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by

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Delicacy or Shame: Christopher Isherwood's Obscured Sexuality in
Lions and Shadows

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**Delicacy or Shame: Christopher Isherwood's Obscured Sexuality in
*Lions and Shadows***

by

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Report

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Dedication

This project is lovingly dedicated to my brother Sam, who has so much in common with certain personalities in *Lions and Shadows*. Don't worry—it took Christopher nearly fifty years.

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I would like to thank both of my committee members, Professors Mia Carter and Alan Friedman, for their time and input on this project, and for setting shining examples of leadership and dedication in academia. My adviser Professor Carter deserves particular thanks for introducing me to Christopher Isherwood's work. His writing has become more meaningful to me than that of almost any other author, and I hope to continue to explore why for years to come.

I would like to thank my parents for their unflagging faith, help, and moral support, without which I'm not sure that I could accomplish anything, and my best friend L.A. Fields for being my sounding board at all hours of the day and night.

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Abstract

Delicacy or Shame: Christopher Isherwood's Obscured Sexuality in *Lions and Shadows*

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Christopher Isherwood's 1938 autobiographical novel *Lions and Shadows* is often read in light of its subtitle as the story of "an education in the 'twenties." Yet Isherwood's early work is more than a simple interwar *bildungsroman*. *Lions and Shadows* is a narratively complicated account of a privileged, queer youth in interwar England and an exposition of the effects of the Great War on an entire generation. The autobiographical novel provides veiled descriptions of the queer cultures of Cambridge and London in the 1920s, and records the early artistic development of several members of what has come to be called "The Auden Generation," including Edward Upward, W.H. Auden, and Stephen Spender.

In this project, I explore how and why Christopher Isherwood obscures his sexuality in *Lions and Shadows*, looking in particular at his friendships with Edward

Upward and W.H. Auden and at the fictional work that the former friendship produced, *The Mortmere Stories*. Chapter 1 provides background information on homosexuality in England during Isherwood's lifetime, focusing on how class and privilege affect the experience and expression of homosexuality. Chapter 2 analyzes the obsession with the Great War that pervades *Lions and Shadows*, concentrating on how the Great War affected ideas of masculinity and male sexuality. Finally, Chapter 3 explores the relationship between Isherwood's social and sexual discomfort and the production and content of *The Mortmere Stories*, which tend to poke fun at sexual foibles and the proclivities of the upper classes.

Table of Contents

Introduction Mental Growing Pains: What's in <i>Lions and Shadows</i>	1
Chapter 1 In the Midst of the Enemy Camp: Class and Sexuality in Isherwood's 'Twenties	7
Chapter 2 Our Neurotic Generation: The Missed Test of the Great War	23
Chapter 3 A Metaphysical University City: <i>The Mortmere Stories</i>	37
Bibliography	56

Introduction

Mental Growing Pains: What's In *Lions and Shadows*

Born in the English village of High Lane 1904, Christopher Bradshaw Isherwood was raised in what his biographer calls a “gentrified atmosphere” complicated by “a Puritan work ethic” inherited from the Bradshaw family, descendants of the judge John Bradshaw who sentenced Charles I to death in 1649. Isherwood and his brother Richard were raised primarily by their domineering mother Kathleen after their father Frank was killed in the Great War when Christopher was eleven. Christopher attended the preparatory school Repton and went on to win a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he studied history with his friend Edward Upward before purposefully being sent down in 1925. Isherwood lived in Berlin from 1929 until 1933, and emigrated to the United States with W.H. Auden in 1939. He eventually moved to California, and met his life partner Don Bachardy, a portrait artist, in 1953 (*Diaries*).

Isherwood's first novel was called *All the Conspirators* (1928), and was centered around a young male character in a battle of wills against his strong mother. In 1932 Isherwood published *The Memorial*, primarily concerned with the aftermath of the Great War. These two novels, along with *Lions and Shadows* (1938), have strong autobiographical elements, characteristic of most of Isherwood's published work. Isherwood's subsequent works included some of his best known: *Prater Violet* (1945), *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935), and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). His later works *A*

Single Man (1964) and *Christopher and His Kind* (1976) have both been adapted into films. Isherwood also wrote several works with his friends, such as *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935) and *Journey to a War* (1939) with W.H. Auden, and *The Mortmere Stories* (1994) with Edward Upward (*Diaries*).

Christopher Isherwood's subtitle to his 1938 autobiographical novel labels his work the story of "an education in the twenties," but *Lions and Shadows* is much more than an account of one young man's coming-of-age. *Lions and Shadows* is, more specifically, an account of a privileged, queer education in the twenties, as well as an exposition of the effects of the Great War on young men of Isherwood's generation. It is also an oblique description of the queer cultures of Cambridge and of London, and a record of the early artistic development of Isherwood himself and of his friends Edward Upward and W.H. Auden.

The significance of Isherwood's class and sexuality, and the relationship between them, should not be understated regardless of how deliberately Isherwood skirts both issues in *Lions and Shadows*. I will explore the implications of Isherwood's considerable social and financial privilege and point to the likely effects of those privileges on Isherwood's rendering and experience of his sexuality. The author underplays his pedigree in this early autobiographical novel, along with the Bradshaw-Isherwood family and their wealth; however, Isherwood makes available a great deal of information about the rest of the Bradshaw-Isherwoods and his relationship to them in two of his later works, *Kathleen and Frank* (1971), a memoir about his parents' relationship, and *Kathleen and Christopher* (2005), a series of letters between the author and his mother. I

will contrast Isherwood's experiences of London with the experiences of less privileged homosexual men between the World Wars in order to explore the contemporary ramifications of class on homosexuality privately, publicly, and legally.

Perhaps more telling is Isherwood's seeming omission of his sexuality from *Lions and Shadows*. Knowing something of Isherwood's biography in advance, a savvy reader can pick up on a great deal of sexual repression and frustration in the narrative of young Isherwood's life, frustration that finds an outlet in *The Mortmere Stories*, Isherwood's collaborative fantasies with Edward Upward, the invention and production of which *Lions and Shadows* chronicles. With Upward's heavy artistic influence, *The Mortmere Stories* are the culmination of Isherwood's complicated engagement with sexuality, landscape, and language. In *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood describes the development of the language that he and Upward invented at Cambridge to describe the "romantic-sinister" qualities that they discerned in the landscapes around them, qualities that they elaborated upon and built fictions around to create Mortmere and its inhabitants. Later on, as his sexuality awakens and he achieves a greater degree of freedom, Isherwood begins to apply the language of Mortmere to the city of London; he initiates W.H. Auden into the cult of linguistic turns that help to express repressed desire.

Inextricably tied to Isherwood's sexuality, and indeed to the sexuality of his homosexual and heterosexual male friends, is the spectre of the Great War. One prominent thread running through *Lions and Shadows* is the young Isherwood's obsession with The Test: the attempt to prove masculinity through a variety of means, from riding motorcycles to kissing girls, since the definitive test of masculinity,

participation in war, has been denied him and his peers. The Test, or the lack thereof, is one cause of the anxieties and neuroses that Isherwood expresses through the language of Mortmere. Isherwood's anxiety concerning The Test is also impossible to separate from his sexuality, as homosexuality would presumably preclude success on a test of traditional masculinity. Isherwood's anxiety concerning The Test is therefore compounded by his sexuality itself, whereas his heterosexual peers feel anxiety only about the failure to consummate their sexuality.

I will begin with the atmosphere in which Isherwood came of age in Cambridge and London, concentrating on the potential effects of class distinctions on the homosexual experience. Against this backdrop, I will analyze Isherwood's relationship to language, landscape, and sexuality in *Lions and Shadows* and in *The Mortmere Stories*. The anxiety occasioned by the Great War is part of a more generalized discomfort that leads to discussion of Isherwood's movement from Cambridge to London, and the changes in his language and sexuality that accompany this change in landscape.

Perhaps unsurprising for a work so concerned with language, *Lions and Shadows* presents an interesting problem of nomenclature or genre. Is the book a novel or an autobiography? Is it fiction or nonfiction? Isherwood's preface, "To The Reader," written before publication in 1937, is presented as a guide, but it reaches a somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion. Isherwood writes that *Lions and Shadows* "is not, in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography; it contains no 'revelations'; it is never 'indiscreet'; it is not even entirely 'true'" (*Lions* 7). Defining his work based on its subtitle, "An Education in the Twenties," Isherwood focuses on his educational career

at school, at Cambridge, and in the world outside these institutions. The subtitle is, however, the reason that *Lions and Shadows* is often grouped with other post-war public-school *bildungsromans*, but I intend to read it outside of this narrow categorization¹. Isherwood is, in his hedging of the book's genre, queering the genre of *Lions and Shadows* in the same way that he queers language and genre in the context of *The Mortmere Stories*, as I discuss later on.

One cannot read *Lions and Shadows* simply as an autobiography because, as we will see, the book omits information traditionally included in autobiographical works, and because the author himself cautions the reader that not everything within the pages is “entirely true.” Yet one cannot read *Lions and Shadows* simply as a novel either, because the work is replete with autobiographical elements. I would like to take Isherwood's advice at the end of the preface to “read it as a novel” simply because *Lions and Shadows* reads as one so enjoyably, but I would also like to disregard his earlier advice and read the book also as autobiographical, since it includes so many autobiographical elements. The fact that not every word of this novel/autobiography hybrid is “entirely true” does not invalidate what Isherwood writes in *Lions and Shadows*; what remains unsaid is just as powerful and important as what the author includes, and the ways in which he presents himself “untruthfully” hold as much interest and can tell us as much about him as the driest, most “truthful” memoir Isherwood could have written. The best genre descriptor for *Lions and Shadows* seems to be “autobiographical novel,” since this phrase includes

¹ Edward Upward's *The Spiral Ascent* comes to mind as an example. Isherwood and Upward were lifelong friends who went to school and University together, yet *The Spiral Ascent* and *Lions and Shadows* are drastically different in content and tone.

both fictional and nonfictional elements while resisting classification as “entirely true” or entirely fictional. The ambiguity inherent in reading *Lions and Shadows* as an autobiographical novel helps to highlight the significant performative aspects of the work: Isherwood is writing about himself in retrospect, depicting a younger version of himself as the autobiographical novel’s protagonist who may or may not be entirely true to fact. For this reason I will refer to Christopher Isherwood by two different names throughout this project. In this context, “Christopher” is the young man of *Lions and Shadows*’ 1920s setting, and “Isherwood” is the author and the autobiographical novel’s narrative voice.

Chapter 1

In the Midst of the Enemy Camp: Class and Sexuality in Isherwood's

'Twenties

We used to watch the Poshocracy from our window as they walked about the court, met, waved gaily, exchanged suitably jolly greetings. 'Look, look!' Chalmers would mutter, rubbing his hands together in gleeful ecstasies of hate: 'Did you see that? Did you see the way he handed him that book? Look at the way he's kicking that stone! Christ, how electrically vile!' (*Lions* 55)

In order to explore fruitfully how Christopher Isherwood represents his sexuality in *Lions and Shadows* and *The Mortmere Stories*, the social and political contexts in which he came of age cannot be ignored. These circumstances are especially important considering how much Isherwood's experience and rendering of his sexuality was influenced by his social and financial status. Interestingly, what brings Isherwood's class background to the forefront is not its prominence in *Lions and Shadows*, but its conspicuous absence. In this early autobiography, Isherwood largely conceals his pedigree, as well as the Bradshaw-Isherwood family and their considerable wealth, which places him solidly in the upper middle class. However, Isherwood makes this information freely available in two of his later works, *Kathleen and Frank* (1971), a memoir about his parents' relationship, and *Kathleen and Christopher* (2005), a series of letters between the author and his mother. Isherwood comes closest to explaining his family background in *Lions and Shadows* when he pokes fun at Cambridge's posh students, known to

Isherwood and his best friend as “the Poshocracy,” a word “coined to designate the highest of [Cambridge’s] social circles” (*Lions* 55). Isherwood recalls the superficial reasons why the Poshocracy tentatively accept him as one of their own, despite his lack of enthusiasm for their friendship:

I was quite presentable. I didn’t look like a midnight swotter, hadn’t pimples or a grammar-school accent, didn’t wear boots; further enquiries (exceedingly tactful) disclosed a minor “county” family with the background of an Elizabethan “place.” So I was all right—even, perhaps, an agreeable surprise. One invitation lead to another. (*Lions* 57)

In Isherwood’s narrative of the years after university, he remembers his struggle to “define the artist’s position in society” and how fruitless this effort was since his only experience of society, the only “society” he knew how to define himself in relation to, was “the peerage” (*Lions* 124). Aside from a few mentions of an allowance from his family later on in the work, Isherwood’s other references to his class are oblique; it is clear where he “belongs” socially, but his family life, his siblings, the origins of his parents and grandparents, his family members’ occupations, and many other details that would ordinarily be included in an autobiography are omitted—one reason why *Lions and Shadows* can best be read as an autobiographical novel, rather than exclusively as an example of either genre.

Despite class being a fairly central concern for Christopher as a young man, several reasons suggest themselves as to why Isherwood censors most of his background from *Lions and Shadows*. Hugh Brogan posits that at the time of writing, Isherwood

simply had not come to terms with his fraught relationship with his parents, which he later explored quite thoroughly in *Kathleen and Frank*; Brogan writes that “had Christopher Isherwood in his thirties been as seasoned as he is now,” circa 1976, *Kathleen and Frank* would never have been written as a supplement (Brogan 309). This is no doubt true, as we can infer from Isherwood’s tentative treatment of class issues in *Lions and Shadows* in the guise of Cambridge’s “Poshocracy.” Christopher and his best friend Alan Chalmers (an alias for Edward Upward) sometimes socialize with the “Poshocrats,” but they repeatedly step back to mock themselves for associating with those who, while undeniably of their class, they see as fundamentally different from themselves (*Lions* 64). Christopher’s discomfort with and even rejection of the class to which he belongs by birth resurfaces several times in *Lions and Shadows* as what Isherwood comes to call “class hatred” (*Lions* 244). In his own autobiography, Edward Upward calls such feelings “inverted snobbery” (*Upward* 212).

As we will see, Isherwood’s repressed sexuality surfaces in his creation with Edward Upward of *The Mortmere Stories* and in his descriptions of city landscapes in Cambridge, London, and in the fictional Mortmere. Similarly, Christopher depicts his feelings towards those of his own class in the form of “The Watcher in Spanish,” another fiction created with Chalmers to express disdain for the ways in which the two men present themselves when dealing with members of the Poshocracy (*Lions* 53). The Watcher in Spanish appears to Christopher and Chalmers “at moments when [their] behavior [is] particularly insincere,” when they are fitting in with the Poshocracy by “telling a boastful story, or pretending an interest in heraldry, or flattering the wife of a

don” (*Lions* 53). The Watcher is cast in the same mold as the whole of Mortmere and Isherwood’s later descriptions of landscape, “macabre but semi-comic,” sinister yet not literally threatening; The Watcher is a manifestation and reminder of the self that Christopher represses and conceals when he participates in the hallmark social interactions of young men of his class (*Lions* 53).

Rather than explicitly addressing the issues of wealth and class at Cambridge—which Isherwood and Upward do in *The Mortmere Stories* through their fictional selves Hynd and Starn—Christopher instead expresses his dislike through The Watcher. Perfectly capable of fitting in with the Poshocracy when they feel like it or when they forget themselves, Christopher and Chalmers invent The Watcher in order to police each other’s “false” behavior. “In other words,” Isherwood writes in his discussion of The Watcher, “we were jealous of each other’s friends” (*Lions* 54):

Chalmers, whatever he tried to pretend to the contrary, had enjoyed these adventures. His noisy hearty friends accepted him without question; he was old Al, our Al, who played soccer and got drunk and ran after girls; he was one of the gang. Nobody minded his being a poet . . . And really, I secretly thought—whatever Chalmers might say—however disloyal it might be to admit it—the Poshocracy could be very nice indeed. Or so I felt when I was actually with them. Their civilized, flattering laughter went to my head. The truth was, in my heart, I really enjoyed society: I could talk their language. . . . (*Lions* 57)

Chalmers seems to fit into the Poshocracy with more ease than Christopher, who struggles with the “icy layers of [his] puritan priggishness” that Chalmers has been trying

to defrost by prompting Christopher to “read the poetry [he] had been pretending for years to admire” and encouraging him to “take, mildly and gingerly, to alcohol” (*Lions* 73). Chalmers is heterosexual, and so Isherwood’s reputation for “puritan priggishness” excuses him from the traditional masculine pursuits that help Chalmers bond with the Poshocracy: playing competitive sports, pursuing women, and drinking to excess.

Many of these masculine performances—some of which come to be part of Christopher’s conception of “The Test” of masculinity, as I discuss in the next chapter—are class-valenced. The young men in question, including Isherwood and Upward, have been educated at elite public schools, where they have been “socialized . . . in the stoic ideal” described by veteran authors like Siegfried Sassoon (Roper 344). The brand of masculinity described by Isherwood in *Lions and Shadows* is part of a public school tradition that shaped the psyches of the Victorian and Edwardian men whose war experiences cause Isherwood and his generation so much angst. Christopher’s “failures of repression,” both social and sexual, recall the failures to maintain “the stoic ideal” that characterize many narratives of the Great War (Roper 351).

Isherwood describes a somewhat paradoxical construction of masculinity that is characteristic of the British public school system in which he was raised, and, as we will see, carries over into the university educational system Christopher enters when he matriculates at Cambridge. The public school system inculcated many of the masculine values that were supposed to prepare young men for experiences like those of the Great War; well before Isherwood’s time, “the ‘muscular Christianity’ of the of the mid-nineteenth century, which had emphasized such qualities as compassion, fairness, and

altruism, had given way to secular and more aggressive ideals” that redefined the concepts of manliness and masculinity into what we now think of as more traditional masculine attributes like self-control, emotional restraint, and physical strength (Roper 347). At the same time as these “traditionally” masculine—and implicitly heterosexual—values were being instilled, public schools encouraged intense homosocial bonding between boys by maintaining all-male social environments; the close, almost telepathic friendship between Isherwood and Upward began at the public school they both attended as children. Boys of Isherwood’s class could move, as they aged, from the public school to the university to the world of London men’s clubs, forming “a continuation of the homosocial worlds” of all-male institutions throughout their lives (Mickenberg 458). Paul Fussell quotes J.R. Ackerley’s observation that the army as well, “’with its male relationships’” could be “’an extension of [the] public school’” (Fussell 273). Fussell emphasizes the homosocial aspects of all of these environments; he equates the all-male nature of educational institutions to the all-male environment of the military, where homosocial bonding fulfilled soldiers’ “need for affection in a largely womanless world” (Fussell 272).

Despite Chalmer’s apparent social success, and despite the fact that Christopher somewhat bitterly sees him performing the role of “a hearty” with ease, Upward notices in his best friend a “dangerous weakness for the society of the college ‘Poshocracy’” (*Lions* 55). Both men feel, as Brogan puts it, like square pegs that are being rammed into round holes (Brogan 308). Upward feels like an outsider because he is a poet, even though the Poshocracy nonetheless wholeheartedly accept him, and because he seeks

more than superficial sexual relationships with women. Meanwhile Christopher's outsider status derives from his desire to become a writer, a career which he thinks would make him an outsider to the "society" he refers to, and a career undermined by Chalmers' established success as a poet. More importantly, Christopher's outsider status stems from his homosexuality.

Whereas Christopher sees Chalmers seduced by the cult of heterosexual masculine camaraderie which he cannot experience with Christopher, Chalmers sees his friend seduced by the allure of a posh audience for his jokes, stories, and opinions. Christopher is susceptible to letting "their civilized, flattering laughter" inflate his ego, foreshadowing the love-hate relationship with his own class visible throughout *Lions and Shadows*, and perhaps throughout Isherwood's life. Christopher, often with Chalmers, vacillates between indulgence in the witty, intellectual, ego-boosting company of his own class, and indulgence in "gleeful ecstasies of hate" for the "niceness" of the Poshocracy (*Lions* 55).

At moments Christopher even longs—superficially—to belong to a different class, one unpopulated by the "nice," "posh" young men at Cambridge. On a seaside holiday during a university vacation, Christopher, despite his obvious "ordinary university accent" and expensive clothes, attempts to make friends with some working men in the seaside town and finds that in his eagerness "to dissociate [himself] from [his] class-mates on the bathing beach—[he] had assumed a slight Cockney twang" (*Lions* 249). This "violently inverted snobbery," the "class hatred" that he enjoys enacting with Chalmers, reaches its zenith in this summer-long episode of class mimicry and verbal

masquerade (*Lions* 248). Unsurprisingly, Christopher's friendship with the attractive, heterosexual working-class young man Tim calls upon him to participate in the ritual of seeking out women together, which recalls the behavior he resented in Chalmers at university. Christopher's experiences with Tim get as close as *Lions and Shadows* ever does to discussing Isherwood's sexuality:

Together, we visited the local cinema, picked up a couple of girls and cuddled them throughout the performance. I found that I was particularly good at cuddling; especially after three or four "dog's noses" (gin and beer) at the pub. Indeed, my very inhibitions made me extremely daring—up to a point. Tim, who really meant business, was often curiously shy in the opening stages. Once or twice, having pushed things farther than I had intended, I was scared to find myself committed to a midnight walk over the downs. But, on these occasions, I always discovered an excuse for passing my girl on to Tim. (*Lions* 251)

In this way, Christopher ingratiates himself with Tim, who, while he apparently guesses at Isherwood's true class background, never seems to suspect Isherwood's homosexuality. He respects Christopher all the more for his apparent boldness with women (*Lions* 249). The "inhibitions" Isherwood speaks of are not moral ones, but sexual ones: Christopher does not desire sex with women, but with men. Christopher's summer friendship with Tim is built on two great lies: that Isherwood is heterosexual, and that he is working-class. Interestingly, *The Watcher in Spanish* does not appear when Christopher falsifies himself to befriend Tim; *The Watcher* manifests himself when Christopher is fitting in with his *own* class, an act that requires a different kind of

falsification, one that, in Isherwood's eyes, seems worse than simply putting on an accent and pretending an interest in girls.

Christopher engages in this same kind of "inverted snobbery" during the General Strike in 1926, as he watches "the Poshocrats" come down from Oxford and Cambridge to make the London goings-on a spectator sport (*Lions* 177):

For the first time, I knew that I detested my own class: so sure of themselves, so confident that they were in the right, so grandly indifferent to the strikers' case.

Most of us didn't even know why the men had struck. I didn't know myself. I couldn't think about such things: I could only shudder with fear and hatred;

hating both parties . . . I hated myself, too, for being neutral (*Lions* 179).

But this desire to distance himself from his own class is, again, superficial. Here we see Christopher place himself awkwardly between classes: he longs to leave his own behind ideologically, yet he continues to take full advantage of its privileges; he longs for some feeling of camaraderie with the working class, yet he is too lazy to educate himself about its struggles and too cowardly to actually join the strikers (*Lions* 180). Christopher does volunteer for duty during the strike, but he volunteers for what he thinks will be least in demand—"help on a sewage farm"—and volunteers so late, after days of brooding at his family's house, that before he can be called upon, the strike is over and "the Poshocracy [has] won, as it always did win, in a thoroughly gentlemanly manner" (*Lions* 180).

Christopher's relief is palpable, and his "doubts and self-reproaches" can again recede into his subconscious for a time (*Lions* 179).

Brogan points toward a criticism on Isherwood's part of the British upper classes, a deep dissatisfaction with "the unbearableness of English life for some of the best Englishmen," the presence of what Brogan calls "something bloody lurking behind the rhododendrons" of high society (Brogan 307). In one of the most telling and candid passages in *Lions and Shadows*, with none of his usual dry humor, Isherwood admits to feeling not just the disdain he expresses via The Watcher in Spanish, but feeling

exclusion, the familiar grudging envy. For, however I might sneer, these people were evidently enjoying themselves in their own mysterious fashion, and why was it so mysterious to me? Weren't they my own blood, my own caste? Why couldn't I—the would-be novelist, the professional observer—understand them? Why didn't I know—not coldly from the outside, but intuitively, sympathetically from within—what it was that made them perform their grave ritual of pleasure; putting on blazers and flannels in the morning, plus-fours or white trousers in the afternoon, dinner jackets in the evening; playing tennis, golf, bridge; dancing, without a smile, the fox-trot, the tango, the blues; organizing a song-song, distributing prizes after a fancy-dress ball?² (*Lions* 246)

Brogan calls this passage "the expression of an all-too-common English ailment," one of "the woes of sensitive English artists" like E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, and W.H. Auden (Brogan 308).

² Some of the language of this passage closely echoes one from page 57 during Isherwood's years at Cambridge, but it is from his account of a beach vacation many years later; his feelings have not much changed.

Brogan expands Isherwood's experience of and feelings towards the Poshocracy into a commentary on British society during the 1920s. Isherwood is critiquing the British class system, but class is not the only reason for his feelings of alienation. Christopher's exclusion certainly does not come from being of a "different" social class from those he is observing since he was born into the upper middle class and has all of its attendant privileges. Nor can Christopher's feelings of exclusion be entirely attributed to his status as an artist or poet or writer; Isherwood himself admits in his descriptions of Edward Upward's poetic life and of his own life and friends that writers like himself were hardly marginalized amongst Englishmen of his class and education. When presented with the opportunity, Christopher balks at joining the working class, where he does not belong, and he often feels disdain for the upper classes, to which he belongs by birth; he naively casts about for the amorphous state of "being an artist," which he imagines to be "the neurotic alternative to being an ordinary human man," but he fails to attain it (*Lions* 124). Christopher's feelings of exclusion must be primarily attributed to his sexuality. It is this difference that leaves him feeling "classless" and excluded from all the social circles he observes. What is Isherwood describing in the above paragraph but the performance of the traditional gender roles assigned to men of his class? Christopher cannot mesh with the "society" he is socially and economically related to, nor with any other class, not because he is an artist but because he is homosexual. Whether or not he is aware of it, Brogan hints at this primary aspect of Isherwood's outsider status on his list of the "best Englishmen" suffering "the unbearableness of English life": four of the six whom he lists

certainly had sexual relationships with men; two were decidedly homosexual (Brogan 308).

Christopher Isherwood was not the only Englishman experiencing social and sexual turmoil between the world wars. The interwar years during which “the Auden generation” came of age were frustrating times for those, commonly called “sexual perverts” whether they were from privileged backgrounds or from the working classes, who suffered from what was often referred to as “sexual inversion” (*Coming Out* 57) (*Queer London* 221). After the crushing of “millenarian hopes” for radical sex reforms during the 1890s due to the downfall of Oscar Wilde (*Making Sexual* 26), the United Kingdom saw the possibility of sexual reform for a brief period of time after the first World War, as other countries effectively legalized homosexuality. Bolshevik Russia, for example, removed penal restrictions on homosexual activity in 1918, nearly fifty years before Britain decriminalized homosexual activity in private between adults in 1967 (*Coming Out* 147). Citizens of the United Kingdom interested in Leftist social and political philosophies, like Edward Upward, advocated for sexual reform in their own country, but to little effect. Men like Edward Carpenter aligned themselves with socialist politics because they saw socialism as the path to sex reform, basing their beliefs “on a long utopian tradition” that never came to fruition in the twentieth century (*Coming Out* 144). In Britain, more hope for sexual reform came in the form of Marxism, which also failed to affect any significant change:

Many of the British literary generation of the 1930s who flirted with Marxism—including W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood—were themselves homosexual, but their political significance was limited, and their Marxism broke under the strain of the 1930s. (*Coming Out* 147)

During the interwar period, homosexuality remained undefended by the more organized, influential political left, and sexual reform did not gain significant momentum again until well after the Second World War, when the Gay Liberation Front began to form during the 1960s (*Coming Out* 148). It was too long of a wait for men like Isherwood, who simply left the country. In 2001 Jeffrey Weeks called the history of reform in the twentieth century an “unfinished revolution” (*Making Sexual History* 163): first came the interruptions of the world wars, then the slow movement of reform measures in the 1950s and 1960s, and then great leaps forward during the 1970s were followed by the devastating effects of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Twentieth-century Britain repeatedly took two steps forward and one step back when it came to sexual freedom.

Weeks notes that, during Isherwood’s formative years between the wars, homosexuality was seen primarily as “a bourgeois deviation and decadence” (*Coming Out* 148). Upper-middle-class homosexual men had always lived different lives from those of other social classes: men like Oscar Wilde and E.M. Forster were able to live “out” personal lives while keeping their sexual “difference” hidden from a more critical wider audience outside of their circles of close friends. E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*, for example, was published posthumously, leaving his reputation relatively protected during his lifetime. *Maurice* makes a relevant point about class and homosexuality: one

character chooses an active upper-class social life in the House of Lords over his true sexuality; another gives up his class privilege in order to live freely with another man. As can be seen from the lives of Edward Carpenter and Oscar Wilde, and from a large quantity of gay literature including E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, homosexuality crosses class boundaries in several ways: not only do homosexuals come from every walk of life, but homosexual friendships and relationships have a long history of crossing otherwise rigid class boundaries (*Coming Out* 40). The desirable working-class youth, unrestrained by the duty to lead a prominent public life, is a common sexual trope in gay literature between the 1880s and 1930s (and one that continues to appear today), representing freedom for constrained upper-middle-class men who feel that they have much to lose if discovered engaging in homosexual activity. A good literary example is again Forster's *Maurice*: Clive Durham rejects his own sexuality because he knows that his valuable social and professional life will never recover if he is discovered; Maurice must give up his social status in order to openly be with the working-class Alec.

Yet the working classes figure little in *Lions and Shadows* and *The Mortmere Stories*. Isherwood's experience of homosexuality in England³ was confined to the upper middle classes where his family background placed him, and this social position afforded a greater degree of freedom than Isherwood might have had if he had been worse off socially or financially. For instance, he recounts his years at Cambridge in *Lions and Shadows*, the setting of Forster's *Maurice* and Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a university where

³ The same cannot be said for Isherwood's experiences in Berlin, where he had working-class lovers, but much has been written about this aspect of *The Berlin Stories* already.

homosexual activity and relationships among undergraduates were largely ignored, and at times even celebrated. *Lions and Shadows* does not reveal whether Isherwood explored his sexuality at the school, but Cambridge's long history of relatively open queerness suggests that Christopher needn't have feared exposure concerning relationships with other men during his years there (Grant 36). Graeme Grant writes of a "cult of homoeroticism" thriving around Isherwood's time at Cambridge, before the Second World War forced Cambridge homosexuals into secrecy (or at least privacy) due to associations with "Communism, security risks, blackmail, and treason" (Grant 37). But Isherwood's sexual repression had many causes, one of which may have been a fear of being harshly judged by his peers at the university; despite Cambridge's history of tolerance and acceptance, Isherwood describes a fairly traditional young male culture, in which Christopher and other students feel the need to prove their masculinity, a feat which often involves engaging in heterosexual trysts and publicly pursuing women. Like the public school culture discussed above, Cambridge embodied a somewhat contradictory construction of masculinity, accepting homosocial and even homoerotic bonding in an all-male social environment, while simultaneously encouraging the sort of traditionally masculine, heterosexual displays that Alan Chalmers sometimes engages in.

Like Cambridge, London, where Isherwood spent time after university, has a particular history with homosexuality. London was, most strikingly, the place where homosexual men were arrested for their supposed crimes; as Matt Houlbrook writes in *Queer London*, "it was in London's public spaces and through the figure of the policeman that queer men most often encountered the law" (Houlbrook 21). London was where male

prostitutes could be found, where anonymous hotel rooms could be rented, where the baths were located, where gay clubs could be found, where relative anonymity was at least potentially possible, and where the law was on the lookout for sex crimes as vague and manipulable as “persistently importuning for an immoral purpose” (Houlbrook 19). As Quentin Crisp makes clear in his 1968 autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant*, a man suspected of being homosexual could quite easily be arrested in the capitol without actually doing anything illegal and certainly without harming or even “importuning” another individual. The law could actually follow a man “into the intimate, prosaic, and ubiquitous spaces of everyday urban life” despite the provisions made for consenting adults in private spaces (Houlbrook 20). Islington, the neighborhood where Isherwood resided in London once he lived alone, was a primarily working-class area where, despite “hostile catcalls and disdainful gossip” directed toward obvious homosexuals, Matt Houlbrook guesses that “sexual mores and practices were more ambiguous” than these descriptions might at first suggest (*Queer London* 167). Based on a series of interviews, Houlbrook builds a picture of the neighborhood, and of much of London, that includes significant homosexual activity and the assertion that having sex with men did not make a man “anything other than a ‘normal’ man,” the social conviction that homosexual sex was not the aberrant mental disorder or moral crime that it was characterized as by the medical and legal establishments (Houlbrook 167). It is in this atmosphere of danger and possibility, license and censure, that Isherwood first admits to feeling “a slight but delicious nausea of sexual desire” in *Lions and Shadows*, wound inextricably into his experience of the London landscape (*Lions* 95).

Chapter 2

Our Neurotic Generation: The Missed Test of the Great War

Isherwood the artist was an austere ascetic, cut off from the outside world, in voluntary exile, a recluse. Even his best friends did not altogether understand. He stood apart from and above ‘The Test’—because the Test was something for the common herd, it applied only to the world of everyday life. (*Lions* 98)

As Hugh Brogan notes in his essay about Isherwood’s autobiographical novel, *Lions and Shadows* is a work fraught with middle-class neuroses. The word “neurotic” appears multiple times in Isherwood’s retrospective self-descriptions, an acknowledgement—sometimes purely comic but often imbued with bitterness and disgust—of the intense self-obsession and often misplaced self-concern that Isherwood recounts. Most of the young Christopher’s neuroses have a sexual origin that the author fails to explicitly acknowledge. His concerns and obsessions range widely in form, but their origin lies in the fear of never being given and/or of never passing The Test of war that men of Isherwood’s generation had been just too young to experience between 1914 and 1918. In Christopher’s particular case, this fear is inflamed by the gendered and sexual aspects of The Test, which seems to have been formulated with traditionally masculine, heterosexual young men in mind.

Lions and Shadows comes not only out of Christopher Isherwood’s individual experience in the interwar years, but out of the collective experience of his generation of

well-educated middle- and upper-class young men. In the author's own typically sardonic words, his experience comprises his own "modest exhibit in the vast freak museum of [his] neurotic generation" (*Lions* 217). In the first half of *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood describes an early novel, also originally called *Lions and Shadows*, that he attempted to write at Cambridge. This early work is a typical coming-of-age story directly connected to the first world war. Isherwood notes that *bildungsromans* of his own gender, class, and age were "written in equally large numbers prior to 1914, but with this difference: we young writers in the middle 'twenties were all suffering, more or less subconsciously, from a feeling of shame that we hadn't been old enough to take part in the European war" (*Lions* 74). Isherwood calls this type of novel "less a work of art than a symptom—of a certain stage of pubic development in a member of a certain class, living in a certain country, and subjected to a certain system of education" (*Lions* 74).

The "system of education" Isherwood refers to has much to do with his generation's reaction to the aftermath of the Great War. Michael Roper writes that "war constituted an important test of manliness for young men of the Edwardian middle class," while "the immediate successors of the war generation, far from rejecting romantic notions of war, lamented that they had been too young to submit themselves to its rigors" (Roper 344). Obviously, Christopher's reaction to the disappearance of *The Test* was not unusual, even taking into account the difference in his sexuality from that of the average young man Roper is considering. Men of Isherwood's generation were conditioned to expect and even to long for this test, just as much as those before them who actually experienced it: the public school system was explicitly geared towards producing young

men qualified for national military duty (Roper 347). “The culture of imperial manliness” was instilled in boys through “the playing of games, and by the removal of boys from domestic comforts” into the relatively Spartan, all-male atmosphere of the public school, usually a boarding school where students were away from these domestic comforts for many months at a time (Roper 347). Most young men were “explicitly trained in military routines through public school associations such as the Officer Training Corps” (Roper 348). Fussell notes Isherwood’s observances of the older students at his public school, when Christopher was barely an adolescent, boys “fully prepared for adversary proceedings,” but with “the accustomed outlet” of war now unavailable to them (Fussell 110). Brought up to expect a violent and demanding test of their manhood which could very well result in death, it is no surprise that anxiety, confusion, and disillusionment resulted for Isherwood’s generation when this test never came. Similarly, it is no surprise that Christopher’s sexuality made the thought of The Test especially prominent in his mind, gendered as the idea of war was in the public schools (Roper 345).

Paul Fussell deals extensively with the sexual aspects of The Test in the chapter “Soldier Boys” in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. This conception of war, and therefore The Test of war, as sexual and gendered is crucial to understanding Christopher’s anxieties in *Lions and Shadows*. Fussell writes of war and sex being linked both abstractly, as in the overlapping “language of military attack” and the language of “sexual importunity,” and more literally in that “the atmosphere of emergency and the proximity of violence will always promote a relaxing of inhibition ending in a special hedonism and lasciviousness. And of course a deeper affection as well” (Fussell 270).

This blending of love and violence mirrors the blending of traditional masculinity with homosociality and even homoeroticism seen in public school, at the university, and in military life. Christopher's anxieties surrounding The Test are often sexual, as his homosexuality does not fit with the idea of The Test of war: homosexual activity among soldiers was not unusual, according to Fussell, but it was thought of as something exclusive to the war experience. And not to be brought back from the front. Fussell refers to the type of homosexuality seen between soldiers as "school homosexuality," a enjoyment of other men to be recovered from or grown out of (Fussell 274). Most tellingly, Fussell writes of the front line experience being

replete with what we can call the homoerotic. I use that term to imply a sublimated (i.e., 'chaste') form of temporary homosexuality. Of the active, unsublimated kind there was very little at the front. What we find, rather, especially in the attitude of young officers to their men, is something more like the 'idealistic,' passionate but non-physical 'crushes' which most of the officers had experienced at public school." (Fussell 272)

This formulation of "temporary homosexuality" leaves no place in The Test of war for men like Christopher, of "the active, unsublimated" persuasion of homosexuality. For however much Isherwood excludes homosexuality from *Lions and Shadows*, there can be no doubt that his sexuality was already a part of his consciousness as a young man, or at the very least when he wrote *Lions and Shadows* at the age of thirty-four.

The original version of *Lions and Shadows* was an incarnation of the 1938 autobiographical novel, but without the sharp perspective of a decade's distance from

chronicled events. This early work was a veiled version of the story of The Test that Isherwood relates with the clarity, insight, and understanding of retrospective self-analysis in the published version of *Lions and Shadows*. But while Isherwood casts more light upon his younger self with each return to the subject, of which there are many in *Lions and Shadows*, his obsession with The Test is never fully resolved over the course of the book. *Lions and Shadows* is, in part, an incomplete excavation of The Test and the emotions associated with it, which during Isherwood's young manhood were "buried deep within" his psyche, feelings and thoughts which made him feel "excited and obscurely ashamed" (*Lions* 75). Isherwood's emotional exploration is incomplete because, while he accurately traces his anxieties and neuroses back to the missed Test of the Great War, he makes no explicit connection between his fear of and inability to move beyond The Test and his failure to embody traditional heterosexual masculinity. In the public school context, The Test is couched in specifically gendered terms; the "relationship between militarism and masculinity" is a close one, and by passing The Test of war, one proves oneself of abstract concepts like courage and honor, but more concretely one proves that one is *a man* (Roper 344). The question of masculinity causes the homosexual Christopher just as much subconscious anxiety, if not more, than the idea of The Test itself.

The initial step in this emotional archaeological dig into The Test comes as Isherwood relates the first year at Cambridge.

This feeling of guilty excitement, now I come to think about it, can also be explained . . . Like most of my generation, I was obsessed by a complex of

terrors and longings connected with the idea “War.” “War,” in this purely neurotic sense, meant The Test. The test of your courage, of your maturity, of your sexual prowess: “Are you really a Man?” Subconsciously, I believe, I longed to be subjected to this test; but I also dreaded failure. I dreaded failure so much—indeed, I was so certain that I *should* fail—that, consciously, I denied my longing to be tested altogether. I denied my all-consuming morbid interest in the idea of “war.” I pretended indifference. The War, I said, was obscene, not even thrilling, a nuisance, a bore. (*Lions* 76)

Isherwood explores The Test, at first, through another youthful fiction written during the 1920s, the story of a British boy named Leonard Merrows, whose great source of guilt and anxiety is not missing out on war, but missing out on public school; he is kept at home instead due to a bout of rheumatic fever (*Lions* 76). The plot of Isherwood’s earliest attempt at a novel makes explicit the close relationships between war, The Test, masculinity, and public school by blatantly conflating the public school experience with the war experience. In retrospect Isherwood makes this connection between Christopher’s feelings about the war and Leonard’s feelings about school, recognizing in his characteristic self-critical way that “public-school life wasn’t, in any heroic sense, a ‘test’ . . . certainly not of your fundamental ‘Manhood’ or the reverse” (*Lions* 77). The public school experience, in other words, cannot be counted as the passing of The Test.

It is on this idea of “manhood” that it is important to focus. Just as Hugh Brogan does in his essay on *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood himself ignores, elides, or misses the significance of his sexuality in his retrospection. Similarly, while he thoroughly explores

the sexual aspects of combat and separately discusses “the subliminal persistence of ‘the war’” in Isherwood’s subconscious and throughout much of *Lions and Shadows*, Fussell does not address the sexual facets of Isherwood’s interwar anxieties. In my exploration of *The Test*, I highlight the import of Isherwood’s apparently latent homosexuality, the unspoken key to the author’s autobiographical novel. *The Test* is, as Isherwood acknowledges, bound inextricably with gender and with “sexual prowess”; what Isherwood does not explore is the fact that this gender was decidedly and performatively masculine, and that this sexual prowess was decidedly heterosexual, which renders Christopher an impossible candidate for taking *The Test*, much less passing it.

Christopher’s first attempt at creating his own version of *The Test* highlights another important theme of *Lions and Shadows*: Christopher’s desire to transform abstract concepts or, in this case mental “complexes,” into objects or landscapes than can be bested or controlled. This transferral of uncontrollable, inexplicable abstracts into more easily managed objects or, as we will see with *The Mortmere Stories* in the following chapter, completely manipulable fictions, allows the young Christopher to exert a semblance of control over his emotions, his obsessions, and even his sexuality.

Soon after introducing the idea of *The Test*, Isherwood recounts the purchase of a motorbike which he acquires particularly because he is afraid of riding it. Because the motorbike arouses feelings of fear, apprehension, and a cathartic anxiety, it can serve as a stand-in for *The Test*. In Isherwood’s words, “‘The Test’ had now transformed itself into a visible metal contraption of wheels, valves, cogs, chains, and tubes, smartly painted black. There was no avoiding it anymore” (*Lions* 83). Isherwood phrases his description

as if The Test is out of his control, but he recognizes the familiar mixtures of divergent emotions that he is purposefully eliciting in himself: the “guilty excitement” of The Test can be conjured up at will with rides on the motorbike that Christopher “loathed and enjoyed,” and when the motorbike is finally sold it is because he has “ceased to get a neurotic pleasure out of being afraid of it” (*Lions* 96).

Highlighting the neuroses that characterized his obsession with The Test of the motorbike, Isherwood describes creating rules for himself that must be followed as he rides: “I wasn’t allowed to reduce speed until I had counted up to a hundred, at least” (*Lions* 84). Like all iterations of The Test, the motorbike is something to be pseudo-involuntarily endured, a source only of guilty or tainted pleasure. The feelings it elicits are not entirely personal, either: the motorbike fills Christopher with social anxiety and makes him feel “dreadfully silly” in front of Chalmers and in front of the Poshocracy, whom he imagines commenting, “Isherwood becomes a hearty—here was a quaint new pose” (*Lions* 83). This is a tacit nod to the sexual connotations of The Test: while Isherwood does not mention homosexuality in this context, he acknowledges that a highly physical, traditionally masculine activity like motorbike-riding does not mesh with the way Christopher is perceived socially at Cambridge. His peers’ perception of him, in this instance, is more true to Christopher’s nature than the thrill-seeking mold into which he briefly tries to cram himself. It is clear that in Christopher’s case, The Test is entirely self-imposed. This passage, particularly Isherwood’s use of the word “pose,” also highlights the performative aspects of *Lions and Shadows* that necessitate some distinction between author and protagonist. In his retrospective self-analysis, Isherwood

the narrator is confessing that his younger self, represented by the protagonist Christopher in the autobiographical novel, engages in the same type of self-conscious performance that Isherwood is engaged in as he presents his younger self to the reader. The narrative layers through which we read the character of Christopher mirror the layers of performance and perception that Christopher engages in throughout *Lions and Shadows*.

Tellingly, the saga of the motorbike comes to an end not when Christopher has a near crash outside of Cambridge, but when the motorbike plays a crucial part in an emasculating, embarrassingly gender-swapping incident in London during a vacation from the university. Christopher is socially and sexually humiliated when, as he has always feared, he has a crash on the motorbike. He is on a

trip to the New Forest, with two motor-cycling school friends and their girl cousins. One of the girls had insisted on riding pillion behind me along a bumpy forest track; we had crashed, and she, not I, had been hurt. Everybody was very nice about the accident, but I noticed, or imagined, contemptuously pitying glances; and, two days later, received, at my own request, an urgent telegram from London, recalling me home. (*Lions* 96)

Isherwood notes the “humiliation” of the incident, but there is more going on in the New Forest than simple embarrassment. To successfully pass The Test, as an analogue to war, Christopher would have had to fulfill the masculine gender role by being injured in the motorbike crash, preferably in the act of protecting his female companion; his failure is the failure of his masculinity and by extension of his sexuality, and he is unable to

continue facing his presumably heterosexual friends and their presumably heterosexual cousins after some level of effeminacy or unmanly cowardice has been revealed.

The closest Christopher gets to the war in *Lions and Shadows* is in his encounters, while on vacation, with a young man named Lester, a homeless veteran of the Great War who walks in the countryside and drinks at the pub with Christopher for a few weeks (*Lions* 253). Christopher is, of course, rapt at Lester's descriptions of training and combat, which finally make real to him that which he has been romanticizing for years. "He never suspected, I think," Isherwood writes, "how violently his quietly told horribly matter-of-fact anecdotes affected me . . . Lester alone had the knack of making all those remote obscenities and horrors seem real" (*Lions* 256). Now, when he is finally presented with the opportunity of understanding The Test in full, Christopher tries to put himself in Lester's place. He wonders how he would behave in various combat situations,

but here, as ever, the censorship, in blind panic, intervened, blacking out the image. No, no, I told myself, terrified; this could never happen to any of my friends. It was physically impossible. It wouldn't be allowed. Nevertheless, Lester had shaken my faith in the invulnerability of my generation; for, in his eyes, we were not invulnerable; what had happened to him could easily happen to us (*Lions* 256).

Faced with the reality of The Test, Christopher feels a horror that the motorbike could never elicit: not just the fear of embarrassment, or effeminacy, or cowardice, but the fear of his entire world bursting "like the tiniest soap bubble . . . just as Lester's world had exploded, thirteen years ago," when finally it is "our turn—Chalmer's, Weston's,

Philip's, and mine" (*Lions* 256). Christopher must distance Lester's world of the war from his own "little world which seemed too precious," and he does so by thinking of Lester "as a ghost—the ghost of the War" (*Lions* 257). Whereas the motorbike was the abstract of The Test made concrete, Lester is concrete evidence of the War which must be abstracted. Lester does not belong to Christopher's world like Chalmers, Weston, and Philip do; instead he "[belongs] for ever, like an unhappy Peter Pan, to the nightmare Never-Never-Land of the War" (*Lions* 256). Isherwood's implication, made explicit in his description of Lester's mental and physical ailments, is that this human remnant of the War should be dead.

He had no business to be here, alive, in post-war England. His place was elsewhere, was with the dead . . . [the doctors] couldn't even suggest one good reason why he shouldn't commit suicide immediately. (*Lions* 257)

This selfish desire to have the memory of the War obliterated from sight, sound, and consciousness betrays just how profoundly the War has effected Christopher's life and especially his self-perception. The possibility of another war, and the inevitable failure of The Test that would result, threatens the "little world" that Isherwood and his friends inhabit.

Without veering too far from the scope of this project, I must note that Isherwood's father was killed in the Great War in 1915, when Isherwood was eleven years old. Isherwood's family is notably absent from *Lions and Shadows*, as I discuss in my introduction, but the significance of his father's death to Isherwood's attitude toward the Great War and toward the veteran Lester cannot be ignored. There is bitterness in

Isherwood's vehement belief that Lester "had no business to be here, alive, in post-war England," that "his place was elsewhere, was with the dead" (*Lions* 257). One reading might suggest that this is implicit praise of Isherwood's father: he has fulfilled the heroic masculine role in war by dying in battle, whilst men like Lester return to haunt the living who should be allowed to move beyond the spectre of the war. Yet Isherwood is unable to move past the spectre of war even without his father's physical presence. He is haunted by the Great War and therefore by the spectre of its victims whether they are alive or not. Additionally, Frank Isherwood's heroic death in the Great War represents the successful passing of The Test that Frank's son is so sure he can never successfully complete. Frank Isherwood might represent that ideal of military heterosexual masculinity that Christopher feels compelled to measure himself against, and of which he is doomed to always fall short.

However, it is Christopher's experience with Lester that prompts him to invent his next version of The Test, one that will partially exorcise the spectre of the War—if not the sexual issues surrounding The Test—from his consciousness. After one of his long vacations from Cambridge, Christopher abandons the motorbike in favor of a new Test, "the self-imposed Test of his integrity as a writer" (*Lions* 97). In this version of The Test, he is able to avoid the issues of masculinity and sexuality by recreating himself as "Isherwood the Artist", "an austere ascetic, cut off from the outside world", and therefore unable "to risk making a fool of [himself] socially, in public" (*Lions* 98). By ostentatiously refraining from sex, Christopher can eliminate the possibility of sexual or gendered embarrassment. This version of The Test, conveniently free of sexual aspects

and suited to his skills and personality, reappears throughout *Lions and Shadows* until Christopher is inspired to write *The War Memorial*, a novel which was “to give expression, at last, to [his] own ‘War’ complex, and to all the reactions which had followed [his] meeting with Lester at the Bay” (*Lions* 296). *The Memorial*, Isherwood writes, is a novel about the war—“not the War itself but the effect of the idea of ‘War’ on [his] generation,” the fears that Lester’s recounting of the War uncovered (*Lions* 296). *The Memorial* is accepted for publication at the very end of *Lions and Shadows*, but not before Christopher has spent many years receiving rejections and digging deeper into his obsession with passing some sort of test to stand in for the combat experience of which he is so terrified.

In this way, “the self-imposed Test of his integrity as a writer” is successful in exorcising the spectre of war from Christopher’s subconscious: The Test is passed, and the feelings surrounding it are expressed, not just for Christopher but for his entire generation. *The Memorial*, however, like *Lions and Shadows*, does not deal with the sexual components of The Test that are particular to Isherwood himself. The author’s excavation of The Test’s subconscious aspects remains incomplete. Isherwood tacitly acknowledges the failure of his formulations of The Test in the last few pages of *Lions and Shadows*, when he describes the emptiness of his conception of “Isherwood the Artist”: “I knew what was inside it now—just plain, cold, uninteresting funk. Funk of getting too deeply involved with other people, sex-funk, funk of the future” (*Lions* 304). This is Isherwood’s first acknowledgement of the problem of sexuality in *Lions and Shadows*, an admission that the silent struggle with masculinity and manliness via The

Test has not been resolved. This is the point at which Christopher resolves to make an escape, not to the coast, or to London, or to Cambridge, or even to Mortmere, but to Berlin, where he will freely experience and write about his sexuality for the first time.

Chapter 3

A Metaphysical University City: *The Mortmere Stories*

This idea of ‘The Other Town’ appealed to us greatly; for it offered a way of escape from Cambridge altogether. It was much more exciting than our attempts to dramatize the prosaic figures of the dons. Here was a world which the dons didn’t even dream existed, although, as we said, it was right in their very midst. (*Lions* 68)

The Test could not always be converted into something tangible like a motorbike, and Christopher Isherwood could not always express his feelings about it as cogently as he does in *Lions and Shadows*. As Christopher keeps his sexuality suppressed in public and invents iterations of The Test to skirt fraught issues of masculinity, his social and sexual anxieties evolve into the fictional landscape of Mortmere. Mortmere, the language surrounding it, and the idea of The Test are all inextricably linked in Christopher’s imagination: the words and phrases that Christopher and Chalmers invent to describe Mortmere act as “a private key to a certain group of responses, all related to the idea of ‘The Test’” (*Lions* 207). Mortmere becomes a landscape in which hidden, socially unacceptable desires, both sexual and otherwise, can run rampant without consequence. As Christopher’s anxieties and neuroses fluctuate, Mortmere and its associated attributes seep into the real-life landscapes of Cambridge and London, more Mortmere-language is generated, and a third party, a stand-in for W.H. Auden named Weston, is introduced to Mortmere and changes it forever. The language Isherwood uses to describe his generation

is markedly similar to that he uses to describe the inhabitants of Mortmere: he and his friends are exhibits in “the vast freak museum of [their] neurotic generation” (*Lions* 217), while the fictional world is inhabited by “the entire museum of Mortmere freaks and oddities” (*Lions* 165). This museum of freaks and oddities is described both in the Mortmere stories themselves and in the “Introductory Dialogue” between Isherwood and Upward that accompanies the stories in their published version:

Moxon never went out until after dark. He kept a cat in a birdcage and a canary loose in his room. The pet serpent understood all languages and was sometimes wheeled about in a perambulator disguised as a baby.

Moxon was to some extent a successor to our Watcher in Spanish.

And an embodiment of our conception of the appearance and habits of Mr T.S.

Eliot. . . . Gunball was our earliest Mortmere character. His immediate

companions were the Reverend Welken, Miss Belmare the artist, Henry Belmare

her brother, Dr Mears and Sergeant Claptree, proprietor of the Skull and Trumpet

Inn. (*Mortmere* 39)

Gunball, central to many of the Mortmere stories, is the oblivious blunderer around whom Mortmere’s weirdness swirls. Isherwood describes Gunball’s world as

the world of delirium tremens: he saw wonders and horrors all about him, his everyday life was lived amidst two-headed monsters, ghouls, downpours of human blood, and eclipses of the sun and everything he saw he accepted with the most absolute and placid calm. His favourite comment, in telling one of his own preposterous stories, was: ‘Of course, it didn’t surprise me in the least.’

(*Lions* 103)

Gunball's frank acceptance of the bizarre or impossible, and his remarkable ability to emerge from Mortmere's ordeals physically and emotionally unscathed, is often what lends the stories their central comic quality despite their sinister elements. Yet Mortmere was generated primarily by Christopher and Chalmer's shared affinity for certain art, literature, and language, not by their desire to produce *The Mortmere Stories* as we see them published.

Language is vitally important to Christopher's developing sense of self in *Lions and Shadows*. It is no surprise that Christopher's most important youthful friendship—the relationship between Christopher and Chalmers which is representative of Isherwood's lifelong friendship with Edward Uoward—is focused on a shared private language and the ability to “queer” language by making old words and phrases mean new things. The friendship is “semi-telepathic”: Christopher and Chalmers can communicate “the slightest innuendo or the subtlest shade of meaning” by a single word or gesture (*Lions* 65). Mortmere grows out of this intimate connection as the two young men use their imagined alternative world to find light humor and hidden, vaguely sinister meaning in their immediate surroundings and in fictions like Mortmere itself. Isherwood establishes the level of intuition between Christopher and Chalmers by describing how easily they understand one another's jokes, which highlights the importance of language to their friendship. Isherwood writes that “the mere tones of Chalmers' voice would start [Christopher] giggling in anticipation, and [Christopher] had only to pronounce some quite ordinary word with special emphasis in order to send [Chalmers] into fits” (*Lions*

65). The two young men converse throughout *Lions and Shadows* in “a rigmarole of private slang, deliberate misquotations, bad puns, bits of parody and preparatory school smut” that evolves into the language of Mortmere—the language that they come to call “rats-ness” (*Lions* 65). In addition to their shared affinity for inventive language and their similar senses of humor, Christopher and Chalmer’s friendship is based partially on a shared passion for the art and literature that the two believe is pertinent to their feelings of social discomfort and sexual dissatisfaction at Cambridge. The art and literature that both boys appreciate is sought out for its adherence to their developing aesthetic, and in turn influences this aesthetic as it evolves into Mortmere. The two bond over imaginative, slightly twisted recreations of “*Alice in Wonderland*, Beatrix Potter and Grimm, and on the imagery of Sir Thomas Browne, Poe and the ballads” (*Lions* 71). They incorporate the engravings of Dürer and later the work of their “favourite writers, particularly of Wilfred Owen, Katherine Mansfield, and Emily Bronte” (*Lions* 72) into a shared romantic-sinister aesthetic that eventually grows into the private landscape and mythology of Mortmere.

The language invented by Christopher and Chalmers has its origins in the two young men’s social angst, for which Mortmere eventually becomes an effective outlet: as soon as Christopher joins Chalmers at Cambridge, the two divide the University into “two sides” socially, with themselves on one and the Poshocracy and the dons on the other (*Lions* 66). At first, Cambridge is the playground of the “other side,” a landscape controlled by agents of the dons and the Poshocracy, in which Christopher and Chalmers are unwelcome interlopers, distinguished from the other Cambridge students by their

ability to discern this usually invisible divide. But soon their conception of the University as socially split suggests the idea of its being split in other senses as well. As Chalmers and Christopher become absorbed in their own “burlesque cult of the Sinister,” they become “psychic tourists, setting out to discover a metaphysical University City” (*Lions* 67). And discover it they do, when Chalmers, in a nighttime wander through lamp-lit Cambridge, glances at a locked door and says, “‘It’s the doorway into the Other Town’” (*Lions* 68). This is the moment of Mortmere’s birth, although the metaphysical village hasn’t yet been named. The invention—or “discovery” as Isherwood fashions it—of the Other Town instantly provides Christopher and Chalmers with the outlet they need for exorcising their dislike for the Poshocracy and for releasing their sexual tension—without being detected by anyone outside the bond of their friendship. Instead of being unwelcome intruders in the world of the dons and the Poshocracy, they are tourists in a world that the dons and the Poshocracy cannot experience. Instead of being two excluded from the world of Cambridge, they are distinguished by their ability to glimpse the romantic-sinister world of the Other Town, which slowly and steadily grows more real to Isherwood than Cambridge itself. Of course, the sense of exclusion that Christopher and Chalmers share is, at least in part, a fiction like Mortmere. As I discuss in Chapter 1, both Christopher and Chalmers have been accepted by the Poshocracy, but they prefer each others’ company to all others. In reality, Christopher and Chalmers are both sought out for their company and Christopher’s “exclusion” is partially performed, as Isherwood acknowledges in his retrospective narrative. Christopher’s difference from the

Poshocracy, whether visible or not, makes him feel far more isolated than he ever actually is at Cambridge.

“The Other Town” is directly generated by Christopher and Chalmer’s private language; it begins as “an extremely vague, mystical conception, which emanates from a few romantic-sinister phrases” (*Lions* 68). This “Other Town” does not begin to morph into Mortmere until the key word “rats” is coined by Upward:

Soon we began to describe as ‘rats’ any object, animal, scene, place or phrase which seemed connected, however obscurely, with our general conception of the ‘Rats’ Hostel.’ ‘Rats’ were, of course, the entire menagerie of Durer. . . .

Graveyards were ‘rats,’ and very old gnarled trees, and cave mouths overhung with ivy, and certain Latin phrases, like ‘Rursus ad astro feror.’ In fact, we used the new word more and more loosely and indiscriminately, until it came to mean, simply, ‘romantic’ or ‘quaint.’ (*Lions* 70)

Since the Other Town can be glimpsed most easily at night, Christopher and Chalmers “[wander] the cold foggy streets, away from the lights and the shops, down back alleys, to the water’s edge,” where Chalmers, looking at a sign reading “Garret Hostel Bridge,” exclaims, “‘The Rats’ Hostel!’” (*Lions* 69). Like most of the two friends’ in-jokes and imaginative joint creations, the Other Town has a linguistic key, as they now discover: “At last, by pure accident, we had stumbled upon the key-words which expressed the inmost nature of the Other Town During the days that followed, ‘The Rats’ Hostel’ became gradually defined in our minds as a name for a certain atmosphere, a genre” (*Lions* 70). This evolution of language continues out of necessity: Isherwood and Upward

must invent language with which to describe the “atmosphere” and “genre” in which they operate creatively and in which they escape from the stifling atmosphere of Cambridge. Before long, the meaning of “rats” has evolved into the linguistic key that will soon open the doors to Mortmere, and is used “more and more loosely and indiscriminately until it came to mean, simply, ‘romantic,’ or ‘quaint’ (*Lions* 70).

This last line is a retrospective simplification on Isherwood’s part. Christopher and Edward invent their personal use of the word “rats” to describe “a certain atmosphere, a genre” for which there is no other descriptive word. The single words “romantic” and “quaint” do not convey the same meaning as the somewhat awkward compound “romantic-sinister,” which the word “rats” is developed to replace. Isherwood and Upward are, essentially, queering language so that it can be used to describe a queer genre or atmosphere.

Mortmere itself is not invented until Christopher returns to Cambridge after his first long vacation, which has been fraught with the trauma of *The Test* of the motorbike and the struggle to reinvent himself as Isherwood *The Artist*. Both Chalmers and Christopher have had frustrating summers: while Christopher has struggled with *The Test* and his identity, and with the unspoken issue of his still unexplored sexuality, Chalmers has grown increasingly “sexually unsatisfied and lonely” (*Lions* 120). Isherwood writes that Chalmers “wanted a woman with whom he could fall in love and go to bed—not any more of these shopgirl teasers and amateur punt-cuddling whores” (*Lions* 120). While Isherwood shies away from exploring Christopher’s sexuality, which he can only envision as deviant, Chalmer’s heterosexual desires and the frustrations that arise from

them are freely discussed. This attitude towards Christopher's sexuality indicates Isherwood's reticence to discuss his own homosexuality at this point in his life. Interestingly, Isherwood's contributions to *The Mortmere Stories*, which were not published until 1994, are more sexual in nature than Upward's. One of Isherwood's stories, an unfinished fragment of only three pages titled "Christmas in the Country" narrated by his protagonist Starn, contains two incidents designed both to amuse and shock the reader:

But [the Reverend] Welken was no longer at my side. And now I watched him as he escorted Miss Belmare into the refreshment-room. For a moment, her voice was audible above the sounds of the dance.

'I hope I'm not old-fashioned,' she was saying, 'but I've no sort of use for these bloody lesbians. I believe in girls being able to give a man a bloody good clean straight fuck, and no nonsense. I hope you're with me there, even if you do wear collars fit for a eunuch.'

Welken, smiling courteously, mumbled assent. (*Mortmere* 95)

A few paragraphs later, Starn listens to an acquaintance reminisce about his school days:

'Go and find the man who used to be our Captain of Cricket at School. He wouldn't let my arse alone during the trigonometry hours. . . .'

'Is it possible,' I asked, forgetting our peril in the interest of pursuing this anecdote, 'that, as a schoolboy, you were good-looking?'

'Most certainly I was, said Corner, nodding vigorously and seeming flattered at my curiosity. 'If you'll come to my house I can show you some snapshots. I'll tell

you what the Captain of Cricket said when he left. He said: Corner, your bottom is just a big bit of all right. Queer, isn't it?' His face, resembling wet mortar, seemed about to brighten. he regarded me with the mild bored eyes of an onanist. (*Mortmere* 96)

While Upward's frustrations are heterosexual and therefore relatively socially acceptably, Isherwood's are homosexual, and so must be confined more strictly than his friend's to the imaginary world of Mortmere, which renders the Isherwood *Mortmere Stories*, as we will see, inherently queer. Another difference between the two authors is their narrative style; while Isherwood exhibits "lucid control as a storyteller" and delivers his stories with brilliant sarcasm and the most casual-seeming hints, Upward "is persistently more experimental," which results in less humorous and perhaps less compelling stories (Bucknell 14). This difference in style carries through into the friends' creative adult lives: Isherwood produces the relentlessly self-mocking *Lions and Shadows*, while Upward writes his serious and sometimes self-hating autobiography *The Spiral Ascent* (1977)⁴. Because of its greater intricacy, Upward's writing in *The Mortmere Stories* contains phrases that seem to encapsulate Mortmere's atmosphere and the concept of "rats-ness" perfectly. His narrator, Hynd, writes about "the obscure and foreign suggestions which [he] liked to fancy that [his] surroundings were offering," and at one point tellingly describes part of the Mortmere landscape as having "the exotic languor of

⁴ Upward's autobiography was written in three parts, the last of which was published in 1977: *In the Thirties* (1962), *The Rotten Elements* (1969), and *No Home but the Struggle* (1977). This trilogy was published as a whole in 1977 with assistance from the Arts Council of Great Britain (Upward ii).

objects in a sexual dream” (*Mortmere* 89). Upward gives excellent examples of how *The Mortmere Stories* and their atmosphere connects to the language of “rats-ness”:

‘I suppose I wished,’ Hynd began again, ‘to make an appropriate answer, in my own language, to the obscure and foreign suggestions which I liked to fancy that my surroundings were offering me. I found a subtle pleasure in imagining that this Georgian country house was actually communicating to me—in the vague language of its lights and shadows, of its tall façade ochreous in the light of evening and its serpentine drive that littered whiteness among the more distant leaves of the park—the usual excitement which I happened to be feeling at the time. (*Mortmere* 86)

That summer while Christopher had been reinventing himself, Chalmers had been reinventing The Other Town, into an even greater escape from Cambridge than before: “‘The Other Town has nothing whatever to do with Cambridge. That’s where we made our fatal mistake—trying to pretend that Cambridge was somehow romantic. You see, Cambridge isn’t romantic in the least: it’s loathsomely real and sordid. . . . The Other Town is miles and miles away from Cambridge’” (*Lions* 101). The removal of the Other Town from the shadow of Cambridge allows Isherwood and Upward freedom in their subject matter: *The Mortmere Stories* end up commenting on university life and on English village life, the hypocrisy of religion, the nightmare of war, and on the more ridiculous aspects of the class system that the students feel so keenly at Cambridge. Once the Other Town has been located and named “Mortmere,” Christopher and Chalmers begin to construct an elaborate fiction around the village. They populate Mortmere with a

wily central villain, numerous sexual deviants, and alternate versions of themselves through which to tell the Mortmere tales. Mortmere is “a satirical portrait of English society as anatomized in their small, highly eccentric village where anarchy secretly reigned and the inhabitants were all a bit mad” (Bucknell 14).

The sexual proclivities of the denizens of Mortmere inevitably have a comic twist, which Isherwood brings out even in his offhanded descriptions of a few stories’ plots in *Lions and Shadows*. The tone he takes in treating the bizarre sex lives of Mortmere’s residents allows him to poke fun at humanity’s sexual foibles and at the hypocrisy of those who would condemn or look down upon them. A particularly comic and hypocritical Mortmere figure who appears repeatedly in a sexual context is “the Reverend Welken,” who has “been guilty of moral offences with a choirboy and later suffered severe pangs of conscience, persuading himself, at length, that, as a punishment for his crime, his dead wife was appearing to him in the form of a succubus” (*Lions* 102). In one story the Reverend spreads “a rumour that he [is] engaged in breeding angels in the belfry of Mortmere church” out of fear that other villages might see or hear his wife’s ghost. He takes his lie so far as to begin regularly performing the ritual of angel manufacture he has invented, “and the original offence, incorporated in this ritual, [becomes] a mechanical and even distasteful duty” (*Lions* 102). The coyness of this Mortmere episode is characteristic of Isherwood’s stories set in the village: there is almost always a deviant yet comic sexual and/or social situation, and while Isherwood is never explicit in his descriptions, what he is implying is always clear. For instance, the

Reverend appears again in Isherwood's Mortmere story "The World War," presumably having just indulged his carnal desires:

In [opening the gate] he contrived not to take his arm from the shoulder of the boy who accompanied him. The curate, a weak hairy-chested young man, wore a pair of khaki shorts and a panama hat. He smoked a half-crown composition briar. His laugh of convulsive geniality strained the muscles of his neck and made the jugular very prominent.

‘Well!’ he cried. ‘We’ve just finished our morning sunbath. And we’re as fit as two fiddles; aren’t we, eh, Raddy?’

The boy drew behind him, giggling. The poor lad was abashed by the presence of Ms Belmare; for his clothing did not extend beyond a pair of boots. I noticed that Charles stepped back several paces, and remembered that yesterday he had been asking if any help were needed with the Scout Troop. (*Mortmere* 113)

In another tale, Isherwood's narrator, Starn, finds himself in dire financial straits while away at school, and ingratiates himself amongst students far wealthier than he in order to get room and board at other colleges. Starn gives his audience heavy hints in "The Greatness of Andy Shanks," a short story about these university days:

I had taken care, therefore, to form, even before my arrival at Cambridge, a number of highly advantageous friendships with young gentlemen as appeared to me to be endowed with more wealth than wits and more generosity than good sense. Making myself secure in their esteem by my adroit ministrations to their vanity and their desires, I was able to claim their hospitality as my reward. Within

a month I was welcome at a hundred tables. I breakfasted in King's, lunched in Trinity, took tea at Pembroke and dined at St Sebastian's. My company was demanded with threats or entreaties and sometimes secured by violence. Indeed, it soon became possible for me to be absent from Slothouse by night as well as by day . . . (*Mortmere* 66)

The suggestive ellipsis is in Isherwood's original. The commentary here is, as in many of *The Mortmere Stories*, aimed at both class and sexuality.

Isherwood's intentional coyness, which he notes in the preface to the published version of *The Mortmere Stories*, emphasizes the personal nature of the Mortmere world to himself and Upward:

Most of our fragments come to an end when we have supplied sufficient hints to make each other, though perhaps not to the general reader, how the action will develop. These two [the stories "The Little Hotel" and "The Horror in the Tower"] are both, and [Upward's] particularly so, parodies of the detective story; and their humour is that they lead up to climaxes of disgust and horror absurdly in excess of anything the ordinary reader could be expecting (*Mortmere* 46).

The intentionality of Mortmere's coyness is an important point, as it mirrors Isherwood's discretion regarding Christopher's sexuality in *Lions and Shadows*. In Mortmere, sex is hinted at and obscured because it is understood without being explicitly explained, as Isherwood's homosexuality probably was to those close enough to him to see through his obfuscations. Mortmere acts as open ground for making clearer that which is only hinted

at in waking life: sexuality is more obvious and social satire comes into sharp focus in stories like “The Horror in the Tower.” This particular tale concerns a university friend with whom Starn spends one Christmas,

Kester, eleventh Lord Wranvers. I must confess that the young peer attracted me largely by his peculiar and striking appearance. He was a hunchback of so pronounced a character that his torso seemed to have been bent in half like a piece of cardboard. His eyes were of a vivid green and his hair was ruffled on the crown of his head like the crest of an eastern bird. But the most arresting feature of his face was undoubtedly his mouth, which was abnormally large and covered by a very broad and flexible upper lip capable of extension to the dimple just above the chin or of elevation to the nostrils. (*Mortmere* 49)

This hideous and apparently inbred peer’s unpleasant visage features memorably in the shocking conclusion of the short story:

Just below me, thrust through the aperture, was a human face, if such a face could be described as human. Its expression was one of fiendish avidity. It was spattered with dark excrement. Its tongue caressed a morsel of faeces, and its lower lip still dripped urine. It was the face of Kester Wranvers. (*Mortmere* 63)

Considering how Christopher comes to feel about his own class over the course of *Lions and Shadows*, the point about the young peer of “The Horror in the Tower” is well taken.

The fact that the language of *Mortmere* is descriptive of Christopher’s repressed desires becomes clearer when *Mortmere* seeps into the landscapes of Cambridge and London. Once he has been sent down from Cambridge and is living in London,

Christopher experiences a sexual realization or awakening thanks to a renewed friendship with the remarkably unrestrained W.H. Auden, called “Weston” in *Lions and Shadows*. At the same time, and not coincidentally, Christopher’s anxieties and neuroses increase dramatically, and he begins to pull away from the imaginary world of Mortmere to come into closer contact with his real-world goals and desires. The process of drawing away from fiction and growing closer to the real world culminates in the publication of Christopher’s first work, *All the Conspirators* (1928), at the end of *Lions and Shadows*.

This process begins when Christopher purposefully fails his Tripos examination at Cambridge and moves to London. His performance on the exam seems to have come from the world of Mortmere and not from the reality of Cambridge: “My act now seemed more than ever unreal to me: failing the Tripos had merely been a kind of extension of dream-action on to the plane of reality” (*Lions* 134). Leaving the university, Christopher contemplates his exit interview with his tutor: “How could I talk to this perfect stranger about Mortmere and Hynd and Starn and the Dürers and Laily and the willows by Garrett Hostel Bridge?” (*Lions* 135). Christopher’s break with his university life, in which he feels that he cannot be understood, is based in the private world of Mortmere, where he finds free expression. The end of Cambridge means the beginning of a new life in London, yet Christopher cannot make a clean start in the city, as his neuroses are exacerbated by his failure at Cambridge and soon by the wanton influence of his friend Weston. Upon moving to the city, Christopher turns to the imaginary world of Mortmere for comfort, and Mortmere and London begin to fuse in his imagination:

[The train rides] were deeply tinged, in my imagination, with the pigments of the Hynd and Starn stories. First came the glimpses of the river, at the bottom of slum streets; the gas-works; the funnels of steamers; then the rows of little houses, with their close-drawn curtains and sharp-leaved shrubs, jealously guarding the secrets of a sinister provincialism. . . . At this time, we were again much occupied with the idea of writing *Mortmere* as a book. (*Lions* 163)

Now that the Cambridge era is over, however, Christopher must find a new primary friendship; Chalmers has graduated and begun his first job as a schoolmaster. In London, Christopher becomes reacquainted with an old schoolmate Weston, whose fresh perspective causes Christopher to have something of a sexual awakening. London already has strange libidinal connotations for Christopher, from his vacations there in previous years. With its sense of anonymity and relative freedom, the city has “a sense of the sinister and the ‘rats’” about it that could cause “a slight but delicious nausea of sexual desire” (*Lions* 95).

Weston, like Christopher, has “his own personal variety of ‘War’-fixation.” Yet instead of channeling this fixation into neuroses and repression, Weston is eminently aware of all of his own desires, and feels no shame for them (*Lions* 194). To Christopher, he is the embodiment of a sexual freedom and guilt-free enjoyment that seems unattainable:

Weston’s own attitude to sex, in its simplicity and utter lack of inhibition, took my breath away. He was no Don Juan: he didn’t run round hunting for his pleasures. But he took what came to him with a matter-of-factness and an

appetite as hearty as that which he showed when sitting down to dinner. . . I found his shameless prosaic anecdotes only too hard to forget, as I lay restlessly awake at night, listening to the waves, alone in my single bed. (*Lions* 195)

While Christopher continues to struggle with his “puritan priggishness,” Weston is “mercilessly inquisitive,” and “enquired into the details of [Christopher’s] dreams and phantasies, unraveled [his] complexes and poked, with his blunt finger” at Christopher’s carefully guarded sexuality (*Lions* 195). The example set by Weston affects Christopher powerfully, both because of the freedom it exhibits and because of its orientation: W.H. Auden was also homosexual. The “acute mental discomfort” stirred up in Christopher by his new friendship with Weston lasts “the next three or four months” (*Lions* 197). This discomfort is based in the same sexualized fear embodied by *The Test*. Weston “[has] given [Christopher] a badly needed shaking-up” that uncovers his “most secret sexual fears.” These fears include being incapable of proving masculinity (*Lions* 194). Watching Weston engage in uninhibited, unashamed homosexual activity presents Christopher with the possibility of a life without repression and pretense. He is not able to accept this possibility immediately, but it should be noted that when he goes to Berlin, he goes with Weston, the inspiration behind his decision to attempt self-liberation.

Weston changes not only Christopher, but Mortmere. Over the course of the intense friendship, he introduces Weston to the imaginary landscape, which then becomes tinged with “Weston’s feelings about the heroic Norse literature” (*Lions* 192). The world of Mortmere becomes not the world of Cambridge that Christopher shared with Chalmers, but the world of preparatory school and London that he shared with Weston.

Naturally, Weston's freedom from shame and repression begins to inflect Christopher's idea of Mortmere. Originally devised to provide escape from a repressed and shame-filled existence, Mortmere begins to fade into the past when Christopher starts down the path toward conquering "the Enemy, the Laily Worm, Cambridge . . . the embodiment of [his] most intimate and deadly fears" (*Lions* 266).

Toward the end of the autobiographical novel, Isherwood describes two events that occur simultaneously: the publication of his first work, *All the Conspirators* (1928), and the end of Mortmere as a refuge. When the advance copies of his first book arrive, Christopher is at the beach with a depressed and disillusioned Chalmers, who has just quit his first post-university job and completed "the longest and most elaborate of all the Mortmere stories," *The Railway Accident*, in his spare time (*Lions* 273).

This is the last contribution either of us ever made to the literature of Mortmere. Mortmere seemed to have brought us to a dead end. The cult of romantic strangeness, we both knew, was a luxury for the comfortable University fireside; it could not save you from the drab realities of cheap lodgings and a dull, underpaid job. (*Lions* 273)

Yet Isherwood's depressive conclusion to the Mortmere saga is disingenuous. Mortmere brings Chalmers and he not to a dead end, but to the reality of adulthood. Mortmere sees Christopher through his years of sexual repression at Cambridge, through his period of uncomfortable awakening with Weston, and into successful adulthood, where he finally publishes a novel, says goodbye to "stifling" London, and moves to Berlin where he feels able to be openly gay (*Lions* 260). Mortmere is left behind like the "sophisticated kind of

nursery game” that Isherwood, Upward, and Auden all know that it is, but not before they avail themselves of its power to uncover deep-seated desires and enable them to face their most intimate fears.

The relationship between Christopher and Weston in *Lions and Shadows* hints at the enormous influence that W.H. Auden has on Isherwood over the course of his lifetime, at least equal to the lifelong influence of Edward Upward. Auden not only brought Isherwood to Berlin, where he would embrace his sexuality and fall in love for the first time; he was also a strong artistic influence, lending his name to the group of authors now often called “The Auden Generation.” In this sense, *Lions and Shadows* serves as an excellent introduction to Isherwood’s subsequent work, both fictional and autobiographical.

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