actions marched across the page, one after the other, with no space for George's thoughts; the sentences acted like code, simple text commanding the body called George. In this scene, the similarly brief phrases, "Clicks on the bedside lamp. His hand does this; arm in sleeve," primarily serve to direct George's thoughts (64). "...pyjama sleeve," George continues thinking before fully awakening. "Am in pyjamas! Why? How?" The memory of the night temporarily places Kenny, an existing personal connection, in front of Jim, the lost personal connection; thus, George's grief does not manifest, and the ritual of waking up stays intact.

By choosing when to deconstruct a ritual as ordinary as waking up, Isherwood shows how George's grief over losing Jim impacts his everyday life. When the knowledge of Jim's death is at the forefront of George's mind, George becomes emotionless, thereby losing his humanity and transforming into an un-human entity. On the other hand, when George focuses on

his current personal connections, Jim's death escapes scrutiny; the daily ritual of waking up does not place Jim's death onto George's consciousness. In *A Single Man*, the loss of a loved one causes grief. This, in turn, causes the deconstruction of daily rituals. As the survivor numbly moves through the day, the deconstructed daily ritual then highlights the survivor's loss of humanity. How can he ever recover? Perhaps, the existence of other personal connections can act as a bandaid, covering the gaping wound and transforming the animal or machine back into a human being.

Works Cited

Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. Simon & Schuster, 1964.