Introduction

Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy (2013). His lectures at California universities have been published as Isherwood on Writing (2007).

Scholarship on Isherwood has almost exclusively focused on his inter-mingling of fact and fiction, the influence of homosexuality on his work, overt or covert, and the influence of Vedanta on his later work. Attention has also been given to what Cyril Connolly calls his ‘fatal readability’ (Connolly 86). This readability of Isherwood has been seen as a major hindrance toward his gaining academic recognition. As Carolyn G. Heilbrun says, ‘Readability is usually allied with superficiality, best-sellerdom, or, at best, competent non-fiction, and there can be little doubt that Isherwood’s readability has preserved him from academic sanctification’ (Heilbrun, Isherwood 3). Worse, according to some readers of literary fiction today, writers like Isherwood may not even be considered literary in the first place, precisely because of this readability. Bemoaning this trend B.R. Myers writes in The Atlantic Monthly, ‘More than half a century ago popular storytellers like Christopher Isherwood and Somerset Maugham were ranked among the finest novelists of their time, and were considered no less literary, in their own way, than Virginia Woolf and James Joyce’ (Myers). Alan Wilde has analyzed his irony, and there have been those like Paul Piazza who have traced the anti-establishmentarian nature of Isherwood’s writings. In Piazza’s book there is extensive discussion of Isherwood’s ‘Truly Strong Man/ Truly Weak Man’ theory; a concept so influential that it continues to generate secondary material, such as David Garrett Izzo’s Christopher Isherwood: His Era, His Gang, and the Legacy of the Truly Strong Man (2001). In all the scholarship of Isherwood, there has been marked a tendency to see his pre-Vedantic and Vedantic phases as two mutually exclusives halves of his life. Even when continuity has been
detected it has been on the level of the presence of homosexuality, the presence of the mother figure et al. What this thesis seeks to show is that, contrary to received opinion, Isherwood’s Vedantic phase was in many essential ways a continuation, not only of his aesthetic concerns as a writer, but his deeply personal concerns as an individual. It argues that these artistic and personal concerns can be traced back to his parents and possibly even further back into the Bradshaw-Isherwood family on his father’s side and to the Machell-Smith family on his mother’s. While Colletta’s volume sheds some more much-needed light on Isherwood’s relationship with his mother and Rebecca Gordon’s valuable article in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* attempts Freud-influenced analysis of Isherwood’s relationship with his father, both these works acknowledge the fact that the full truth about his relationship with his parents may never be known. Colletta rightly observes that Isherwood ‘is not as frank about himself or others’ as he is in his other writings, but it must be remembered that he is almost entirely frank in his diaries (Colletta xi). Rebecca Gordon comments, ‘While discussing *Kathleen and Frank* in an interview in 1974, Isherwood states that he wished to leave his parents’ words from diaries and letters unedited, although to what extent he remained true to this is still open for debate’ (Gordon 216). This thesis hopes to address this persistent lacuna and suggest a possible filling in of a few gaps in the received understanding of Isherwood’s life and work.

What he gets as part of his heredity is a predisposition to humour and theatre that is marked by under-playing. Here the term ‘heredity’ is used in a way which attempts to suggest that a person’s genetic inheritance – the sense in which ‘heredity’ is commonly used – can often be organically linked with their cultural inheritance to understand the work that the person produces.
The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English defines ‘heredity’ as “(a) passing on of physical or mental characteristics from parents to children: heredity (b) such characteristics in a particular person: part of one’s heredity” (584, Indian edition, 1992, my emphasis). Isherwoood uses the term in Kathleen and Frank thus when he writes about his parents: ‘Christopher saw how heredity and kinship create a woven fabric; its patterns vary. But its strands are the same throughout’ (KF, 509, my emphasis). Using the term deployed by Isherwood himself anchors my thesis more firmly to Isherwood’s life and work.

‘Sense of humour’ and ‘understatement’ are aspects of self-expression that are associated with the English. Once this association is concretised over centuries, it becomes a part of the ‘English character.’ In the globalised world of today it is increasingly difficult to attribute certain characteristics to certain races or communities or nations, but when Isherwood was growing up, it was a world which still believed in distinct racial features and discrete communal characteristics. It is impossible to say with any kind of certainty that cultural conditioning, practiced over centuries, do not eventually become coded in the genes of a person. Here the use of ‘heredity’ seeks to blur the distinction between genetic and cultural inheritance, because while it may be possible to separate the two, in Isherwood’s case such a separation would not be tenable because his identity is as racial as it is cultural and he himself does not agonize over separating one from the other. Nowhere is this blurring more valid than while discussing Isherwood’s homosexuality. Is his homosexuality genetic or cultural? Did he inherit it from his uncle or did he acquire it as an iconoclastic culture? Yet, his practice of homosexuality has overt genetic and cultural aspects. His love for blond boys, his sexual
attraction for the social other and cultural other is primarily an affirmation of the role race plays in his culture. He cannot sexually relax with someone of his own class, someone who speaks Isherwood’s native language, and yet the boy or man must be of European extraction. He rarely expresses any sexual interest in any non-European male body, with the exception of two Indian monks that he is attracted to during his 1963-64 visit to India.

Is his sexual object choice genetic or cultural? Yet, this choice feeds his work and the culture he produces. One is therefore inextricably fused with the other. His cultural likes and dislikes can easily be read as his racial likes and dislikes. So, what he inherits is as much genetic as it is cultural. Therefore to call what he inherits either only cultural or only genetic would be partial. My use of the term ‘heredity’ hopes to make the term available to a wider signification.

As has been attempted to show in the First Chapter, a well-developed sense of humour existed in the Bradshaw-Isherwood family, particularly in Frank Isherwood. In his lectures notes, as published in *Isherwood on Writing* he writes, ‘[I]n order to go on admiring my Father I had to make him into an anti-heroic hero, and stress his … drag comedy acting’ (Isherwood 224). Emily Machell-Smith, Kathleen’s mother, on the other hand, was obsessed with the theatre. A sense of theatre could be detected even in her own day-to-day life. But what we also find in Kathleen, Isherwood’s mother, is a predilection towards appearing younger than she was. There is, for example, a photograph of her, reproduced in *Kathleen and Frank* (1971) where she is aged twenty-seven but dressed as ‘a girl of sixteen’, according to her father who had taken the photograph (KF 38). Not only was Kathleen dressed as a girl of sixteen, it was also her costume for a children’s dance held on 31 December 1895. She was dressed as ‘Miss L. Abney’ (KF 37). So in a
single photograph we catch a glimpse of Kathleen the twenty-seven year-old ‘girl’ as well as a role-player - ‘Miss L. Abney.’ This photograph is useful to understand another crucial component of Isherwood’s character: his constant detection of the child-like in the adult. This tendency can be marked in many of Isherwood’s characters, and he even found it in many of the men and women he met in the course of his life. His keen eye detected the child in the adult not only in the people he met but also in historical figures that he wrote about. There were some, such as Sri Ramakrishna, who were so obviously child-like that Isherwood did not have to strain his imagination at all to detect it in them. So, sense of humour and the element of the child-like may well have become the earliest accretions to his artistic temperament.

Since appearing to be younger than one is, especially when it is an adult playing at being a child, a kind of performance, then acting becomes an organic part of the exercise. We shall see the reverse as well later in this introduction and in my thesis; that is where the child is endowed with adult characteristics, though not in the pessimistic sense of William Golding. To this was quite inevitably added a love of the theatre. It may therefore be suggested that the kind of role-playing developed by Isherwood incorporated humour and infantility. If one surveys the entire body of his work, one would find that this is what bridges the vast distance between Sally Bowles and Shri Ramakrishna: both given to play-acting, both given to child-like behavior, both gifted with a sense of humour. Sally Bowles uses humour to make her way in the world; she uses it variously as a defence mechanism, a means of seduction, a means of comforting herself, a means of performing her identity. Shri Ramakrishna uses humour to render spirituality accessible to anyone who may be averse to it. So, he uses it to seduce others into spirituality and to
perform his identity. Humour relies on distance, on objectivity. The notion of ‘maya’ also requires one to be objective about one’s life; to realize that the worldly life is not an end in itself and should not be emotionally invested in completely. So, for Ramakrishna humour was a happy tool with which to communicate the importance of objectivity which the awareness of ‘maya’ necessitates.

The only difference between the two – apart from the cultural, racial and temporal ones – is that one’s life is centred on the worldly, while the other’s is organized around spirituality. And yet, the distinction between the worldly and spiritual may also be not a hermetically-sealed one, because one reaches the spiritual only through the worldly.

Susan Sontag’s definition of ‘camp’ has proved useful in integrating the three aspects of Isherwood’s artistic and personal predilections that always inform his writing. Her 1964 essay ‘Notes on “Camp”’ sets out to explore the essence of ‘camp’ with a list of notes, or rather observations, that she made on this aesthetic phenomenon. As we shall see, her notes uncannily explain what could have drawn Isherwood to Vedanta, apart from what he sets down as his reasons in *My Guru and his Disciple* (1980). (Here it may be mentioned that Isherwood may have been drawn to the Hindu monk because the latter’s personality had distinct echoes of Isherwood’s own personality or of Isherwood’s past. The Swami’s small build, his chain-smoking, his taste in pointed shoes, his smile - all had deep resonance for Isherwood.)² It is interesting that while Sontag refers to Isherwood’s ‘lazy two-page sketch’ attempt at definition of camp in *The World in the Evening* (1954) in the beginning of her discussion, she would have found much to fuel her discussion of this phenomenon had she looked at Isherwood’s entire oeuvre. I shall seek to explore the ways in which elements of ‘camp’ permeate Isherwood’s pre-Vedantic
and Vedantic work and indeed his personal life, and how Isherwood would not have this 
unique temperament had it not been for his heredity.

Sontag sees ‘camp’ as a way of looking at the world ‘in terms of the degree of 
artifice, of stylization’ (Sontag 277). She continues by saying that the ‘Camp sensibility is 
disengaged’ (Sontag 277). This element of disengagement is something that we notice not 
only in Isherwood’s famous line about the narrator being like a camera, recording not 
thinking, but also in the constant emphasis on detachment that he found when he came to 
Vedanta. She returns to the crucial point of being detached later when she explains that 
so many objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned because it is ‘simply that the 
process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment – or arouses a 
necessary sympathy’ (Sontag 285).

To this necessary element of detachment she adds the necessity of humour. 
Speaking of the element of camp in the movies she mentions ‘the delicate relation 
between parody and self-parody in Camp’ (Sontag 282). ‘Camp is playful,’ she writes, 
‘anti-serious’ (Sontag 288). She connects detachment with humour by suggesting, ‘Camp 
proposes a comic vision of the world’ in the sense that ‘comedy is an experience of 
underinvolvement, of detachment’ (Sontag 288). Here it must be mentioned that 
Isherwood was delighted when he found Lionel Trilling describing E.M. Forster as 
‘essentially a comic writer’ (Isherwood, Isherwood on Writing 56). He regarded himself 
as one too.

To the elements of detachment and humour we then see the inevitable accretion of 
play-acting. According to Sontag, ‘To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to 
understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the
metaphor of life as theatre’ (Sontag 280). She elaborates on this aspect later by saying that in Camp ‘character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility’ (Sontag 286). Continuing in the same strain she says that the Camp sensibility is ‘the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience’ (Sontag 287). Camp is, for Sontag, a victory ‘of irony over tragedy’ (Sontag 287). Therefore in Camp, detachment, theatricality and humour find a curious synthesis; a synthesis which we find in the life and work of Isherwood.

Isherwood speaks of ‘joy’ as ‘higher fun’ and quotes from Tatttarya Upanishad: ‘In joy the universe was created, in joy it is sustained, in joy it dissolves’ (Isherwood, Isherwood on Writing 65). In the same published volume he speaks approvingly of the ‘cosmic fun’ in Moby Dick (83), ‘unexampled farce’ in The Brothers Karamazov (119), and misses it in Tolstoy’s novella Father Sergius (129). He deplores the fact that ‘we no longer understand the mystery of meta-comedy, super-farce. The cult of tragedy has obscured this great truth’ (238). But while he thinks of himself as a comic writer, he finds the ‘comic’ novel to be suffering from ‘heartlessness’, just as he condemns the ‘superficiality’ of the ‘tragic view of life’ (249). He says that he has never really been interested in satire (213). Therefore, the humour that Isherwood is interested in is not the kind that is content to ridicule others from a position of superiority, but a humour that acknowledges a joy of being alive. What this thesis seeks to show is how that humour initially starts with him as a schoolboy making faces at others, but gradually turns into one that helps him laughs even at himself.
But, there is one other element in Isherwood’s work which I want to examine, an element which forms an important part of the typically Isherwoodian sensibility, as mentioned earlier – the child-like. Susan Sontag seems to have made a nod in that direction as well, because she states at one point, ‘Camp rests on innocence’ (Sontag 283). When Sontag uses the term ‘innocence’ she means ‘unconsciousness,’ the lack of awareness that one is being perceived as being ‘Camp’, just as a child even in its desperate attempts at striking adult poses, is nonetheless seen for what it is – a child – by mature, indulgent, adult eyes. However, one can also play at innocence while one is being camp. It is this performance of campy innocence that one finds in the published correspondence between Isherwood and Bachardy. In her introduction to the letters Katherine Bucknell says that by becoming Dobbin and Kitty, Isherwood and Bachardy respectively, evolved the ‘pet’ personalities ‘as a camp that allowed [them] to masquerade and to play about serious matters of love and commitment…’ (The Animals, ix-x), but also ‘the Animal personae could be deployed falsely, and thereby maintain a sentimental fiction of harmony when there was none’ (The Animals, xx).

As is unavoidable, Sontag makes the point that while, ‘it’s not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap’ (Sontag 290). However, in this thesis there has been an attempt to leave this aspect of Camp out because this thesis about humour, theatricality, the childlike and Isherwood’s hereditary influences does not have Isherwood’s homosexuality as its pivotal or even an important subsidiary aspect. Had this thesis dwelt on the sexuality of Camp some pride of place would have been given to Isherwood’s homosexual uncle Henry, although a small section is devoted to him in the First and Fourth Chapters. One would also have had to cover
much of the ground that Jeffrey Kripal covers in his book on Ramakrishna, when discussing Isherwood’s Vedantism.

At this point it may be useful to focus briefly on Isherwood’s developing philosophy of life and how humour, child-likeness, and role-playing contribute to it. The node at which the three characteristics converge is ‘detachment.’ If one were to single out one feature that exists in Isherwood’s pre-Vedantic and Vedantic writing, it is the concept of detachment. It is through the exercise of detachment that Christopher Isherwood the writer emerges out of Christopher, the son of Kathleen and Frank Isherwood. Just as “I am a camera, recording, not thinking” is a line that speaks of detachment, the detached observation of George in *A Single Man* speaks of the way Isherwood’s narrative voice remained not only objective and dispassionate, but was also further reinforced by the valorization of detachment in the Vedantic philosophy that he studied later in his life. The narrative voice used in *A Single Man* is the same as the narrative voice in *Goodbye to Berlin*. The only difference is that in the 1964 novel there is the covert presence of the disinterested interest that *The Gita* advises: sympathetic disinterest. Vedantic philosophy recommends looking out beyond oneself and even to regard oneself with calm objectivity so that one can laugh at oneself. Isherwood is seen practicing this kind of objectivity when he takes the decision to name a character after himself in his fiction. By calling a character after himself and by observing it from a distance he practices the detachment which serves him in good stead when he finds that same detachment recommended in Vedanta. The treatment of the empirical world as ‘maya’ is something that must have come easily to Isherwood the writer, if not Isherwood the man. As in Shakespeare, Vedanta also believes that the world is a stage and men and women, merely players. It
must be remembered that Isherwood’s strategies of literary reception and expression are not only informed by this notion of detachment, but also by mechanisms that he obviously inherits being an Isherwood.

There have been discussions of ‘camp’ in Isherwood and also of the dramatic metaphors that he deploys in his life and work, but these discussions have limited themselves to either one book or to only one aspect of ‘camp’, that is theatricality, in Isherwood’s work. Frank Kermode describes the Berlin stories as ‘High Camp about civilisation; The World in the Evening [as] decadent Camp; The Memorial … [as] pre- or proto-Camp’ (Kermode 125). A discussion of ‘camp’ can be found in Peter Thomas’s paper “‘Camp’ and Politics in Isherwood’s Berlin Fiction’. As is evident from the title, Isherwood’s use of ‘camp’ is given a political, ergo social imperative. Although there is an acknowledgment that ‘fun’ is also an important element of ‘camp’ it is more the politics of ‘camp’ as it were that interests Thomas.

There is a similar desire to bring in society in Alan Kennedy’s discussion of dramatic metaphors in Isherwood’s work. He focuses on A Single Man (1964) for his analysis of the applications of theatricality in Isherwood’s fiction, but is of the opinion that ‘[d]ramatism allows one to live in the world of other people without having to accept the conformity of any particular definition of society’ (Kennedy 217). In neither discussion is humour given much importance, nor is the element of the child-like engaged with, two crucial components of Isherwood’s aesthetic and artistic make-up.

However, as has been suggested above, the one new aspect that this thesis would like to introduce in Isherwood studies is that Isherwood’s discovery of Vedanta may very
well have been atavistically influenced by both Frank and Kathleen’s considerable interest in the Indian subcontinent. When Christopher Isherwood discovered Vedanta in 1939 he thought he had found a religion, or a philosophy which was completely alien to his upbringing as an upper-middle-class Englishman. As far as he was concerned, by espousing Vedanta he was defying not only the Church of England but also England as a whole and the personification of everything he hated about his country – his mother. It is not until he came to write his parents’ biography Kathleen and Frank that he realised that his career had furrowed a course that would have pleased his mother greatly, much as he had tried to have the opposite effect on her by the choices he made in his life. He still thought that though his teaching at American universities pleased his mother she would continue to be not a little shocked by his choosing an Eastern religion. He had assigned her, albeit with some justification, a personality which was everything he liked to think he was not. She admired Churchill, he was fashionably left-wing. She was very much a Church-of-England worshipper, he announced very early in his life that he was an atheist. She wanted him to get married and give her grandchildren, he declared himself homosexual. It seems natural therefore that his espousal of Vedanta would, he thought, not be approved of by his mother. As we shall discover, however, he was quite wrong. When he started to read Kathleen’s diaries in order to research her life he could not have failed to notice that far from being an insulated little-Englander, she was quite knowledgeable about Eastern religions. As is shown in the First Chapter, this interest in the Orient may well have been inspired by a patronizing sense of the ruling race taking a polite interest in the art and culture of the ruled. But it is also possible that the interest had come about as a result of her marriage to the sincerely Orientophiliac Frank
Isherwood. Isherwood’s deeply ambivalent attitude to India may quite easily be seen as an extension of Kathleen’s own ambivalence towards the Orient. Nonetheless, the strong interest that we detect in Kathleen’s journal entries, for all things Indian - from recipes to politics – cannot be ignored in our investigation of what went into the making of Isherwood’s life and interests. This interest in the Orient in general and India in particular, which also included her reading Jiddu Krishnamurti’s works and actual attending one of his lectures, is curiously never mentioned by Isherwood either in *Kathleen and Frank* or elsewhere when he talked about his mother. However, the possibility remains of Kathleen’s interest in the Orient in general, and in India, in particular, being in keeping with the predictable occurrence of a person of the colonizer country taking a patronizing interest in the culture of a colonized country. Her admiration for Churchill and her agreement with Churchill in his opinion of Gandhi certainly does not show her as anything other than a conventional believer in Imperialism. The fact remains, however, that she knew more about Indian culture than Isherwood had, given the associations he chose after his settling down in California. It should also be clarified here that while Kathleen is interested in China and Japan, her interest in those countries are more superficial than her interest in India. This may be due to the fact that she does not feel a sense of colonial superiority over China and Japan (countries never colonized by Britain) the way she may have felt towards India. This may also be due to the fact that her life took her into social circles where there were either Britons who were frequently going to India, or had close association with Indians, or were Indians themselves. Indian culture was therefore more available to her than Chinese or Japanese culture could ever be.
However, the fact remains that she could have chosen *not* to be interested in the culture of a colonized, and therefore ‘inferior’ people. She did not do that. She sought out Indian culture in a way that may not be unproblematically dismissed as ‘patronising,’ although such a possibility always lurks. She was more than superficially familiar with the writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti and had seen him twice during his visit to London in March-April 1928. Given Isherwood’s meetings with Krishnamurti (the first one happened in the fall of 1939) he makes no mention of his mother having seen the same man eleven years before him when he writes her life between January 1967 and 1971 in a book that became *Kathleen and Frank*. Further, to dismiss the love that she may have felt for the ‘Orient’ would be to undermine the love she obviously felt for her husband. It may be suggested that her interest in India was no doubt helped by friends like Madgie Reid and Mamie Tristram but it was also a legacy of Frank. In a sense Frank could be said to have lived on in Kathleen through her continuing interest in India. No relationship is ever entirely always an equal relationship, be it between two persons or two cultures. But this inequality perhaps should not be read as a stable one. It would be unfair to dismiss her interests in India as either entirely colonial or entirely not.

Isherwood’s engagement with the Orient is problematic, as has been said. His hatred of Hindus is something that he speaks about for the first time in *Christopher and His Kind*, then in *My Guru and His Disciple* and now we find it unabashedly expressed in his published diaries. We first see it, albeit indirectly, in the character of Bernhard Landauer in *Goodbye to Berlin*, but are afforded a longer glimpse of it, again indirectly, in his account of the Sino-Japanese War in *Journey to a War*. As has become virtually *de rigueur* recently, no investigation of an Orient-Occident encounter can be carried out
independent of Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism*. His other book along similar lines, *Culture and Imperialism*, cannot be ignored in any discussion of an encounter between a colonised and a colonising people and society. Douglas Kerr has examined *Journey to a War* using Edward Said’s earlier book as a springboard. Doubtless such an investigation can be carried out with Isherwood’s other writings as well, but that is not of prime concern in this thesis. Here a focus is attempted on the troublingly racist overtones to his anti-Hindu sentiments. Of course, it needs to be pointed out over here that by ‘Hindus’ Isherwood seems to have meant ‘Indians’ as a whole. This sad essentialization notwithstanding, it is interesting to see how Isherwood struggles to reconcile this aspect of his personality with the love and admiration that he so transparently feels for the Hindu and Indian Swami Prabhavananda. While the charge of essentialism may, with whatever degree of anachronism, be leveled against Kathleen (if we make concessions for the fact that she was not highly-educated and even if she were, education at that time had not begun to problematize racism and colonialism the way it does now), it seems that the same charge can be leveled against Isherwood, but with greater justification. Isherwood clearly regarded himself as being culturally superior, more sophisticated than his mother. This perception of himself is seen in his frequent criticism of Kathleen. Yet, there does not appear to much attitudinal difference between Isherwood’s reception of China and his reception of India. The racist prejudice that he self-confessedly feels towards ‘Hindoos’ seems congruous with his total lack of interest in Chinese culture and people. In the case of India and China, he seems unwilling to acquaint himself with areas of native life not relevant to his immediate concerns. This thesis hopes to show, however, that Kathleen, insofar as she was not a creative writer, never saw the need to dramatize, organize, render
literary her responses to the Orient. They are unmediated by conscious politics of representation. But for Isherwood, his skills as a writer are brought to bear on his troubled reception of the ‘Orient’ in general, and India, in particular to render invisible the almost-racial prejudice that simmers subtextually. It should, however, be mentioned that with the publication of his 1960s diaries, one detects a softening of his antipathy towards India by the time he visits Bengal in 1963-64.

Isherwood is arguably not the first or the last writer to be obsessed with the theatre. One can readily think of Charles Dickens and his amateur theatricals. Even the Victorian novelist’s book reading performances can clearly be seen as a means by which he satisfied the actor in himself. Another, later, writer who was influenced by the theatre was Henry James. Reviewing a reissue of *A Small Boy and Others: A Memoir* by Henry James, Toby Litt writes, ‘As a small boy, James was obsessed with the theatre, with drama’ (Litt). Here it may perhaps be mentioned that Colin Wilson finds the spirit behind Isherwood’s ‘detached, observant first-person narrative… Jamesian’ (Wilson 314). In the case of Dickens he is theatrical as if almost inspite of himself and in a melodramatic way. In Henry James the theatre or drama in his fiction is so subtle as to be almost impalpable; it is strictly underplayed. Further, James’s experiments with the theatre in the 1890’s, led him to use the dramatic method in the novels of his final period. But in neither writer do we find such a proliferation of self-conscious theatricality; a theatricality which is deployed and yet regarded with amusement, from an ironic distance. The characters Isherwood takes any interest in are bound to be self-consciously theatrical.
Similarly Isherwood is not the first or the last writer to use humour for artistic, literary reasons in their work. Whether it be the Swiftian brand of satire which we find in Isherwood’s contemporary Evelyn Waugh or the bleak black humour of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* or the gentle caricature of Oxford life in Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*, humour, be it gentle or acerbic, has been a part of fiction for as long as one can remember. But in Isherwood’s novels, humour is not only used but also referred to. Characters not only show their perceived superiority by trying to laugh at others, but also show the others to be inferior if a lack of that crucial sense of humour is somehow seen to be revealed. However, characters also laugh at themselves. Whereas Aristotle says in his *Poetics*, ‘comedy represents the worse types of men’ (Aristotle 37), taking for granted the moral superiority of the playwright, in Isherwood’s fiction, not having a sense of humour is a failing in itself, deserving of denigratory laughter. Isherwood’s characters also salvage some dignity for themselves in the midst of humiliation by convincing themselves that their sense of humour at least has not been lost. So the mere perceived presence or absence of a sense of humour, whether that sense is actually ever used or not, becomes an important aspect of an Isherwoodian character.

Considering that this thesis is on the importance of, among other elements, theatre in Isherwood’s fiction and non-fiction, question may arise as to why it has not discussed the very plays that he wrote in collaboration with Wystan Hugh Auden. (They wrote a total of four plays together. The first one, *The Enemies of the Bishop, or, Die When I Say When: A Morality in Four Acts* was written probably in July 1929. They wrote the play *The Dog Beneath the Skin* in 1935. They collaborated on *The Ascent of F6* in 1936. Their
final play together was *On the Frontier* in 1938.) The reason for this is that Isherwood’s contribution to the plays was more in the area of putting the plot together. The organisation of *The Dog Beneath the Skin* was by Isherwood, as Edward Mendelson points out in his article ‘The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration’. Although Mendelson clearly attributes certain scenes or sections of scenes to Isherwood in the case of *The Ascent of F6*, it is still difficult to be sure of the amount of independence that Isherwood had, due to the very nature of the exercise. By this same reason could have been left out of this thesis Isherwood’s collaborative effort with Huxley – *Jacob’s Hands*. The screenplay is included because it was felt that there were certain aspects of the screenplay which were so obviously Isherwood’s and that these aspects had remained so unchanging even after conversion to Vedanta that they had to be pointed out to underline the resistance to change that marked his apparent spiritual regeneration. However, *Journey to a War*, another collaborative effort with Auden, has been included because it is clearly stated in the book that the poems were Auden’s and the prose was Isherwood’s. It is similarly clear as to exactly what the nature of Isherwood’s collaborations with Swami Prabhavananda must have been – the latter translating the Sanskrit, the former polishing and fine-tuning that translation for the text. The sole item of poetry that has been kept in the thesis is *The Bhagavad Gita*. Quite apart from the fact that this was the first time Isherwood was engaging with Vedantic literature, and all the importance that this fact alone merits, his version of *The Gita* is discussed to show how convenient Isherwood may have found undertaking the translation of a work which had theatricality, drama, and yet ironic distance and emphasis on detachment as its organic elements. Not included are Isherwood’s translations of Baudelaire’s *Journaux Intimes* (1930) or indeed his earliest
poetic exercise, *People One Ought to Know* (1982). The former is generally regarded as being ‘amateur’, as does Brian Finney, while the latter was written to complement young Sylvain Mangeot’s drawings of animals with human characteristics (Finney 79). While *People One Ought to Know*, written two years before the publication of *All the Conspirators*, does reveal Isherwood’s sense of humour, it is compromised to a very large extent by the fact that the verses would have to match the drawings, even if one allows for the fact that Isherwood had very early on grasped the importance of the visual component in literature. The humour revealed there has neither the anti-establishmentarian anarchy of that of *The Mortmere Stories*, nor the psychological depth of that to be found in his debut novel. Neither can be treated as serious work and so have been excluded from the thesis, while including *The Gita*. Also left out on two counts is his collaborative translation of Brecht’s *A Penny for the Poor* (1938). It has been left out on account not only of the work not being original but also because Isherwood translated only the verse in that play.

It is also because it is difficult to ascertain Isherwood's contribution that his filmscripts had to be reluctantly excluded. He had written many filmscripts in the course of his life, many of which were made into films eventually and it would have been especially illuminating to look at those scripts in the light of what is proposed in this thesis. However almost all of them are collaborative efforts. He wrote *Little Friend* (1934) with Margaret Kennedy, *Rage in Heaven* (1941) with Robert Thoeren, *Forever and a Day* (1944) with others, *Adventure in Baltimore* (1949) with Lionel Houser and Lesser Samuels, *The Great Sinner* (1949) with Ladislas Fodor and Rene Fulop-Miller,
The Loved One (1965) with Terry Southern, The Sailor from Gibraltar (1967) with Don Magner and Tony Richardson, and finally Frankenstein: The True Story (1974) with Don Bachardy. Bachardy says about writing the screenplay:

We discussed the story in detail for days, weeks. We worked out the construction together. We each had ideas, made suggestions, and developed from each other’s suggestions until we had a general direction, a general sense of our characters and how they were going to interact. And then at that very decisive moment when the first serious words of the script had to be written, I took my place at the typewriter and Chris dictated to me. (Chatterjee 106-107)

The only successfully completed film of a screenplay written by Isherwood only is Diane (1955). However the text of this screenplay is unavailable as far as can be ascertained.

While deciding on how to divide the chapters an attempt has been made to adhere to as strict a chronological order as possible in order to show the way in which the elements of humour, theatricality, the child-like and even his visual imagination gradually formed an organic whole. Attempt has been made to argue that for all his hatred of his mother and all things English that she represented, Isherwood the novelist would not be possible without the characteristics that he had inherited from her, from his father Frank and indeed from his maternal grandmother. The thesis seeks to show that it is these elements that provide a seamless link between the otherwise disparate areas of his fiction,
autobiography and non-fiction (of which much was on the subject of Vedanta). In addition to looking at the texts of Isherwood’s fiction and non-fiction available in libraries or in print, essays and other short pieces that he published in various periodicals have been looked at, his unpublished letters, typescripts, his transcriptions of Kathleen Isherwood’s diaries and Kathleen Isherwood’s diaries themselves have been discussed. While attempts have been made to make the discussion as inclusive as possible and exclusions made after much deliberation, there still may be omissions which have escaped notice. Those omissions are regretted.


2 In My Guru and his Disciple Isherwood mentions all these features of the Swami’s personality either without any apparent disapproval or with total enthusiasm. The Swami’s ‘very elegant pointed shoes’ (48) may have brought to his mind his favourite teacher at St. Edmund’s, immortalised in Lions and Shadows as Mr. Holmes (7). Prabhavananda’s smile is ‘so touching, so open, so brilliant with joy that it makes [Isherwood] want to cry’ (24). Prabhavananda’s small build enables Isherwood to love him ‘in a special, protective way, as [he] loved little Annie Avis, [his] childhood nanny…’ (39). The Swami’s chain-smoking would not have bothered Isherwood because he himself chain-smoked (24). But all this would have had no effect on Isherwood had the Swami not accepted the former’s homosexuality without making any moral judgements but with the words that Isherwood should try to see his lover as the young Lord Krishna (25).