

# A Single Man: Despite everything...

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*Directed by Tom Ford, screenplay by Ford and David Searce, based on the novel by Christopher Isherwood*

*A Single Man* follows George Falconer (Colin Firth), a middle-aged, English-born college professor living in Los Angeles, through the course of a single day and night. It is November 1962, a month after the Cuban missile crisis, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union.

The film, directed and co-written by Tom Ford, is based on a novel by Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) published in 1964.

George finds it difficult to make it through each day since the death, in a car crash, of his longtime partner, Jim (Matthew Goode). They were together 16 years, but because of the disapproval of Jim's family, George was not even able to attend the funeral service.

Growing older, having lost his great love, appalled by many aspects of American life, George explains in a voice-over that what he sees staring back at him in the mirror "isn't so much a face as the expression of a predicament."

George's closest companion in Los Angeles, the witty, disheveled, alcohol-fueled Charley (Julianne Moore), is also a British expatriate. Divorced and at loose ends, she contemplates moving back to London, but that prospect seems unlikely.

Each morning, George performs the various rituals (personal hygiene, physical appearance, clothing, etc.) that enable him to become the individual the world recognizes. "By the time I have dressed and put the final layer of polish on the now slightly stiff, but quite perfect George, I know fully what part I'm supposed to play," he says in a voice-over. His inner life remains something quite distinct. His sexual orientation, as well

as his tastes and views, sets him apart from his respectable, middle class neighbors and their annoying children.

At college, he teaches a course in English literature. He has a generally dim opinion of his students, telling a fellow professor that most of them "aspire to nothing more than a corporate job and a desire to raise coke-drinking, TV-watching children who as soon as they can speak start chanting TV jingles and smashing things with hammers."

(This type of comment, part misanthropy and snobbery, part social criticism, can be traced directly to Isherwood's novel. Soon after writing *A Single Man*, Isherwood contributed to the screen adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's scathing satire of American life (and death), *The Loved One* [1965].)

On this particular day, a student raises a question about the novel the class is reading. It involves fear, the fear of "threatening" minorities in particular. George goes on to explain his view: "Fear is taking over our world. Fear is being used as a tool of manipulation in our society. It's how politicians peddle policy and how Madison Avenue sells us things that we don't need. Think about it. Fear that we're going to be attacked, fear that there are communists lurking around every corner, fear that some little Caribbean country that doesn't believe in our way of life [Cuba] poses a threat to us. Fear that black culture may take over the world. Fear of Elvis Presley's hips. Well, maybe that one is a real fear. Fear that our bad breath might ruin our friendships.... Fear of growing old and being alone."

After class, one of his students, Kenny (Nicholas Hoult), tells George that he never tells them everything he knows about a given subject. George acknowledges his reluctance to speak his mind: "I can't really discuss things completely openly at school. Someone would misunderstand.... I tried to do that today. It doesn't work."

Throughout the course of the day, George seems to be putting his affairs in order, as though he has come to some fateful decision.

In the evening, he goes over to Charley's, and the pair of old friends have a lovely time, drinking, smoking, dancing, reminiscing ...until she wonders out loud about what they could have been to each other if they had had "a real relationship and kids." When he objects, "I had Jim," she suggests that Jim was "really just a substitute for something else." He blows up, "Is that really what you think after all these years?... Jim wasn't a substitute for anything, and there is no substitute for Jim, anywhere!"

Still later, George has an encounter with Kenny at his local bar. They discuss things, including Kenny's dissatisfaction with his present and his past, then go for a swim in the ocean. Kenny comes back to George's house, they have a beer. It grows later.

The writers (Ford and David Searce) and director have done an intelligent job with Isherwood's novel. It is a small sensitive piece of life, and they've retained that quality.

The best scenes, George and a young Spanish hustler, George at Charley's (both Firth and Moore are excellent), a flashback of George and Jim meeting just after World War II, have something of the messiness, intensity, possibility of real life. The latter scene—inside and outside an oceanside dive in 1946—is especially well done; Goode's performance is delicate, leisurely. The warm, packed bar, the informality of the moment, the pleasure of a California evening, the amiability of the crowd—it all adds up to something sensual, or "pagan," as George calls it, and worth living for.

Despite his despair over aging, his sorrow over Jim's tragic death, his legitimate sourness about "the American utopia, the kingdom of the good life upon earth," Isherwood's George decides that life has value for him: "*I am alive*, he says to himself, *I am alive!* And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite."

Several pages later, comparing himself to his "age-mates" at a gym, George observes that he "is different from them because, in some sense which can't quite be defined but which is immediately apparent when you see him naked, *he hasn't given up*."

Ford's *A Single Man* catches at this sense of things. Perhaps sometimes too easily. In one of his final voice-

overs in the film, George notes his realization "that everything is exactly the way it was meant to be."

"To accept the world" can have different and even opposed meanings.

For the serious artist or the opponent of the social order, it means the opposite of idealizing or fantasizing about reality. Soviet literary critic and Left Oppositionist Aleksandr Voronsky, for example, argued strongly for the need to "accept the world," to see it accurately and clearly, "in order to transform it and master it according to our collective will. The world is great and wonderful." The artists, he wrote, "have no need to retreat from it into themselves." He complained about the lack in art of the "sensation of the solid existence of the world."

On the other hand, when rather well-heeled film writers and directors exclaim that "everything is exactly the way it was meant to be," it may signify something quite different.

This weak side of Ford's work, its over-willingness perhaps to bathe the present world in a radiant glow, finds expression in the fact that nearly everyone and everything in the film is gorgeous. Isherwood's picture is a more critical, pointed one.

In any event, *A Single Man*, while not earthshaking, is a moving and sensitive work.



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