THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM MOTTER INGE: 1948-1960

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Patton Lockwood

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By

Patton Lockwood

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

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This study considers the plays written by William Motter Inge prior to 1960. It identifies those aspects of his plays which are characteristic, and considers their dramatic effectiveness. Idea, character, story, dialogue, and structure, the standard dramatic elements, along with Inge's philosophy are considered.

The study is limited to the published versions of Inge's plays except in the case of "Summer Brave," an earlier version of Picnic, and the unpublished one-act plays, typewritten copies of which were made available by the playwright.

The first chapter brings together the scattered biographical material that is available on William Inge, provides an outline of his occupational and geographical peregrinations, furnishes a concise introduction to some of the incidents and characters in his life that are reflected in his plays, and indicates the development of his theatrical aspirations, and introduces the playwright's early ideas on dramaturgy.

The bulk of the dissertation deals with the specific plays, one chapter being devoted to each of Inge's five New York productions: Come Back, Little Sheba (1950), Picnic (1953), Bus Stop (1955), The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (1957), and "A Loss of Roses" (1959), and one to his one-act plays. A recapitulation of the action, a detailed consideration of the major characters, and a critical evaluation was made of each play.

The final chapter is a summary of Inge's techniques and subject matter.

Inge's plays were found to be true to life, utilizing characters and situations in an unobtrusive manner. All of his plays were found to be striking in their apparent sincerity. Inge himself was found to be a plain-speaking playwright, fluent, yet prosaic, who exploited both sentiment and dramatic conventions. His plays were found to be filled with irony, humanity, and objectivity. Freely constructed to the demands of free character interrelations, the plays were found to reflect a philosophy of resignation, interpreted and expounded in Freudian terms. Midwestern locale, a naturalistic presentation, inconclusive conclusions, and colloquial dialogue were also found to be characteristic.

It was concluded that Inge had not been an innovator, having neither introduced new dramatic techniques, nor changed the course of contemporary American theatre. It was felt that Inge's skill lay in his ability to bring

together familiar literary elements, in particular authentic Midwestern Americana and dark, Freudian torments. Inge was placed in the company of such American playwrights as Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams in his use of Freudianism, Naturalism, and genre background. It was concluded that Inge, aware of the demands of the commercial theatre and sensitive to the temper of his times, is among the best American playwrights writing today.

437 Words

Approved: John O. Walker
Thesis Director

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I am indebted to several individuals for their assistance: the playwright, who willingly lent me for a considerable length of time the only copies of his unpublished one-act plays; Dr. Nat Eek, whose copy of "Summer Brave" threw considerable light on Inge's second Broadway play, Picnic; and the members of my Doctoral Committee. I would like especially to express my appreciation for the practical advice, constructive criticism, and patience of Dr. John A. Walker and Dr. John A. Waite, who have contributed so much of their time and energy. My deepest gratitude goes to my wife, Nancy, for her constant encouragement.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study describes, analyzes, and evalutes the plays which William Motter Inge wrote in the first twelve years of his professional playwriting career. The purpose is to discover the dramatic strengths and weaknesses of Inge's plays, and to locate and identify their characteristic elements. The study does not consider Inge's film scenarios and adaptations, except briefly in passing. While no precursive criteria have been established, analysis of his use of the standard dramatic elements of idea, character, story, dialogue, and structure has been considered a logical starting point for the investigation.

The study considers all of the plays which Inge wrote before 1960 for which scripts are available. These include five full-length plays which have had Broadway productions and thirteen one-acts. Only the final published versions are available for Come Back, Little Sheba, Bus Stop, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, "The Mall," "Glory in the Flower," and "The Tiny Closet." In the case of Inge's 1959 failure, "A Loss of Roses," the preliminary working script, published in Esquire, is the only source. Picnic is the only play which has an alternative but unpublished version, "Summer Brave."

The study is thus limited to the published versions except in the case of "Summer Brave" and the one-acts which were lent by the playwright.

There is no doubt that William Inge is one of the most important contemporary American playwrights. Next to Tennessee Williams, William Inge has written more plays that have been produced on Broadway in the last decade than any other American. His plays have had an additional impact in their film versions, especially Picnic, which proved to be extremely popular. Despite Inge's prominence, no comprehensive study of his plays has been undertaken. Scattered reviews exist which are limited to evaluating or discussing specific productions, but between 1950 and 1960 only one magazine article was written that considered Inge on the basis of all of his works to that time. "A Loss of Roses," which marked a radical structural change from his earlier plays, has been forgotten or is unknown, and few people are aware of his one-acts, even those that have been published. It is time that this material was brought together.

Both the failure of "A Loss of Roses," which followed four commercially successful Broadway plays written by Inge, and the fact that Inge turned from the legitimate stage to write specifically for the films, mark the end of a period in Inge's playwrighting career, the period with which this study is concerned.

It is expected that William Inge will continue to write for both stage and screen, and that in the future further evaluation will necessarily take place in the light of additional evidence. But it is also clear that this is a most convenient and appropriate time for an initial survey.

William Inge's life has been filled with incidents and individuals whose influence is repeatedly and clearly revealed in his plays. While one tends to look with some scepticism on sequences which indicate an elementary cause and effect relationship, biographical material can provide convenient points of reference and occasionally considerable insight into an artist's subject matter, working methods, and objectives. The scattered biographical material that is available on William Inge, besides providing an outline of his occupational and geographical peregrinations, furnishes a concise introduction to incidents and characters in his life that are reflected in his plays, indicates the development of his theatrical aspirations, and introduces the playwright's early ideas on dramaturgy. While Inge unfortunately has never made a detailed statement of his objectives, a few limited comments on objectives exist, and these need to be considered, as they provide an invaluable basic orientation. Such a preliminary frame of reference will serve as a useful guide until the plays themselves can be considered.

Matrices

William Inge was born in Independence, Kansas,[1] on May 3, 1913. His life has been superficially quiet and unspectacular, but, like his plays, this apparent calm hides moments of fear and loneliness, defeat and triumph. Considerably younger than the four older children of Luther Clayton Inge and Maude Sarah Gibson, William Inge grew up lonely and self-contained. His father, a travelling salesman and small-town merchant, contributed to the boy's loneliness by his frequent absences from home. Like Sonny in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, William collected movie magazines and memorized recitations, the imaginary world of the theatre providing him with an outlet for his imagination and an escape from his loneliness.

Inge's histrionic abilities first made themselves known at the age of eight when he memorized a speech, which his sister, Helene, had prepared, and proudly spouted it in an elocution class.

> Hi-yo, Peter Johnson
> Come inside that fence

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[1]The city of Independence (chartered 1872) is located in the southeast corner of Kansas. A city of some 12,000 population which boomed with the discovery of oil in 1903, it acts as the distribution point for a considerable agricultural area. Today, Independence is noted primarily for its Neewollah celebration, which takes place in one hundred and fifty-six acre Riverside Park, located in the Verdigris Canyon some miles outside of the city.

I done told yo' yesterday
Yo' ain't got no sense.[2]

Remembering that day many years later, he remarked,

> For the first time in my life I felt that audience reaction. It meant an awful lot to me. I hadn't been a very good student at all. From then on I found a way of getting along with people that I hadn't had.[3]

Longer poems, then monologues and dialect pieces followed Hi-yo, Peter Johnson, and soon Inge was established as an attraction at church socials, school programs, women's clubs and local talent shows.

Young Inge was alone among his brothers and sisters in his enthusiasm for the theatre. Although his interest in the theatre was not shared by his immediate family, it was encouraged by his mother's brother, John W. Gibson, who ran a harness business in Wichita. John Gibson's accounts of his own early experience with a Shakespearean troupe intrigued and excited Inge, as did the trips the boy took with his uncle to Kansas City to see repertory theatre.[4]

By the time he graduated from Montgomery County High School in Independence in 1930, Inge had accumulated a considerable amount of acting experience. In the fall of that year he went to the University of Kansas where he enrolled as a Speech and Drama major. During his years at the University of Kansas, Inge was active in dramatics and became a member of the National Collegiate Players. While

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[2]Milton Bracker, "Boy Actor to Broadway Author," New York Times, March 22, 1953, sect. II, p. 1.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

he was in college, he spent two summers touring Kansas with a "Toby Show" acting juvenile roles. The Toby Show was an old-time tent show which featured a hayseed clown, traditionally called Toby. It was an exciting but precarious existence. "I lived on peanut butter sandwiches and milk," Inge recalls.[5]

In the summer of 1934, the year before he graduated from the University of Kansas, Inge took a summer job acting with the Maxinkuckee Mummers, a small stock group which was sponsored by Culver Military Academy in Indiana. The job was to lead the following year to a more responsible one as a teacher and director, replacing Major C. C. Mather, the head of the speech and drama department, while the latter was on leave from the academy. Inge hoped to finance a trip to New York with what he expected to make that summer, and, like hundreds of other hopefuls, he saw himself on the verge of a brilliant acting career. However, after working all summer, Inge found himself insolvent.

At this critical juncture he was offered a graduate scholarship at George Peabody Teachers' College in Nashville, Tennessee. He accepted and temporarily gave up the idea of professional acting in New York. Recalling his decision to go to Tennessee, he remarked, "I gave up acting with no inner contentment. I became morose."[6] Two weeks before he

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[5]"'Picnic's' Provider," New Yorker, April 4, 1953, p. 23.

[6]Bracker, loc cit.

was to receive his master's degree, he developed what he termed "a sickness of mood and temper."[7] Later he recalled,

> I sort of based my life on the theatre. Having given up the theatre, I'd given up the basis I'd set my life upon. I was terribly miserable and confused. I went home to Kansas and began to flounder.[8]

Unwilling at the time to accept teaching as a profession, Inge first took a job working on a Kansas highway gang for the summer. Working on days when the temperature occasionally reached 118 degrees, he found some peace of mind in physical exhaustion. "I started sleeping at night."[9] For a period he stayed with his uncle in Wichita and worked briefly for a time as a radio newscaster in that city. In the fall of 1937, Inge accepted a position in the high school at Columbus, Kansas, located some fifty miles east of Independence. The job consisted of teaching classes in English, speech, and dramatics and lasted for nine months.

The following summer Inge returned to Nashville and completed his master's work. His thesis was written on David Belasco and seems competent, if possibly uninspired. In the fall, Inge accepted a position at Stephens College for Women, located in the center of Missouri at Columbia. The Stephens job lasted for five years, during which time Inge worked in the Department of Communication Skills and in conjunction with the drama department, headed by the well-

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[7]"William Inge," 20th Century Authors, Stanley J. Kunitz, ed. (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1955), p. 475.

[8]Bracker, loc. cit.

[9]Ibid.

known actress, Maude Adams. While at Stephens, Inge had an opportunity to act in and direct productions of the Burrall Bible Class, a vigorous, philosophically-oriented, non-sectarian organization which included the entire student body of Stephens. For this group he played his last acting role, the drunken choirmaster in Thornton Wilder's Our Town, and directed Watch on the Rhine.

During the years at Stephens,

> Inge was charming, casually well-dressed, and good-looking, and despite his phlegmatic constitution and chronic detachment, he was a fine dancer and a social success when he made the effort. He was particularly noted for his detached and sardonic humor and his great skill as a teller of elaborate stories.[10]

The years at Stephens were restless years. While there, he lived with an interesting group of brilliant and sometimes eccentric intellectuals in a furniture-cluttered, ante-bellum mansion presided over by a landlady of Boone County's old Southern aristocracy.[11]

In 1943, Inge left Stephens and moved to St. Louis, where he became culture and entertainment critic for the St. Louis Star-Times. Inge arrived in St. Louis weary of institutional life and with a vigorous unfulfilled interest in the theatre.[12] The job with the Star-Times was apparently exactly what he needed. He took a room in one of the

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[10]Interview with John A. Waite, August 24, 1960 (Michigan State University, East Lansing).

[11]Idem.

[12]20th Century Authors, p. 475.

less desirable sections of town,[13] worked, because of the nature of his job, mostly at night, and for the first time in his life was really content. Inge found the job both stimulating and enjoyable and no doubt would have been happy to continue it indefinitely had circumstances allowed. His articles for the Star-Times, after a somewhat flamboyant start, settled down to routine factual reviews dealing with films, records, concerts, and theatre. He devised a standard review format based on four factors: (1) audience numbers, (2) audience response, (3) theatricality, and (4) a synopsis of the plot. If anything distinguishes these reviews, it is their occasional reference to the classics, theatre history, or the origin of the play itself. It should be pointed out that, although Inge did review the dramatic events that took place in St. Louis during his stay, by far the greatest number of his reviews were film reviews. It was not uncommon for him to report on five a week. The theatre season might provide him with ten legitimate plays, and he filled in his job with infrequent record reviews, occasional personal interviews, and a complete coverage of musical events.[14]

In the last year of his job with the Star-Times he seems to have favored the films more and the theatre less. Summing up his theatrical experiences of four years he wrote:

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[13]Tennessee Williams, "Writing is Honest," Passionate Playgoer, ed. George Oppenheimer (New York: Viking Press, 1958), p. 246.

[14]Bracker, loc. cit.

> The theatre today remains a somewhat isolated enterprise, still full of talent and expressing occasional brilliance, but limited by the select nature of its audience, whose tastes have become either recherche or obsolete. The theatre must expand its appeal and enlarge its audience if it expects to continue an independent existence much longer.[15]

Two significant influences made themselves felt during these years. The first was the staggering number of plays and films Inge saw, ranging from the best to the worst Hollywood and Broadway had to offer. It is difficult to assess whether these viewing experiences were beneficial or harmful. No doubt this massive dose quickened Inge's grasp of dramatic techniques and dramatic structure and revealed to him the theatre's limitations and capacities, but at the same time it must have dulled his senses by burdening them with a collossal amount of trivia and inferior theatre. In any case, this exposure impressed on his mind the temper of the times, the era's psychology, its logic, its needs, its demands.

The second significant influence was Tennessee Williams. Inge's earliest effort in playwriting was made while he worked on the Star-Times. In November, 1944, Inge contacted Tennessee Williams, whose home was in St. Louis, concerning an interview. Williams, under considerable pressure from the rehearsals of The Glass Menagerie, had returned to St. Louis to get away from the tension. Realizing the nervous strain Williams was under, Inge suggested that the interview

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[15]William Inge, "Theatre in Wartime," St. Louis Star-Times, May 12, 1945, p. 11.

take place in his own apartment. Williams accepted and, during the interview, he and Inge found themselves kindred spirits. Inge's article in the Star-Times on this interview clearly reflects his admiration.[16] Just before Christmas Inge went to Chicago to see Williams' play and afterwards revealed to Williams his own desire to become a playwright. Williams states[17] that at the time he thought Inge was trying to cheer him up, but Inge had, in fact, been deeply moved. "It was so beautiful when I saw it there. It was the finest thing I had seen in the theatre in years. I went back to St. Louis and felt, 'Well, I've got to write a play,'"[18] Later he admitted, "I felt a little ashamed for having led what I felt was an unproductive life."[19]

Newspaper writing had given Inge confidence, and he thought he could write as well as the authors of some of the plays he had seen. In three months' time he wrote "Farther Off From Heaven." "I didn't always know what I was doing," he admits.[20] This initial work, having won Williams' support, was first sent to Audrey Wood, who was Williams' agent. She firmly rejected it, suggesting its production by an experimental group. Inge was insulted at the time but has since

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[16]William Inge, "St. Louis Personalities," St. Louis Star-Times, November 11, 1944, p. 11.

[17]Passionate Playgoer, p. 247.

[18]Bracker, loc. cit.

[19]20th Century Authors, p. 476.

[20]Bracker, loc. cit.

concurred with her judgment. The play was a "family-portrait sort of thing," Inge stated in 1953. "It didn't have much story or action. I regard it as a first draft. I'm thinking of rewriting it."[21] Earlier he had admitted that "the play had none of the action or plot interest that are minimum essentials in any Broadway production."[22] The play dealt with "a shoe salesman, his ambitious wife, and two maladjusted children."[23] In 1947, Inge decided to send the play to Tennessee Williams, who was in Dallas working with Margo Jones, and it was produced there as a companion piece to Williams' Summer and Smoke. The play proved to be acceptable to the critics. Inge recalled:

> I felt pretty encouraged, but the play itself didn't dig very deeply into peoples' lives. It suggested the deeper meanings pretty tentatively. It was a sort of sketch--something I want to do in deeper perspective.[24]

With the end of the war, the friend who had held Inge's job before him returned, and Inge relinquished the position. In 1946, he took an extension teaching job with the English department of Washington University in St. Louis.[25]

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Richard Gehrman, "Guardian Agent," Theatre Arts, July, 1950, p. 21.

[23] Bracker, loc. cit.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Bernard Sobel, ed., The New Theatre Handbook and Digest of Plays (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), p. 379.

Inge continued to write plays while in St. Louis and produced two works, one of which, "Front Porch," was later to provide the characters for Inge's most famous play, Picnic.[26] Inge's third effort was more successful. "I began to develop [an earlier fragmentary short story] and it began to write [sic.] me. I felt for the first time that I really had a play."[27] This play was produced in New York by the Theatre Guild after a successful summer run in Westport, Connecticut. Its title was Come Back, Little Sheba. Sparked by the acting of Shirley Booth and Sydney Blackmer, it was to be the first of four commercially successful plays by Inge: Come Back, Little Sheba (1950), Picnic (1953), Bus Stop (1955), and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (1957). The Broadway productions of Sheba, Picnic, and Bus Stop were followed almost immediately by motion picture versions for which the film industry paid Inge one million dollars before taxes, according to Time Magazine.[28] "A Loss of Roses" (1959) followed. It ran just nine days for eleven performances.

In addition to his full-length plays, Inge has written a baker's dozen of one-act plays, three of which have been published: "The Mall,"[29] "Glory in the Flower,"[30] and

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[26]At two intermediate stages the play was titled, "A House With Two Doors" and "Women in Summer."

[27]Bracker, loc. cit.

[28]Time, December 16, 1957, p. 54.

[29]William Inge, "The Mall," Esquire, January, 1959, pp. 75-8.

[30]William Inge, "Glory in the Flower," 24 Favorite One-Act Plays, ed. Bennett Cerf and Van H. Cartmell (New York: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 133-150.

"The Tiny Closet."[31] The one-acts are of special interest, as Inge tends to develop his major productions from such materials.[32]

Inge, strangely depressed and disillusioned by his success, underwent psychoanalysis a few weeks after Sheba opened. Recalling this period, Inge provides us with a partial answer as to why.

> Other people, friends and acquaintances, couldn't imagine why I started being psychoanalyzed at this time. "But you're a success now, they would assure me. "What do you want to get analyzed for?" As though successful people automatically become happy. . . . None of [my plays] has brought me the kind of joy, the hilarity, I had craved as a boy, as a young man. . . . Strange and ironic. Once we find the fruits of success, the taste is nothing like what we had anticipated.[33]

Inge's problems were further complicated by alcoholism, a condition with which he had struggled and which led to his becoming a member of Alcoholics Anonymous a short time after Picnic, his second play, opened on Broadway in 1953. It is to be noted that his first play, Come Back, Little Sheba was based in part on Inge's own experiences as an alcoholic.[34]

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[31]William Inge, "The Tiny Closet," The Best Short Plays: 1958-1959, ed. Margaret Mayorga (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 35-43.

[32]Recently Inge announced that he was about to write a full-length version of "Bus Riley's Back in Town," a one-act play that was produced at Pennsylvania State University in 1958. (Milton Esterow, "News of the Rialto: Inge's Plans," New York Times, June 17, 1962, sect. II, p. 1.)

[33]William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. vi.

[34]Bracker, loc. cit.

Inge's public life has been extremely limited since he moved to New York in 1950 after a two-months residence in southern Connecticut. He has, of course, been present for the openings of his plays in 1953, 1955, 1957, and 1959. But he seems to prefer to remain apart, living in an apartment in one of the more conservative neighborhoods bordering Central Park. Occasionally his name gets into the papers in connection with a dramatic festival or theatrical planning committee. Recently, for instance, he was elected a trustee of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Theatre Arts,[35] was chosen to be a judge for the U.N.-A.N.T.A. sponsored one-act play competition,[36] and was named as a member of the Theatre Advisory Group to Dartmouth College's new seven-and-a-half million dollar educational and cultural center.[37] Except for such honorary appearances, however, he seems deliberately to avoid publicity.

Describing him in 1953, Milton Bracker wrote that Inge was a quiet, articulate, determined man, unmarried, and without ostentation.[38] Four years later Maurice Zolotow added,

> Inge is a plump, slow-moving, slow-speaking man. His face is large and noble, his features are patrician, his eyes are light transparent blue, very large and sensitive eyes.[39]

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[35]New York Times, January 11, 1959, p. 2.

[36]New York Times, January 22, 1959, p. 26.

[37]New York Times, April 3, 1959, p. 122.

[38]Bracker, loc. cit.

[39]Maurice Zolotow, "Playwright on the Eve," New York Times, November 22, 1959, sect. II, p. 3.

Currently Inge is on the West Coast writing for the films and working on two new full-length plays, "Natural Affection" and "Bus Riley's Back in Town." This year (1962) a book of one-act plays is scheduled to be published.[40] It is clear that he intends to continue writing for both stage and screen.

> I like writing for the films because they are a mass media [sic.] and because they are visual. I will continue writing for them (and the theatre when I feel like it) as long as I can write either original stories or adaptations of novels that really interest me.[41]

Standards

Inge has written very little concerning his objectives. What he has written about his plays (and he has written an excellent commentary on his Broadway successes)[42] has been tailored to the existing facts.

Until a play is produced, public reaction to it cannot, of course, influence the playwright's thinking, but when the play opens and the reviews and critiques are published the playwright may find himself in a defensive position which calls on him to rebut criticism and defend his own opinions and objectives. At the same time, he is exposed to a variety of penetrating and often provocative analyses. Under such circumstances, a playwright is likely

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[40] New York Times, June 17, 1962, sect. II, p. 1.

[41] William Inge, "Writing for Films," Playbill, October 16, 1961, p. 9.

[42] William Inge, 4 Plays, pp. v-x.

to adopt in his own defense approaches which other critics have taken, if they further clarify his basic intentions. The result may be a considerable development of his original approach if not a complete reworking of it.

Inge has written several short newspaper articles in which his objectives are suggested, and there are a few relevant passages to be found in the mass of material he wrote as the theatre critic of the St. Louis Star-Times. However, no detailed summation of his objectives has been published. The vast majority of Inge's non-dramatic writings are ex post facto descriptions of his play's production and content, in which he explains and justifies what he has done. This material will be discussed in the final chapter.

In his early reviews for the St. Louis Star-Times, Inge made conventional judgments using familiar theories and terminology. "The main antagonist of any drama," he wrote in 1945, "must be hated, and to be hated with justification, he must be the conscious perpetrator of evil."[43] The sentence smacks of William Archer. Having read somewhere that characters should develop during the course of a play, Inge wrote in an even earlier review:

> It is perhaps debatable whether Life with Father actually is a play. There is no basic motivation for anything the actors do, and at the end of the third act, none of the characters is changed in any

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[43]William Inge, "'Tomorrow the World' Has Message On Post-War Nazis," St. Louis Star-Times, October 25, 1945, p. 9.

respect from what he was at the beginning.[44]

While there is not enough evidence to draw absolute conclusions, it is clear that during this period, Inge tended to measure and evaluate plays according to conventional standards.

When Inge moved to New York he began to develop a personal rationale which can be pieced together from the statements he made in a number of articles he wrote and interviews he gave. In 1954, after he had written three successful plays, he made this brief but significant statement of his objectives:

> I want my plays to provide the audience with an experience they can enjoy (and people can enjoy themselves crying as much as laughing) and which shocks them with the unexpected in human nature, with the deep inner life that exists privately behind the life that is publicly presented.[45]

Inge has also clearly stated his antipathy for any play designed to dramatize a message.

> I don't think the pure "message" play gets across or changes the audience's mind. I hate a play that tells me what to think.[46]

So he wrote plays in which he claimed there was no apparent message.

> I have never written a play that had any intended theme or that tried to propound any particular idea.[47]

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[44]William Inge, "'Life with Father' Still Proves Enjoyable In American Return," St. Louis Star-Times, November 15, 1943, p. 4.

[45]William Inge, "From 'Front Porch' to Broadway," Theatre Arts, April, 1954, p. 33.

[46]Bracker, loc. cit.

[47]Inge, Theatre Arts, April, 1954, p. 33.

Taken literally, this last statement may seem an overstatement. Art is a structured experience and reflects a point of view (theme), whether it is stated explicitly or not. Fortunately, Inge modified his initial stand three years later. "I never start [italics mine] writing with a 'theme' in mind," he admitted. "I find my themes only as the characters and the situation develop."[48] His belief persisted, however, that a play should provide an experience rather than an idea or story.

> A play should be admired for the experience it gives, not for the ideas a playgoer comes away remembering. He should feel richer within himself, more responsive, more aware.[49]

It is clear that what Inge is rejecting is merely the pure thesis or propaganda play and trite moral aphorisms. Despite Inge's ingenious explanations of his intentions, his plays reflect ethical and intellectual judgments.

Inge never defends his plays from criticism on the basis of fixed criteria. Rather he deflects criticism by carefully describing and explaining his dramatic intentions. This conveniently limits discussion to determining whether or not the playwright has succeeded in achieving what he says he intended. While such a discussion may be interesting, it ignores any comparative judgment based on the efforts of other playwrights, or the intellectual concerns of the day. An attempt to determine Inge's position as a

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[48] Time, December 16, 1957, p. 42.

[49] Inge, 4 Plays, p. vii.

contemporary dramatist must, of necessity, judge him in terms of what is happening throughout the theatrical scene.

It is not surprising that Inge, whose plays vary greatly in structure, has favored free form. Dramatic form, he has stated, should be the by-product of character interaction. "Form" he wrote in 1958, "is the shape any creative work must take in order to exist with its ultimate force, beauty, and meaning."[50]

Inge has repeatedly exploited psychoanalysis to help him uncover "the deep inner life that exists privately,"[51] and to help provide the audience with an experience rather than a story. His plays are filled with its terminology, its findings, and its techniques. Asked to what extent he was affected by the Freudian interpretation of the nature of man, he replied rather obscurely:

> Any writer inwardly involved with his own time cannot help but reflect the feelings and viewpoints that Freud exposed in us. . . . I feel that the understanding and sympathy expressed for human characters . . . come about as the result of Freud's discoveries, even though the authors . . . may not have read Freud, or any of the psychoanalytic writers since.[52]

The other articles that Inge has written are filled with provocative statements and opinions. But in all cases they are ex post facto judgments, not propositions; commentary, not statements of objectives. Only as the individual

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[50]Inge, 4 Plays, p. vii.

[51]Inge, Theatre Arts, April, 1954, p. 33.

[52]W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), p. 256.

plays are investigated will we discover how Inge "provides an audience with an experience . . . which shocks them with the unexpected in human nature."[53] Only after we have investigated them can his objectives be deduced.

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[53]Theatre Arts, April, 1954, p. 33.

CHAPTER II

COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA

Background

Come Back, Little Sheba was written by Inge while he was an instructor of English at Washington University in 1948. Developed from a fragmentary short story, the play convinced Inge of his ability and provided him with the first genuine satisfaction he had derived from play writing.[1] It will be recalled that Inge had written "Farther Off from Heaven" the year before and that it had been produced with Williams' Summer and Smoke in Dallas. Evidently this earlier play provided Inge with little more than the temporary relief of his frustrated artistic wish to express himself. Certainly it did not give him any lasting satisfaction.

Phyllis Anderson, the associate producer of Come Back, Little Sheba, and the head of the play reading department of the Theatre Guild, has contributed an exact record of Come Back, Little Sheba's production history from February 4, 1949, when it was initially submitted by Inge's agent, Audrey

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[1]Milton Bracker, "Boy Actor to Broadway Author," New York Times, March 22, 1953, sect. II, p. 1.

Wood, until it closed in July of the following year.[2] Two months after it was submitted to the Theatre Guild, Come Back, Little Sheba was selected for the Theatre Guild's Westport, Connecticut, summer season. After tryouts, Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer were selected for the leading roles. The play, which opened at Westport under Daniel Mann's direction on September 12, was acclaimed by the critics. It was so well received that the Theatre Guild decided to produce it on Broadway. Unfortunately, Sidney Blackmer, Shirley Booth, and Daniel Mann were already committed to other plays, and Come Back, Little Sheba's opening was postponed for five months. The play finally opened on Broadway on February 15, 1950. Inge, whose anxiety had been tremendously increased by the five months delay, consoled himself with coffee and waited for the review.[3] The play was modestly successful and, after a number of uneven performances, settled down to a comfortable run of 190 performances. In early July, the film rights were sold, and the following fall a touring company was formed. The fact that the film industry and the investors who sponsored the touring company were willing to buy the play attests to its commercial value.

Commenting on the initially luke-warm responses awarded Come Back, Little Sheba, Inge wrote long after the

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[2]Phyllis Anderson, "Diary of a Production," Theatre Arts, November, 1951, p. 58.

[3]Ibid.

play had closed:

> It takes the slow-moving theatre audience one or two plays by a new author, who brings them something new from life outside the theatre, before they can feel sufficiently comfortable with him to consider fairly what he has to say. A good author insists on being accepted on his own terms, and audiences must bicker awhile before they're willing to give in.[4]

As audiences became aware of Inge's intent and familiar with his procedures, they stopped "bickering."

Action

Come Back, Little Sheba is concerned with a crisis in the lives of an unsuccessful, middle-aged couple, Doc and Lola Delaney. Both of them have found ways to avoid the realities of their own blighted union, a union initiated with a hasty marriage and the birth of a still-born daughter. The action of the play takes place in two rooms of the Delaney home, the kitchen and the living room, both shown simultaneously. The first scene, which is the play's longest, clearly reveals Inge's method of organizing a play as a composite, a conglomerate in which each incident by its interaction with other incidents contributes to the overall picture.

The scene opens in the Delaney's kitchen at eight o'clock on a spring morning. Inge establishes Doc, a quiet middle-aged man, as the figure around which the action momentarily centers. In quick succession he appears in episodes with Marie, a young energetic boarder, then with

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[4]William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. vii.

his apathetic wife, Lola, and finally in an episode with both of them. The opening unit reveals his affection for Marie, the second his lack of communion with his wife, and the third his resentment of Turk, an athletic ex-serviceman who drops by to take Marie to the library. Soon after Turk's arrival Doc leaves for his office, and Lola becomes and remains the central character up to the end of the scene. Lola's conversation with Marie reveals that Marie is engaged to be married to Bruce, a rather uninteresting young man who "comes from one of the best families in Cincinnati,"[5] and discloses some of Lola's background, including her protected youth, her quick marriage to Doc, the loss of their daughter, her inability to have any more children, and her father's complete abandonment of her.

For a short time after this long unit Lola is left alone. Then a mailman, Lola's next-door neighbor named Mrs. Coffman, and a milkman temporarily relieve Lola's loneliness. Lola tries to prolong each of their visits, but each has responsibilities which call him away. Alone again, Lola immerses herself in a radio program. "It's Ta-boo, radio listeners," says an oily voice, "your fifteen minutes of temptation."[6]

A few moments later a Western Union messenger delivers a telegram for Marie, which Lola opens to learn that Marie's fiance will arrive the following day. Marie brings Turk

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[5]Ibid., p. 13.

[6]Ibid., p. 22.

back to the house to pose for her life drawing, and Doc returns from his office. The scene ends with a contrapuntal sequence in which Doc and Lola, Marie and Turk, take part. In the kitchen Doc angrily accuses Lola of encouraging Turk, while unseen by him Turk starts making advances to Marie in the living room.

The remaining scenes in the play are much shorter. In the second scene of the first act, the contrast between the two couples is disclosed. The first half of this scene bares the relationship between Doc and Lola, the second that between Turk and Marie. Joining the segments is another of Inge's contrapuntal scenes in which the dialogue and the action of the two couples are set against each other.

The opening segment between Doc and Lola establishes Lola's simplicity, romanticism, and her desperate drive to recapture her youth. It also makes it clear that Doc is equally desperate to forget the past. Each time that Lola tries to discuss the past Doc changes the subject. "Remember the dances we used to go to, Daddy?"[7] Lola asks. And Doc answers, "Please, Honey, I'm trying to read."[8] "Remember the walks we used to take?"[9] "That was twenty years ago."[10] "Remember the first time you kissed me?"[11] "Baby, what's done is done."[12] "Remember the Charleston, Daddy?"[13]

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[7] Ibid., p. 31

[8] Ibid.,

[9] Ibid., p. 32.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 33.

[13] Ibid., p. 35.

"What's in the past can't be helped. You . . . you've got to forget it and live for the present."[14]

The episode between Marie and Turk which balances Doc and Lola's is appropriately about the future, the immediate future. "How about tonight, lovely; going to be lonesome?"[15] asks Turk, and Marie demurely accepts his proposition. "Tonight will never come again,"[16] she says as they embrace and start to dance.

Two examples of Inge's contrapuntal technique will illustrate how Inge binds these two contrasting episodes together. His first method is to juxtapose dialogue and action. "Do you have to go now?"[17] asks Lola as Doc prepares to leave. In the living room Turk and Marie move closer on the couch. The implications of this juxtaposition are obvious: the older couple is separating, the younger couple is uniting. A second example which illustrates how Inge's characters interact obliquely occurs just before Doc leaves for his Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. It is contained entirely in a stage direction and indicates how important is Doc's belief in Marie. Each time that Doc hears Turk laugh he turns to a whiskey bottle, but Marie's giggle and Lola's voice turn him away.

> (DOC is at platform when he hears TURK laugh on the porch. DOC sees whiskey bottle. Reaches for it and hears MARIE giggle. Turns away as TURK laughs again. Turns back to the bottle and hears LOLA'S voice from upstairs.)[18]

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[14] Ibid., p. 33.

[15] Ibid., p. 41.

[16] Ibid., p. 42.

[17] Ibid., p. 37.

[18] Ibid., p. 39.

This episode does more than illustrate the way in which juxtaposed characters interact in Inge's plays, it also clearly identifies the tenuosity of the restraints which hold Doc from alcoholism: his belief in Marie and his responsibility toward Lola.

The second act of Come Back, Little Sheba is made up of four short scenes. In the opening scene, Doc remarks to Lola at the breakfast table that he thought he heard a man's voice in the night. Then, as he leaves for work, he is sickened to hear Turk laughing in Marie's room. He stumbles outside but soon returns looking for the whiskey bottle. At the door he meets Turk who slips away mumbling unintelligible apologies. Cautiously Doc secretes the bottle in his raincoat. Lola comes down stairs and kisses him good-bye, Marie catches his eye and smiles. Doc goes out.

In the second scene of act two, which takes place that evening, Inge once again juxtaposes two worlds. This time they are the romantic, candlelit world that Lola has created for Bruce and Marie, and the world of sick panic which engulfs Lola when she discovers the whiskey bottle missing and realizes that Doc is out on a binge.

The third scene of the second act contains the climax of the play. Unable to believe that Marie is responsible for her actions, and blaming his wife for encouraging the couple, Doc returns home and attacks Lola with an axe. Fortunately he is almost at the point of physical exhaustion and collapses after a terrifying struggle. The action is

quickly resolved. Ed and Elmo, two men from Alcoholics Anonymous, remove Doc, and Marie, unaware of the chaos that she has created and undeterred by her premarital sexual relations with Turk, announces blandly that she is leaving school to marry her fiance, Bruce. In the final scene, Doc, after a week in the City Hospital, comes quietly home to take up life again, and the play ends with his reconciliation with Lola.

Characters

Of the four characters who dominate this play, Doc, Lola, Marie, and Turk, the latter is the least completely drawn. Certainly his physical attributes are manifest. He is, according to Inge's stage direction,

> A young, big, husky, good-looking boy, nineteen or twenty. He has the openness, the generosity, vigor and health of youth. He's had a little time in the service, but he is not what one would call disciplined. He wears faded dungarees and a T-shirt.[19]

While his actions during the course of the play verify his impetuosity and virility, very little more is learned about him except that he is in college on a football scholarship,[20] that he models in Marie's art class, that he throws the javelin, that he likes sex. Nothing is learned of his family background. What future lies ahead of him is a mystery.

Marie is given only slightly more depth. Inge describes her as a cheerful young girl of eighteen or

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[19] Ibid., p. 14.

[20] Ibid., p. 11.

nineteen.[21] Her actions and her comments reveal more. First of all she is a flirt, who teases Doc as well as Turk. "Aren't you going to kiss me, Dr. Delaney?" she asks Doc in the first scene.[22] She is also very practical, realizing that while she likes Turk she will marry Bruce. "Bruce is so dependable, and . . . he's a gentleman," she explains and then adds, "Bruce is going to come into a lot of money some day."[23] Marie is also practical enough not to have tied herself down before coming to college. Near the end of the play she explains to Lola the agreement she had with her fiance. "Bruce and I had a very businesslike understanding before I left for school that we weren't going to sit around lonely just because we were separated."[24] Very little is said about Marie's background, but one of her lines is instructive. "Sometimes I'm glad I didn't know my father," she admits, and then adds, "Mom always let me do pretty much as I please."[25] Whether Marie's father died or simply separated from his family is never stated. The permissive attitude of Marie's mother helps to explain Marie's sexual independence. One rather amusing characteristic is Marie's habit of skipping, running, and dancing. Marie never walks on or off stage except when she is with Bruce.

Inge does not give descriptions of Doc and Lola in the published play. Their size, their age, their physical

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[21] Ibid., p. 5.

[22] Ibid., p. 11.

[23] Ibid., p. 13.

[24] Ibid., p. 50.

[25] Ibid., p. 14.

characteristics are omitted. Pictures of the Broadway play show Doc dressed in shirt and vest and Lola in a lumpy kimono. The script confirms the clothing but nothing else. Despite this surprising omission Doc and Lola's characters and backgrounds are quite fully delineated. The play contains the following information scattered through its pages. Doc is a middle-aged man, the son of a wealthy widow who lived in Green Valley.[26] He married Lola when she was eighteen.[27] Lola was pregnant at the time.[28] Afraid of social ostracism the young couple had the baby delivered by an unqualified and unidentified "woman." The baby died, and the Delaneys' world began to crumble. Doc withdrew from medical school and became a chiropractor. The twenty-five thousand dollars which his mother left him when she died was soon gone, spent first on office equipment, then alcohol, and finally hospital bills.[29] As he became an alcoholic, Doc's practice deteriorated. In the last year he has slowly built it up again.[30]

At the beginning of the play it is clear that Doc is barely holding on to his emotional stability and that Marie has become an important factor in his life. His emotional involvement with Marie, whatever its nature,[31]

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[26] Ibid., p. 13.

[27] Ibid., p. 14.

[28] Ibid., p. 33.

[29] Ibid., p. 13.

[30] Ibid., p. 17.

[31] Whether, as is proposed by Sievers (Freud on Broadway, p. 353), Doc resents Marie's seduction because of his own subconscious desire for the young boarder, or whether he wants to protect Marie because he thinks of her as his own still-born daughter, is never clear.

lets him forget his own failures and his present condition, and provides him with an ideal which he can connect with his own lost hopes.

One of Doc's curious idiosyncrasies is his habit of picking up and fondling Marie's scarf. Twice during the play this fetishism is demonstrated, once in the first scene of the play and again just before Turk's laugh is heard in Marie's room. For Doc, Marie is the personification of all that he had hoped for as a young man. The play's action is dominated by the response Doc makes when this ideal is destroyed.

The early parts of the play indicate how Doc sublimates his physical desire for Marie by viewing her with an almost religious reverence. Marie is a fun-loving, vigorously uninhibited young woman. Doc, unfortunately, connects her with his own religious feelings:

> Study hard, Marie, learn to be a fine artist some day. Paint a lot of beautiful pictures. I remember a picture my mother had over the mantlepiece at home, a picture of a cathedral in a sunset, one of those big cathedrals in Europe somewhere. Made you feel religious just to look at it.[32]

Later, dismayed at finding her doing a figure study of the muscular athlete, he complains: "Why doesn't she draw something else, a bowl of flowers or a cathedral . . . or a sunset?"[33] When Marie goes upstairs in the first scene to take a bath, after stating that she likes to start the day feeling fresh and clean, Doc repeats her words after her exit,

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[32]Inge, 4 Plays, p. 6. [33]Ibid., p. 25.

"Yes, fresh and clean--."[34] Inge's stage directions at this point read "(The words appeal to him.)"[35] Perhaps the most conclusive evidence of Doc's attitude is provided by his reaction to hearing "Ave Maria" at the beginning of the second scene of the first act. Left alone on stage for a moment, Doc starts twisting the dial of the radio.

> He rejects one noisy program after another, then very unexpectedly he comes across a rendition of Shubert's famous "Ave Maria" sung in a high soprano voice. Probably he has encountered the piece before somewhere, but it is now making its first impression on him. Gradually he is transported into a world of ethereal beauty which he never knew existed. He listens intently. The music has expressed some ideal of beauty he never fully realized and he is even a little mystified.[36]

Inge makes it very clear that Marie is also an "ideal of beauty" for Doc. In act two, at the moment when Doc is made aware of Marie's premarital relationship with Turk, Inge inserts the following comment in a stage direction. "(The lyrical grace, the spiritual ideal of Ave Maria is shattered.)"[37]

At the beginning of the play, despite his hasty marriage, his withdrawal from medical school, and his alcoholism, Doc has succeeded in adjusting to life. Part of the circle which protects him from reality is his attitude toward, and faith in, Marie. Turk and Marie's affair destroys this circle, and momentarily reality galvanizes Doc into murderous action. Only when Maris is gone, and after Doc

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[34] Ibid., p. 7.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. 29.

[37] Ibid., p. 44.

has been restrained at the City Hospital, is a new circle drawn, a circle about Doc's quiet desperation, a circle bulwarked with Lola's love.

Thoreau followed his now familiar line from Walden, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," with another which may be called the theme of Come Back, Little Sheba. "What is called resignation," Thoreau wrote, "is confirmed desperation."[38] Doc is resigned to his predicament when he returns from the hospital at the end of the play, and, despite the tremendous improvement in his relationship with his wife, his resignation is certainly that of confirmed desperation.

Lola is the most carefully drawn character in the play. While the limits of her experience are narrow, she is brilliantly drawn. Lola's actions reveal her character. She is late to meals. She does not wash the dishes. On her first appearance she is dishevelled. During the play she flirts with the milkman and the postman. She is fascinated by sentimental rubbish on the radio. She is "dazed" by Turk's semi-nudity.

Perhaps the most characteristic of her actions, which demonstrate her loneliness and romanticism, are her encouragement of Turk and Marie, and the forlorn cries for the little dog she lost so many years before. In the first scene, when Marie asks Lola, "Is it all right if I bring Turk

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[38]Henry David Thoreau, Walden, Vol. I (Bibliophile Society, Boston, 1909), p. 60.

home this morning to pose for me?"[39] not only does Lola agree, but offers to let Marie and Turk use the living room that evening. "Doc's gonna be gone tonight. You and Turk can have the living room if you want to."[40] Later that morning she brings up the matter once again. "Remember, Marie, you and Turk can have the front room tonight. All to yourselves.[41] Lola may not be completely responsible for the relationship between Turk and Marie, but her encouragement leads directly to the liaison which activates Doc. Lola is fully aware of the liaison, it should be noted, as she is watching the couple when Marie agrees to letting Turk spend the night with her.

Lola's loneliness is most obviously expressed in her dreams of Little Sheba and her plaintive cries in the night for the lost puppy. Lola's urge for vicarious romance and her loneliness are beautifully juxtaposed at the end of act one. Just before the act ends, Turk and Marie dance slowly out the door.

> (LOLA moves quietly into the living room and out onto the porch. There she can be heard calling plaintively in a lost voice.) Little Sheba . . . Come back . . . Come back, Little Sheba. Come back.[42]

After the climax of the play a new dimension is added to the character of Lola, a feeling of protectiveness for Doc. Soon after Doc returns from the hospital he loses control of his emotions and begs Lola for forgiveness. Inge's stage

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[39]Inge, 4 Plays, p. 12.

[40]Ibid., p. 13.

[41]Ibid., pp. 17-18.

[42]Ibid., p. 42.

directions and Lola's response reveal Lola as protector as well as wife.

> LOLA. (There is surprise on her face and new comment. She becomes almost angelic in demeanor. Tenderly she places a soft hand on his head.) Daddy! Why of course I'll never leave you. (A smile of satisfaction.) You're all I've got. You're all I ever had.[43]

At the end of the play it is also clear that she is more capable of facing the future. Little Sheba has died in her dreams, and it is to be supposed that the end of her longing for her youth which Sheba represented has released her to live a more effective life. The house is clean, her husband is home and needs her, and Lola once more has a purpose in life. Her final line, "I'll fix your eggs,"[44] may not be poetry, but it indicates her mental stability and the resumption of an existence approximating a normal life.

Characterization, as it provides the initial stimulus for Inge's playwriting, is fundamental in his plays. In Come Back, Little Sheba his characters are small; that is, they are people whose influence never extends beyond their own immediate circle of acquaintances. They do not affect national, state, or community policy. They are not affected by events outside of their isolated, personal world. They are characters who live in a world cut off from contemporary history, isolated by the personal and individual nature of their predicament. Inge seems to be interested in men as individual units, not as members of a larger community.

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[43] Ibid., p. 67.

[44] Ibid., p. 69.

Limited in this way, Inge's characters acquire universality and accurately illustrate basic aspects of the human condition: failure, alienation, resignation, unconnected to any specific political, intellectual, or ideological movement.

Dream Symbolism

One of the most intriguing factors in Come Back, Little Sheba is Inge's dream symbolism. Two dreams are recounted by Lola in the play, both dealing with her white puppy, Little Sheba, which ran away long ago and which Lola expects to return. The title of the play is, as a result, the futile cry of a middle-aged woman for the youth that has slipped away from her. It should be noted that the dialogue which leads into Lola's telling of her dream and that which follows it is identical for both dreams, implying that despite Doc's momentary lapse, his attitude is the same as it was before his attack. Lola's first dream of Little Sheba is related immediately after her first appearance on stage; the second one, just before the final curtain, closes the parenthetical arrangement which Inge has used. That Doc has listened to many of Lola's dreams is obvious from the start.

> LOLA. (Sadly.) I had another dream last night.
> DOC. (Pours coffee.) About Little Sheba?
> LOLA. (With sudden animation.) It was just as real. I dreamt I put her on a leash and we walked down town--to do some shopping. All of the people on the street turned around to admire her, and I felt so proud. Then we started to walk, and the blocks started going by so fast that Little Sheba couldn't keep up with me. Suddenly I looked around and Little Sheba was gone. Isn't that funny? I looked everywhere for her, but I couldn't find her. And I stood there feeling sort of afraid.

(Pause.) Do you suppose that means anything?
DOC. Dreams are funny.[44]

Lola's last dream of Little Sheba is used by Inge to provide subtle but conclusive evidence of Lola's new maturity, as well as a mechanical device to indicate that the play has come full cycle. It is evident that the second dream tells symbolically the story of her life; the changing athletes represent her various suitors, the javelin provides a rather obvious phallic symbol, and the dead puppy stands for her lost youth.

LOLA. . . . I had another dream last night.
DOC. About Little Sheba?
LOLA. Oh, it was about everyone and everything. (In a raptured tone.) Marie and I were going to the Olympics back in our old high school stadium. There were thousands of people there. There was Turk out in the center of the field throwing the javelin. Every time he threw it the crowd would roar . . . and you know who the man in charge was: It was my father. Isn't that funny? . . . But Turk kept changing into someone else all the time. And then my father disqualified him. So he had to sit on the sidelines . . . and guess who took his place, Daddy? You! You came trotting out there on the field just as big as you please . . .
DOC. (Smiling). How did I do, Baby?
LOLA. Fine. You picked up the javelin real careful, like it was awful heavy. But you threw it, Daddy, clear up into the sky. And it never came down again. (DOC looks very pleased with himself. LOLA goes on.) Then it started to rain, and I couldn't find Little Sheba. I almost went crazy looking for her, and there were so many people, I didn't even know where to look. And you were waiting to take me home. And we walked and walked through the slush and mud and people were hurrying all around us and . . . and . . . (Sentimental tears come to her eyes.) This part is sad, Daddy. All of a sudden I saw Little Sheba . . . she was lying in the middle of the field . . . dead. . . . It made me cry, Doc. No one paid any attention. . . . I cried and cried. It made me feel so

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[44]Ibid., p. 7.

> bad, Doc. That sweet little puppy . . . her curly white fur all smeared with mud, and no one to stop and take care of her . . .
>
> DOC. Why couldn't you?
>
> LOLA. I wanted to, but you wouldn't let me. You kept saying, "We can't stay here, Honey; we gotta go on. We gotta go on." (Pause.) Now isn't that strange?
>
> DOC. Dreams are funny.[45]

The dream is so crowded with symbols that one is tempted to find significance in every detail. Not until Rosemary, the spinster teacher in Picnic, mistook a hose for a snake would Inge's audience nod with more knowing satisfaction at having understood his Freudian symbolism.

Structure

Considerable criticism of Inge's first act and violent climax is on record. The following comment by Brooks Atkinson is typical. "Come Back, Little Sheba is a small play. During the first half . . . so slight it verges on the monotonous."[46] Inge has justified and explained this seeming lack of dramatic impact in the following way:

> I remember once being in a tornado. It came like a blast after a morning of unnatural quiet in the atmosphere. It wasn't a dull monotonous quiet; it somehow had intensity and meaning, and there was just an occasional breath of breeze to suggest a hidden restlessness that had to break. No one could interpret this atmosphere, but people in the community felt that something was going to happen. That is the atmosphere that I wanted to create in my plays; a slow, slightly suspenseful prelude to the eruption of a man's despair.[47]

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[45] Ibid., p. 68.

[46] Brooks Atkinson, NYTCR, February 20, 1950, p. 348.

[47] William Inge, "The Schizophrenic Wonder," Theatre Arts, May, 1950, p. 23.

That these earlier scenes did hold audience attention can be deduced from the reaction of several other critics who attributed the capacity of the first act of the play to excite the imagination to the ability of the leading actors. "What makes the play absorbing to a degree in the earlier scenes and doubly compelling in its climax is the excellent acting of Shirley Booth, as Lola, and Sidney Blackmer as Doc,"[48] wrote William Henry Beyer. His reactions were typical. The critics on the whole were reluctant to acknowledge the major role played by Inge's script and his extraordinary ability to create effective emotional sequences. Several of the reviews were completely derogatory. The following is representative:

> Mr. Inge has written a poor play on all counts. Nothing is neat, there are no motivated curtains, the contrast [of plot and sub-plot] in the assorted drabness is never made really clear.[49]

Repeatedly the critics expressed dissatisfaction with the bareness of Come Back, Little Sheba's dramatic structure. "It is the synopsis of a good play, but the author has not filled in the scenario, hasn't detailed it sufficiently for the click it might have been," complained Robert Coleman.[50] "Unfortunately, the drama, despite its modest integrity, seems the outline of a play or perhaps a few scenes from

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[48]William Henry Beyer, "The State of the Theatre," School and Society, June 3, 1950, p. 345.

[49]Kappo Phelan, "'Come Back, Little Sheba,'" Commonweal, March 3, 1950, p. 558.

[50]Robert Coleman, "'Come Back, Little Sheba' Gets Much Out of Little," NYTCR, February 20, 1950, p. 350.

it rather than the finished work itself," said Richard Watts.[51] "It is all obviously blocked out, underwritten and underdeveloped with no integration of the various facets used to present Doc and Lola in their special milieux," was Beyer's comment.[52]

Come Back, Little Sheba is not formless. It was designed to meet the needs of a special progression, tracing a man's life through resignation and revolt back to resignation. The structure is asymmetrical, but it is balanced. Doc's violent attack compensates for the long preparation that precedes it. Inge's play, like those of Chekhov, Williams, Saroyan, and Wilder, does not fit the pattern of standard, conventional structure. It is a unique product shaped by the needs of particular character relationships and the situations they evoke. The critics were apparently unwilling to believe that such a seemingly modest play could be responsible for moving the audience as deeply as it did. They gave the chief credit to the stars.

The structure of Come Back, Little Sheba is unconventional, the story line is slight, and the play up to the climax is frustratingly restrained. Inge has suppressed overt action until late in the second act, avoiding the conventional pattern, a sequence of events which increase in vigor from attack to climax. His early scenes are calculated

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[51]Richard Watts, Jr., "The Man, the Dog, and the Bottle," NYTCR, February 20, 1950, p. 350.

[52]Beyer, op. cit., p. 345.

to engage the audience by building up its expectations. The longer nothing happens, the more something is expected to happen. These scenes leading up to Doc's attack frustrate the expectations of the audience and suggest more and more strongly the potential violence.

While Lola is an important character in the play, the protagonist is Doc. Lola may evoke pity and sympathy, but Doc, in addition to these emotions, raises our apprehensions. Lola is a passive personality. Doc is potentially dangerous. The play is constructed to expose this potential, bit by bit. In the first act we learn of Doc's failure to become a medical doctor; we are shown the disagreeable environment in which he lives; we learn of Doc's alcoholism and his attraction to Marie. During this part of the play the psychological pressure on Doc increases. Lola recalls their unhappy past. His anxiety about Marie is aggravated by Turk. Finally, he is a witness as Turk leaves the house after spending the night with Marie. Even at this point Inge avoids violence. Doc secretes a bottle of whiskey in his coat and walks out of the house.

Inge at this point uses two methods to bring the audience to the point of high anxiety and, more essentially, high involvement. First, he keeps Doc off-stage and allows the audience's uncertainty and fears to grow along with Lola's as she discovers the bottle missing, calls Alcoholics Anonymous, and tries to trace Doc. Secondly, Inge contrasts Lola's frantic state of mind with the mood of the candlelit

romantic dinner she has prepared for Marie and her visiting fiance, Bruce. Only after Bruce and Marie have left and Lola is close to exhaustion from waiting does Doc return. The scene of climactic fury which follows is sudden, but it has been completely prepared for and is psychologically necessary. Its violence is certainly understandable and justified by the pressures which have been put on Doc.

Other Factors

While analysis of structure and characterization provides insight into Inge's technique in Come Back, Little Sheba, three other aspects should be considered: the way in which Inge has used language; the locale which he has chosen; and the dramatic devices he has used.

Inge has employed colloquial language effectively in this play. The language is pedestrian in character, although, it should be noted, it is not pedestrian in its effect. As none of the characters in the play is exceptionally intelligent or witty, their language reflects this condition. It is colloquial and highly functional. Even the language of Marie, the most refined of the play's characters, is everyday. Inge has occasionally used more sophisticated language for humor. For instance, in an early scene between Turk and Marie, Turk asks: "Now Miss Buckholder, what is your opinion of the psychodynamic pressure of living in the atomic age?"[53] But "C'mon, Baby, we've got by with it before, haven't we?"[54] illustrates his

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[53] 4 Plays, p. 42. [54] Ibid., p. 41.

normal usage.

Since the playwright, like most contemporary writers, has limited his language to the everyday speech of the middle classes, his dialogue is restricted in its range. Inge has used dialogue conventionally to characterize, evoke emotional responses, and supply expository material. His dialogue is appropriate, functional, and unobtrusive. An example of the way Inge handled dialogue in Come Back, Little Sheba is seen in the following interchange which occurs at the beginning of the second act. Lola has just spent the day cleaning the house for Bruce's arrival. She is showing her German-born neighbor, Mrs. Coffman, the living room.

> MRS. COFFMAN. I declare! Overnight you turn the place into something really swanky.
> LOLA. Yes, and I bought a few new things, too.
> MRS. COFFMAN. Neat as a pin, and so warm and cozy. I take my hat off to you, Mrs. Delaney. I didn't know you had it in you. All these years, now, I been sayin' to myself, "That Mrs. Delaney is a good for nothing, sits around the house all day, and never so much as shakes a dust mop." I guess it just shows, we never really know what people are like.
> LOLA. I still got some coffee.
> MRS. COFFMAN. Not now,Mrs. Delaney, seeing your house so clean makes me feel ashamed. I gotta get home and get to work. (Goes to kitchen.)
> LOLA. (Follows.) I hafta get busy, too, I gotta get out all the silver and china. I like to set the table early, so I can spend the rest of the day looking at it. (Both laugh.)
> MRS. COFFMAN. Good day, Mrs. Delaney.[55]

It is clear from the dialogue that Mrs. Coffman is a neat person herself, a woman who has looked upon the disheveled Lola with disapproval. It is also clear that she is impressed by Lola's change. And, when she laughs with Lola

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[55]Ibid., p. 45.

as she is about to leave, we know that she is friendly and sympathetic.

The second supporting factor which characterizes Sheba is the locale. Although there was considerable disagreement as to whether Come Back, Little Sheba was a good play or not, few critics denied that in his first play Inge established himself as a master in presenting authentic, Midwestern, middle-class Americana. It is this Midwestern, middle-class scene which establishes the locale in all of Inge's professionally produced plays. "[Come Back, Little Sheba] is true Americana of a kind that has become rare on the stage for the past ten years or more," wrote Harold Clurman.[56] With an acute ear for Midwestern idioms and inflections, and a sharp eye for telling details, Inge vitalizes scenes which might otherwise be rejected as trivial, boring, or sordid. Occasionally the details obscure the action. Miss Euphemia Wyatt, in a rather amusingly old-fashioned review, writing from her particular viewpoint as critic for the Catholic World, found Come Back, Little Sheba

> a mean tragedy in which the aftermath of a youthful sin is shown with merciless precision and a Belascan realism which includes a succession of assorted snacks . . . a predominant garbage pail, dirty dishes and water left running in the sink to the shocked murmurs of the audience.[57]

In this particular case the critic seems to have been so

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[56]Harold Clurman, "A Good Play," New Republic, March 13, 1950, p. 23.

[57]Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, "Come Back, Little Sheba," Catholic World, April, 1950, p. 67.

struck by the setting that she found it easier to ignore or miss the significance of what was happening on stage.

Come Back, Little Sheba is also characterized by a minimum of dramatic machinery. Inge has avoided almost all of the conventional devices. There are no flashbacks. The action of the play progresses in a straight forward direction. Exposition is unobtrusively inserted in the dialogue, and narration is kept to a minimum. Inge's greatest concession to dramatic machinery is his use of Freudian symbolism, especially in Lola's dreams.

A final feature which characterizes Sheba is its universal significance. Every adult has experienced disappointment, frustration, and rejection at some time during his life, and it is these universal experiences and man's loss of youth with which Inge deals in this play. In Come Back, Little Sheba Inge presents two individuals who have been cut off from the world and each other. The play shows their struggle to achieve stability and affection. It is Inge's insight into and presentation of this peculiarly human experience which gives Come Back, Little Sheba its universality.

In Come Back, Little Sheba, Inge consistently avoids drawing attention to dramatic devices. He depends as much as possible on the commonplace to achieve his ends. His language is effective but not scintillating; his characters evoke sympathetic responses, but are not exceptional; he tries to avoid anything which would distort the world as he

knows it. Thus Come Back, Little Sheba is ended in such a way that the play becomes only a passing moment in the lives of real people. The audience is left wondering what will happen to Doc and Lola. Inge never reveals the final outcome, although he is willing to speculate, as he would about the future of an actual person. "Doc may or may not go on another binge," he wrote while the play was running in New York. "I forone, find it very easy to believe he will not."[58]

Inge has written a short commentary on Come Back, Little Sheba in which he made an attempt to clarify his objectives and to correct misconceptions concerning the play. Three factors were of especial concern to him: the classification of the play; the audience's attitude toward Marie, Lola, and Doc; and the implications of the final scene. "Sheba," he states, "is not a tragedy and I think the play misses its mark if it is regarded as such."[59] He preferred to classify it as a "pathetic comedy."[60] He noted that Come Back, Little Sheba does not have a protagonist with the stature required by Aristotle's definition of tragedy. While the battle over the label "tragedy" has not been settled, Inge's play, insofar as it is the treatment of the tragic aspect of life, certainly is middle-class tragedy.

Inge made the following comments about the characters in his plays:

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[58]Inge, Theatre Arts, May, 1950, p. 23.

[59]Ibid., p. 22. [60]Ibid.

> Lola is uneducated, lazy, and not very intelligent, but she possesses enough human warmth and compassion to make her [Doc's] equal in basic worth.
>
> Doc, because he is self-righteous, should not fool people into regarding him as a fallen aristocrat who has married beneath his station.
>
> Nor is Marie a 'slut.' Surely we are thinking in very Victorian terms if we refer to a girl in this way because she has been seduced before marriage.[61]

The fact that Inge tried to correct these misinterpretations is, of course, indicative of his concern over audience reaction. Whether, however, these "misinterpretations" arose because of ambiguity in the script, the demands of Broadway production, or the nature of the audiences who watched the play, is difficult to judge.

Preliminary Evaluation

Come Back, Little Sheba established a number of precedents which should be noted and evaluated. The most obvious aspect of the play is its dramatic structure. In Come Back, Little Sheba Inge initiated a system of dramatic amalgamation. Eschewing a clear-cut, gradually developing story line, he bombards the playgoer with a concentrated series of carefully juxtaposed and interrelated scenes. The result is a sustained audience involvement, which makes each part of the play interesting. The effect is the projection of what Inge refers to as an "overall texture."[62] For the playgoer who expects a story to emerge distinctly and

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[61] Ibid., p. 23.

[62] Ibid., p. vii.

steadily from the play, watching Come Back, Little Sheba becomes a somewhat confusing experience. Inge expects his audience to pay close attention to what happens on stage. "I doubt," he comments in the introduction to 4 Plays, "if my plays 'pay off' for an audience unless they are watched rather closely."[63] Elsewhere he wrote, "I strive to bring meaning to every moment, every action."[64] The technique which Inge has exploited most effectively within this dramatic composite, is the counterpoint of character, action, and dialogue.

Other factors which characterize and distinguish Come Back, Little Sheba are the dramatic ingredients he utilized: Inge's characters, his dialogue, and his locale, all derived from the middle-class, Midwestern world in which he grew up. Each of these elements is striking in its authenticity, although each of these elements is inherently unobtrusive.

Inge's preoccupation with the process of estrangement and readjustment is also illustrated by Come Back, Little Sheba, as is his concomitant tendency to interpret the personal problems of peripheral characters, such as Doc and Lola, in Freudian terms. Doc's fetishism and Lola's dreams reflect Inge's interest in psychoanalysis. Doc and Lola's struggle to adjust to each other and to their current plight is the basis for the entire play.

The theme of the play is suggested at the beginning of the second scene. Doc is talking to Lola.

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[63] Ibid., p. viii. [64] Ibid., p. vii.

> DOC. No . . . no, Baby. We should never feel bad about what's past. What's in the past can't be helped. You . . . you've got to forget it and live for the present. If you can't forget the past, you stay in it and never get out. I might be a big M.D. today, instead of a chiropractor; we might have had a family to raise and be with us now; I might still have a lot of money if I'd used my head and invested it carefully, instead of gettin' drunk every night. We might have a nice house, and comforts, and friends. But we don't have any of those things. So what! We gotta keep on living, don't we? I can't stop just 'cause I made a few mistakes. I gotta keep goin' . . . somehow.[65]

This is the philosophy of confirmed desperation that the play supports. This is the central meaning of the play.

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[65] Ibid., p. 33.

CHAPTER III

PICNIC

Background

Picnic, Inge's second play to reach Broadway, opened on February 19, 1953, at the Music Box Theatre and starred Ralph Meeker as Hal and Janice Rule as Madge. The New York production was variously described as "a piece of synthetic folklore,"[1] "a graph of emotion,"[2] "a kind of naturalistic round-dance of women hungry for what they have lost, or never had, or were better off without,"[3] and an "autumnal, fitfully erupting bit of nostalgia."[4]

While the New York newspaper critics were unanimously impressed by the play, several of them thought that Joshua Logan's direction distorted Inge's script. "Joshua Logan, who is a crackerjack craftsman, has done a meticulous, shrewd, thoroughly knowledgeable job of staging," noted Harold Clurman. But on stage, he added, the result was "a rather coarse boy-and-girl story with a leering sentimental

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[1]Eric Bentley, "Pathetic Phalluses," The Dramatic Event (New York: Horizon Press, 1954), p. 102.

[2]Richard Hayes, "'Picnic,'" Commonweal, March 20, 1953, p. 603.

[3]Time, March 2, 1953, p. 72.

[4]Walter Kerr, "Picnic," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 350.

emphasis on naked limbs and 'well-stacked' females."[5] Nathan added this comment: "What we have got is a big Broadway Show at the expense of a small but doubtless considerably superior play."[6] Henry Hewes summed it up when he said, "Each sequence in the play is a conscious demonstration of [Logan's] handiwork."[7]

That Picnic impressed the critics is evident. It won the Pulitzer prize as the best play dealing with the American scene. The New York Drama Critics Circle, made up of twenty-two critics in the New York area, chose it as the best new American play of the 1952-53 season, and the Outer Circle, an organization of out-of-town (New York) correspondents and critics selected Picnic as the best play of the year.

Action

The play shows the effect that a lusty young vagrant named Hal has on a representative cross-section of Midwestern womanhood, "a portrait gallery of women,"[8] "a fortress of feminity,"[9] The women include an old woman, a widow, a spinster past her prime, a wiry adolescent, and an as yet

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[5]Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, March 7, 1953, p. 213.

[6]George Jean Nathan, 'Director's Picnic," Theatre Arts, May 19, 1953, p. 15.

[7]Henry Hewes, "'Picnic' and More Fun," Saturday Review of Literature, March 7, 1953, p. 33.

[8]Richard Watts, 'Mr. Inge's Second Striking Play," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 345.

[9]William Inge, "From 'Front Porch' to Broadway," Theatre Arts, April, 1954, p. 33.

unawakened virgin. Hal affects each of them.

The action of the play, which runs its course in just twenty-four hours, takes place "on the porches and in the yards of two small houses that sit close beside each other in a small Kansas town."[10] The houses of Flo Owens and Helen Potts, which frame the stage picture, are backed with a Midwestern panorama: "a grain elevator, a railway station, a great silo and a church steeple."[11] The fact that Inge mentions the name of Cherryvale several times in the play as a nearby town would indicate that the locale is, in fact, Independence. Cherryvale, Kansas, is located eleven miles east of Independence. Independence is also the site of an annual Neewollah (Halloween spelled backwards)[12] celebration to which the play makes direct reference. The first act, which begins early on Labor Day morning, introduces and explains the relationships of all of the characters in the play except one.

Like Come Back, Little Sheba, Picnic is made up of a profusion of short, interrelated episodes. In the opening minutes of the first act we are introduced to Hal, the virile vagrant; Mrs. Potts, the "merry, dumpy little woman close to

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[10]William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 92.

[11]Ibid., p. 75.

[12]Inge's fascination with the anagramatic transposition of the word "Halloween" may have been responsible for two of the names in the play, Hal and Owen. Certainly the combination of Hal and the Owens (Halloween) produces a dramatic "trick or treat" situation.

sixty,"[13] who has taken him in; Millie, a "wiry kid of sixteen;"[14] Bomber Gutzel, a tough newsboy about Millie's age; and Madge, Millie's unusually beautiful sister. The action of this opening portion is commonplace. Hal is hauling trash for Mrs. Potts; Millie and Bomber are arguing and fighting. Madge, who has been drawn to the scene by the noise, is watching them scrap. Madge's appearance makes Bomber forget all about Millie. We discover in the ensuing conversation that Madge is going steady with a wealthy boy named Alan Seymour. Returning to the scene as Bomber roughly grabs Madge's arm, Hal forcefully sends Bomber on his way. But before Hal and Madge can talk they are interrupted by Flo Owens, the girls' suspicious mother, who suggests that Hal move along.

A long discussion between Madge and her mother follows in which Flo questions Madge about her relationship with Alan and recollects her own unsuccessful marriage. Then we are introduced to all of the other characters in the play except Howard, a small-town businessman who appears in the second act. First, Rosemary Sidney, a spinster school teacher who rooms with the Owens, interrupts Flo and Madge's discussion. Then Alan Seymour arrives and, to the amazement of Flo, greets Hal with great affection. Alan and Hal recall their college days when they were in the same fraternity, and Hal asks Alan to help him find a job. The act concludes in

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[13] 4 Plays, p. 75. [14] Ibid., p. 76.

a welter of exits and entrances. Preparations are being made for a Labor Day picnic. Rosemary's cronies, Irma Cronkite and Christine Schoenwalder, appear and take Rosemary to a luncheon. Millie and Hal rane off to get a car so that they can go swimming, and Alan, after a short scene with Madge, reluctantly follows them.

In the first act, Hal's virility and insecurity are established, and the complacent nature of the relationship between Madge and Alan is made evident. We are made aware of the mother's concern for her daughter's marriage and of Rosemary's loneliness which she offsets by her relationships with her fellow teachers. While the first act lacks a clear story line, it establishes the conditions which will lead subsequently to Madge's seduction and to Rosemary's aggressive emotional "blitzkrieg" on Howard that culminates in marriage.

The second act of Picnic takes place later in the day. The sun is setting. In the distance a piano is playing. Everyone is waiting to go to the picnic. Flo is worrying about Madge, about Hal, about drinking at the picnic. The three school teachers return from their festivities, rather depressed after playing bridge all afternoon. Then Howard Bevans, a small, middle-aged man arrives to take Rosemary to the picnic, and almost immediately Alan joins the group.

The second act adds a number of incidents which make Madge's capitulation almost inevitable. The act is full of forewarning commentary. Within nine lines Madge admits her

interest in Hal, saying, "It's not going to hurt anyone just to be nice to him."[15] Next, she refuses to put a stop to any drinking that might occur, with "I'm not going to be a wet blanket."[16] Then, she implies that she needs some physical reassurance of her identity as she adds, "It seems like--when I'm looking in the mirror that's the only way I can prove to myself I'm alive.[17] As the act continues Alan is effectively removed from the scene by Flo who asks him to chip up some ice and "put the baskets in the car."[18] Howard produces a bottle of bootleg whiskey, and it is soon being consumed.

What follows is clearly stylized. In the background a dance band begins to play, and, as the scene continues, Hal dances with Millie, Madge, and Rosemary: an adolescent, a young woman, and a spinster. Each dance reflects the female's psychological state. Millie is awkward and defensive; Madge is responsive; Rosemary forces herself on Hal despite his embarrassment and, when he refuses to continue, attacks him with a vicious, scathing verbal barrage. The subsequent action leaves Hal and Madge alone together on stage. Howard, Rosemary's perennial fiance, takes the emotionally exhausted spinster away. Mrs. Owens, discovering that Millie has been surreptitiously drinking, angrily insists that Millie ride with her to the picnic. The inevitable occurs. Madge, attracted and moved by Hal's humiliated

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[15] 4 Plays, p. 104.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., p. 105.

[18] Ibid., p. 112.

rage, impulsively kisses him, and Hal, offered the opportunity to vindicate his masculinity, takes it.

The two short scenes which make up the third act take place in the early hours of the following day. Most of the first scene is devoted to the return of Howard and Rosemary. Depressed and weary, Rosemary pleads with Howard to marry her.

> ROSEMARY. (Desperately.) Oh God! Please marry me, Howard. Please . . . (She sinks to her knees.) Please . . . please . . .
> HOWARD. (Embarrassed by her suffering humility.) Rosemary . . . I . . . I gotta have some time to think it over. You go to bed now and get some rest. I'll drive over in the morning and maybe we can talk it over before you go to school. I . . .[19]

Howard finally manages to tear himself away, and Rosemary, drained of energy, "pulls herself together and goes into the house."[20]

Inge follows this episode immediately with a parallel one between Hal and Madge. When they appear he is bitter with self-disparagement; she is sobbing. A final good-night kiss momentarily revives their passion, and then Madge tears herself away and runs sobbing into the house.

The final scene of the play is a tangled exercise in ironic counterpoint. Providing the major contrast are the moods of Madge and Rosemary. First, Rosemary, escorted by her jubiliant, laughing, shouting colleagues maneuvers the reluctant and somewhat surprised Howard into a promise of matrimony. Then Madge, despite her mother's dismay, decides

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[19]Ibid., p. 131.

[20]Ibid., p. 133.

quietly but firmly to follow Hal to Tulsa where he has fled. Alan passively takes a fishing trip to Michigan, and Millie states emphatically, "I'm never going to fall in love. Not me."[21]

Principal Characters

Each of Picnic's seven main characters is sharply etched by the playwright, and each of the women is a vignette limning a stage or variation of love. Inge, in an article in the New York Times, describes how these characters were conceived.

> One of the many titles I considered for my new play was Women in Summer. No one else seemed to like the title much so I forgot it, but I rather liked it . . . because it recalled something to me: a memory of women, all sorts of women--beautiful, bitter, harsh, loving, young, old, frustrated, happy--sitting on a front porch on a summer evening. There was something in that atmosphere I wanted to recreate, and that is how Picnic got under way. First, I remembered all the pretty girls I knew in my youth . . .[22]

Madge is a distillation of all the girls Inge knew while he was in high school. "She is," he wrote, "a girl of eighteen, the prettiest girl in town, who accepts her feminity gracefully and I wanted her to have all the sweetness and charm of the girls I knew."[23] The critics, when they saw the play, were less impressed. "With Mr. Inge's phallic hero," wrote Eric Bentley, "goes a heroine of equal crudity and equal

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[21]Ibid., p. 145.

[22]William Inge, "'Picnic' of Women," New York Times, February 15, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

[23]Ibid.

appeal: the dumbest and loveliest girl in town."[24]

Madge is a quiet, rather proper girl, who is somewhat dissatisfied with her life. "I'm not one of those girls that jump in a hot rod every time you boys turn a corner and honk," she tells Bomber. "If a boy wants a date with me, he can come to the door like a gentleman and ask if I'm in."[25] Behind this attitude of propriety, however, Madge appears to be waiting for something exciting to happen. Just after she has met Hal a train whistle blows in the distance. She listens and then remarks: "Whenever I hear that train coming to town, I always get a little feeling of excitement--in here (Hugging her stomach.)"[26] Madge is not a particularly bright girl. In a verbal skirmish with Madge, Millie jibes: "You couldn't even pass Miss Sydney's course in shorthand and you have to work in the dime store."[27] Madge is, however, aware that her beauty is superficial and merely masks her personality. "Mom," she asks, after a squabble with Millie, "what good is it to be pretty?"[28] Her mother cannot give her a satisfactory answer.

As the play progresses, Madge's isolation is intensified. When the other young people go swimming, she is left at home to fix lunch. Alan is oblivious of her need to be treated as an individual. "I don't care if you're real or not," he admits, and then confirms Madge's suspicions

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[24]Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event, p. 105.

[25]4Plays, p. 77.

[26]Ibid., p. 79.

[27]Ibid., p. 82.

[28]Ibid., p. 84.

concerning what it is that attracts him to her. "You're the prettiest girl I ever saw."[29] His words are cold comfort. As she turns to go into the house a train whistle blows in the distance, and Madge stands listening while Alan drives away.

In the second act Madge's character is further developed. She is an excellent dancer, and her ability is demonstrated in the slow, sensuous dance that brings her in physical contact with Hal for the first time. She also reveals an inherent compassion and tenderness when she comforts Hal after Rosemary's attack. She is resigned when Hal picks her up and carries her off.

What Madge's feelings are when Hal brings her back that night are obscure. Although she is crying and "resists him furiously,"[30] Madge allows Hal to kiss her good-night before she "tears herself away from Hal and runs into the house, sobbing,"[31] Her emotions are equally confused the following morning when Hal comes to say good-bye, but when he is gone she admits her love. "I do love him! I do!"[32] she cries and moments later walks out of the house to catch the bus to Tulsa.

Madge is the most important of the women that people Inge's play, but Hal, as the play's catalyst, is more essential. Hal is a mixture of boastful exhibitionism and insecurity, a dreamer and a hoodlum. He was described in

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[29] Ibid., p. 101.

[30] Ibid., p. 132.

[31] Ibid., p. 133.

[32] Ibid., p. 144.

the reviews as "a vagabond Hercules,"[33] a "garrulous, muddled, brawny, rolling stone,"[34] "an aggressively virile young man,"[35] and "a brawny footless girl-chaser."[36]

He is dressed, according to the stage directions, in T-shirt, dungarees, and cowboy boots. The boots are of particular importance as they symbolize Hal's inherent masculinity. The boots, we discover, were left to him when his father died. He father had said,

> Son, there'll be times when the only thing you have to be proud of is the fact you're a man. So wear your boots so people can hear you comin', and keep your fist doubled up so they'll know you mean business when you get there."[37]

The only time Hal is without his boots is at the end of the play when he stands drenched, bloody, and barefoot before Madge and says good-bye. Hal's exhibitionistic tendencies are suggested most effectively by his behavior at the swimming party as reported by Millie.

> MILLIE. I think he's a big show-off. You should have seen him this morning on the high diving board. He did real graceful swan dives, and a two and a half gainer, and a backflip--and kids stood around clapping. He just ate it up . . . And he was

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[33]Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, "Picnic," Catholic World, April, 1953, p. 69.

[34]Robert Coleman, "'Picnic' Is A Stirring, Hilarious Click," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 350.

[35]Richard Hayes, "Picnic," Commonweal, March 20, 1953, p. 603.

[36]John Chapman, "Inge's 'Picnic,' Absorbing Comedy, Given an Admirable Performance," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 345.

[37]4 Plays, p. 111.

> braggin' all afternoon how he used to be a deep-sea diver off Catalina Island . . . And he says he used to make hundreds of dollars doin' parachute jumps out of a balloon. Do you believe it?[38]

Whether or not Hal's boasts are based on the truth, his boastfulness is demonstrated.

One of the more amusing episodes in the play occurs when Hal tells Alan of an incident which occurred to him while he was hitchhiking to Texas. It neatly typifies the way in which Hal mixes his experiences with fantasy. All of the stories that Hal tells of his successes tend to evoke skeptical smiles. The marvelous tale he recounts of how he was picked up by two "babes" in a big yellow convertible, taken to a tourist cabin, forced at gunpoint repeatedly to prove his manhood, and how, when he passed out, relieved of the two hundred dollars he owed Alan, effectively demonstrates Inge's mastery of this technique, as well as providing us with appropriate characterization. How much of Hal's story is wishful thinking the audience never finds out.

Another of Hal's characteristic traits is his sanguine disposition. His dream of the job he expects Alan to find for him is typical.

> ALAN. What kind of a job did you have in mind?
> HAL. (This is a favorite fantasy.) Oh, something in a nice office where I can wear a tie and have a sweet little secretary and talk over the telephone about enterprises and things. (ALAN walks away skeptically.) I've always had the feeling, if I just had the chance, I could set the world on fire.[39]

But behind his bravado Hal is extremely insecure. In his

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[38] Ibid., p. 103.

[39] Ibid., p. 93.

very next line he says, with some desperation creeping into his voice, "I gotta get some place in this world, Seymour. I got to."[40] Later, in his reaction to Rosemary's onslaught, his insecurity is made even more evident. It is in fact in this scene with Madge that Hal reveals the truth about himself.

> HAL. (Gives up [trying to hide his feelings] and begins to shudder, his shoulders heaving as he fights to keep from bawling.) What's the use, Baby? I'm a bum. She saw through me like a goddamn X-ray machine. There's just no place in the world for a guy like me.[41]

Drawn out by Madge's sympathy, Hal reveals the story of his youth.

> HAL. When I was fourteen, I spent a year in the reform school . . . For stealin' another guy's motorcycle. Yah! I stole it. I stole it 'cause I wanted to get on the damned thing and go so far away, so fast, that no one'd ever catch up with me . . . Then my old lady went to the authorities. (He mimics his "old lady.") "I've done everything I can with the boy. I can't do anything more." So off I go to the goddamn reform school . . . Finally some welfare league hauls me out and the old lady's sorry to see me back. Yah! she's got herself a new boyfriend and I'm in the way . . . Well--that's the Hal Carter story.[42]

Hal is another example of the dungareed male which Inge introduced to us in Turk in Come Back, Little Sheba. Eric Bentley points out that Hal's character in the Broadway production was nicely calculated to guarantee his popularity. In a delightful essay entitled "Pathetic Phalluses," he states, "Inge . . . gives his priapus [Hal], a bad character, but he is careful to stipulate that the badness is the kind

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[40] Ibid., p. 94.

[41] Ibid., p. 126.

[42] Ibid.

the public sympathizes with; this priapus is pathetic."[43]

What Inge writes about Millie, Madge's younger sister, reveals not only her personality but the way in which Inge's characters form the basic building blocksof his dramaturgy, allowing him flexibility derived from a thorough acquaintance with all of the physical and psychological idiosyncrasies of the character.

Inge sees Millie as opposed to Madge in temperament, a girl

> who must find compensation for not being pretty, who perhaps has not wanted to compete with Madge's prettiness. Millie will have herself a career some day. Perhaps she'll write a brilliant novel or become a successful editor or critic. I suspect, that she will know some unhappiness when she grows up, but I feel I've given her enough intelligence and will to cope with it.[44]

Inge's description of Flo, the mother of the two girls, is of particular interest in that she is a character type who will appear again in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs and "A Loss of Roses." Concerning Flo, Inge wrote that she

> is a realistic, rather hard woman who left a husband she apparently loved because she wanted a higher standard of living than he could provide. It was an impatient move on her part and she probably regrets it in later years when the play finds her. She is ambitious for her two daughters making a mistake mothers frequently make, of using their children's lives to compensate for their own.[45]

The action of the play reveals Flo as a wary, worried woman.

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[43]Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event (New York: Horizon Press, 1954), p. 22ff.

[44]Inge, Theatre Arts, April, 1954, p. 33.

[45]Inge, New York Times, February 15, 1953, sect. II. p. 3.

She worries especially about Madge. "A pretty girl doesn't have long," she warns Madge, "just a few years . . . If she loses her chance then, she might as well throw all her prettiness away."[46] She is constantly urging Alan on. "Alan, why don't you go up and see Madge."[47] "Come sit down, Alan."[48] Even after Hal and Madge's affair she pleads, "Alan, come to dinner tonight."[49] "Alan, go inside and say good-bye to Madge!"[50] "See her one more time, Alan!"[51] All to no avail. As she watches Madge going to catch the bus she remarks sadly: "She's so young. There are so many things I meant to tell her, and never got around to."[52]

Rosemary, the school teacher, is a brilliant picture of spinsterhood. She is, Inge noted, "a very frustrated woman approaching middle age, who never paid any attention to the demands of her heart and her feelings until loneliness finally caught up with her."[53]

Rosemary is the product of a strict upbringing. Her emotions have been warped by her inability to establish normal relationships. Her curiosity about Hal, which she masks with concerned alarm, is symbolic of her psychological state. "Mrs. Owens," she protests, "he's working over there with his shirt off."[54] And then, a moment later, she manages

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[46] 4 Plays, p. 81.

[47] Ibid., p. 88.

[48] Ibid., p. 108.

[49] Ibid., p. 144.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., p. 145.

[52] Ibid., p. 117.

[53] New York Times, February 15, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

[54] 4 Plays, p. 85.

to glance at Hal once more. In the second act when she sees Hal and Howard watching Madge she boasts of her own beauty as a girl.

> ROSEMARY. (Taking the bottle.) I had boys callin' me all the time. But if my father ever caught me showing off in front of the window he'd have tanned me with a razor strap. (Takes a drink.) 'Cause I was brought up strict by a God-fearing man. (Takes another.)[55]

Besides providing a rather ironic comment on the results of her upbringing, Rosemary's rather obvious and crude lines and actions establish the causes which helped shape her personality. Another factor, her chummy relationship with Christine and Irma, is further evidence of her inability to develop a normal heterosexual relationship. The factor, however, that most clearly reveals her is her attitude toward sex. Two expressions of her attitude are illustrative. The first is Rosemary's bawdy laughter as she tells how she was responsible for the emasculation of the statue of a Roman gladiator which stood in the school library. The second is her reaction upon seeing what she thought was a snake. Inge obviously intended her reaction to this familiar Freudian symbol as a comment on her character. "Lord," she remarks as she returns to the stage, "I thought I was going to faint!"[56] When, in the second act, Hal rejects Rosemary, he drives her to a point where she is able to break the emotionally inhibiting hold of her past experiences and initiate a new relationship with Howard.

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[55] Ibid., p. 117.

[56] Ibid., p. 116.

Howard is a minor character in the play but a convincing one. Inge's stage directions indicate that he is "a small, thin man, rapidly approaching middle age. A small-town business man, he wears a permanent smile of greeting which, most of the time, is pretty sincere."[57] He is a highly functional and carefully delineated character. Inge uses him to introduce the whiskey bottle at the beginning of the second act and to restrain Rosemary and remove her at the end. When, at the beginning of the third act, Howard brings Rosemary home, his futile efforts to escape matrimony also provide some of the funniest and yet most terrible, agonizing moments in the play. In an article written just before Picnic opened in New York, Inge made the following rather wry comment:

> [Howard] probably never would have married if a woman had not taken such initiative, but six months of married life will make it impossible for him, at the age of forty-two, to believe that he ever lived any other way.[58]

The only other important character is Flo's lovable neighbor, Helen Potts, who lives with the demanding voice of her senile mother. Mrs. Potts is, according to Inge, "a woman in her fifties, whose marriage was thwarted by a possessive mother."[59] The following exchange between Rosemary and Flo helps to characterize her.

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[57] Ibid., p. 107.

[58] New York Times, February 15, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

[59] Ibid.

FLO. (Confidentially to ROSEMARY.) Poor Helen! She told me sometimes she has to get up three times a night to take her mother to the bathroom.

ROSEMARY. Why doesn't she put her in an old ladies' home?

FLO. None of 'em will take her. She's too mean.

ROSEMARY. She must be mean--if that story is true.

FLO. It is true! Helen and the Potts boy ran off and got married. Helen's mother caught her that very day and had the marriage annulled!

ROSEMARY. (With a shaking of her head.) She's Mrs. Potts in name only.

FLO. Sometimes I think she keeps the boy's name just to defy the old lady. (ALAN'S car is heard approaching.)[60]

Despite her disappointments, Helen Potts is happy. "She has learned," Inge writes, "to live cheerfully a life she never created for herself, . . . she still has a girl's longing for romance."[61] This explains why she takes Hal in and why she watches the relationship between Madge and Hal with such satisfaction. At the end of the play Flo turns to Mrs. Potts and says, "You--you liked the young man, didn't you, Helen?"[62] Mrs. Potts admits she did and then explains:

MRS. POTTS. With just Mama in the house, I'd got so used to things as they were, everything so prim, occasionally a hairpin on the floor, the geranium in the window, the smell of Mama's medicine . . . He walked through the door and suddenly everything was different. He clomped through the tiny rooms like he was still in the great outdoors, he talked in a booming voice that shook the ceiling. Everything he did reminded me there was a man in the house, and it seemed good.

FLO. (Skeptically.) Did it?

MRS. POTTS. And that reminded me . . . I'm a woman, and that seemed good, too.[63]

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[60] 4 Plays, p. 86.

[61] New York Times, February 15, 1953, loc. cit.

[62] 4 Plays, p. 145.

[63] Ibid.

Before an evaluation of Picnic can be undertaken an earlier version of the play, entitled "Summer Brave," must be considered.

Summer Brave

Picnic is a play which Inge has rewritten several times. The earliest version, which was produced at the University of Kansas in the fall of 1955, is entitled "Summer Brave" and is the script which Inge originally submitted to the Theatre Guild. Considerable insight into Inge's interest can be derived from a comparison of Picnic and "Summer Brave."[64] Two major differences are apparent immediately. The first is the significance of Hal. The second difference is in the endings of the two plays.

In Picnic Hal is introduced immediately and is presented as the protagonist. He is the pivotal figure, and the other characters serve to demonstrate the effect he produces. In "Summer Brave" Hal's first entrance is delayed until the entire Owens family and Madge's boyfriend, Alan Seymour, have been introduced. This delay performs two functions. First it allows Inge to establish the mood and locale and what Hawkins calls the "congested female atmosphere"[65] before introducing his "vagrant with the loud voice and the

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[64]I am indebted to Dr. Nat Eek of the Speech Department of Michigan State University for the use of his script of "Summer Brave" duplicated for the University of Kansas production in the fall of 1955. All references to "Summer Brave" are annotated to this script.

[65]William Hawkins, "Inge Again Vivifies Little People's Souls," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 350.

unsavory past."[66] Secondly it puts Hal in a less dominant position and, while allowing him to be the pivotal figure, increases the significance of the other characters proportionately.

Some idea of the drastically different effects produced by the two endings, the second major difference, can be gained from the following comparison. In Picnic, Hal departs for Tulsa after seducing Madge, and Flo, almost to the end of the play, is hopeful that Alan will marry her daughter. The final episode begins when Madge, wearing a hat and carrying a small cardboard suitcase, emerges from the house. ("There is a look of firm decision on her face.")[67] Then while the romantics in the audience sigh and smile to each other, Madge trudges off to catch a bus to Tulsa and to the presumably waiting Hal.

In "Summer Brave" Hal and Madge part more abruptly. The scene is far fiercer and there is no doubt that it is final. Hal has taken Madge forcefully in his arms and is kissing her long and passionately. Alan and Howard try to wrench him loose.

> HAL. I'm warning you sons-of-bitches, I'm a strong man and I'm mad. I'll beat hell out of both of you if you don't let me be. (ALAN and HOWARD withdraw, understandably intimidated. HAL resumes with MADGE like a puppet in his arms.) When you hear that train whistle and know I'm on it, your sweet little heart's gonna be busted. And maybe it'll serve you right, 'cause you love me, God

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[66] Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 348.

[67] 4 Plays, p. 146.

> damn it! You love me, you love me. (HAL drops Madge and runs off to catch his train. MADGE drops in a heap crying uncontrollably.)[68]

All this occurs near the middle of the third act. Half of the third act remains to be seen, time enough for Inge to reveal unhurriedly what Hal has wrought to his brief visit.

In the scene that follows Hal's departure, Madge realizes that everything is over between her and Alan.[69] Millie admits for the first time an interest in boys. "I've always liked you, Alan, didn't you know it?"[70] Flo, the mother, reconciles herself to the loss of Alan. Rosemary starts for her honeymoon in the Ozarks in a flurry of inanities, and Mrs. Potts happily recalls Hal's overpowering masculinity. Her speech is given here to indicate the similarities and differences it has to her corresponding speech in Picnic.

> MRS. POTTS. He sat at the table and suddenly everything was different. There was a clean smell of laundry soap and coarse linen, and some sort of nice hair oil and shaving lotion . . . and there he was talking in a full voice that I feared would shake the ceiling, 'cause Mama and I always whisper; and he took the dainty napkin I gave him and wiped the jam off his mouth without dabbing, the way Mama and I do. Then when he walked upstairs in his boots, he made a clatter and you heard him. Everything he did made you know there was a man in the house, and it seemed good.[71]

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[68]Inge, "Summer Brave," Act III, p. 23.

[69]John Chapman, "Inge's 'Picnic' Absorbing Comedy, Given An Admirable Performance," NYTCR, February 23, 1953, p. 349.

[70]"Summer Brave," Act III, p. 25.

[71]Ibid., p. 32.

Just before the final curtain, Inge breaks the solemn mood with comedy. "Hey, Goon-Girl!" an admirer calls to Millie, "come kiss me, I wanta be sick."[72] Millie races angrily off stage to exact her retribution. Millie has tasted adult life and found it not to her liking. Despite Hal, she is still a tomboy.

The last scene of "Summer Brave" starts as did the last scene of Picnic. Madge emerges from the house looking very solemn. But in "Summer Brave" she is ready to return to her job at the dime store. That she is still popular is evident. Before she leaves she is asked for dates by two admirers but, still recuperating from her experience with Hal, temporarily postpones them. With a carload of high school boys acting as a choral background

> Hey, Madge!
> Hey, Good Lookin'!
> Where you goin'?
> C'mon get in.
> We're waitin'.[73]

and their car radio "sending forth hot blasts of brassy jazz . . . Madge, with a sort of peaceful equanimity goes down the walk, and starts for work."[74]

Some reviewers, unacquainted with Inge's original script, appear to have been misled by the priapic vigor that Logan mixed with Inge's moody nostalgia. "Apparently [Inge] did not put his best effort into the portrayal of the pivotal character, who appears so oafish that it is difficult to

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[72] Ibid., p. 34. [73] Ibid., p. 39.

[74] Ibid.

believe he has ever been admitted to college even on a football scholarship,"[75] commented Theophilus Lewis. Aware of Inge's quiet ability, John Lundstrom wrote

> Although [Picnic] was an often lyrical and haunting piece of work, it received a knock-'em-dead kind of direction. Its overtones were pushed into the background and by the third act it was clear that the whole affair was becoming something not far removed from magazine pulp fiction.[76]

John Pyle was even more critical. "Picnic is rigged, contrived and narrow. It is not a play. The actors suffer from direction and the audience agonizes with them."[77] It was even suggested that Inge's material was more suited to ballet than drama.[78]

Inge's reaction to Logan's changes is somewhat hard to determine as two seemingly contradictory responses are on record. "I have never had to make any serious compromises because of the demands of a director," he told Maurice Zolotow in an interview in 1959, but later in the same interview he remarked: "In Picnic I changed the ending in a way I didn't want to . . . I didn't believe Hal would want to marry Madge and that Madge would run away to meet him in Tulsa and get married."[79]

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[75]Theophilus Lewis, "Picnic," America, March 7, 1953, p. 632.

[76]John W. Lundstrom, "Treachery Afoot," New York Times, April 2, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

[77]John Pyle, "Not a Play," New York Times, April 26, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

[78]J. David Bowen, "Two Plays," New York Times, May 17, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

[79]Maurice Zolotow, "Playwright on the Eve," New York Times, November 22, 1959, sect. II, p. 3.

That Inge was disturbed by Logan's changes has been further documented by George Jean Nathan in an article which appeared in Theatre Arts three months after the play opened. Nathan, who was acquainted with the original script, claims that during rehearsals

> Inge was bombarded by hundreds of suggestions from outside sources and was prevailed upon to incorporate many of them into his script . . . scene after scene in that original script was subjected to criticism from volunteer analysts and . . . [Inge] was persuaded to give ear to the criticism. . . . At one point in the rehearsals [Inge] was so upset that he put on his hat and went around the corner to commune with a sympathetic bartender.[80]

Inge later justified his acceptance of these changes in the following manner: "I was uncertain about the play and about myself. Logan took over. If I'd shown more confidence and proved to him my ending was more logical, he would have accepted it, I'm sure."[81]

Those critics who were fortunate enough to have read the original script were quick to point out Logan's changes. Harold Clurman pointed out: "The boy in the script, who was a rather pathetic, confused, morbidly explosive and bitter character is now a big goof of a he-man whom the audience can laugh at or lust after."[82]

It is evident that Joshua Logan, by his forceful direction, added inconsistencies as well as theatricality to

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[80]George Jean Nathan, "Director's 'Picnic,'" Theatre Arts, May, 1953, p. 15.

[81]Maurice Zolotow, "Playwright on the Eve," New York Times, November 22, 1959, sect. II, p. 3.

[82]Clurman, Nation, March 7, 1953, p. 213.

the play. Logan made Picnic commercial at the expense of Inge's delicate balance between sentimentality and cynicism. He changed the ending into a conventional, romantic opiate and softened Hal's crudity, although not his popular virility. A particularly revealing example of the type of change Logan introduced can be gathered from what he did to the curtain line of Act II. As written originally by Inge, the act ended so as to pierce any romantic fog which might have been induced merely by the juxtaposition of Hal and Madge. It will be recalled that in Picnic, as Hal concludes telling Madge his unpleasant family story, Madge suddenly and impulsively kisses him. Hal is a product of the lower classes, and Inge presents him as opportunistic and crude. Hal brings down the curtain with "We're not going to no God damned picnic."[83] Logan changed this second act curtain "to a beautiful and tender bit of pantomime with Hal stretching his arms out to [Madge] silently and leading her off . . ."[84]

Although the elimination of much of Hal's crudity and a romantic ending insured Picnic of commercial success, it also falsified and stereotyped him and, in so doing, eliminated much of the depth of his character. Hal, as Inge conceived him, was a combination of conflicting forces, a complex character whose contradictions made him real and believable. By eliminating the grossest of Hal's faults and allowing the audience to think that they understood him,

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[83]Inge, 4 Plays, p. 127.

[84]Hewes, Saturday Review of Literature, March 7, 1953, p. 34.

both Hal's individual uniqueness and his character depth were reduced. Fortunately "Summer Brave" exists, and, in this version, not only does Hal retain his believability, but his part functions logically as a contributing element, not as an overwhelming dominant focal point.

Evaluation

In Picnic, Inge continued to follow the precedents he established in Come Back, Little Sheba. That his command of characterization had been considerably broadened is confirmed by his use of more characters and a greater variety of characters. The individual character has benefited from the resultant increase in the complexity of relationships.

Like Sheba, Picnic is filled with insights derived from psychoanalysis. Sievers, writing from a psychoanalytical point of view, is quick to point out the significance of Hal's boots, which, passed down from his worthless, but much-loved father, represent his virility and manhood.[85] Inge himself remarked that

> [Hal's] inner conflict and insecurities, exposed in the play, make him . . . a shocking and appealing character by whom the women are, respectively attracted and repelled. Their reactions to him are the substance of the play.[86]

Sievers adds, "Madge's deepest emotional needs have been answered by Hal with his combination of aggressive virility

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[85]W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), p. 335.

[86]Inge, New York Times, February 15, 1953, sect. II, p. 3.

and small-boy self pity."[87] The significance of Rosemary's reaction to the garden hose has already been mentioned. It might be pointed out that in "Summer Brave" the desecrated statue, instead of being located in the library, is merely a plate in an Ancient History textbook, and the emasculation is carried out with a heavy pencil.[88] Rosemary's comment to Hal, which follows her recounting of the gladiator anecdote, does not leave much to the imagination. "You remind me of one of those ancient statues,"[89] she says, clearly indicating her hostility.

Little more needs to be said about the play. Inge's use of colloquial dialogue, Midwestern locale, middle-class characters, juxtaposition of characters and action for meaning, and establishment of a texture of events rather than a sequential story line, are again manifest. In "Summer Brave," although not in Picnic, Inge's philosophy of resignation dominates, and in both plays he has exploited the insights of psychoanalysis to reveal character motivation and psychological condition. Although the simplifications of Logan, which caused Bentley to ask why Inge "can't see through the popular fallacies of priapism whose symbol is the torn shirt of Stanley Kowalski,"[90] are to be deplored, both Picnic and "Summer Brave" are powerful and intimate studies of "the emotional needs of a group of women."[91]

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[87]Sievers, loc. cit.

[88]"Summer Brave," Act II, p. 37.

[89]4 Plays, p. 121.

[90]Eric Bentley, "Pity the Dumb Ox," New Republic, March 16, 1953, pp. 22-23.

[91]Sievers, Freud on Broadway, p. 254.

CHAPTER IV

BUS STOP

Bus Stop opened on March 2, 1955, at the Music Box, starring Kim Stanley as Cherie and Albert Salmi as Bo. Bus Stop is Inge's treatment of a familiar dramatic formula: isolating a group of characters temporarily from the outside world and watching while they adjust and readjust to each other. In this case, isolation is insured by a howling blizzard which has trapped the passengers of an interstate bus at a cheerful, small-town restaurant while they wait for road crews to clear the blocked highway ahead. Given an enthusiastic ensemble performance, Bus Stop proved to be Inge's longest running play, closing only after four hundred and twenty nine performances.

Action

As in all of Inge's plays, the action is limited to one location, in this case "a street corner restaurant in a small town about thirty miles west of Kansas City."[1] The action takes place between 1:00 and 5:00 a.m. on a night in early March. Outside it is snowing heavily, and there is a strong wind. Although the restaurant is somewhat dingy

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[1]William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 152.

"the scene is warm and cozy."[2] In the first act, Inge introduces the characters gradually, letting each character establish himself before introducing another. When the curtain goes up we discover Grace, the proprietor, and Elma, her teenage assistant, preparing for the arrival of an interstate bus. As they check the supplies rather lackadaisically, the town's sheriff, Will Masters, comes in. He informs Grace that the roads to Topeka are blocked and that it may be necessary to hold the passengers until morning.

When the bus arrives, five more characters are introduced. The first is Cherie, a young woman of about twenty who is trying to get away from a cowboy who has abducted her and has been left asleep on the bus. The second is Dr. Gerald Lyman, a scholarly, middle-aged man who has been drinking. He is followed by the bus driver, Carl. Told that the bus will be delayed for a while, Carl remarks casually to Grace,

> CARL. It'd sure be nice to have a nice li'l apartment to go to, some place to sit and listen to the radio, with a good-lookin' woman . . . somethin' like you . . . to talk with . . . maybe have a few beers.[3]

Finally Bo Decker and Virgil Blessing appear. Bo is a young, brash cowboy who has just been to the rodeo and is now intent on returning to his ranch in Montana and marrying Cherie. Virgil, Bo's buddy, is a man in his forties. He is a quiet, picturesque man. He is carrying a guitar in a case. Bo immediately dominates the stage. He boasts of his rodeo

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[2] Ibid., p. 153. [3] Ibid., p. 163.

triumphs; he chides Cherie for getting off the bus without waking him; he orders a huge "snack": three raw hamburgers with onion and piccalilli, some ham and eggs, potato salad, two pieces of pie, and a quart of milk; and he snuggles, hugs, and kisses Cherie until she twists free and protests: "Bo! fer cryin' out loud, lemme be!"[4]

Grace, feigning a headache, soon leaves to join the waiting bus driver, Carl. Then Bo discovers Cherie's hidden suitcase and realizes that she might not love him. The act concludes as Dr. Lyman strikes up an acquaintance with Elma. In the first act Inge painstakingly establishes the relationships and conflicts which motivate the rest of the action.

In the second act, Inge manages to keep the stage "bubbling with a restless kind of action."[5] Dr. Lyman begins courting Elma in earnest and succeeds in making a date with her in Topeka. Bo unsuccessfully tries to awaken Cherie's interest in him. And a floor show is organized to pass the time. Inserted between and incorporated in these activities is considerable exposition. Bo admits to Virgil that in the past few months he has been lonely, that he does not understand why Cherie does not like him, and that he does not know how to express his love. Cherie admits to Elma she was attracted to Bo from the time they first met and that she suspects that she will go with him in the end. "Somewhere deep down inside me," she says, "I gotta funny feelin' I'm gonna end up in Montana."[6]

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[4] Ibid., p. 172.

[5] Ibid., p. vii.

[6] Ibid., p. 184.

The floor show that is put together by the travelers is not a success. Virgil plays his guitar, but it serves as little more than background music for another of Bo's futile attempts to interest Cherie. "Cherie," he pleads, "I'm really a very tender person." "I ain't int'rested," she replies.[7] The scene from Romeo and Juliet played by Dr. Lyman and Elma ends in dismal failure. Dr. Lyman, quite intoxicated, finds in Shakespeare's lines, especially, "Henceforth I never will be Romeo," and "My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,"[8] a sudden personal meaning and cannot continue. "Tell your audience," he says to Elma, revealing his own state of mind, "that Romeo suddenly is fraught with remorse."[9] The last number, Cherie's sincere, but funny, rendition of "That Old Black Magic," is also cut short. Enraged by Bo's loud, approving comments, Cherie stops singing in the middle of the song, gives Bo a stinging slap on the face, and flounces out.

The act ends in a flurry of activity. Bo attempts to drag the kicking and protesting Cherie to a justice of the peace. Dr. Lyman is laughing like a loon and is very sick. Will Masters, the sheriff, arrives and in a moment is struggling with Bo. Grace, wearing a dressing gown, appears and urges Will on. Bo is knocked down and handcuffed, Cherie sobs, Grace retires to get dressed, and Dr. Lyman heads for the outhouse. There is a momentary lull before the

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[7] Ibid., p. 193.

[8] Ibid., p. 196.

[9] Ibid., p. 196.

curtain falls, in which Cherie, moved by Virgil's revelation, is persuaded to drop charges against Bo:

> VIRGIL. (Coming very close, to speak as intimately as possible.) Miss . . . if he was to know I told ya this, he'd never forgive me, but . . . yor the first woman he ever made love to at all.
> CHERIE. Ha! I sure don't b'lieve that.
> VIRGIL. It's true, miss. He allus been as shy as a rabbit.
> CHERIE. (In simple amazement.) My God![10]

The final act takes place later that morning. It is almost dawn and the storm has stopped. The act contains, as usual, a conglomerate of dramatic elements presented in a manner which is deceivingly similar to the haphazard sequence of events in everyday life. Grace asks Carl to be discreet. Will explains to Bo that "Bein' humble ain't the same thing as being wretched,"[11] and insists that he apologize to Grace, Elma, and Cherie. Reluctantly the young cowboy does.

The conclusion of the play is a mixture of happiness and loneliness. Dr. Lyman cancels the date he had made with Elma and momentarily considers visiting the Menninger Clinic for psychotherapy. Bo and Cherie, after several abortive attempts at reconciliation, are finally united. Then Carl calls, "All aboard," and the marooned travelers start to board the bus. Inge, however, does not end the play with Bo's exuberant shout of joy, "Yahoo! We're gettin' married after all."[12] Instead he balances Bo's happiness with the loneliness of Grace and Virgil. Virgil realizes

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[10] Ibid., p. 201.

[11] Ibid., p. 205.

[12] Ibid., p. 215.

that Bo no longer needs him and insists that the young couple go on without him. The bus leaves, and he stands alone. Grace is closing the diner. Elma goes home. The final moments of the play, which take place in the deserted diner, are poignant with loneliness.

> GRACE. We're closing now, mister.
> VIRGIL. (Coming center.) Any place warm I could stay til eight o'clock?
> GRACE. Now that the p'lice station's closed, I don't know where you could go, unless ya wanted to take a chance of wakin' up the man that runs the hotel.
> VIRGIL. No--I wouldn't wanta be any trouble.
> GRACE. There'll be a bus to Kanz City in a few minutes. I'll put the sign out and they'll stop.
> VIRGIL. No thanks. No point a goin' back there.
> GRACE. Then I'm sorry, mister, but you're just left out in the cold. (She carries a can of garbage out the rear door, leaving VIRGIL for the moment alone.)
> VIRGIL. (To himself.) Well . . . that's what happens to some people. (Quietly, he picks up his guitar and goes out. GRACE comes back in, locks the door, snaps the wall switch, then yawns and stretches, then sees that the front door is locked. The sun outside is just high enough now to bring a dim light into the restaurant. GRACE stops at the rear door and casts her eyes tiredly over the establishment. One senses her aloneness. She sighs, then goes out the door. The curtain comes down on an empty stage.)[13]

Principal Characters

There are eight characters in Bus Stop, and each is important. The two which emerge as the two most important characters, Bo and Cherie, do so not because of any preference on the part of the author, but because their relationship is the familiar one of "boy-meets-girl." Inge has scattered their scenes throughout the play.

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[13] Ibid., p. 219.

Bo, an exuberant, rambunctious, good-looking, young cowboy, yet an extremely sympathetic character, is described by Inge as follows:

> (Bo is in his early twenties, is tall and slim and good-looking in an outdoors way . . . He wears faded jeans that cling to his legs like shedding skin; his boots worn under his jeans, are scuffed and dusty; and the Stetson on the back of his head is worn and tattered. Over a faded denim shirt is tied a bandanna.)[14]

He has grown up, isolated from the world, on a ranch in Montana, and his trip to Kansas City is his first away from home. While his actions at the beginning of the play indicate that he is uninhibited, brash, and determined, the audience discovers as the play progresses that he is, at least in love, an innocent; that behind his bravado lies loneliness. Soon after his first entrance he loudly announces to the world in general:

> My name is Bo Decker. I'm twenty-one years old and own m'own ranch up in Timber Hill, Montana, where I got a herd of fine Hereford cattle and a dozen horses, and the finest sheep and hogs and chickens anywhere in the country.[15]

There is nothing restrained about him. He strides around the room. His bearlike hugs practically crush Cherie. He repeatedly grabs and mauls her.

Bo has other qualities, however: humor, tenderness, and most of all a deep love for Cherie. At the very end of the play, the course of his love is recalled in a touching scene. The slightly humorous dialect only adds to its sweet compassion.

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[14] Ibid., p. 169.

[16] Ibid., p. 170.

BO. Ya see . . . I'd lived all my life on a ranch . . . and I guess I din know much about women . . . 'cause they're diff'rent from men.

CHERIE. Well, natur'ly.

BO. Every time I got around one . . . I began to feel kinda scared . . . and I din know how t'act. It was aggravatin'.

CHERIE. Ya wasn't scared with me, Bo.

BO. When I come into that nightclub place, you was singin' . . . and you smiled at me while you was singin', and winked at me a couple of times. Remember?

CHERIE. Yah, I remember.

BO. Well, I guess I'm kinda green, but . . . no gal ever done that to me before, so I thought you was singin' yor songs just fer me.

CHERIE. Ya did kinda attrack me, Bo . . .

BO. Anyway, you was so purty, and ya seemed so kinda warm-hearted and sweet. I . . . I felt like I could love ya . . . and I did.

CHERIE. Bo--ya think you really did love me?

BO. Why, Cherry! I couldn't be familiar . . . with a gal I din love. (CHERIE is brought almost to tears.)[16]

Bo's loneliness is indicated much earlier in the second act of the play. The contrast between what he felt and what he thought he should feel is pointed up by the apologetic tone he uses. "Virge. I hate to sound like some pitiable weaklin' of a man, but there's been times the last few months, I been so lonesome, I . . . I jest didn't know what t'do with m'self."[17] After Cherie tells Bo that she had quite a few boy friends before him, Bo's tenderness and love are evoked more strongly than ever.

BO. Cherry?

CHERIE. (A little expectantly.) Yah?

BO. I been talkin' with my buddy, and he thinks I'm virgin enough for the two of us.

CHERIE. (Snickers, very amused.) Honest? Did Virgil say that?

BO. Yah . . . and I like ya like ya are, Cherry. So I don't care how ya got that way.

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[16]Ibid., p. 210.

[17]Ibid., p. 210.

> CHERIE. (Deeply touched.) Oh God, thass the sweetest, tenderest thing that was ever said to me.[18]

Moments later, Cherie capitulates.

Cherie, the nightclub singer whom Bo had abducted from a Kansas City clip joint, is a new character type for Inge. Her life has been as dismal as Hal's in Picnic and as filled with adventure. Born to a family of Holy Rollers on a farm in the Ozarks, Cherie lost her family in a flood. After working in a drugstore in Joplin, she won second prize in an amateur contest and ended up singing at the Blue Dragon in Kansas City. Her life has been anything but innocent, and yet she maintains a real innocence of character. Cherie is a reluctant captive during the play, but she has been overpowered by her curiosity and the excitement of her adventure. She resents the fact that the young cowboy does not treat her with much respect. As she says to Elma, "I just gotta feel that whoever I marry has some real regard for me, apart from all that lovin' and sex. Know what I mean?"[19]

Cherie has been described in considerable detail by Inge:

> (CHERIE, a young blond girl of about twenty enters. . . . She wears no hat, and her hair, despite one brilliant bobby pin, blows wild about her face. She is pretty in a fragile, girlish way . . . Her clothes, considering her situation, are absurd: a skimpy jacket of tarnished metal cloth edged with not luxuriant fur, a dress of sequins and net, and gilded sandals that expose brightly enameled toes. Also, her make-up has been applied under the influence of having seen too many movies. Her lipstick creates a voluptuous pair of lips that aren't her own, and her eyebrows

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[18] Ibid., p. 183.

[19] Ibid., p. 187.

also form a somewhat arbitrary line. But despite all these defects, her prettiness is still apparent, and she has the appeal of a tender little bird. Her origin is the Ozarks and speech is Southern.)[20]

Like Bo, Cherie is a combination of contradictory elements. Behind her resentment there is curiosity, behind her gaudy accounterments, and despite her experiences, she is an innocent girl.

Dr. Lyman is a curious specimen, a veteran of three marriages and an intensive education. "I graduated magna cum laude from the University of Chicago, I studied on a Rhodes Scholarship, and returned to take my Ph.D. at Harvard, receiving it with highest honors,"[21] he admits. However, he has other less impressive facts concerned with him which Carl reveals to Grace.

CARL. Hey, know what I heard about the perfessor? The detective at the bus terminal at Kanz City is a buddy of mine. He pointed out the perfessor to me before he got on the bus. Know what he said? He said the p'lice in Kanz City picked the perfessor up for loiterin' around the schools.
GRACE. (Appalled.) Honest?
CARL. Then they checked his record and found he'd been in trouble several times, for gettin' involved with young girls.[22]

Inge describes Dr. Lyman on his first entrance as

(. . . a man of medium height, about fifty, with a ruddy, boyish face that smilingly defies the facts of his rather scholarly glasses and iron-grey hair. He wears an old tweed shirt of good quality underneath a worn Burberry. His clothes are mussed, and he wears no hat, probably having left it somewhere; for he has been drinking and is, at present, very jubilant. He looks over the restaurant approvingly.)[23]

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[20] Ibid., p. 157.
[21] Ibid., p. 180.
[22] Ibid., p. 213.
[23] Ibid., p. 138.

With Grace and Virgil, Dr. Lyman reminds the audience of the realities of life, of pain and disappointment. In a sense Dr. Lyman speaks for the playwright. He is certainly one of Inge's most complex characters. He is obviously an intelligent man, acquainted with the classics, and yet he is a depraved alcoholic. During the course of the play he spends almost all of his time with Elma. His lines are filled with self-judgements which the other characters in the play do not comprehend but which prove very revealing. Cherie, giggling at one of Dr. Lyman's lines, admits:

> CHERIE. I don't understand a word you say, but I love the way you say it.
> DR. LYMAN. And: I . . . understand <u>everything</u> I say . . . but privately despise the way I say it.
> CHERIE. (Giggling.) That's so cute.[24]

Later he admits to Elma the reasons for his failure as a teacher:

> DR. LYMAN. I could never stay in one place very long at a time. And I hated having anyone over me, like deans and presidents and department heads. I never was a man who could take <u>orders</u> . . . from <u>anyone</u> . . . without feeling resentment. Right or wrong, I have always insisted on having my own way.[25]

The professor is the ideal character to speculate on the serious questions that Inge's interpretation of life poses.

> Maybe we have lost the ability [to fall in love and stay in love], maybe Man has passed the stage in his evolution wherein love is possible. Maybe life will continue to be so terrifyingly complex that man's anxiety about his mere survival will render him too miserly to give of himself in any true relation.[26]

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[24] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 168.

[25] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 177.

[26] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 188.

The point at which Dr. Lyman most clearly explains himself is after the "Romeo and Juliet" scene. He is very drunk, but his lines present the truth. "I'm a child," he admits, "a drunken, unruly child, and I've nothing in my heart for a true woman."

Two comments which Dr. Lyman makes to Elma just before he boards the bus puts the finishing touches on his characterization. "Ah!," he exclaims after telling Elma of his decision to continue straight on to Denver, "sometimes it is so gratifying to feel that one is doing the 'right' thing, I wonder that I don't choose to always."[27] Elma follows him to the door:

> ELMA. Thank you, Dr. Lyman. I feel it's been an honor to know you. You're the smartest man I've ever met.
> DR. LYMAN. The smartest?
> ELMA. Really you are.
> DR. LYMAN. Oh, yes, I'm terribly smart. Wouldn't it have been nice . . . to be intelligent? (He chuckles, blows a kiss to her, then hurries out the door.)[28]

Inge uses Dr. Lyman as a spokesman for some of his most satirical comments. The fact that Dr. Lyman expresses himself in appropriately profound professorial language adds to the humorous effect. His anecdote on functional education was probably inspired by Inge's five years at Stephens. Although Dr. Lyman, at the beginning of the speech, carefully locates in the East the college where he taught, the fact that everyone in the story is female, except for the president of the college (who could be either male or female),

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[27] Ibid., p. 200.

[28] Ibid., p. 213.

leads one inevitably to the conclusion that the college in Inge's mind was Stephens.

> DR. LYMAN. My last position was at one of those revolting little progressive colleges in the East, where they offer a curriculum of what they call functional education. Educators, I am sure, have despaired of ever teaching students anything, so they have decided that the second-best thing to do is to understand them. Everyday there would be a meeting of everyone on the entire faculty, with whom the students ever came into any contact, from the president down to the chambermaids, and we would put our collective heads together to try to figure out why little Jane or little Mary was not getting out of her classes what she should. The suggestion that perhaps she wasn't studying was too simple, and if you implied that she simply did not have the brains for a college education, you were being undemocratic.[29]

Ironically Inge's criticism of educators is the same one used by Driver,[30] Brustein,[31] and Weales[32] about the plays of Inge. Each of these critics correctly pointed out that Inge tends to avoid probing what they feel are the deepest and most important questions of life, being content to do "the second best thing," trying to understand character. In the cases in which Inge is concerned, disillusioned and alienated individuals, understanding is a prerequisite for values. People under emotional stress do not behave according to a set of values until that stress is removed or reduced. Even "the deepest and most important

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[29] Ibid., p. 179.

[30] Tom F. Driver, "'Psychologism': Roadblock to Religious Drama," Religion in Life, XXIX (Winter, 1959-60), p. 108.

[31] Robert Brustein, "The Men-taming Women of William Inge," Harpers, November, 1958, pp. 52-57.

[32] Gerald Weales, "American Drama Since the Second World War," Tamarack Review, Issue 13 (Autumn, 1959), pp. 93-94.

questions in life" must wait until they are capable of being considered. Inge, accordingly, stops short of real meaning, expecting the audience to provide answers from their own experience.

The older cowboy, Virgil, is one of the loneliest of Inge's characters. He is a "big man, corpulent and slow-moving," "a man in his forties who seems to regard Bo in an amost parental way."[33] His function is obviously that of a confidant, and he is responsible for evoking most of the biographical exposition the audience receives about Bo. Where Bo is loud, Virgil is quiet; where Bo is impetuous, Virgil is cautious. He tries to prevent the fight between Bo and the Sheriff but fails. It is his quiet talk with Cherie that makes her drop charges against Bo. Thus Virgil is a foil for Bo and, at the same time, his guardian and advisor. Virgil is also a foil for the romance and happiness of the play. His scene at the end of the play makes him more than a "tall monastic figure who strums his guitar and breathes primitive philosophy," as McClain has suggested.[34] It makes him a representative of Inge's basic philosophy. The scene in which he is turned out into the snow is one of the most poignant Inge has written.

Carl is the least fully developed of the play's eight characters. Inge describes him briefly as a hefty man, loud

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[33] 4 Plays, p. 169.

[34] John McClain, "Inge Comedy Hits High Spots: Kim Stanley and Albert Salmi Shine in Hilarious Triumph," NYTCR, March 7, 1955, p. 347.

and hearty, who looks very natty in his uniform. His rather obvious hint to Grace that they retire to her apartment, filled with faked innocence and accompanied by broad winks, leaves little to the imagination, and their familiarity the following morning removes any doubt that further intimacies lie ahead:

> GRACE. See ya day after tomorrow. (She winks at him.)
> CARL. (Winks back.) Ya might get surprised . . . what can happen in twenty minutes. (Slaps GRACE on the buttocks as a gesture of farewell.) All aboard![35]

Grace, the proprietress of the restaurant at which the bus is marooned, is a woman in her thirties or early forties. She was, by her own admission, a "headstrong brat" who had to have her own way, a way which led quickly to marriage and divorce. Like all of the characters in the play, she has her lonely moments. Early in the play she makes this confession:

> GRACE. If I didn't have this restaurant to keep me busy, I'd probably go nuts. Sometimes, at night, after I empty the garbage and lock the doors and turn out the lights, I get kind of a sick feelin', 'cause I sure don't look forward to walking up those stairs and lettin' myself into an empty apartment.[36]

Grace, however, is a practical soul and finds a practical solution which she reveals to Elma at the end of the play. ". . . I'm a restless sort of woman, and every once in a while, I gotta have me a man, just to keep m'self from gettin' grouchy."[37] Carl, the bus driver, keeps her contented

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[35] 4 Plays, p. 155.

[36] Ibid., p. 218.

[37] Ibid., p. 219.

during the play.

Elma, a curious, innocent high school girl who works for Grace as a waitress, stands in stark contrast to her worldly employer. Big-eyed and intelligent, she has embarrassed away boys with her good grades and is quite pleased when she discovers that Dr. Lyman intended to "make love" to her. "It's nice to know someone can feel that way," she remarks.[38]

Her relationship with the professor provides the kind of contrast that Inge delights in. Elma's innocence and the professor's depravity are of course only two elements in the overall pattern of contrasts that Inge provides in Bus Stop. "I seek dramatic values in a relative way," Inge writes in his foreword to 4 Plays.[39] The play is an excellent example of this technique.

Presiding over this motley assembly of characters is Will Masters, the town's honest sheriff, a huge, saturnine man with a forehead scar and a thick black beard. He serves three obvious functions: to inform the audience and the characters of the progress of the storm; to represent the law to Dr. Lyman and Bo; and to heckle Carl and Grace. His rather dry comment after Carl exits whistling into the night and his less than subtle comment when Carl returns without his overshoes, encourage the audience to like as well as respect him. His confession to Bo that he was himself once beaten within an inch of his life draws the sting from Bo's

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[38] Ibid., p. 219.

[39] Ibid., p. viii.

defeat and makes it possible for Bo to apologize for his conduct.

Evaluation

Bus Stop is full of paradoxical contrasts. Hatch has pointed out that the characters in the play are themselves paradoxes: "the nightclub girl who is vulgar but not cheap; the cowboy who is absurd but not ridiculous; the professor who is pitiable but not maudlin; the restaurant owner who is tough by not callous."[40] While the characters in Bus Stop are suspiciously similar to the stereotyped figures that can be found in contemporary fiction, drama, and cinema, Inge's characters are drawn with such accuracy and sensitivity that they possess individuality and freshness.

In Bus Stop Inge has attempted to find meaning in contrasts and unusual juxtapositions. While Inge does not go as far as Victor Hugo, who believed that truth could only be achieved through the juxtaposition of the grotesque and the beautiful, he does balance every overt idiosyncrasy with a covert subconscious logic. Inge again has exploited psychological findings in Bus Stop in order to create more effective characters, characters who gain depth and believability because of contradictions between their conscious behavior and their subconscious motivations.

The characteristic methods and means that were identified in Inge's earlier plays are found once again in Bus Stop:

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[40]Robert Hatch, "Theatre," Nation, March 19, 1955, p. 245.

the colloquial, Midwestern dialogue; the contrapuntal technique; the creation of a dramatic texture; the attitude of resignation.

Bus Stop is the most light-hearted of William Inge's plays, and, due to the happy uniting of Bo and Cherie, his most atypical. In it he comes very close to forgetting the rather melancholy pessimism of his earlier plays, but the presence of Virgil, Dr. Lyman, and Grace insure that we remain constantly aware of those darker facets of life to which Inge is so often drawn: loneliness, uncertainty, alienation. Inge provides a range of emotions, not only in a variety of characters, but within each of his characters. Bus Stop provides a fine example of his craftsmanship. In Bus Stop Inge searches for the meaning of love in the snowbound experiences of eight travellers. The play skillfully reveals Inge's "wistful awareness of the loneliness of human beings."[41]

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[41]Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: 'Bus Stop,'" New York Times, March 3, 1955, sect. II, p. 1.

CHAPTER V

THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Inge's fourth and last Broadway success to date (July, 1962), opened on December 5, 1957, at the Music Box Theatre starring Theresa Wright as Cora and Pat Hingle as Rubin. The show ran for 468 performances, just eleven less than Bus Stop's record. Dark was Inge's first Broadway experiment in autobiography, recalling his own boyhood days and providing us with "a homely and enormously compelling insight into the sort of surroundings in which William Inge grew up."[1]

Action

Like Bus Stop, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is divided into three acts which are not broken into scenes. The setting is the living room of a house "in a small Oklahoma town close to Oklahoma City."[2] The time is the early 1920's. The play opens with a long discussion between Rubin Flood, a harness salesman, and his wife, Cora. Rubin is about to leave on a business trip, and his wife is reluctant to see him go. "Why don't you wait now until

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[1]John McClain, "Inge's Best Play--With Kazan's Aid," NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 160.

[2]William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 224.

morning?" she asks.[3] Then she expresses her anxiety about their two children, Reenie and Sonny.

> CORA. Rubin, I worry about them. Reenie's so shy of people her own age, I don't know what to make of her. She's got no confidence at all. And I don't know how to give her any, but you could. Her eyes light up like candles every time you go near her.
>
> RUBIN. (A little embarrassed.) Come on now, Cora.
>
> CORA. It's true . . . and the boy. Other boys tease him and call him names, Rubin. He doesn't know how to get along with them.
>
> RUBIN. He ought to beat the tar outa the other boys.
>
> CORA. He's not like you, Rubin. He's not like anyone I ever knew. He needs a father, Rubin. So does Reenie. Kids need a father when they're growing up, same as they need a mother.[4]

Besides establishing the fact that Rubin is away from home a great deal and that this absence has had an effect on his children, this opening sequence provides considerable background information. First, there is the fact that the town is an oil boom town:

> RUBIN. Chamber of Commerce says we're the wealthiest town per capita in all the Southwest. I guess they're not exaggeratin' much either, with all this oil money, those damned Indians ridin' around in their limousines, gettin' all that money from the government. Millions of dollars and nobody knows what to do with it.[5]

Next, there is the fact that money has destroyed old friendships:

> RUBIN. Harry and Peg Ralston puttin' on the dog now, are they?
>
> CORA. Oh, yes. I hardly ever see Peg any more.
>
> RUBIN. I guess they don't have time for any of their old friends, now that they've got so much money.[6]

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[3] Ibid., p. 226.

[4] Ibid., p. 227.

[5] Ibid., p. 230.

[6] Ibid., p. 230.

Then, there is the fact that Reenie has been invited to a party at the country club. Their discussion is interrupted by a chorus of jeering voices, taunting Sonny. Cora rushes to protect him. Rubin stands quietly by. "It's his battle," he states. "He's gotta fight it out for himself."[7] However, his son is not interested in learning to defend himself, and Rubin, exasperated by his son's diffidence, says good-bye and drives off.

The scene between Cora and Sonny which follows reveals Sonny's lack of interest in his father, the feeling of companionship that he derives from his movie star scrapbooks, and his skill at reciting poetry.

The Floods' daughter, Reenie, is introduced next. She is sixteen. She is accompanied by Flirt, a flapper friend. In the ensuing moments which are filled with small talk about the party and the Ralstons--"I just hate Mary Jane Ralston . . . I think she's a cow."[8]--the audience discovers the antipathy that exists between the Flood children. When Sonny feels the new dress which Cora has just bought Reenie, Reenie snaps, "Take your dirty hands off my new dress,"[9] and only Cora's intervention stops a fight. We also discover while Flirt is there that Reenie's date is a Jewish boy whose mother is a moving picture actress. Reenie's lines during the discussion which follows clearly reveal her apprehension.

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[7] Ibid., p. 231.

[8] Ibid., p. 237.

[9] Ibid., p. 236.

Do you think it's all right for me to go out with a Jew, Mom?[10]

Mom, what's a Jewish person like?[11]

I don't know what to expect.[12]

Mom, I feel sort of scared to go out with someone so different.[13]

The thought of the party terrifies Reenie, and she is soon looking for a reason why she should not go, but her mother is adamant.

The remainder of the first act is filled with a long and increasingly violent quarrel between Rubin and Cora. Flirt has left for home, and Reenie is playing the piano when Rubin enters. He is angry at having discovered that his wife has surreptitiously bought Rennie a dress for the party. "What the hell's been goin' on behind my back?"[14] he shouts. While the dress initiates the argument, it is merely the first of a series of mutual recriminations. Cora accuses Rubin of "frisking over the country like a young stallion,"[15] of never having wanted to marry her in the first place, and of carrying on with Mavis Pruit, a former girl friend who lives in Ponca City. Finally the argument returns to Reenie's dress, and they present each other with ultimatums.

CORA. Reenie's going to wear her new dress to the party, or you'll have to bury me.
RUBIN. You'll take that dress back to Loren Delman, or I'm leavin' this house for good and

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[10] Ibid., p. 237.
[11] Ibid., p. 238.
[12] Ibid., p. 238.
[13] Ibid., p. 239.
[14] Ibid., p. 242.
[15] Ibid., p. 246.

never comin' back.[16]

Taunted by his wife's, "Go on hit me! You wouldn't dare!" Rubin sends Cora reeling and drives angrily away. The children, who have been watching and listening, react quite differently. Reenie is tense with anxiety.

> REENIE. Did he mean it about not coming back? Oh, Mom, why did you have to say all those things? I love Daddy. Why did you say those things to him?[17]

Sonny, when he is informed that they may have to move to Oklahoma City to stay with Cora's older sister, jumps up and down with glee.

The act ends quietly. While Reenie plays a "lovely Chopin nocturne,"[18] Cora, lying on the floor, takes Sonny in her arms. "Oh, God," she cries, "wouldn't it be nice if life were as sweet as music!"[19] The curtain falls as she and Sonny exit to set the table for supper.

The second act takes place "after dinner, the following Friday,"[20] the night of the country club party. Lottie and Morris Lacey, Cora's sister and brother-in-law, have come for dinner, and when the curtain rises Lottie and Sonny are singing lustily. Almost immediately the various members of the Flood family make their exits and allow a long expository dialogue to take place between Morris and Lottie. It is revealed that Cora is planning to

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[16] Ibid., p. 247.

[17] Ibid., p. 248.

[18] Ibid., p. 249.

[19] Ibid., p. 250.

[20] Ibid., p. 224.

move to Oklahoma City and has asked Lottie to put her and the children up. Lottie does not like the idea. "My God, Morris," she exclaims, "we'd be in the loony bin in less than two days with them in the house."[21] Lottie also reminisces about the way Rubin and Cora met.

> LOTTIE. Cora and I were coming out of the five-and-ten. She'd wanted to buy a little lace to put on a dress. And here comes Rubin, like a picture of Sin, riding down the street on a shiny black horse. My God, he was handsome. Neither of us knew who he was. But he looked at Cora and smiled, and Cora began to get all nervous and fluttery. And do you know what? He came by the house that very night and wanted to see her. Mama and Papa didn't know what to do. They stood around like they were afraid of Rubin. But Cora went out riding with him. He'd brought a buggy with him. And six weeks later they were married.[22]

The action of the remainder of the second act breaks neatly into two segments followed by a symbolic coda. The first segment leads up to and includes the scene with Sammy, the Jewish cadet who is Reenie's date. Before Sammy arrives, Reenie, sick with apprehension, vomits in the bathroom. Downstairs Sonny shows his uncle his collection of movie stars, and Lottie rattles out a bigoted anti-Catholic tirade.

When Sammy arrives, he turns out to be an ideal date for Reenie and a sympathetic friend for Sonny. While Punky Givens, his companion, necks with Flirt in the parlor, Sammy plays with Sonny. He lets Sonny play with his sword and encourages him to recite the familiar "To be or not to be" soliloquy from Hamlet. As Sonny begins, Cora starts

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[21] Ibid., p. 253. [22] Ibid., p. 254.

down the stairs with Reenie. Shakespeare's lines are fitting accompaniment for the emotional turmoil that the young girl is suffering. Sammy, to everyone's surprise, succeeds in charming Reenie, his own loneliness and uncertainty giving him insight into hers. Before he leaves, Sammy demonstrates his uncanny, intuitive understanding once again, quickly quieting a temper tantrum which Sonny throws when he is told he cannot go to the party. After Sammy and Reenie have left, Cora confesses, "Why, that's the nicest young man I ever met."[23]

A long discussion of marriage and love between the two sisters makes up the closing segment of the second act. Here we learn of Lottie's frigidity and unhappiness, of the emptiness which makes her a compulsive eater and talker.

> LOTTIE. I talk all the time just to convince myself that I'm alive. And I stuff myself with victuals just to feel I've got something inside me. And I'm full of all kinds of crazy curiosity about . . . all the things in life I seem to have missed out on. Now I'm telling you the truth, Cora.[24]

When the Laceys have gone, Cora stands thinking. Then, suddenly, she picks up the phone and calls the Hotel Boomerang in Blackwell. "I want to talk to Mr. Rubin Flood," she says. But Rubin is not, and has not been, there.

The act ends as Cora and her son "start up the stairs to face the darkness hovering there like an omen."[25]

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[23] Ibid., p. 274.

[24] Ibid., p. 280.

[25] Ibid., p. 283.

The final act takes place the following day, late in the afternoon. It is drizzling outside. Reenie and her mother are sitting by the fire. Both are quiet, occupied with their own thoughts. Then, as they begin to talk, it is disclosed that, during the party the previous evening, Sammy had mysteriously disappeared. Reenie, who had come to like Sammy very much, was terribly disappointed and left the party. She is disillusioned. "Mom," she says, "I don't think I ever want to get married."[26]

At this point, Sonny is driven up in a chauffeured limousine. He burts into the living room waving a five dollar bill. "Look, Mom!" he shouts, "Mrs. Stanford gave me five dollars for speaking my piece. See? Five whole dollars . . . and Mrs. Stanford sent me home with her chauffeur, too, Mom."[27] He is jubilant, but his elation is short-lived. First Cora takes the five dollars from him and drops it into his piggy bank, and then she sits down with him for a serious talk. She tells him that in the future he must not crawl into bed with her.

> CORA. Can you understand, Sonny? (He looks away from her with unconscious guilt. She studies him.) I think you're older in your feelings than I ever realized. . . . I've kept you too close to me, Sonny. Too close. I'll take the blame, boy. But don't be mad. Your mother still loves you, Sonny. (But she sees that they are at an impasse.) Well, we won't talk about it any more. Run along to the store now, before it closes.[28]

As Sonny leaves, Flirt comes rushing in to announce that

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[26] Ibid., p. 287.

[27] Ibid., p. 288.

[28] Ibid., p. 290.

Sammy has committed suicide. The news stuns the family. Then Rubin returns. He has lost his old job selling harness and has spent the last two days searching for another. In an emotional scene with his wife, he admits his doubts, apologizes for striking her, and professes his love. Sonny, drawn to his sister for the first time by their mutual loss in Sammy, pleads with Reenie to go to the movies with him and, when she agrees, smashes the piggy bank. As the children leave for the movies, "Cora, like a shy maiden, starts up the stairs, where we see Rubin's naked feet standing in the warm light at the top."[29]

Principal Characters

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs has no protagonist, although the Broadway and "road" companies found one in Cora. Because Rubin and Cora Flood open and close the play, they acquire a functional importance which justifies considering them in some detail. Rubin is described as "quite a good-looking man of thirty-six, still robust, dressed in Western clothes--a big Stetson, boots, narrow trousers, colorful shirt and string tie."[30] He has had little formal education. "I on'y had six years a schoolin' 'cause that's all the Old Man thought I'd ever need,"[31] he admits near the end of the play. His language is strong, and he is a plain-speaking man. Talking of the way in which Cora clings to her children Rubin remarks:

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[29] Ibid., p. 304.

[30] Ibid., p. 226.

[31] Ibid., p. 298.

> RUBIN. You're like an old mare Pa used to have on the ranch. Never wanted to give up her colts. By God, she'd keep 'em locked inside her and make all of us men dig inside her with our hands to get 'em out. She never wanted to let 'em go.[32]

When he is angry his language is filled with profanity. "Jesus Christ," he complains when Cora nags him to stay home, "ya talk like a man had nothin' else to do but stay home and entertain you."[33] Nor does Rubin have the patience or tolerance to understand his son. His frustrated inability to communicate with Sonny is illustrated in the following interchange which takes place just after Sonny has fled from his jeering playmates:

> RUBIN. Son!
> SONNY. Huh?
> RUBIN. Want me to teach you how to put up a good fight?
> SONNY. (Turning away from his father.) I don't think so.
> RUBIN. (To CORA.) What else can I do? Buy him a shotgun?[34]

Even at the very end of the play Rubin cannot reach him.

> RUBIN. Your mom said maybe you'd like to go to the movie tonight. I guess I could spare you the money. (He digs into his pocket.)
> SONNY. I've changed my mind. I don't want to now. (SONNY turns away from his father.)
> RUBIN. (Looks at his son as though realizing sadly the breach between them. With a feeling of failure, he puts a warm hand on SONNY'S shoulder.) Oh! Well, I ain't gonna argue.[35]

Rubin is a stubborn, independent man, too proud, at first, to share his doubts about his declining livelihood with his wife. He hides his misgivings until near the end of the play. Then, after expressing his determination to

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[32] Ibid., p. 228.
[33] Ibid., p. 227.
[34] Ibid., p. 232.
[35] Ibid., p. 298.

accept a job offer with an equipment company, he tells Cora of his fears about the future.

> RUBIN. The new job is work I've never done. Work I never even thought of doin'. Learnin' about all that goddamn machinery, and how to get out there and demonstrate it. Working with different kinds of men, that's smarter than I am, that think fast and talk sharp and mean all business. Men I can't sit around and chew tobacco with and joke with like I did m'old customers. I . . . I don't like 'em. I don't know if I'm gonna like them.
>
> CORA. But you just said you wanted the job.
>
> RUBIN. I don't like them, but I'm gonna join them. A fellow's gotta get into the swim. There's nothing else to do. But I'm scared. I don't know how I'll make out. I . . . I'm scared.
>
> CORA. I never supposed you had it in you to fear.
>
> RUBIN. I s'pose all this time you been thinkin' you was married to one of them movin'-pitcher fellas that jump off bridges and hold up trains and shoot Indians, and are never scared of nothin'. Times are changin', Cora, and I dunno where they're goin'. When I was a boy, there wasn't much more to this town than a post office . . . Now look at things. School buildin's, churches, fine stores, movie theatres, a country club. Men becomin' millionaires overnight, drivin' down the street in big limousines, goin' out to the country club and gettin' drunk, acting like they was lords of creation. I dunno what to think of things now, Cora. I'm a stranger in the very land I was born in.[36]

Rubin's speech demonstrates a new maturity. He has been been forced to stop and think. His reconciliation with Cora is indicative of a new willingness to try and understand his wife, his family, a new job, and the future of the society in which he lives.

Cora, too, is concerned with the future, especially where the lives of her children are involved, but her greatest fear is that her marriage will be destroyed.

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[36] Ibid., p. 301.

Externally she is "gentle, soft, and wondering,"[37] but beneath her primness and faint demands are strong sexual needs and a real affection for her husband.

Inge includes no physical description of Cora in his stage directions. But enough is learned of her background and personality to characterize her. How she met Rubin has already been recorded. That she came from a "proper" family is evident. Chiding Lottie for telling lewd stories Cora protests, "Lottie! That's enough. That's enough . . . Sometimes you talk shamefully, Lottie, and when I think of the way Mama and Papa brought us up . . ."[38] Yet Cora, despite her upbringing, quickly capitulated before Rubin's advances. Lottie reminds Cora of this. "My God, Cora, he had you pregnant inside of two weeks after he started seeing you."[39] And Cora admits what happened.

> CORA. I never blamed Rubin for that. I was crazy in love with him. He just swept me off my feet and made all of my objections seem kinda silly. He even made Mama and Papa seem silly.[40]

An important aspect of Cora's personality is revealed in her relationship with her son. It is suggested at the end of the play that Cora finally has managed to break the bond that ties her too closely to her son. At the beginning of the play, after having chased her son's jeering tormentors away, Cora asserts: "I can't stand quietly by

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[37] Brooks Atkinson, "Illuminations by Inge," NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 159.

[38] 4 Plays, p. 277.

[39] Ibid., p. 279.

[40] Ibid., p. 280.

while they're picking on my boy."[41] Rubin replies, "It's his battle. He's gotta fight it out for hisself." At this she vows, "If they touch one hair of that boy's head I'll destroy them."[42] In the final act when the jeering voices are heard once again, Cora starts toward the door, but then she stops. Turning back to Reenie she remarks, "I guess I can't go through life protecting him from bullies."[43] The change indicates that she is aware of the risk she runs in keeping Sonny too close to her. In the final moments of the play, the Oedipal bond is finally broken:

> CORA. (She turns thoughtfully to her son.) Have you forgiven your mother, Sonny?
> SONNY. (Inscrutable.) Oh . . . maybe.
> CORA. Your mother still loves you, Sonny. (She puts an arm around him but he avoids her embrace.)
> SONNY. Don't, mom.
> CORA. All right. I understand.
> RUBIN. (Upstairs, growing more impatient.) Cora! Come on, honey!
> CORA. (Calling back to him.) I'll be up in a minute, Rubin. (SONNY looks at her with accusing eyes.) Good-bye Sonny! (REENIE sticks her head in the door from outside.)
> REENIE. Hurry up, Sonny!
> RUBIN. Come on, Cora!
> (CORA starts up the stairs to her husband, stopping for one final look at her departing son. And SONNY, just before going out the door, stops for one final look at his mother, his face full of confused understanding. Then he hurries out . . .)[44]

Near the end of the play, Cora, reconciled to her husband, talks to him about their children.

> CORA. Every time I see the kids go out of the house, I worry . . . like I was watching them go out into life, and they seem so young and helpless.

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[41] Ibid., p. 231.
[42] Ibid., p. 231.
[43] Ibid., p. 294.
[44] Ibid., p. 304.

RUBIN. But ya gotta let 'em go, Cora. Ya can't hold 'em.
CORA. I've always felt I could give them life like a present, all wrapped in white, with every promise of happiness inside.
RUBIN. That ain't the way it works.
CORA. No. All I can promise them is life itself.[45]

This realization and the new family relationships that have been established momentarily free Cora of her fears and allow her "like a shy maiden"[46] to be happily reunited with her husband.

It will be recalled that The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is a revision of Inge's first play, "Farther Off From Heaven," which he wrote immediately after seeing The Glass Menagerie. The similarity between Reenie, the Flood's adolescent daughter, and Laura, the young daughter in Tennessee Williams' play, cannot be regarded as a mere coincidence. Reenie "is a plain girl with no conscious desire to be anything else."[47] She does not have many friends and is too shy to attend social functions where she might make more. Her mother admits to Rubin, "Reenie's so shy of people her own age, I don't know what to make of her. She's got no confidence at all."[47] Reenie finds some solace in music, but her mother's exasperated remarks make it clear that Reenie's piano playing is a form of masochism. "All you do is pity yourself at the piano. That's all. You go in there [the parlor] and pity yourself playing all those

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[45] Ibid., p. 300.
[46] Ibid., p. 304.
[47] Ibid., p. 235.
[48] Ibid., p. 227.

sad pieces."[49]

Reenie is very deeply attached to her father. She is distressed when he storms out of the house in the first act and overjoyed when he returns in the third. But it is Sammy Goldenbaum, the young Jewish cadet, who moves her most deeply. "I liked him . . . very much," she sobs,[50] remembering his quiet kiss the night before. And when Flirt announces his suicide, Reenie is inarticulate with grief and shock. Her violent, emotional reaction to Sammy's suicide destroys the protective barrier of self-pity Reenie has built about her own insecurities. Her concern for someone else makes her forget her own problems.

> REENIE. He asked for me . . . for me. The only time anyone ever wanted me, or needed me, in my entire life. And I wasn't there. I didn't stop once to think of . . . Sammy. I've always thought I was the only person in the world who had any feelings at all.[51]

Throughout almost the entire play Reenie fights with her brother, but in the last moments she states that she is never going to fight him again. As the curtain falls, the two children leave to go to the movies together.

Sonny, Cora and Rubin's other child, is a sullen, rebellious sprout and is without doubt based on the author's own experiences as a boy. His fears, intensified by his parents' arguments, have turned him into an inverted, friendless boy. He has found happiness only in the world

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[49] Ibid., p. 242.

[50] Ibid., p. 286.

[51] Ibid., p. 294.

of movie fantasy. He is spoiled and precocious and "woefully Oedipal."[52] Besides noting that he is ten years old, the stage directions fail to describe him at all. His character is delineated by his relationships with the other characters in the play. He is hostile to his father and sister. He is happy with his mother and aunt. His temper tantrums and his inability to adjust to the society of other boys his age are indicative of his psychological condition. As he leaves to go to the movies with his sister at the end of the play his future looks brighter, but one cannot quite forget Cora's worried words:

> CORA. Kids don't just "get over" these things, in some magic way. These troubles stay with kids sometimes, and affect their lives when they grow up.[53]

While he was delving into the psychology of the characters in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Inge realized that they had one thing in common: "fear, the personal fear with which each man lives in a world that does not want to recognize fear." Then he added, "It has taken me many years of living to realize the fears in us all, the fears in the most seemingly brave, the bravery in the most seemingly frightened."[54] The play was designed to reveal these fears and this bravery.

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[52]Patrick Dennis, "A Literate Soap Opera," New Republic, December 30, 1957, p. 21.

[53]4 Plays, p. 257.

[54]Time, December 16, 1957, p. 42.

Inge's insight into and understanding of Sammy, the young Jewish cadet, was doubtlessly aided by his experiences at Culver Military Academy. Sammy Goldenbaum is the most sympathetic character in the play. He captivates the entire Flood family when he comes to pick up Reenie for the dance. His charming manner and quiet assurance subdue Sonny's temper tantrum and calm Reenie's fears. Yet Sammy turns out to be the loneliest and most desperate character Inge has placed in the dark. His suicide is the final measure of his loneliness, but before he dies the audience is allowed a glimpse into his personal agony. His desperate need to believe that he is loved by his mother is pathetic. "My mother," he explains to Reenie, "doesn't have a place for me, where she lives. . . . But you mustn't misunderstand . . . she's really a very lovely person."[55] Just how important Sammy was to his mother is revealed after Sammy's suicide.

> FLIRT. They called Sammy's mother way out in California, and told her, and I guess she was terribly sorry and everything, but she told them to go on and have the funeral in Oklahoma City, that she'd pay all the expenses, but she wouldn't be able to come for it because she was working. And she cried over the telephone and asked them please to try and keep her name out of the papers, because she said it wasn't generally known that she had a son.[56]

Only Morris, the pitiable uncle, really senses Sammy's psychological state. The others are oblivious of it. The following conversation takes place after the young people

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[55] 4 Plays, p. 271. [56] Ibid., p. 292.

have left for the party.

> CORA. Why, that's the nicest young man I ever met.
> LOTTIE. I thought so, too, Cora. And my goodness, he was handsome. Morris says he felt sorry for him, though.
> CORA. Sorry? Oh, Morris.
> LOTTIE. He seemed like a perfectly happy boy to me. But Morris says he looked like a very unhappy boy to him. What makes you think that, Morris?
> MORRIS. Oh . . . I don't know.
> CORA. Unhappy? Why, he made himself right at home, didn't he?
> LOTTIE. I should say he did. He was laughing and enjoying himself. But Morris says sometimes the people who act the happiest are really the saddest.
> CORA. Oh, Morris.
> LOTTIE. Morris, I think you make these things up. Ever since you went to that psychologist, you've gone around imagining everyone's unhappy. (MORRIS quietly gets up and walks to the door, leaving LOTTIE to wonder if she has said anything wrong.)[57]

Lottie and Morris complete Inge's montage of fear. Lottie, Cora's raucous, talkative, older sister, is "a big fleshy woman."[58] whose domineering tone covers her own insecurity and frigidity. By her constant verbal barrages she has reduced her husband, Morris, to quiet desperation, a state in which, as a dentist, he is afraid to hurt his patients and, as a husband, unable to overcome his wife's frigidity. Like Lola in Come Back, Little Sheba, Lottie is a compulsive eater and talker. Near the end of the second act, she lets down her mask of happy vivacity and admits her failure as a wife. "But what happened?" Cora asks.

> LOTTIE. Did you notice the way Morris got up out of his chair suddenly and just walked away, with no explanation at all? Well, something

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[57] Ibid., p. 274.

[58] Ibid., p. 251.

> inside Morris did the same thing several years ago. Something inside him just got up and went for a walk, and never came back.[59]

Morris is, according to Inge, "a big, defeated-looking man of wrecked virility."[60] His condition is easily classified as an example of psychological castration. Throughout the play he does little more than agree with his wife. His longest line is eleven words long: "We'd better be starting back now, honey. It looks like rain."[61]

Inge has introduced a comic figure in the character of Flirt Conroy, a flapper friend of Reenie's. Described by Coleman as an Orphan Annie who has grown up enough to Charleston,[62] she is a stereotype whose frenetic gyrations contrast most effectively with the McKinley style living room of the Flood's home. She gossips constantly, stopping only to neck or demonstrate some new dance step. The following example provides an example of her scatter-brained, verbal field-running:

> FLIRT. But when you've got as much money as the Ralstons do, I guess you can be a member of anything. I just hate Mary Jane Ralston. Some of the boys at school think she's pretty but I think she's a cow. I'm not being jealous either. I guess if I had as much money to spend on clothes as she does, I'd have been voted the prettiest girl in school, too. Anyway, I'm absolutely positive she peroxides her hair.[63]

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[59] Ibid., p. 278.

[60] Ibid., p. 251.

[61] Ibid., p. 280.

[62] Robert Coleman, "'The Dark' Is Inge's Best Play," NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 159.

[63] 4 Plays, p. 237.

Even Sammy's suicide only temporarily dampens her high spirits.

> FLIRT. Oh . . . it's really the most terrible thing that ever happened to me. I never did know anyone who killed himself before. . . . It all makes me feel so kind of strange. Doesn't it you, kid? I think I'll go to Sunday School tomorrow. Do you wanta go with me, Reenie? (REENIE nods yes.) Oh, I feel just terrible.[64]

It is clear from the preceding that there is no protagonist in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs. Every character which has been discussed dominates the stage for a period, but none dominates the entire play.

Evaluation

The Broadway production of Dark evoked a variety of responses. One critic likened it to a procession of penitents: "One by one, each character is led up to the dark at the top of the stairs and revealed in his hair shirt."[65] Another thought of it is a simple formula: "Husband fights with wife. Husband leaves wife. Wife's sister by revealing her own failure makes the wife realize that she is wrong. Husband and wife make up."[66] A minister categorized it as "a play of human redemption in terms analogous to the Christian gospel,"[67] and a second scored it

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[64]Ibid., p. 292.

[65]Time, December 16, 1957, p. 42.

[66]Henry Hewes, "Light in the Living Room," Saturday Review of Literature, December 21, 1957, p. 27.

[67]B. Davie Napier, "The Problem of the Dark," Pulpit, November, 1958, p. 5.

as "Latter-Day Freudianity."[68]

Kerr has suggested that The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is presented from the viewpoint of a child. The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, he writes, "is the kind of play that a child might have overheard as he passed, hastily or idly, through the back corners of his parents' lives." What Inge captures, is the "erratic, tantalizing, half-understood and violently unexpected universe of mysteriously behaved adults."[69] Childhood memories are admittedly the source of the mood and some of the characters in this play, but Inge has impregnated his play with too much mature wisdom and insight for it to be limited in this way. The serious discussions between Rubin and Cora, and Lottie and Cora, are hardly presented from a child's viewpoint. Both the terminology and subject matter are adult. Kerr's statement can be applied to the scenes which Reenie and Sonny dominate, for here the child's point of view is quite appropriate.

The main negative criticism of The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, and one which has frequently been leveled at Inge's plays, concerns the play's episodic structure. Lewis wrote: The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is "a fruitcake of numerous stresses and conflicts of life, . . ."[70]

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[68]Sidney Lanier, "The Gospel According to Freud," Christianity and Crisis, April 14, 1958, p. 51.

[69]Walter Kerr, "'The Dark at the Top of the Stairs,'" NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 161.

[70]Theophilus Lewis, "Dark at the Top of the Stairs," America, January 11, 1958, p. 436.

"There are too many people with too many diverse, or at least only imperfectly related, problems; too many abrupt shiftings from folk comedy to quite another mood; and altogether too much indigestible richness everywhere,"[71] wrote Wolcott Gibbs in the New Yorker. Patrick Dennis, struck by its episodic structure, called Dark a "literate soap opera" and then hastened to add:

> [Inge's soap] is of the best French-milled quality. His writing is adult. He is incapable of schmaltz. His characters are funny where he wants them to be funny, and sad where he wants them to be said and always touching and understandable."[72]

Watts, in an opening-night review entitled "Another Striking Drama by Inge," made this additional comment:

> Dark suffers from a certain diffuseness in its attack. . . . The threads of the [characters] mutual sadness were not entirely pulled together, leaving a certain feeling that we were watching a series of individual plays.[73]

The play is admittedly a melange of episodes. This is the essence of Inge's dramatic technique. But, as has been discussed before, each element has been placed with care. There is nothing haphazard in the arrangement. The scene in which Sammy charms Sonny and Reenie, for example, is carefully counterbalanced with the activities of Flirt and Punky Givens. While Sammy plays with Sonny, Punky makes

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[71]Wolcott Gibbs, "The Crowded Stairway," New Yorker, December 14, 1957, p. 83.

[72]Patrick Dennis, "A Literate Soap Opera," New Republic, December 30, 1957, p. 21.

[73]Richard Watts, Jr., "Another Striking Drama by Inge," NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 158.

love to Flirt. When Sammy tells Reenie about his own fears, Punky yawns audibly. Binding the episodes together are the scenes between Rubin and Cora which open and close the play and act as firm buttresses for the material that is found between them. The realization that Inge intended to "keep the stage bubbling with a restless kind of action"[74] tempers, if it does not refute, the preceeding comments.

One of the most penetrating analyses of The Dark at the Top of the Stairs appeared in the Canadian Tamarack Review, written by Gerald Weales, a man whose academic background and literary training provided a unique basis from which he could judge the play.

> [The Dark at the Top of the Stairs] is the most beautiful collection of cliches for our time that has so far managed to make its way into the heart of Broadway. It has a sensitive adolescent girl who has to learn that her own fear is selfishness. It has a little boy who is an angel and a monster, doing an endless specific Oedipal double with his mother. It has a frigid aunt who compensates by bubbling and an uncle who shuffles off into his dream world where, presumably, the aunt manages to be as sexy as she talks; this couple is trying just to look at, but Inge, recognizing today's textbook predilection . . . insists on having the aunt give a long explicit account of her difficulties. There is even an old-fashioned liberal bromide gone modern, the Jewish boy who commits suicide--one part tortured adolescent, two parts anti-tolerance. The most typical and tiresome thing about Dark is its conclusion, when the husband and wife, who are socially incompatible and in dire economic difficulties . . . go upstairs to bed together to solve all their problems under the Stanley-Stella post-Streetcar sex-is-all method of resolving problems.[75]

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[74] 4 Plays, p. vii.

[75] Gerald Weales, "American Drama Since the Second World War," Tamarack Review, Issue 13 (Autumn, 1959), pp. 93-94.

This evaluation of The Dark at the Top of the Stairs represents the legitimate reaction of a person who is aware of what has happened in literature and drama in the twentieth century. Inge has been influenced by Freudianism. The play is a series of humorous and poignant vignettes rather than the organic drama of tradition, and Inge's plays do reflect his association with Tennessee Williams. But Inge's treatment of popular psychological beliefs results in valid insights, his episodes are powerful and effective, and his similarities to Williams reflect Inge's representativeness rather than a lack of originality. Weales' review does more to illuminate the critic's literary sophistication than the play.

While Gerald Weales objected to the cliches which he feels saturate The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Sidney Lanier objected to what he called the "bare bones of Freudian dogma" which he saw continually bursting through the play.[76] It is especially important that Lanier's particular bias be recognized. As a vocal exponent of Christianity, he is compelled to deny the validity of any system such as Freudianism and Naturalism which considers man as merely the product of his instincts and heredity. It is not surprising that he views Inge's implicit Freudian gospel with alarm. Despite his frame of reference Lanier's comments are useful in establishing Inge's involvement with Freudianism and Naturalism.

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[76]Lanier, op. cit., p. 51.

It is curious that The Dark at the Top of the Stairs should be Inge's only play to date to have evoked two rather serious articles by churchmen. They are partially accounted for, of course, by current divinity school programs. To reach contemporary man the ministry has frequently sought vitality through attacking and defending current intellectual involvements. The modern minister is trained to use the social sciences in his pastoral work and is expected to present Christianity in the context of current events, contemporary literature, and the fads and foibles of the day. In The Dark at the Top of the Stairs the uncomplicated presentation of a family's relationships in simple Freudian terms becomes particularly vulnerable to ministerial attack and defense.

Lanier felt that the play lacked substance "because as directed by Elia Kazan, it becomes a Freudian homily, a parable of id, ego, and superego."[77] For Lanier, like Weales, Inge's characters fall into stereotyped molds.

> All the predictable types are here, and in spite of the brilliant characterization and sometimes frantic stage movements they remain types. . . . The overpractical mother; the blustering negligent father, with his manhood threatened; the father-fixated adolescent girl; the gifted, mother-smothered boy; the lewd gossip, crippled into vulgarity and bitterness by her own sexual innocence and/or inadequacy--and so on.[78]

Lanier is specific in pointing out that he does not challenge Inge's right to see things as he pleases, but is simply warning that "it is very important that we recognize

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

the 'realism' of the play bears within itself the didache, if not the dogma of a vigorous upperclass religion."[79]

Lanier suggests, in the face of Inge's repeated denial of any particular theme as a starting point in his work, that a message is presented through the subliminal persuasiveness of Inge's view of man which his plays reflect. He warns the thinking playgoer not to accept without reflection what he calls a "secular gnosis," the popularly accepted beliefs otherwise known as Latter-Day Freudianity. "This play," he notes, "is . . . implicit Freudian gospel; it is written and directed that way."[80] While Inge is not proselyting for Freudianism there is no question that his plays reflect a Freudian point of view.

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is the most autobiographical of Inge's plays, but it deals with occurrences which took place in the playwright's childhood, in a period quite remote from the time at which the play was written. Time, no doubt, has not only distorted these childhood memories but also made them more ambiguous. Distortion becomes inevitable. Inge, familiar with the Freudian interpretation of family relationships, such as the rivalry that exists between father and son and the bonds of affection that exist between father and daughter has adopted the Freudian view to clarify his own experiences. The play is "implicit Freudian gospel."

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[80] Ibid.

Two critical observations conclude the evaluation of the play. The first was made by Walter Kerr, drama critic of the New York Herald Tribune, who felt that "a cadet's suicide is too much of a burden for the fragile and sentimental memories that constitute the core of the evening."[81] But The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is more than a sentimental journey. It is a tensely dramatic portrayal of several lives. The suicide, it is true, falls like a thunderbolt into the personal problems of the members of the family. It provides, however, a tragic absolute, against which their problems seem trivial, and which provides them with the necessary motivation to reconcile their differences. Inge has attempted to justify its suddenness by pointing out that suicides are never expected, only rationalized post hoc:

> Some people felt upon reading the play, and others on first seeing it, that the announcement of the suicide came as too much of a shock; but every suicide that I have ever heard of came to me in the same way, with no preparation. I have never heard of a suicide that I expected. We always find the reasons for such events after they happen in re-exploring the character to find motivations we had previously overlooked.[82]

Inge did not mention an even more obvious justification for the use and timing of the suicide: the dramatic needs. These are the needs of art, not logic.

A rather startling observation was made by Napier, another minister who in contrast to Lanier was deeply moved by the play. He pointed out that Sammy's death, like

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[81] Kerr, NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 161.

[82] 4 Plays, p. vii.

Christ's, "was seen as redemptive of the relationships and lives of all who understood the death."[83] While this comparison is legitimate, it is, to be sure, only incidentally dramatic criticism. Most characters in a drama interact in some way. And it should be noted that Lottie's predicament, her living death, helps to redeem the relationship that exists between Rubin and Cora, as clearly as Sammy's death redeems their childrens' lives. In a sense, Inge is only reiterating the old idea that our personal identities are dependent to some degree upon each person with whom we come in contact. Inge's play demonstrates this dynamic interrelation.

While dominated by its serious overtones, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is balanced with domestic comedy and filled with the happy childhood reminiscences of the playwright. Peppered with "restrained parlor comedy and domestic vaudeville,"[84] it leaves the playgoer, at its conclusion, aware that he has re-run a gamut of long-forgotten emotions, remembered in maturity with nostalgia.

Dark is a study in fear, obscured by a fast-moving, constantly changing montage of domestic farce, comedy, drama, and tragedy Accelerated by colloquial dialogue and expert characterization the play races to its conclusion, suggesting but not confirming that happiness lies ahead for the Flood family. Rubin's apprehensions about his new job,

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[83]Napier, Pulpit, November, 1958, p. 18.

[84]Life, December 16, 1957, p. 42.

as well as Sammy's death, are there to remind us that this is life as Inge sees it.

Inge's dramatic strength lies in his character vignettes, and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs provides several exceptionally effective ones which provide "quick and poignant glances into the privacy of hearts and souls."[85] By his "thoughtful, unpretentious and very gifted writing,"[86] Inge's episodes dramatize the eternal inner desperation which he implies lies beneath the facade of every human and which he symbolizes by the darkness at the top of the stairs.

Like all of Inge's earlier plays The Dark at the Top of the Stairs proved theatrically effective both on Broadway and when on tour across the country. In it Inge once again demonstrated his ability to write of the conflicts of common men and women. While The Dark at the Top of the Stairs reflects a number of familiar literary and philosophical concepts, including the Naturalism and Freudianism to which Lanier takes exception, Inge's authentic characters and dialogue, his insight into everyday problems and frustrations, and his compassionate, if occasionally nostalgic, presentation of small-town life, assured the play its long successful run.

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[85]Atkinson, NYTCR, December 12, 1957, p. 159.

[86]Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

A LOSS OF ROSES

"A Loss of Roses" opened on Saturday, November 28, 1959, at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre starring Betty Field and Carol Haney. The play was met with almost unanimous rejection by the critics. "A very bad play," wrote Richard Watts.[1] "A dull play," said Atkinson.[2] "A skimpy play," echoed Robert Coleman.[3] "Out of focus," said Clurman.[4] "A mess," wrote Kenneth Tynan.[5] All expressed surprise that Inge after four successes had produced a dud.

Background

"A Loss of Roses" was conceived on a three-day cross-country trip from Los Angeles to New York in 1957. Inge likes to ride on trains, primarily because he is able, in the privacy of his compartment, to forget everything

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[1]Richard Watts, "Everything Didn't Come Up Roses," NYTCR, December 7, 1959, p. 211.

[2]Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: 'A Loss of Roses,'" NYTCR, December 7, 1959, p. 212.

[3]Robert Coleman, "'A Loss of Roses' Is Inge's Loss," NYTCR, December 7, 1959, p. 213.

[4]Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, December 19, 1959, p. 475.

[5]Kenneth Tynan, "Roses and Thorns," New Yorker, December 12, 1959, p. 99.

but the dramatic materials he is working on and to write and think undisturbed. He recalls that before the trip he had been intrigued by both the Venus-Adonis myth and the Oedipus complex and that he had written, at one time, a humorous sketch based on the Venus and Adonis story.[6]

> Suddenly on the train this story came to me that embodied both myths. It came in very much of a piece. I didn't have a typewriter with me, but I wrote a draft. It took me about two days.[7]

For a year this initial draft was left on the shelf. Then Inge took it out again, read it over, and decided to expand it into a full-length drama. During this expansion his original interest sank into the background. "I had deliberately set out to write a play about the Oedipal relationship, of how it is between a mother and a son, how it really is when there is too much love."[8] The mythological sources were forgotten, and Inge's own Midwestern background and experience were superimposed. As Inge readily admits, "It's background drama again, all right out of my own backyard. As in all my plays, I've given it the best reality I can."[9]

The failure of "A Loss of Roses" has been attributed to many factors including personality conflicts, last-

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[6]Gilbert Millstein, "Ten Playwrights Tell How It All Starts," New York Times Magazine, December 6, 1959, p. 63.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Maurice Zolotow, "Playwright on the Eve," New York Times, November 22, 1959, sect. II, p. 3.

[9]Millstein, p. 63.

minute revisions, lack of publicity, and Inge's insistence on having the play produced as he had written it. Each of these factors probably contributed to its collapse. The major catastrophe occurred when Shirley Booth, who had agreed to play the role of Helen, the mother, withdrew during the pre-Broadway tryouts. Whether the play would have survived with her is anyone's guess. Inge has been very reluctant to speak of Shirley Booth's withdrawal and has refrained from making any direct accusations. But at the time he pointedly mentioned the modern actor's distrust of heightened dramatic language and deplored the fact that actors "have an unfortunate habit of wanting to collaborate with playwrights. They love rewriting speeches . . . Why don't they trust the dialogue . . .?"[10]

Miss Booth was equally silent and non-committal about her decision to leave the show, but Zolotow reveals that when Shirley Booth agreed to play the role of Helen she stipulated that her part, which she felt was somewhat meager, was to be enlarged, and that Inge agreed to make appropriate additions.[11] During rehearsals and the Washington tryouts, Miss Booth cut a considerable number of her lines. The result was that her part was significantly shortened. Inge, who evidently objected to the cuts, was doubly determined not to compromise his artistic integrity by inserting lines which the actress felt would be more

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[10]Zolotow, loc. cit.

[11]Ibid.

appropriate.[12] As Inge had put up four-fifths of the money for the production,[13] he was in a position to dictate. Miss Booth, as the star, was in a position to make demands. As she cut her lines her part dwindled into secondary importance. During the out-of-town tryouts, she decided to withdraw.

Betty Fields, who had been ill with sinus trouble and a slipped disk which was to force her to miss vital rehearsals, was flown in from Hollywood to fill the gap. Working with Daniel Mann, the director, Shirley Booth helped to coach Betty Fields as she tried vainly to make up for lost weeks of rehearsal. Inge, aware that this last-minute substitution might prove disastrous, but insured from total loss by an earlier sale of the film rights to 20th Century Fox, decided to risk the opening. His worst fears were realized in the flood of adverse reviews that followed, and he took refuge in Nashville, home of Tennessee Williams. Inge refused to blame anyone but himself for the play's failure, acknowledging that he should have stopped the show, but stubbornly insisting that "A Loss of Roses" was the best play he had ever written.[14]

Action

The play deals with the Oedipal relationship which

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Jack Balch, "Anatomy of a Failure," Theatre Arts, February, 1960, p. 10.

[14] Ibid.

exists between a middle-aged widow and her 21-year-old son. The play is divided into two acts. The first act has three scenes, a long expository scene that introduces the characters, followed by two short scenes which establish character relationships. The second act, which has only two scenes, contains the play's climax and resolution.

The action takes place in the home of Helen Baird located in "a little Kansas town . . . close to Kansas City."[15] The simultaneous setting includes the kitchen, living room, porch, and Kenny's bedroom with a connecting hall. When the curtain rises Kenny, a boy of nineteen, and his mother are having supper. Kenny is in a bad mood. His mother has just informed him that he will have to sleep on the davenport in the living room while Lila, a tent-show actress, is visiting them. Kenny, who pays half of the household expenses, remarks, "If I'm man enough to pay half on things, I'm man enough to get treated like a man in other ways, too."[16] He is referring to the fact that he was not consulted when his mother invited Lila to stay, but his comment has far greater significance. It is soon apparent that Kenny is unnaturally drawn to his mother. He has refused a job in a Wichita airplane factory so that he can remain with his mother, and he seems incapable of establishing a natural heterosexual relationship with other women.

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[15]William Inge, "A Loss of Roses," Esquire, January, 1960, p. 120--hereafter cited as "Roses."

[16]Ibid., p. 120.

After supper Jelly Beamis, a neighborhood crony of Kenny's, drops by to ask Kenny about his plans for the evening. During the course of their conversation we learn something of Kenny's attitude toward women.

> JELLY. I don't notice you spendin' any money on the girls we pick up. You always say, "Sure, baby, we'll go downtown and get a malt pretty soon." Then you get your kicks and find out you lost your dough.
>
> KENNY. I'm not wastin' any money on the bags we pick up.[17]

After Jelly leaves, Helen produces a small, woman's coin purse which she found in one of Kenny's pockets. She asks him to return it, and Kenny agrees to take it back. They are both aware of his discomfort. This incident is the first indication in the play of Kenny's fetishism, a by-product of his emotional predicament.

At this point enter the four members of a disbanded acting troupe who are travelling to Kansas City to look for work. The first to appear is Lila, the thirty-two-year-old actress, whom Helen has invited to stay with her. Lila then introduces her friends: Ronny Cavendish, an effeminate actor with peroxided hair; Madame Olga St. Valentine, an actress of fifty who speaks with an exaggerated English accent; and Ricky Powers, a dark, handsome man. The group has stopped only to let Lila off, and they are soon on their way, but not before two significant remarks have been made which anticipate events to occur later in the play. Both remarks are made by Lila, and both are made to Kenny. The

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[17] Ibid., p. 124.

first is particularly obvious, despite the fact that it is hidden within one of Lila's speeches. Lila recalls, "I was a kind of substitute mother to you, Kenny."[18] The second is equally portentous. Lila is introducing Ricky to Kenny:

> LILA. And Kenny, this is Ricky Powers. Ricky's our villain, Kenny. So if you ever become our leading man, you two'll have to hate each other. (Laughs.) But you don't have to begin now.[19]

The remainder of the scene is filled with small talk. Lila admits to Helen that as a girl she had a crush on Helen's husband. Helen tells Lila how her husband drowned after saving a high school girl who had gone swimming in a flood-swollen river. Then the two women say good-night.

The second scene of the first act is extremely short. "It is about two hours later. Lila has unpacked and is in bed asleep."[20] Kenny and Jelly return. They are quite drunk. After Jelly leaves, Kenny stumbles to his room forgetting that Lila is sleeping there. Lila, awakened when Kenny crashes to the floor as he tries to take off his shoes, is initially alarmed, then concerned about his condition, and finally amused. She helps him to bed.

The last scene of the first act takes place the following morning. It is Sunday, and the church bells are ringing. Helen and Lila are talking on the front porch. The scene opens with a long expository passage in which Lila

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 126.

[20] Ibid., p. 128.

tells of her marriage and its failure, her attempted suicide, her stay at a mental institution, and her new attitude toward life. "I don't fight things like I used to. I've learned to take things as they come and make the best of them," she says.[21] Helen, for her part, confesses that she is disappointed in Kenny, disappointed in the girls he goes with, in his habit of picking up items of female clothing, in his decision not to take the job in Wichita. She admits that, when her husband died, Kenny became too important to her. And she regrets not having married a young farmer after her husband died, because she was afraid that Kenny would object.

Helen tries unsuccessfully to waken Kenny and then leaves for church. As soon as she is gone, Kenny stirs, and then he and Lila talk. She tells him about her career as a dancer and singer, and then, happily, goes to get him breakfast. "Kenny leans back in his bed, with a smile of gratification on his face. 'You wanta know something, Lila?' [he says] 'I'm gonna like having you here.'"[22]

The second act takes place a month later. When the curtain rises Lila, sipping a cocktail out of a cheese glass, is sitting on the front doorstep and waiting for Kenny. He arrives and shows Lila the receipt for a wrist watch that he has bought for his mother's wedding anniversary, a watch that he has been saving for all summer. While they wait for Helen to arrive, Kenny and Lila dance, and Kenny holding

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., p. 130.

Lila in his arms for the first time tells her how she attracts him.

> KENNY. It's been kinda hard, living here in the same house with you, Lila. Sleeping in the room right next to you, trying to keep myself from making love to you. Don't you like me a little, Lila? Just a little?[23]

Lila is moved by Kenny's appeal, but despite his implicative question: "What's wrong with a guy marrying a girl a li'l older than he is?"[24] and despite the fact that Helen will be working at the hospital all night, Lila rejects him. However, events transpire which eventually undermine her resolve.

When Helen comes home she is disturbed to see that Kenny and Lila have been drinking together, and she is a little suspicious when Lila remarks, "He looks so much like his father."[25] Then Kenny appears and presents his mother with her present. He is flabbergasted when she refuses it. A watch which her husband gave her so many years before has become a symbol of the Bairds' marital relationship, and Helen will not accept Kenny's watch for fear that she would, in doing so, acknowledge that he was more than her son. Kenny angrily stalks out of the house vowing never to return. After he has gone, Lila questions Helen.

> LILA. Why didn't you take the present, Helen?
> HELEN. I couldn't.
> LILA. But why?
> HELEN. Something just rose inside me and forced me to refuse.

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[23] Ibid., p. 137.

[24] Ibid., p. 132.

[25] Ibid., p. 134.

> LILA. He just wanted to make up for his father's being gone. He just wanted to do what big Kenneth would have done.
> HELEN. I can't let him do the things his father did, Lila.
> LILA. But every boy wants to be like his father.
> HELEN. (Almost harshly.) There are some ways he can't be allowed.
> LILA. (Awed.) Oh!
> HELEN. Sometimes he reminds me too much of his father.[26]

The anniversary dinner grows cold on the dining-room table.

Suddenly the phone rings. Ricky Powers has found a job for Lila that will pay a hundred dollars a week. He says he will give her the details when he picks her up. Helen leaves for work. "I'll see you in the morning,"[27] she says, and Lila is left alone. In the background the voice of an evangelist can be heard.

> VOICE OF THE EVANGELIST. I have heard, all over this great country, the cries of helpless people saying, "What am I to do?" and I feel for them in their plight, these countless people all over our land today who are asking themselves and their brothers, "What am I to do? How am I to live?"[28]

When Ricky arrives Lila runs to him. They kiss, and, while the preacher continues, Lila allows Rick's little intimacies. "And then there is that other kind of Depression, friends. The depression of the heart, the drought of the soul, the deflation of the spirit."[29] The evangelist's words are relevant. Lila's initial excitement gives way to suspicion as Ricky begins to explain to her what her job entails. Then she is frightened.

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[26] Ibid., p. 137.
[27] Ibid., p. 138.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 140.

> LILA. (Screaming.) Rick!
> RICKY. Keep your voice down, Lila.
> LILA. Rick, it's blue movies your talking about, isn't it? Yah. And a sex act. That's what we do in the roadhouse, isn't it?[30]

Despite Ricky's threats Lila refuses to accompany him, and, when Ricky tries to compel her physically, Lila's wild screams bring Kenny running to the porch. The moment is melodramatic. Ricky, "knowing he is foiled,"[31] leaves, and Lila throws herself into Kenny's arms. As the curtain falls, Lila lifts her head to be kissed.

> KENNY. I'll take care of you, Lila. I'll take care of you. (All we hear from Lila is a long sigh of crying relief.)[32]

The final scene of the play takes place a little after seven o'clock the next morning. "Kenny still lies in bed, in Lila's bed."[33] Lila is radiantly happy, but it is clear that Kenny is having second thoughts. As he eats breakfast he interrupts Lila's chatter and with one question shatters her hopes: "Look here, Lila, I wanta do the right thing, and all that, but . . . I din really promise anything, did I? (He waits for an answer.) Did I?" And Lila, lifelessly answers, "No, Kenny."[34] She excuses herself and hurries to the bathroom to get dressed.

Now Helen returns from work. She hears Lila sobbing and asks Kenny bluntly, "Did you and Lila spend the night here together? Did you?"

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 141.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

LILA now bursts out of the bathroom, making KENNY'S answer unnecessary. She holds one wrist with the other hand, and blood covers her arm. She screams hysterically.[35]

Helen, a nurse by profession, soon has the situation under control. She tapes Lila's wrist and gives her a mild sedative. Then, at Lila's request, Helen calls Ricky and asks him to pick Lila up. Frightened and awed by Lila's suicide attempt, Kenny tries to make amends, but Lila releases him. "I've got no strings on you, Kenny," she says. "I've got no strings on anyone. You can forget you ever knew me."[36] But Kenny cannot forget her. He gives Lila the watch that he had bought for his mother.

Before Ricky arrives and Lila leaves, the Oedipal bond between Kenny and his mother is broken, and a new relationship is established. He tells his mother of the symbolic dream he had in which she died. "You had to die, for some reason, Mom. You had to," he explains.[37] Later he demonstrates by his violent reaction to Jelly's insinuating questions about Lila that he has acquired a new maturity:

JELLY. Tell me about it. What'd she do?
KENNY. (With sudden ferocity, grabbing Jelly's collar.) If you don't shut up, I'm gonna kill ya.
JELLY. Fer cryin' out loud, what ya gettin' so sore about?
KENNY. I just don't go for that talk.
JELLY. What's got into you?
KENNY. It's a serious business, making love. I can't kid around about it any more. I . . . I don't

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., p. 142.

want to.[38]

But it is Kenny's decision to take the job in Wichita, and Helen's newly-found capacity to call her son by her husband's name, Kenneth, that provide the most persuasive evidence that Helen and Kenny's unnatural bond has been transformed.

Characters

Unlike Inge's earlier plays, "A Loss of Roses" is severely limited in its dramatis personae. There are only three important figures: Kenny, Helen, and Lila. Kenny is a nice looking boy who "wears a mysterious look of misgiving on his face, as though he bore some secret resentment,"[39] no doubt a reflection of his latent incestuous impulses. His actions during the play all clarify his Oedipal predicament. He is a tyrant with his mother, critical and demanding. His contacts with the opposite sex are callous. He is ashamed of, but unable to control, his fetishism. He is interested in neither marriage nor a well-paying job, either of which would necessitate his leaving home. And he is particularly incensed by his mother's repeated attempts to run his life. Kenny is at last freed of the silver chord that binds him to his mother in his brief affair with Lila, which Wenning categorized as "recreational therapy."[40] For the first time in his life, he can give of himself in a relationship. His gift of the watch is symbolic

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[38] Ibid., p. 143. [39] Ibid.

[40] T. H. Wenning, "Drooping . . .," Newsweek, December 7, 1959, p. 96.

of his new maturity and understanding of love.

> KENNY. There's times when a man has to give something, Mom. I guess . . . maybe that's what a man is for.[41]

Nor does Kenny explode in anger when, at the end of the play, his mother suggests he walk to work with a girl that lives near by. The contrast is indicative of the change that has occurred in him. In the first scene the following exchange had taken place:

> HELEN. The little Caswell girl down the street, so pretty. And I admire her. Working in her father's law office this year instead of going away to school. She passes the house every morning on her way to work, and if you knew half as much about women as you pretend at times, you'd know she walks instead of driving the car because she hopes that some day you'll walk with her.
> KENNY. (Slamming his fists.) I hate Miriam Caswell.[42]

In the last scene Kenny is quiet.

> GIRL'S VOICE. Good morning, Kenny!
> KENNY. (Looking up.) Hi, Miriam.
> HELEN. Good morning, Miriam. (A moment passes, then to KENNY.) Aren't you going to walk to town with her?
> KENNY. (Gently.) Let up, Mom.
> HELEN. She's a lovely girl.
> KENNY. Let me find these things for myself, Mom.
> HELEN. (Biting her tongue.) All right, Kenny.[43]

Helen Baird, according to Inge's stage directions, is

> a woman in her early forties who works during the day as a nurse . . . She is a tired looking woman who long ago gave up her youth and no longer strives to make herself sexually attractive . . . There is still a little beauty, however, in the simple dignity of her sad face, a fact that has looked on tragedy and never forgotten it.[44]

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[41]"Roses," p. 143.

[42]Ibid., p. 121.

[43]Ibid., p. 144.

[44]Ibid., p. 120.

She is, of course, the necessary complement to Kenny. She has spoiled her son with affection, sacrificed her own happiness to his whims. While she is a righteous woman, who will not allow swearing in her home, and who enjoys the religious revival meetings which take place nearby, she is aware of her own weaknesses. At the end of the play, while she and Lila wait for Ricky, Helen comments on her hidden sins.

> HELEN. (Putting an army around LILA.) Last night you told me of your sins, Lila, and I regretted them. But you're fortunate in one way. Your sins have always been out in the open where you can see them. Some people hide their sins so deeply in their hearts, they never know they're there.[45]

When Kenny tells her that he dreamed she died, Helen is deeply hurt, but, by the time that Kenny tells her that he is leaving home, she has reconciled herself to her new aloneness.

> KENNY. I hate to think of you all alone here, Mom, but . . . I guess it's time I was out on my own.
> HELEN. (Deeply moved.) Yes. (She puts an arm around his shoulder.) You'll have to let me deal with loneliness for myself, son. Don't worry. I've been preparing myself for a long time.[46]

Her final line, the last line of the play, which she finally dares speak after Kenny is gone, clearly reveals the end of her Oedipal fears. "Good-bye . . . Kenneth,"[47] she says, and she goes back into the house as the curtain falls.

The last major character to be considered is Lila

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[45] Ibid., p. 143.

[46] Ibid., p. 144.

[47] Ibid.

Green. A great deal of her background is revealed in the course of the play. She had lived next door to the Bairds when Kenny was very young, and she had done housework for them and looked after Kenny. She was faced with an intolerable family situation: a step-father who was constantly drunk and a step-brother who "treated her disgracefully."[48] Lila fell in love and ran away with Ed Comiskey, a man who worked with a travelling tent-show. The marriage proved disastrous. Hounded by her husband's father, who tried to force himself on her, Lila ran away and, in a hotel room in Bismark, North Dakota, tried to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills. The authorities put her in a mental institution for three months. When she was released, Lila worked in a series of vaudeville acts until she met Ricky. Lila's character is most clearly delineated in the account she gives of a psychiatric opinion made while she was in North Dakota.

> LILA. I'm weak, Helen. The doctor told me I was emotionally immature. And I know what he meant, because sometimes I feel like a child, just as helpless as a child, and as afraid as a child. And when I get afraid that's when I do silly things. When I'm afraid I want somebody close to me, Helen. I don't care who it is, but I've gotta have someone close. Sometimes men take advantage of this. And that's when I do the things I regret. That's when I feel I've been silly and childish. That's when I hate myself.[49]

What happens in the play duplicates this pattern. Ricky frightens Lila. Kenny takes advantage of Lila's need. Lila tries to slash her wrist and in the end regrets what

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[48] Ibid., p. 121. [49] Ibid., p. 138.

she has done. For Lila, who is faced with the prospect of a life of continued dependence upon a perverted purveyor of sex, there is a brief moment of hope, which is dashed when Kenny realizes that marriage to Lila is not for him.

In the last scene of the play, just before Ricky drives up, Lila and Helen watch a young mother, leading her six-year-old daughter by the hand to her first day at school. Lila watches, almost with pain, so envious is she of the girl's innocence.

> I remember my first day of school. Mother took me by the hand, and I carried a bouquet of roses, too. Mama had let me pick the loveliest roses I could find in the garden, and the teacher thanked me for them. Then Mama left me and I felt kinda scared, 'cause I'd never been any place before without her; but she told me Teacher would be Mama to me at school, and would treat me just as nice as she did. So I took my seat with all the other kids, their faces so strange and new to me. And I started talking to a little boy across the aisle. I din know it was against the rules. But Teacher came back and slapped me, so hard that I cried, and I ran to the door 'cause I wanted to run home to Mama, quick as I could. But Teacher grabbed me by the hand and pulled me back to my seat. She said I was too big a girl to be running home to Mama and I had to learn to take my punishment, when I broke the rules. But I still cried. I told Teacher I wanted back my roses. But she wouldn't give them to me. She shook her finger and said, when I gave away lovely presents, I couldn't expect to get them back. . . . I guess I never learned that lesson very well. There's so many things I still want back.[50]

Like Lola's dream in Come Back, Little Sheba this reminiscence symbolically summarizes Lila's entire life. There are many similarities between Lola and Lila. Their names are, except for one letter, identical. Both want to run "home"

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[50]Ibid., p. 144.

when they are afraid and lonely, and both use the same endearment, "Daddy." The following selection is taken from "A Loss of Roses" but could have been used as effectively and appropriately in the scene in Come Back, Little Sheba in which Doc returns home:

> RICKY. Miss me?
> LILA. Oh, Daddy, you know I did.
> RICKY. Been a good girl while Daddy's been gone?
> LILA. Yes. I really have, Daddy.[51]

Lila should not be considered merely the helpless victim of circumstances and an evil man. She is strongly attracted to Ricky, as is indicated several times in the play. This combination of attraction and revulsion is typical of Inge's method of characterization. Lila explains:

> LILA. He's not very reliable, in some ways, and he's got an awful temper. I get disgusted with myself sometimes, after he treats me bad, and promise myself I'm never going to have anything more to do with him, but . . . when he comes to me and puts his arms around me, I . . . can't help myself. I fall in love all over again. And that's the way it goes.[52]

The other characters in the play are largely functional. The most attractive minor character is the sly, yet shiftless, neighborhood boy, "Jelly" Beamis, whose constant begging for cigarettes becomes the play's "running gag." Jelly also performs the important function of confidant, exposing the less attractive yet most revealing characteristics of Kenny.

Ronny Cavendish, an aging, effeminate juvenile actor;

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[51] Ibid., p. 138. [52] Ibid., p. 126.

Madame Olga St. Valentine, a posturing, fifty-year-old actress; and Ricky Powers, a tent show "heavy," round out the cast. These three show people, inspired, no doubt, by the actors with whom Inge toured during his college days, provide the play with scenes of humor and paralyzing viciousness. Ronny and Madame Olga are comic characters and are especially two-dimensional due to their brief appearances. Ricky is a diablo ex machina and is more fully developed. Together they represent the vices traditionally associated with the acting profession: bombastic insincerity, homosexuality, and degenerate pandering. Kenny, speaking to Lila after her colleagues have continued on their way to Kansas City, remarks, "As a matter of fact, I thought all those people you were with were pretty darn peculiar." To this, Lila replies with damning candor, "Well . . . they're show people, Kenny."[53]

Ronny, with his "obviously peroxided hair and flamboyantly feminine personality,"[54] is more than peculiar. His courting of Kenny is designated as such by Inge.

> RONNY. (Following Kenny left.) . . . And if you ever come over to Kanz City, I'll be at the Hotel Wadsworth, down by the Union Station. I should be delighted to . . .
>
> OLGA. (On the porch now and perceiving RONNY's courtship to KENNY. Her voice rings with authority) Ronny! (RONNY is obviously respectful of OLGA'S authority. KENNY goes off. RONNY wanders back to OLGA, looking sheepish.)[55]

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[53] Ibid., p. 127.

[54] Ibid., p. 124.

[55] Ibid., p. 125.

Inge has made Madame Olga the most extreme character in "A Loss of Roses." She is, according to the original working script,

> a woman of fifty, obviously an actress, wearing long flowing garments that suggest a heroine out of Elinor Glyn's novels. She speaks in a very exaggerated British accent, dramatizing every word, every gesture.[56]

Introduced to Helen, she declaims, "My dear lady, it is most nobly generous of you to receive we poor actors, frightened refugees that we are, caught in this financial storm without a port."[57]

Ricky Powers is far less voluble than Madame Olga, as suits a sinister heavy. He is by far the most dangerous character in the play, "a sleek and handsome man, with black hair and sideburns,"[58] about thirty-two years old. His coarse degeneracy is neatly demonstrated in the scene in which he discloses the nature of the job he has lined up for Lila in Kansas City.

Evaluation

"A Loss of Roses" brought a chorus of bored and resigned cries of recognition. "Playwright Inge has once again, with the help of a good cast, achieved his sharp little vignettes, his touching, muffled cries and lonely moments."[59] "Everything about the story is a legitimate part of Mr. Inge's playwriting milieu--the commonplace

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[56] Ibid., p. 124.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Time, December 7, 1959, p. 56.

surface of life, the depths of private feeling that are invisible."[60] In a sarcastic attack, Brustein wrote, "Since this is Inge's fifth (and let us hope final) version of the same situation [the relationship between the weak male and the comforting mother woman], I took [the revolving stage which gives the audience three different views of the Baird household] as some sort of underground comment on the play."[61] Brustein astutely points out that "A Loss of Roses" can almost be considered a sequel to The Dark at the Top of the Stairs. "At the end of Dark, the mother was arguing that her ten-year-old son was getting too old to sleep in the same bed with her; in "A Loss of Roses," eleven years have passed and the argument is still going on."[62]

A variety of opinions was put forward to explain the demise of "A Loss of Roses." Atkinson tentative hazarded, "Perhaps the relationship between the mother and son is stated too ambiguously."[63] Tynan categorically stated, "You cannot write a first rate play about the Oedipus complex alone,"[64] then went on to exonerate the director,

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[60]Harold Clurman,"Theatre: 'A Loss of Roses,'" Nation, December 19, 1959, p. 475.

[61]Robert Brustein, "'A Loss of Roses,'" New Republic, December 21, 1959, p. 23.

[62]Brustein, New Republic, December 21, 1959, p. 23.

[63]Atkinson, NYTCR, December 7, 1959, p. 212.

[64]Kenneth Tynan, "Roses and Thorns," New Yorker, December 12, 1959, p. 99.

putting the blame for the play's failure on Inge. "There is nothing wrong with Daniel Mann's direction that a stronger script could not have remedied."[65] Harold Clurman was not so sure. "The cast," he noted, "is good, but for some reason (direction?) the characters do not come off the written page."[66] The critics all wondered with Hewes, "Did the actors fail the play or did the play fail them?"[67]

Clurman felt that the play was weakened by an esoteric orientation that called for a knowledge of Freudian psychology. "Another weakness of the play," he wrote, "is that its two main characters--mother and son--are sketched in a sort of shorthand, the intelligibility of which depends on the audience's smattering of Freud."[68] Noting that there was some uncertainty as to who was the main character of the play, he suggested that "the most interesting character, the girl who serves as the purifying agent . . . should have been made the unequivocal center of the play."[69] Time, on the other hand, felt that "the dancer's [Lila's] role, whatever its own interest or its catalyst value, somehow obstructs the son and mother story and keeps it from breathing."[70]

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Clurman, Nation, December 19, 1959, p. 475.

[67]Henry Hewes, "Oedipus Wrecks," Saturday Review of Literature, December 19, 1959, p. 24.

[68]Clurman, loc. cit.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Time, December 7, 1959, p. 56.

It is clear from the above that the critics were able to find numerous reasons for the failure of "A Loss of Roses." In a sense, "A Loss of Roses" was an experiment for Inge, an experiment that failed. For the first time he wrote a play with three central characters. He did not try to evoke a restless texture of action as he had in previous plays. The scenes for the most part were between two characters, and these scenes were long and often filled with a great deal of exposition. The movement and drive that Inge had achieved by rapidly juxtaposing a number of short episodes was not generated by these long scenes.

When there is added to this weakness the confusion caused by Shirley Booth's withdrawal so close to the opening on Broadway, and the fact that the original balance between the characters had been destroyed by last-minute revisions, the play's failure is not surprising. There were, of course, many aspects of the play that were characteristic of Inge. Once again there is the Midwestern scene, the middle-class milieu, colloquial American dialogue, and, although they are infrequent, Inge's skillful juxtapositions. The reunion of Lila and Ricky to the accompaniment of the voice of the evangelist has been cited. Once again we are made aware of Inge's compassion, his attitude of non-judgement and the Freudian interpretation of life, specifically the elements of the Oedipal syndrome. However, Inge changed a basic element in "A Loss of Roses," its integrated textural structure. The result was an experiment that failed.

CHAPTER VII

THE ONE-ACT PLAYS

Inge's one-act plays provide a revealing glimpse into his playwriting technique. Inge's method of composition involves a gradual development of characters and situations in brief dramatic sketches. Frequently these are the result of momentary inspiration stimulated by unrelated occurrences or chance thoughts. Once committed to paper, they are stored away for periods ranging up to two or more years. The sketches are taken out periodically, reread, expanded, modified, and then stored away once more. The result is a series of playlets in various stages of development, some little more than anecdotes, some taking on a more complex aspect, a few providing the basis for a full-length work. Of these one-act plays, three have been published: "The Mall,"[1] "The Tiny Closet,"[2] and "Glory in the Flower."[3] Ten are unpublished:[4] "Bus Riley's Back in

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[1] Esquire, January, 1959, pp. 75-78.

[2] The Best Short Plays: 1958-1959, ed. Margaret Mayorga (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 35.

[3] 24 Famous One-Acts, ed. Bennett Cerf and Van H. Cartmell (New York: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 133-150.

[4] According to The New York Times, Random House will soon publish a book of Inge's plays entitled "Summer Brave and Eleven One-Act Plays." (Milton Esterow, "News of the Rialto," New York Times, June 17, 1962, sect. II, p. 1.)

Town," "A Corner Room," "The Day I Did Wrong," "Departure," "An Incident at the Standish Arms," "Memory of Summer," "People in the Wind," "The Rainy Afternoon," "Sounds of Triumph," and "To Bobolink, for her Spirit."

In this chapter each of Inge's one-acts will be described and analyzed.

Because the unpublished works have neither been modified to meet Broadway's box-office requirements nor censored to the taste of the pious guardians of public morality, they provide an unequaled opportunity to study the vital, essential spirit of the playwright. They also allow us to identify Inge's dramatic purposes more clearly. They reveal his particular evaluation of contemporary man and American society. They provide a guide in interpreting his longer works.

It should be noted, however, that the one-acts do not throw much light on Inge's handling of character and plot. The one-acts are short, and they deal usually with a single incident and a single central character. The textural quality that is so characteristic of Inge's longer plays is missing in the one-acts, as are the multi-faceted character relationships. They are two- and three-part inventions rather than symphonies.

The Mall

"The Mall" was the first of Inge's one-acts to be published. Symmetrically structured and tightly written, it is the most self-conscious of Inge's shorter plays. In it

Inge set up a number of relationships between characters, some conventional, others less so. Apparently all of them are, in the eyes of the playwright, equally valid. What draws one person to another has always intrigued Inge, and this play is a series of two-person portraits which show the bonds that draw five pairs of people together. By the end of the play, every character has been neatly matched with another by some common experience or need. Simultaneously, each couple has been isolated from all of the others.

Of the five couples, three are of the same sex: two old crones, alcoholic park scavengers, who find comfort in each other's cynicism; two fat, middle-aged matrons, drawn to each other by the problems of their obesity and monotonous everyday routine; and Dell and Barney, a Mutt and Jeff pair, physically unlike yet dependent upon each other in their need for companionship. The other two couples are heterosexual: the young lovers, a sailor and his girl; and Clara, the streetwalker, and her most recent attachment.

This cross-section of humanity raises several questions. Does "The Mall" accurately reflect Inge's evaluation of contemporary American society? Does he feel that romantic love, as exemplified by the young lovers, exists only in the brief, sweet moments of innocence awakening? Does he consider all other types of heterosexual love merely forms of prostitution? Is he contending that relationships between individuals of the same sex are more logical, more frequent, more desirable? Or has Inge in "The Mall" simply

chosen his characters to suit his dramatic needs? Considering Inge's tendency to work from characters to action, one is tempted to see the world of "The Mall" as Inge's.

"The Mall" is a symmetrically structured play. Its symmetry is obvious and can be demonstrated easily, using the character's entrances and exits as points of reference. In the following graph the asterisks indicate the characters' presence on stage.

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H - hags (2)                       ***************************
M - matrons (2)                    ***                     ***
B&D - Barney and Dell                 *********************
L - lovers (girl and sailor)             ***         ***
C - Clara                                   *********
F - Clara's friend                             ***
                                   start                   end
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The action in "The Mall" takes place in early fall on the deserted broadwalk of a seaside amusement park. Presiding over this desolate area are the two hags, who act as a sarcastic chorus. Although the old crones are on stage for the entire play, it is the dialogue of the dumpy, middle-aged matrons which opens and closes the play. Their short interchanges on diets and children, vacations and husbands, act as comic parentheses, within which occur the romantic and serious parts of the play. Barney and Dell come on soon after the matrons' opening dialogue. Barney is a big man, a recent inmate of an asylum for the insane, which he refers to as the "zoo." Dell is a quiet, reserved laborer in the unenviable position of being guardian and friend to Barney,

who is not only physically overpowering, but also determined to find happiness with a most unlikely woman, Clara, a "two-bit whore." Spurred on by the frustrations of a long stay at the "zoo" and by a fanatic need to find someone to "take his love," Barney is driven to inevitable failure.

Inge contrasts Barney's failure with the uncertain beginnings of love between the young sailor and his girl. The initial clandestine meeting of the young lovers with its futile conclusion is followed by another tentative, happy beginning which underlies the barrenness of Barney's search for love. Both experiences demonstrate the play's central thesis: love isolates a couple from all others.

The emotional climax occurs in a scene between Barney and Clara near the end of the play in which Clara, irritated by Barney's insistent demands that she marry him, knees him in the groin and, while he grovels in pain, flaunts off with her new "daddy." While the subsequent comments of the matrons are amusing, and although the young lovers are finally reunited, it is the darkling mood of the play that is sustained, and it is the frustrated cry of the partly demented, middle-aged man one remembers after the curtain falls.

"The Mall" has no plot. It slices across the lives of its characters, reveals them for a moment, and then passes on. Although the lovers part and are reunited, and Barney searches with intensity for "real" love, neither action

dominates the play adequately to be called its central action. Nor is either of these moments supported by the action of the other characters. The play is fractured and segmented as it deals with the way in which any two people who are drawn together become isolated from the rest of society.

Barney is an unusual character. He is an uncultured man with a long history of mental instability. Inge, it is true, has repeatedly used characters who have been in mental institutions. As we shall see, he does so again in "Glory in the Flower," "Bus Riley's Back in Town," and "Memory of Summer." But here Inge has given an unstable character the additional twist of religious fanaticism. As Barney pleads with Clara to marry him, his pleas are prayers, his arguments are filled with revivalistic analogies, and his language is apocalyptic. Even when Clara viciously stops him, his tone is that of the baffled martyr. "Oh, God," he cries, "and sweet, sweet Jesus. Where shall I find another?" Barney stands uniquely alone among Inge's characters caught in confusion between God and sex.

Glory in the Flower

"Glory in the Flower" was the second of Inge's one-acts to be published. The action of the play takes place in a small-town drugstore. The two central characters are Bus, a traveling man about thirty-four years old, and Jackie, his old "girl friend." Expository dialogue reveals that years ago Jackie had been seduced and deserted by Bus. After

her pregnancy, the loss by adoption of their child, and a period of acute depression, she has apparently adjusted to loneliness and found the strength to live on in the town, now grown old, its vitality gone. When the play begins, Jackie's seducer has returned and urges her to start again where they left off, in bed. To Bus' surprise, Jackie rejects him. She realizes that the love she still feels really means nothing to him.

There are three other characters in the play who support the main action: Joker, Howie, and the Proprietor. Joker is a young teenager, obviously attracted to Jackie, although she is considerably older than he. In her relationship to Joker, Jackie reveals the wistful wish to relive her youth and nostalgia for that youth. Howie, an older traveling salesman, a familiar character in Inge's plays, provides a great deal of exposition of the play through his relating of his memories of the town as it was when he was a young man and his questions about Jackie and Bus to the Proprietor. With his answers the Proprietor supplements Howie's expository function.

While "Glory in the Flower" probes into the life and emotional make-up of Jackie, it lacks the focus that is essential to any work of art, especially a play as short as this. The supporting characters draw attention away from the central action rather than contributing to it, with the result that, although the play captures the mood of sad, painful acceptance, it lacks the power of "The Mall."

The Tiny Closet

"The Tiny Closet" is the latest of Inge's one-acts to have been published. It is a short work with only three characters: Mr. Newbold, a floorwalker in a big department store; Mrs. Crosby, his curious landlady; and Mrs. Hergesheimer, her accomplice in gossip. Once again the setting is placed in a Midwestern city. The scene unfolds in the Victorian living room of a boarding house, complete with high ceiling, ornate woodwork, and an impressive wooden stairway.[5] Using his narrative abilities, Inge spends a third of the play establishing the fact that the tidy Mr. Newbold suspects that someone has been trying to get into his locked closet. He succeeds in arousing the audience's curiosity, like Mrs. Crosby's, to a high pitch. As Mr. Newbold leaves for work, Mrs. Crosby is already telephoning her cohort, Mrs. Hergesheimer (gesheimer--accomplice). "Hurry over," she urges, "and we'll try again."[6] Mrs. Hergesheimer soon arrives, and there follows a short expository discussion in which the two women justify the search they are about to begin. Mr. Newbold could be a Communist spy. Still, it is with some hesitation that they go up the stairs to his room.

No sooner have they disappeared than Mr. Newbold

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[5]William Inge, "The Tiny Closet," The Best Short Plays: 1958-1959, ed. Margaret Mayorga (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 35.

[6]Ibid., p. 38.

returns, suspecting his landlady's intentions.

> He is very nervous. His heart is pounding. He starts up the stairs and comes down again. He can't seem to get the courage to confront the women.[7]

Hearing the women descending, he hurriedly hides in a closet. When she reappears, Mrs. Crosby is carrying "a lovely hat, in a light pastel color with great flowers on its limber brim, and sleek satin ribbons."[8] The secret is out. Mr. Newbold designs hats in the privacy of his room. Mrs. Crosby is greatly disturbed. The man is unusual, peculiar, a freak. She would have preferred harboring a Communist. She begins to speculate on what type of a person he really is. "Why," she says, "he might do any kind of dangerous, crazy thing."[9] Reluctantly she allows her scruples to be overcome by Mrs. Hergesheimer who points out that, after all, "he hasn't done anything really wrong."[10]

Mrs. Crosby watches Mrs. Hergesheimer flutter out. She tosses the hat into a chair and goes into the kitchen. Mr. Newbold emerges from the closet a shattered man, but, after weeping briefly over his beautiful hat, he determines a course of action.

> Twisting a great, beaded hat-pin from the feathers and fur-belows of his creation, he walks boldly to the kitchen door and stands, holding the pin behind his back, calling in a voice that is eerie with dire purpose, "Mrs. Crosby! Could you come here a moment,

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[7] Ibid., p. 40.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p. 42.

[10] Ibid.

please. Could you come here a moment, Mrs. Crosby?[11]

The curtain falls.

Besides being an ironic comment on middle class want of principle, this play is an exercise in suspense, using a standard literary device, the double reversal. The first occurs when Mr. Newbold's secret is revealed, the second is in the final line, "Could you come here a moment, Mrs. Crosby?" when his homicidal intent is quite clear. The length of the opening action is eloquent testimony to Inge's ability to spin out the suspense of a simple situation. The surprise of both reversals is a tribute to his craftsmanship.

Before leaving this play it might be well to note that there is material here which reflects a particular frustration of the creative artist. Inge may not design hats, but his art is similar to that of Mr. Newbold, as is his sensitivity to criticism. There are few playwrights that do not wish for a "great, beaded hat-pin" at those moments when their works are attacked and their personal normalcy questioned. "The Tiny Closet" stands by itself among Inge's plays, his only attempt to self-defense.

Inge's ten unpublished one-act plays fall into three groups: (1) extended narrative anecdotes, (2) plays which illustrate a specific progression leading to an individual's alienation, and (3) those plays which are earlier or

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[11] Ibid., p. 43.

alternative versions of his published plays. The most easily classified of these categories as the extended narrative anecdote, exemplified by "The Day I Did Wrong" and "An Incident at the Standish Arms." Both of these plays are organized to surprise the audience or reader in the last few lines of the play with a morbid twist, and to comment wryly on one of life's ironies. They are dramatized anecdotes rather than plays.

The Day I Did Wrong

This play is one of Inge's most complex one-acts. It is divided into two scenes, but the setting remains the same throughout: "an old Victorian house of fussy dignity, kept in the most excellent tidiness and repair."[12] Inge's stage directions move attention rapidly about the house, calling for a flexibility only the motion picture camera could manage. The play has not been disciplined to the narrow requirements of the stage. While most of the action is centered in the kitchen of the house, "a big, clean, white room, with a table in the center," (1) Inge also describes a portion of the exterior. "Outside the house," he notes, "pinned to the ground, is a small, neatly painted sign, 'Rest in peace with Scranton Mortuary.'"(1) He sets the final scene of the

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[12]"The Day I Did Wrong," page 1. All references to, and quotations from, the unpublished plays of William Inge are derived from a set of typewritten scripts lent by the playwright. As Inge is constantly reworking this material, the present pagination, indicated in parenthesis, cannot be considered final. It is included, however, to give some indication of the location of pertinent passages within each play.

play in the cellar of the house. Any stage set which could provide these locales would be economically unjustified by the brief length of the play.

The plot of the play is simple and straightforward, although the emotional overtone of the character relationships are not. Spenser Scranton, the central character, is a mortician in a small mining town close to Pittsburgh. Burdened with an inarticulate, paralyzed, alcoholic father, and a mother who is both unnaturally affectionate and ruthlessly pious, it is not surprising to discover that he takes every opportunity to enjoy the night life of Pittsburgh. Spenser's brother has already permanently escaped this house of the dead and now resides in a mental hospital where he ended after a period of wild excesses. Spenser's father has escaped the same unpleasant incarceration only because he suffered an early, incapacitating stroke.

The play opens with a short matter-of-fact dialogue between mother and son concerning the funeral arrangements for "poor old Mrs. Herndon," who was burned to death when her hen-house caught fire. As Mrs. Scranton prepares to leave for a women's church meeting, the first suggestion that Spenser may be a rather unusual mortician is intimated in her sarcastic comment on her son's last, extremely expensive weekend in Pittsburgh. After she leaves, there is a short scene between Spenser and Joker. A similar character called Joker appears in two other of Inge's plays: Picnic and "Glory in the Flower." The scene between Joker and

Spenser reveals Joker's sexual and intellectual talents and his plans for college and, later, marriage to Sue Carmody. The scene also effectively illustrates Spenser's affection for the boy, his embarrassed incapacity for heterosexual love, and his basic immaturity.

A grotesque, comic interlude follows in which Spenser is encouraged by a series of unintelligible guttural noises from his father to fetch a large bottle, labeled Embalming Fluid, from the cellar; the two toast each other. These pleasantries are interrupted by the early return of Mrs. Scranton. Gasping, dumbfounded, and horror-stricken by the gossip at the meeting, she accuses her son of "corrupting himself in low degeneracy," in a "disgusting salon, where men meet other men and join together in . . . in some form of unnatural vice, in some form of . . . of lewd depravity." (15) Scourged by her scorn and disgust, Spenser packs a bag and, despite his mother's desperate pleas, drives off.

The second scene takes place early the following morning. "Mrs. Scranton is alone on stage, sitting in her husband's chair . . . her face stricken with emptiness and grief." (16) Spenser, defeated, returns home, and "their need, their desperate dependence on each other, their deep love brings them together like lovers." (16) Inge has saved an even more forceful scene to climax the play. After the mother and son are reunited, there is a knock at the back door and Mrs. Scranton remarks casually, "Oh, it's the body. I took a call while you were gone. Some young boy

got drowned in the river last night." (17) Spenser is too tired to understand what the aidience grasps instantly, that the boy is Joker. He plods upstairs as two men, dressed as miners, carrying the blanket-covered body on a stretcher through the kitchen to the basement door and down the stairs.

The rest of the play, which takes place the following morning, is played in grotesque counterpoint. Mrs. Scranton, in the kitchen, chatters on righteously about the accident: "Boys and girls together, going in swimming naked. Oh! . . . What are things coming to?" Meantime Spenser in the cellar passes from disbelief through reverence to necrophilia. The curtain falls as he collapses in a chair after severing Joker's main arteries. Upstairs, Mrs. Scranton sings "Rock of Ages" as she prepares breakfast.

This cinematic tour-de-force ending certainly suggests Inge's feeling of alienation from life. Spenser, looking down at the body of Joker, asks: "Why couldn't you have been more careful, boy? You were alive. Didn't you appreciate it? Most of us are just pretending, and it don't matter when we end up down here. But you were alive." (20) Spenser is an effective representative of Inge's estranged characters. His final words express their tragic position as men who can only watch while others waste what they themselves desire most but can never have.

"The Day I Did Wrong" reflects Inge's primary interest in the alienated individual. Whether he is trying to justify

his personal outlook, exploit dramatically what psychology has suggested lies repressed in our subconscious, or is performing an agonizing, masochistic act of repentance for actual or imagined deeds cannot be determined. Certainly the Oedipal relationship that exists between characters in many of his plays is again stated here, its ability to incapacitate normal sexual responses reiterated, and its tendency to provoke unnatural, substitute relationships acknowledged. Inge generally provides us, however, with sufficient human motivation to justify and acquit his characters, while at the same time he presents the conventional objections to abnormal relationships in such a way that they appear overstated, if not slightly fanatic. Thus when, in "The Day I Did Wrong," Mrs. Scranton berates her son for his low degeneracy, one can detect a note of hysteria in her voice, hysteria which keeps her from acknowledging her own responsibilities for her son's behavior, hysteria which keeps the audience from accepting her accusations at face value.

Again in this play can be seen the agonized longing of the alienated person for the normal life that the ordinary individual leads, unaware of its normality. It is this normality which attracts Scranton to Joker, but it is a normality he can never achieve. Thus in the final scene, Spenser's agony is intensified by the realization that not only has he lost Joker, but that Joker had a happy, productive life to look forward to and which Spenser could

never expect to enjoy himself, except vicariously through the boy.

An Incident at the Standish Arms

"An Incident at the Standish Arms," the other dramatic anecdote that is found among Inge's one-act plays, is very short. Again there are three characters: a divorcee, an attractive, cultivated woman in her mid-thirties; a taxicab driver, big, dark, handsome, uncultured; and a girl, the woman's oversensitive, nagging, twelve-year-old daughter. As the title implies, the scene is laid in a luxurious apartment.

The play is a dialogue between the adults. From the moment the woman enters in her negligee, followed by the taxicab driver buttoning his shirt, the basic situation is clear. The dialogue does little more than confirm our initial evaluation and recapitulate the events which led up to this moment. Driven by a highly developed sexual appetite which she will not recognize or admit, the woman has invited the cab driver up for a drink. He understands her needs and he meets them matter-of-factly, untroubled by the fact that he is a family man. What he cannot understand is her frantic desire to get rid of him, which makes him feel cheap and brands her as a hypocrite in his eyes. As he puts it, "You ask me to come up to your apartment, you throw your arms around me when we get here and start givin' me the works . . . and then it's all over and ya can't wait for me to get out." Angered by her rejection, he smashes a

costly Chinese vase and slams out of the room.

Moments later the daughter returns from school. Her mother has regained her accustomed poise. The play ends on a mocking, ironic note when the mother agrees to write a letter to her daughter's teacher requesting that the daughter's seat be changed so that she will not have to sit next to a "horrid girl" who uses "filthy words . . . never bathes, and . . . wears ugly, dirty dresses." (5)

Before analyzing the plays which fall into the second category, a three-step progression which Inge uses repeatedly must be pointed out.

We have already noted Inge's preoccupation with the unusual individual, the rejected individual, the lonely individual, and particularly the incapacitated individual, the living dead. As we have seen, in "The Day I Did Wrong" he symbolically makes the protagonist a mortician whose home is a funeral parlor. Inge seems to be drawn to characters who have been cut off from normalcy. In many of his one-acts, Inge has traced their withdrawal. Each of these plays in the second category provides an explanation for an individual's alienation. All of them illustrate at least one stage in a three-stage progression which is peculiar to Inge.

The first stage of this chain leading to alienation depicts a strong Oedipal relationship fostered by an affectionate, lonely mother and an insecure child. The second stage explores the failure of a personal relationship, either

because of psychological incapacity, or a virile rival. The latter is clearly a symbolic personification of the character's personal impotence. The third stage describes the character's final condition of social alienation, abnormal personal relationships, or the acceptance of the role of a spectator in life. There is only one central character in this sequence, but he is supported by four others at some point in his course. The boy's protective mother has been mentioned. A second supporting character is the boy's father who is often dead, or travelling, or, if he is at home, incapable of understanding his son. The rival "hero" appears in many of Inge's plays, a symbol of the virility, vigor, and assurance the estranged character lacks. This third supporting character provides the alienated individual with a specific rationalization for his failure, allowing him to avoid the critical question of his own inadequacy, by attributing his loss to superior competition.

It is interesting to note that Inge carefully avoids making his heroes overpowering, always tempering their animal vitality with crudity, hidden insecurities, or insensitivity. Invariably he portrays his heroes in such a way that the sexually aggressive and successful individual is seen in reality to be using his external virility to mask deep personal insecurity. Inge's heroes have the characteristics necessary to create conventional protagonists, but Inge does not allow them completely to realize this potential position of dominance.

The fourth supporting character used in these plays is a girl, the girl who is lost by the inadequate character and won by the hero. While Inge has presented effective, penetrating portraits of adolescent girls and young women in several of his plays, for example, Madge in Picnic, these "lost" loves are almost faceless. It is important not to confuse these supporting young characters with the young girl which Inge uses with his young lovers. The young lovers are used to add poignancy to the predicament of those characters unable to find love. We have seen examples of this in "The Mall," Come Back, Little Sheba, and as the central figures in Bus Stop. The young lovers in Inge's plays are used to offset and intensify the predicaments of others. The "lost" girls objectify the estranged character's failure.

The idea that love leads to rejection and that this rejection results in action is basic to Inge. This is certainly true in the Broadway plays which have been discussed. In Come Back, Little Sheba, the sexual relationship between Turk and Marie renews Doc's feeling of rejection and catapults him into action. In Bus Stop, Virgil philosophically insists on his own rejection when he realizes that Bo is going to marry Cherie. The curtain line of the play, delivered by Virgil, "Well . . . that's what happens to some people," indicates how central that thought is to Inge's attitude toward this triangle. In Picnic the affair between Madge and Hal is the stimulus for

all of the ensuing action. It is the feeling of rejection that stimulates both Millie and Rosemary: Rosemary, to capture Howard; and Millie, to determine her life's course. Sammy's suicide in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is, of course, prompted by the intensification of his feeling of rejection which results when Reenie deserted him.

Especially in his short one-acts is it clear that Inge is always most interested in the unsuccessful individual, the loser. In his plays, both long and short, he investigates and presents the gamut of response people make to rejection: suicide, insanity, acceptance, withdrawal, substitution. Sometimes he deals with the individual after he has responded to rejection. More often he attempts to explain the process.

To Bobolink, for her Spirit

Within the second category, standing by itself among Inge's one-acts is a cameo entitled "To Bobolink, for her Spirit." This limns a prototype of the autograph hunter. Inge has a special understanding of the psychology of autograph hunters. His boyhood world was filled with movie magazines and the movie stars of his day. As a celebrity he has had to endure being the object of determined autograph hunters. It is not surprising then that he has a special understanding of their psychology. "To Bobolink, for her Spirit" is a sampler of the breed, identifying several distinct types of autograph hunters and suggesting that each type is a phase in what might be called the

autograph hunter's syndrome.

The play has no plot and, like "The Mall," is a terse vignette derived from personal observation colored by curiosity, sympathy, and compassion.

The major characters in the play are two women, Bobolink and Nellie, a Laurel and Hardy pair of professional autograph hunters. Bobolink is a middle-aged caricature of fatness, "so fat that her body in silhouette, would form an almost perfect circle." (1) Her disposition is "stolidly complacent"; her grin is a guzzle of contentment; her hair short and kinky; her eyes the size of buttons behind thick-lensed glasses; her legs are bowling pins above her bobby socks and saddle shoes. Nellie, her companion, is Bobolink's antithesis. She is a young woman in her twenties, starved and eager.

Waiting with them when the curtain rises are four teenagers: two boys, Renaldo and Fritz; and two girls, Gretchen and Annamarie. "They are," notes Inge rather dourly, "people without any personal attraction, [who] must find in others attributes they want and lack in themselves." (1) The six wait patiently outside a nightclub, recalling past collecting successes, boasting of autographs, and discussing the personalities of actresses. A young man and woman come out of the club, and the teenagers rush for signatures. Bobolink has the "dignity of her past career to think of. She stays back . . . with a look of superior calm on her face." (8) Later when the enthusiasm of the

teenagers lags, her determination and certainty inspires them. The curtain comes down as they "resume their positions of patient attendance." (10)

"To Bobolink, for her Spirit" has almost no action. The characters are fixed forever at their posts. They are vegetables, growing old without maturing, collecting dust from what passes them, forever confined to the miniscule world of blind escapism. Inge has animated his characters, but their animation is dramatically purposeless. Perhaps these characters will function effectively in some later play and find some dramatic justification. Here they do not. "To Bobolink, for her Spirit" is a tribute to Inge's ability to capture mood, to depict a group of the living dead in our society.

The Rainy Afternoon

A very young girl's first experience of rejection is depicted in "The Rainy Afternoon." All of the characters in this play are children. It is a parable. The fact that the children are dressed in fragments of their parents' clothing only makes the meaning more forceful. "It is raining a slow constant drizzle," as Wilma, an aggressive ten-year-old girl, and Billie Mae, only seven or eight, play house and gossip in the "interior of an old barn in a small Midwestern town." (1)

Vic Bates, a boy of Wilma's age, pulls up at the door on his bicycle. Slowly his initial attitude of superiority dissolves before his curiosity. He gets off

his bike and comes into the barn. Soon he is completely involved, and, as he and Wilma play the part of husband and wife, Billie Mae becomes more dissatisfied and hostile. "I'm not having any fun," she complains. (7) Play-supper is over quickly; the baby, Billie Mae, is tucked into bed and Wilma, completely self-possessed, says, "I think I'll go to bed." (11) Vic at first misses her implication, then tries vainly to escape, but to avoid her taunt of "scaredy cat" he finally follows her up a crude stairway into the darkness of the loft and silence. Left alone, Billie Mae is at first annoyed by their long silence, then curious: "What're you crazy kids doin' up there in the loft?" (13) Then she is frightened; then angry: "I'm going home now and tell my mother." (14) Finally, realizing that she has been forgotten, she runs out of the barn crying, "I hate you, Wilma Wadsworth." The stage is left empty for a few minutes and then the curtain comes down in complete silence.

The play beautifully illustrates Inge's dramatic method. While many playwrights concern themselves only with the successful pair in a triangle, dismissing the unlucky, excluded individual or treating him with brusque, uneasy haste, Inge spends his energies and his art on these rejects. One of the characteristic psychological moods that occurs again and again in Inge's plays derives from this consideration of the unfortunate, rejected individual. When this mood is violated, as it was in the ending of the Broadway and Hollywood versions of Picnic, starry-eyed

romantics may smile quietly to each other, but one of Inge's basic beliefs is reversed. To accurately reflect Inge's philosophy of life Madge must walk quietly back to the candy counter at the dime store, not trudge off to a romantic reunion with Hal.

Sounds of Triumph

In "Sounds of Triumph," a second one-act that illustrates the playwright's concern with the estranged individual, Inge has recast his triangle with teenagers. A most important character in this play is an old man, however, himself the product of an earlier rejection. He acts as the understanding guide to a young college student after the alienating crisis, guiding the youth surely towards an attitude of acceptance and resignation.

The action of the play takes place on a small hill overlooking an athletic field. The field itself is not seen by the audience, but bright colored pennants can be glimpsed in the background. Throughout the play there is the sound of cheering voices and strident band music providing sound effects which interact, anticipate, and comment on the action that is occurring on stage. "Give 'em the axe, the axe, the axe," chants an unseen crowd, and one wonders what it forebodes. The set is an accurate projection of a situation peculiarly Inge's. First, it is remote, away from the crowd, yet located so as to encourage detached evaluation. Secondly, it is juxtaposed in such a way that what occurs on stage gains meaning through its relationship with

what occurs off stage. Thirdly, it provides the audience with just enough indication of this other world, by the flags and shouts and music, to imply that this world may not be what it seems.

In all of Inge's plays one senses that he is juggling two worlds, the personal world of his own experience and the world of success, vitality, and romantic love which is the stock in trade of contemporary scenarists and novelists. His attitude toward this latter world and his use of it characterize his work. His attitude is critical. His use, contrapuntal. Invariably Inge uses a successful, heterosexual relationship merely as a device to point up a less successful relationship (Sheba), always suggesting that such a successful relationship is superficial, incomplete, or unnaturally motivated.

As "Sounds of Triumph" begins, the old man, carrying a cane, enters and stands with his back to the audience, watching the distant games. Then the two lovers come on. Ann is a pretty girl, simply dressed in a sweater and skirt, her hair free. Tom, a young athlete, wears a sweat suit and track shoes. They laugh, they talk of love, they talk of Ben, Tom's rival and friend, and then they run off happily together. As the lovers disappear another young athlete, Ben, comes on stage. "He stands rigid with bitterness and rage. Then gradually the intensity subsides, his features and his body relax into sad resignation." (5)

The old man with the cane, appropriately a professor

of "Ancient Languages," tries to console him, but Ben fights off the old man's concern. For a moment the vindictive voices of the cheering squad rise into an explosion of calls, whistles, and shrieks. When they subside, the old man speaks, his back still to the audience. He tells of his own life, his flight from participation in life, his love of research. A rousing cheer comments sarcastically, "V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! That's the way to spell it. Here's the way to yell it!" (7) Ronny Hopkins has apparently won the discus throw. The professor notes wryly that Ronny had been in his class the previous year. He remembers him as a belligerent boy who would bellow, "Why should I spend my time worrying about what happened in the past? I'm living now." (8) This statement reflects what Inge feels is the basic difference between the professor and the boy.

Two relay runners enter at this juncture, to call Ben for the next race, but he rejects their plea to compete. He has lost interest in athletic competition. (11) The runners leave, puzzled. Then after a short transition of band music and cheers, the lovers return, just long enough to tell Ben of their decision to marry, unintentionally to goad him with an invitation to dance with Ann after the game, and to ask him to be Tom's best man. Ann remarks that she still "likes" him. (15) Left alone once again with the professor, Ben is torn between love and hate. Then, stimulated by the professor's comments, he begins to find a new and different interest in the games, Inge's symbol of

life. As the curtain falls, it is apparent that Ben has found a way to deaden his pain, has found a safe world from where he can "watch the games forever." (17) As the professor remarks: "Up here, you can see them all, and the view gives them perspective . . . And when the games are over, you don't have to fight your way through all the crowd."(16)

A Corner Room

While "Sounds of Triumph" ends in resignation, "A Corner Room," one of the longest of Inge's one-act plays, presents an alternative way in which an individual can compensate for a feeling of inadequacy. The play is a quiet, thoughtful discussion of homosexuality, a type of homosexuality, however, that is never offensive, at least during the action of the play. The play is set in "the corner room of a deluxe suite in a luxury hotel." (1) Inge implies symbolically that its occupants are "in a corner," and, as the play develops, we discover that both of them are. Although there is a bell boy and a cluster of teenage girls introduced into the play briefly, Guard and Lydia are the only significant characters. Guard is an athletic young man, reticent and a bit uncertain. In an early expository passage we learn that he is currently Hollywood's top-ranking boxoffice star. His new bride, Lydia, is in her early thirties. She is a little-known star from the legitimate stage.

From the first line of the play: "I'd like to have your autograph, Mr. Dolman," (1) and Lydia's accompanying

smirk, the audience is aware that their relationship is unusual. By the time Guard has had a long-distance talk with his manager, during which his voice becomes "softer," his psychological make-up is clear. During the expository dialogue which makes up the rest of the play, the anatomy of homosexuality is revealed. Guard's name is actually Alfred, Guard, appropriately, being his mother's maiden name. He also finds it appropriate because he plays guard on a basketball team; and also, he admits reluctantly, because his analyst pointed out how he always guards himself psychologically.

The dialogue takes us back to the beginnings of his predicament. Long before he had become a star, he had a job bell-hopping in a hotel on the beach in Miami. There he met a wealthy woman and her daughter. The mother took considerable interest in him and eventually persuaded him to marry her daughter and return with her to Detroit. His wife was soon pregnant, but her mother attracted him even more, and he soon found it impossible to continue living in the house. As Guard puts it: "I . . . well, I kind of cracked up." (9) In California, Guard met his agent, Herbie. His wife soon divorced him on the grounds of desertion. Despite psychiatric help, Guard has never touched a woman since, still attracted and repelled by his wife's mother. In addition to this traumatic experience it is revealed that Guard had had an almost classically unhappy childhood. His father was an alcoholic who beat both mother and son, thus

intensifying Guard's affection for his mother.

As is evident, the first half of "A Corner Room" is little more than a well-told case history, but in the second half Inge creates a dramatic tension which rivets the attention and the emotions. There it is made clear that both Lydia and Guard are truly attracted to each other, and that Lydia's attraction is normal and sexual. She realizes that Guard is a homosexual suspect and indirectly connected with a murder, but the fact that he has picked her to be his wife intensifies her affection, as does her own past, distorted by a relationship with an animal of a man named Kurt. One can sense that her desire for Guard is strong. As the tension mounts over whether Guard and Lydia can work out a normal relationship, they are interrupted by a gang of giggling girls, searching for autographs. The interruption is only momentary but a device needed at this point in the play to provide an essential respite. Then Guard and Lydia are alone again.

The interruption allows Lydia to recognize and admit to herself her desire, and she soon reveals her feelings to Guard. Embarrassed by her increasing desperation, "I can't help myself, I <u>want</u> you . . . Why <u>can't</u> you love me?" (22) Guard cannot respond. Despite Lydia's strong desires, Guard remains emotionally impotent, psychologically castrated. Lydia, realizing the futility of her hopes, standing on the threshhold of resignation and acceptance, bids Guard a platonic goodnight as the play ends. A partial solution is

proposed: acceptance, a concept which is psychologically necessary if not emotionally satisfying.

It is interesting to contrast Tennessee Williams' treatment of a similar relationship in Sweet Bird of Youth. In Williams' play the basic relationship between the youth and the older actress is grossly distorted by drug addiction, castration, abortion, and nymphomania and obscured by phony philosophical and segregationist sentiments. Inge avoids this visceral appeal not only in "A Corner Room" but in all of his plays.

Memory of Summer

An alternative to acceptance and resignation is insanity, an alternative that "Memory of Summer" explores. It is easy to see Miss Viola, the tragic protagonist of "Memory of Summer" as the woman from the Standish Arms some years after her experience with the taxicab driver, or as Lydia without the partial solution that marriage to Guard brought. "Memory of Summer" takes place on the beach of a deserted resort. Emptiness, chill, grey dampness create a somber, foreboding mood. There are only two other characters in the play besides Viola, who at forty is trying to bring back her youth as she strives to bring back the summer which has also gone forever. These characters are Alice, Viola's housekeeper, a fretful woman in her sixties, and a young, bronzed, god-like youth, in the Coast Guard. The play systematically exposes Viola's predicament, and the dialogue with her housekeeper and the young man relentlessly

eliminate all the hopes that agile minds might suggest to solve her dilemma. Viola tries unrealistically to will the summer back and, at least in her own mind, momentarily succeeds. She chatters on about "young people, laughing and playing . . . splendid days . . . dining and dancing at the inn," (3) ignoring Alice's suggestion that they return to St. Louis and Alice's plea that she admit the evidence of her eyes. The shops are boarded up. There are no other swimmers.

Viola runs off toward the water after an opening argument with Alice, and the young guard enters. His first question comes directly to the point: "Is the lady loco?" (4) Alice avoids a direct answer and, leaving Viola's beach blanket and a flask of brandy with the guard, hurries off to call Viola's doctor. Viola, responding to the guard's whistles and shouts, returns to dry herself hurriedly. Wrapped in her beach blanket and warmed by a swallow of brandy, she tries to persuade him to stay with her. The guard listens to her curiously. She offers him brandy, a drink in the cottage; she describes her days on the beach during the summer; she calls him handsome, an angry sea god, and herself a disobedient naiad. She is trembling, but one doubts that it is because of the cold.

The play is brought to a quick close. Viola's housekeeper returns. The guard, puzzled by Viola's excessive gratitude, runs off. As Viola is led off by Alice she forlornly asks, "Where are all the young people today?" (10)

She is unaware of the implication in Alice's remark that the family doctor is going to take her to see another doctor. She is lost in a world of bright suns, laughing young people, gay dances. They exit, and the curtain falls.

One might remark in passing that the name Viola is most appropriate for the fragile brightness of this pathetic, disturbed woman. Compared with the hopelessness of Viola's situation, one is tempted to see even the partial relationship between Lydia and Guard as adequate, and certainly preferable.

Bus Riley's Back in Town

While the remaining three one-acts, "Departure," "People in the Wind," and "Bus Riley's Back in Town" might be classified either as extended narrative anecdotes or illustrations of the links in the chain of alienation, the fact that they contain material which has been developed or modified in Inge's published works sets them in a category by themselves. Thus "Bus Riley's Back in Town" not only has the same situation as Inge's first published one-act, "Glory in the Flower," but it also has its major characters: Howie, the reminiscent salesman; Jackie Loomis; and Bus Riley himself. The setting is different--the action now occurring in the Fiesta Room of the Hotel Boomerang located in a small town in Texas--but the running commentary of the salesman is the same, as he recalls the "good old days" and asks questions, providing or evoking most of the expository material. The details of Jackie's

affair with Bus and its effect on her apprehensive, prosperous father, the affairs's sequel--her pregnancy, Bus' imprisonment, her abortion, her attempted suicide, and mental treatment--all are revealed in the scenes between the bartender and salesman, Bus and Jackie, and Bernice and Ralph Henry, two new characters. Despite her experiences Jackie is still in love with Bus, although she realizes that he is a crude man who is willing to take advantage of her old affection. Repelled initially by Bus' suggestion that they get a bottle and a cabin for the night, and aware that she is "just any other girl" (24) to him, Jackie leaves. But in this play, unlike "Glory in the Flower," Inge has added a shocking reversal. A moment after her exit, Jackie returns and accepts Bus' offer, "strictly for kicks," The curtain comes down as they exit. Howie, the bartender, watches them, silently drying glasses.

Inge uses music in this play as he uses the shouts and whistles in "The Sounds of Triumph," to comment upon the action. The soft love song to which Bus and Jackie first dance is obviously appropriate to her initial mood. But it is to a "slow, mean blues . . . full of rasping trumpet" that Jackie returns to Bus at the end of the play, and its mocking notes accompany their kiss, intensifying our awareness that love is not always beautiful, or logical, or for eternity.

Inge uses non-judgment effectively in this play. The silent bartender reflects Inge's own silence. He does

not judge what has happened. He is neither "for" nor "against" such a relationship. His ambiguous silence, expressed by the bartender, tempts the reader to provide his own evaluation. Such involvement is the essence of effective dramaturgy.

People in the Wind

While "Bus Riley's Back in Town" is a complete reworking of "Glory in the Flower," the second play in this final category, "People in the Wind," appears to be an earlier draft of Bus Stop. Although there are significant differences and considerably more character development in the latter, the basic situation and the essential characters are the same. In "People in the Wind," the bus travelers are not marooned for the night by a blizzard. The play, as a result, lasts only as long as a rest stop. There is no sheriff to maintain order and pacify the young cowboy. There is no guitar-playing buddy to draw out the cowboy's insecurities and doubts. And most significantly the minor characters are inadequately realized. In "People in the Wind," the relationship between Grace and the bus driver is neither consummated nor even suggested. Two old ladies make conservative, homey conversation; they are appropriately alarmed by the possibility of violence between the bus driver and the cowboy; and at play's end, they are pleased by the nightclub singer's final capitulation. The play closes as Grace and Elma prepare for the next bus.

While this one-act suffers in comparison with Inge's longer work, it has an integrity of its own. The similarity of the opening and closing provide it with a cyclical unity. The dominance which the cowboy-singer relationship acquires, because of the lack of accompanying and distracting subsidiary detail, gives the play a focus that Bus Stop lacks.

The difference in polish is illustrated in the way in which Inge handled the scene which establishes the relationship between the young cowboy and the nightclub singer in each play. The following dialogue from "People in the Wind" serves to indicate a tentative relationship between the two central characters but is really little more than meaningless small talk.

> MAN. (Surreptitiously has made his way from the magazines to the side of the GIRL. He speaks in a low voice.) Hi! (The GIRL doesn't answer.) What'd you come runnin' in here for?
> GIRL. I had my reasons.
> MAN. Care to tell me?
> GIRL. (A little tense.) I . . . I just didn't care for the way you was behaving. That's all.
> MAN. You didn't!
> GIRL. No . . . I didn't.
> MAN. I see you brought your suitcase in.
> GIRL. Yes, I did.
> MAN. I thought you was goin' to Wichita.
> GIRL. Wise people can change their minds. (She looks at him.) (4)

In Bus Stop the discussion of the suitcase comes after considerable preparation. Bo's intentions to marry Cherie have been made quite clear: "Wait til I get ya up to the Susie-Q, I'll fatten ya up."[13] The audience knows

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[13]William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 171.

that he has been completely infatuated with her from the moment that they met at the Blue dragon: "I told myself then and there, she's for me."[14] In Bus Stop the scene verifies our suspicions that, despite his unorthodox approach, Bo is driven by a fierce, innocent love. Returning from behind the counter he has tripped over Cherie's hidden suitcase. Shaking the frightened girl by the shoulders, he demands,

> Tell me, what's your suitcase doin' behind the counter? What ya tryin' to do, fool me? Was you plannin' to git away from me? That what you been sittin' here plannin' t'do?[15]

His questions are stopped by the sheriff, and the first act curtain falls on his baffled anger and embarrassed admission: "I just never realized . . . a gal might not love me. . . ."[16]

Although this incident is admittedly a minor one in both plays, the difference between them clearly illustrates how Inge, in Bus Stop, has succeeded in dramatically integrating material which was indifferently handled in his earlier one-act. The pointless dialogue in "People in the Wind" has been eliminated in Bus Stop, and what appears as casual conversation is pregnant with implication, exposition, and character revelation.

Departure

The third one-act play that anticipates and parallels Inge's published works is a short scene entitled "Departure."

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[14] 4 Plays, p. 172.

[15] Ibid., p. 174.

[16] Ibid., p. 178.

At one time, according to the title page, it was called The Dark at the Top of the Stairs which is understandable in that its three characters are similar to Rubin, Cora, and Sonny in Inge's play by that name. There is a significant difference, however, in all of their ages. Each of the characters is presented as ten to fifteen years older than they were presented in the Broadway production. Despite this age change, the psychological relationships existing between them are the same. In both plays the close Oedipal bond between the mother and son, intensified by the mother's loneliness while her husband is away, has made the boy overly dependent. In "Departure" both mother and son realize the dangers of this dependency and the need to break it, but they are reluctant or unable to do so.

Inge's characterization of the father in "Departure" is different than in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs and far more searching. In "Departure" there is a real question as to whether the father's anger over his son's dependency, what he calls his "damned foolishness," is completely innocent of at least a subconscious understanding that he is himself partly responsible for his son's condition. In the conversation between the father and mother which opens the play, he ridicules his son's dependence on his mother, a dependence which, it is soon learned, has brought the son home from college in the middle of his first year. The father calls it "imagination," something that the boy will forget in a few years. His initial response to his son's

confusion is the threat of physical violence. His only other response is self-justification. He is, he feels, a responsible, hard-working husband.

When the wife confesses that she has been faithless, that she has found in her son a response to her love which her husband is incapable of giving her, that she fears that this relationship is the cause of their son's problem, the husband will neither listen nor allow himself to understand. Clearing his throat he excuses himself to go over some accounts. It is obvious that he cannot face his son nor his responsibilities.

The scene which follows between the mother and son, in which they talk of "the dark at the top of the stairs," is calculated to provide insight and arouse pity. The son, while he envies "the other freshmen . . . so excited to be away from home," (8) can think of nothing but his mother. In desperation the mother tries to find a way to release him, but it is the son who resolves the problem. Somehow he has been able to accept his predicament. "Sometimes," he comments philosophically, "we have to live without courage." (9) He kisses his mother lightly on the cheek and leaves to catch a bus back to college. His mother cries convulsively on the floor.

The boy's father hastily reappears, blowing cigar smoke confidently in the air. "You needn't worry about that boy," he assures his wife, "he'll get along." (9) However, it is the mother's curtain line which comes closest

to the truth: 'Dear God! I feel destroyed that he is gone." (9)

It is more than likely that Inge based this short one-act on personal experience. We know that he returned home in a highly depressed state during his own college days. We know that he had a strong affection for his mother, that his father was frequently away from home, that his own psychiatric experience would lead him to interpret such a situation in Freudian terms. Certainly "Departure" reflects Inge's major preoccupation in that it shows the effects of frustrated affection on the personalities of several characters.

"Departure" is most interesting, of course, not for the speculation it may evoke concerning the playwright's personal life, but as an example of how Inge develops material from fragmentary scenes. "Departure" is not, like several other of Inge's one-act plays, an undeveloped idea. It has been worked through in considerable detail. The characters are convincing and vital. The dialogue clearly expresses the tensions, frustrations, and agonies of the mother and son.

These three final one-acts remind us that, while they are in themselves worthwhile entities, they are, more importantly, the central ideas around which Inge has built and will build his major works.

CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

All of Inge's plays are effective comments on the human condition. While Thoreau's phrase "quiet desperation" accurately describes the psychological state of the peripheral characters with which Inge is particularly concerned, Inge's philosophy of resignation has been best expressed by Wordsworth. Twice Inge has used phrases from Wordsworth's "Ode On Intimations of Immortality" as the titles for his works: "Glory in the Flower" and Splendor in the Grass. It is not merely a coincidence. A few lines of this ode contain the essence of Inge's attitude toward life and reflect the dominant belief that is found in all of Inge's plays:

> What though the radiance which was once so bright
> Be now forever taken from my sight,
> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind;
> In the primal sympathy
> Which having been must ever be;
> In the soothing thoughts that spring
> Out of human suffering;
> In the faith that looks through death,
> In years that bring the philosophic mind.[1]

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[1]William Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Invitation to Poetry, ed. Lloyd Frankenberg (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 213.

The bitter-sweet loss of youth and the determination to find "strength in what remains" are the central motif of Inge's plays. Wordsworth, it will be noted, has suggested four sources from which the adult may expect to draw strength: love, pity, faith, and "the philosophic mind." Inge has turned most often to his own conception of this final source of strength. He has not, it should be emphasized, rejected the other three, the Biblical faith, hope, and charity (love),[2] but they are not depended upon as frequently.

Inge treats of individual loneliness and fear in all of his plays. He voluntarily limits himself by dealing with only the mental conflicts of the individual. He seems to feel that only acceptance and understanding are logical and appropriate responses to the disappointments of life, and this is the solution that he proposes in his plays.

Again and again in his plays Inge presents lonely and estranged individuals, whose only recourse is to accept their particular predicament. Doc, Virgil, and Lila are outstanding examples. In Come Back, Little Sheba, when Doc explains, "What's in the past can't be helped," and adds, "you . . . you've got to forget it and live in the present,"[3] his comments reflect his inability to face a past which has

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[2] I Corinthians, XIII, 13.

[3] William Inge, 4 Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 33.

paralyzed and isolated him. His return, at the end of the play, is a tacit admission of acceptance and resignation. Virgil's final line in Bus Stop when he is turned out into the cold: "Well . . . that's what happens to some people,"[4] and Lila's at the end of "A Loss of Roses," when she starts off with Ricky to make "blue movies": "No one's gonna proteck me,"[5] are two other expressions of these characters' essential loneliness. The mood which is projected by this philosophical stand colors Inge's plays, giving them a tone which is characteristic. Young love, adolescence, personal and family relationships are all evaluated by Inge according to this standard, a standard which makes loneliness, frustration, disappointment, and impotence the norm; and adjustment, happiness, and love illusive exceptions.

Inge is a melancholy optimist. He believes that every man is beset with fear and loneliness, and he offers in his dramas acknowledgment and acceptance as a remedy for these ills. It is this philosophy that provides the underlying similarity in his plays.

> All are concerned with the characters' fears of revealing and facing their innermost selves . . . In each case when the characters find it possible to lay themselves bare to others, reconciliation becomes possible with the result that happiness is seemingly predicted. . . . [However] the new found abilities of the characters to face truth is indicative of future promise rather than a completely

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[4]Ibid., p. 219.

[5]William Inge, "A Loss of Roses," Esquire, January 1960, p. 144.

realized present happiness.[6]

In Come Back, Little Sheba, it will be recalled, Inge went so far as to suggest that survival may be all one should expect from life. Despite this attitude, Inge has a strong faith in man's ability to adjust to difficulties and to reconcile himself to life's brutal and perverse acts.

Inge's plays clearly express a Naturalistic philosophy of life. He sees man as a natural product of his heredity and instincts, whose motives and actions are strongly influenced, if not completely controlled, by his biological drives and emotional needs. This also helps account for Inge's frequent use of popular Freudianism. The two theories are completely compatible.

Inge's Naturalism is reflected in the amorality of his plays. Inge is very careful to avoid personal expressions of either condemnation or praise of the characters in his plays. While his plays reflect a very distinct ethic, this ethic is never stated blatantly. Inge tries to present life. He avoids judging it. Of course, the very nature of the material he selects, its arrangement, and the results which he sees as growing out of them provide an accurate indication of his bias and intent. It is for this reason that in analyzing his plays it has been necessary repeatedly to find clues in his choice of character, situation, and language.

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[6]O. G. Brockett, "Four Plays," Players Magazine, February, 1960, p. 111.

Inge's avoidance of moral judgment has disturbed Driver, who expresses standard religious objections to Inge's Naturalism in the following statement:

> Psychologism [Driver's term for Inge's mixture of Naturalism and Freudianism] tends to remove the question of good and evil. What is explainable as the result of an antecedent cause is neither good nor evil in itself but simply a fact that may or may not be altered. Thus there grows up the cult of acceptance, in which, since all is accepted and nothing rejected, all values disappear except the value of psychological understanding which is taken for granted.[7]

Inge's view is unacceptable to a Christian theologian such as Driver, who believes that there is considerable danger in "audiences unknowingly and uncritically accepting the view of man offered in what purports to be a homely 'slice of life.'"[8] Driver points out that Inge's plays, despite their external appearance, reflect a philosophy which is geared to failure, a philosophy which subordinates ethical standards to the need for survival. While such a philosophy may be justified as therapy, and this is the context in which Inge places it, it can hardly be expected to be appropriate for individuals who are mentally healthy and stable. Driver's concern is that the attitude of resignation and acceptance which Inge suggests as appropriate for his peripheral characters will be adopted by people with no such difficulties.

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[7]Tom F. Driver, "'Psychologism': Roadblock to Religious Drama," Religion in Life, XXIX (Winter, 1959-1960), p. 108.

[8]Ibid., p. 109.

A layman's version of Freud's tenets has in the last sixty years penetrated contemporary writing and produced what might be called "Freudiology" or "Freudiolotry." This popularized Freudian orientation provides a basic set of tenets which are easily identified:

1. The Oedipal situation is the most important aspect of human nature.
2. The ills of mature life are the result of childhood experiences.
3. There is no satisfactory adult life without sexual fulfillment and conversely, sexual fulfillment is the hallmark of satisfactory adult life.
4. The proper and sufficient attitude toward all defects in human behavior is acceptance.[9]

That these tenets are reflected in the plays of William Inge cannot be denied, although it should be pointed out they do not necessarily dominate his plays. While Inge has been guided by the tenets of popular psychology, he has rarely let it interfere with his personal observations. His plays are filled with fundamental human problems: man's eternal loneliness, his constant frustrations, his moments of happiness and understanding. Inge has accurately observed and recorded life as he sees it, and these observations will be valid regardless of the system used to interpret them. Inge has found in the insights of psychoanalysis a fruitful source of ideas, adapted to the needs of contemporary man, and he has exploited its most obvious insights for his own dramatic purposes.

Inge's frequent use of psychological terms and

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[9]Ibid.

concepts suggests one reason his plays are so representative in our age of anxiety.

It will be noticed that Inge brings more than a textbook familiarity with psychoanalysis to his plays. There are many details in his plays which reflect Inge's personal experiences. Here are two examples taken from "The Mall" and Come Back, Little Sheba:

> CRONE 2. I've smelled that smell before and I don't like it. It's that disinfectant they use in them loony bins. Before they let you out, they give you clothes that have been soaked in it. Oh, God, Sister, it's a frightful smell to me.[10]

The following dialogue takes place near the beginning of Come Back, Little Sheba:

> LOLA. Who do you have to help tonight?
> DOC. Some guy they picked up on Skid Row last night. (Gets his coat from back of chair.) They got him at the City Hospital. I kinda dread it.
> LOLA. I thought you said it helped you.
> DOC. (Puts on coat.) It does, if you can stand it. I did some Twelfth Step work down there once before. They put alcoholics right in with the crazy people. It's horrible--these men all twisted and shaking--eyes all foggy and full of pain. Some guy there with his fists clamped together, so he couldn't kill anyone. There was a young man, just a young man, had scratched his eyes out.
> LOLA. (Cringing.) Don't, Daddy. Seems a shame to take a man there just 'cause he got drunk.
> DOC. Well, they'll sober a man up. That's the important thing. Let's not talk about it any more.[11]

One needs only to recall Inge's use of dream symbolism in Come Back, Little Sheba, Kenny Baird's fetishism in "A Loss of Roses," the gladiator anecdote in Picnic, and the

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[10]William Inge, "The Mall," Esquire, January, 1959, p. 21.

[11]4 Plays, p. 10.

Oedipal relationships in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs and "A Loss of Roses" to realize the extent to which Inge has exploited Freudian terms and concepts.

While Inge utilizes all of the familiar dramatic elements, two in particular are of special importance: characterization and structure. These two elements will be discussed in detail after three brief statements on dialogue, overt action, and environment.

Inge's dialogue is colloquial, the functional language of middle-class Americans. While nothing lends distinction to the language that Inge uses, his use of the language is exceptionally effective. He uses it to authenticate character, to introduce ideas unobtrusively, and to put his philosophy in terms which the average man can understand. A single example from the first act of "A Loss of Roses" will clarify all three uses. Lila is confiding in Helen:

> HELEN. Lila, I'm so sorry for you.
> LILA. Why? The hospital wasn't a bad place. As a matter of fact, there's times when I wouldn't mind being back.
> HELEN. (Repelled.) Lila! No!
> LILA. Oh, you don't have to worry, Helen. I'm not ever going back. And I'm never going to do anything silly again with that darn sleeping medicine. This doctor, he made me see things a lot differently. He told me I was "emotionally immature." He said lots of people are. He said that "immature" people expect the whole world to be rosy, and when they have to face reality, it looks hard and ugly. So I just don't expect so much of life any more, Helen. And I've been gettin' along just fine.[12]

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[12]William Inge, "A Loss of Roses," Esquire, January, 1960, p. 128.

Limiting our attention to Lila's lines, it is clear that her first line indicates values, such as her subdued longing for the protection that institution life offered, that characterize her. Her next line provides both exposition, the fact that she was psychoanalyzed, and a statement of Inge's basic philosophical convictions, to not expect too much of life.

Overt action, as it is derived from the story line, is the least important dramatic element in Inge's plays. The action in his plays is primarily internal and psychological, intense, covert. Virgil's reaction to Cherie's and Bo's engagement is characteristic. Virgil does nothing which would physically demonstrate his anguish and loss. Inge expresses his loneliness in Virgil's eloquent curtain line. This does not mean that there is no overt physical action in Inge's plays. There is a great deal. Doc's attack on Lola in Come Back, Little Sheba, the fight between the sheriff and Bo Decker in Bus Stop, and the Wild West ride Sammy gives Sonny in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs are only three obvious examples. However, such action is only of secondary importance to Inge. His primary concern is with the hidden psychological tensions in his characters.

The third element in Inge's dramaturgy is his use of the Midwestern environment in which he places his action. It has already been pointed out that all of Inge's major plays are set in the Midwest. Only in a few of the one-acts, "The Mall," "An Incident at the Standish Arms," "To Bobolink,

for her Spirit," "A Corner Room," and "Memory of Summer," has Inge found locations elsewhere. In all of his plays, he has expertly blended locale and dialogue to produce an authentic, realistic fabric of life.

By far the most significant element in Inge's plays is his characterization. Inge tends to present characters in pairs or singly. He avoids large group scenes, and when they do occur he effectively isolates individuals and couples within this group.

"The characters are indistinguishable from thousands of middle-class Americans who live on meager incomes and never get much beyond the process of day-to-day existence,"[13] wrote Atkinson in 1959. With the exception of The Dark at the Top of the Stairs their world is restricted. There is little sense of contact with current affairs. Often there is only the suggestion that a community surrounds them. Inge sketches in only as much material and includes only as many characters as are necessary to avoid the impression that his plays are taking place in a void.

In Come Back, Little Sheba, the milkman, postman, neighbor, Ed and Elmo serve this function. In Picnic, the sense of living in a community is achieved with three characters: Bomber, the newsboy, and Irma and Christine, Rosemary's cohorts. In Bus Stop, Inge uses only one character, the sheriff.

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[13]Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: 'A Loss of Roses,'" NYTCR, December 7, 1959, p. 212.

Inge writes about alienated individuals. In "The Mall," his interests lie with Barney, the demented man searching for "real" love. In "The Sounds of Triumph" they are with Ben, the rejected athlete. Inge, of course, is interested in more than individuals in love. He is interested in any character with a peripheral existence, an existence which is cut off from society and the everyday world by personal inadequacy, emotional tensions, or psychological conflicts.

Brustein, in the most comprehensive analysis to date of the plays of William Inge, maintains that they all contain a basic relationship involving a weak male and a mother-woman.[14] But while it is true that Lola, Madge, Cora, and Lila all have scenes in which their maternal instincts are exposed, it is wrong to assume, as Brustein does, that their affections are predominantly maternal, or that the males with whom they are associated are therefore necessarily weak.

Inge does not deny that a man has emotional needs. Quite the contrary, Inge feels man is the product of his emotional needs. But, in this sense, every individual is "weak." To assume that Doc, Hal, Bo, and Rubin have each been "tamed" by a woman is to overlook the fact that in each case the woman has been equally "tamed" by the man, or more accurately all have been tamed by their biological make-up.

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[14]Robert Brustein, "The Men-taming Women of William Inge," Harpers, November, 1958, p. 52.

Each admits a dependency. To admit this dependency, Inge seems to feel, is strength, not weakness. Dr. Lyman expresses his convictions in Bus Stop:

> DR. LYMAN. It takes strong men and women to love . . . People strong enough inside themselves to love . . . without humiliation. People big enough to grow with their love and live inside a whole, wide new dimension. People brave enough to bear the responsibility of being loved and not fear it as a burden.[15]

Two relationships recur frequently in Inge's plays: an Oedipal relationship between a mother and her son, and a satisfactory, usually sexual, relationship of a young couple.

The Oedipal relationship is most effectively presented in "A Loss of Roses," The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, and "Departure." We have already noted that in each of these plays the sexual attraction between the mother and son is demonstrated. At the end of "A Loss of Roses," Helen and her son have the following revealing interchange:

> HELEN. What have you expected of me all these years, Kenny? Tell me.
> KENNY. (Pulling away, still unable to face her.) Let me go, Mom.
> HELEN. (Demanding.) Tell me, Kenny. Tell me.
> . . . . . .
> HELEN. All these years, you've felt I was neglecting you, that I was denying you, haven't you, son?
> KENNY. Maybe.
> HELEN. Oh, Kenny, I didn't mean to deny you. I didn't want to. But if I'd kept you any closer, I'd have destroyed you, Kenny. (She runs into the kitchen, sobbing uncontrollably.)[16]

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[15] 4 Plays, p. 200.

[16] Inge, Esquire, January, 1960, p. 142.

While this is the first overt statement of the nature of their relationship, its existence has been clear since the beginning of the play. The argument between Kenny and his mother which opens the play establishes the fact that Kenny is a demanding, rather arrogant boy, and that his mother is overly concerned with him. She is too apologetic and humble to be normal. It is Helen's confession to Lila, however, which most clearly establishes the Oedipal bond. Recalling how the boy was all she had after her husband died, she admits, "He became too important to me."[17] So important, in fact, that when she had to choose between Kenny's happiness and her own marriage, she chose Kenny's happiness. She acknowledges:

> It's the only time in my life I felt weak, like I'd given in to Kenny in some way I shouldn't have. As though he had a claim on me I couldn't break. Oh, there's something wrong between us, Lila, and I don't know what it is.[18]

While the Oedipal relationship is most thoroughly explored in "A Loss of Roses," it is equally evident in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, especially when Cora lies on the floor with her son in her arms,[19] and again in "Departure" in the even more explicit confession which the mother makes to her husband concerning her relationship with her son.

The second relationship, and one that contributes to the alienation of the peripheral character, is the relationship established between an athletic, virile young man and a

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[17] Ibid., p. 129.

[18] Ibid.

[19] 4 Plays, p. 250.

girl. In Come Back, Little Sheba, it is possible to categorize Turk and Marie as such a couple, with Doc as the individual who is alienated by their relationship. In Picnic it is Hal and Madge, and Alan is the loser. In Bus Stop it is Bo and Cherie, while Virgil is cast off. The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, "A Loss of Roses," and many of the one-acts do not utilize this pair. "The Rainy Afternoon," "Sounds of Triumph," and "The Mall" do. It will be observed that in a play like "Sounds of Triumph," Inge is primarily concerned with Ben, the cast-off member, while in Bus Stop, the estranged individual is Virgil, a supporting character, used by the playwright to help express his philosophy of life as well as to act as a confidant for Bo.

When one considers the structure of Inge's plays, one is immediately struck by their dissimilarity, their heterodox forms. Inge publicly rejects the idea that a play should be contrived to exploit suspense and ingeniously extended conflicts and then to resolve them at a climactic moment near the end of the play.

> I despair of a play that requires the audience to sit through two hours of plot construction, having no reference outside of the immediate setting, just to be rewarded by a big emotional payoff in the last act. This I regard as a kind of false stimulation.[20]

Inge writes plays in which he intends every scene to have significance and in which each scene is located so as to

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[20]Ibid., p. viii.

comment on, and provide insight into, the scenes with which it is connected.

Bus Stop provides an excellent example of this technique, similar to the cinematic device known as "montage." Inge, by carefully arranging the sequences of dialogue fragments, is able to make them, although they are merely juxtaposed, express relationships and meanings and acquire significance that they would lack in isolation. "I use one piece of action to comment on another,"[21] wrote Inge in the foreword to 4 Plays. The following example is an obvious use of calculated juxtaposition:

> DR. LYMAN. (Musingly, he begins to recite as though for his own enjoyment.)
> "That time of year thou may'st in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs--"
> CHERIE. (Shivering, she goes to the stove.)
> I never was so cold in my life.[22]

It should be noted that Inge, in a stage direction at the beginning of the play, has characterized the scene as "warm and cozy," which makes Cherie's comment significant. That Inge intended Cherie's seemingly unrelated line to comment on Dr. Lyman is evident. Later in the play he repeats the juxtaposition and points it up in the dialogue:

> DR. LYMAN. For these qualities [sweetness, youth, and innocence] I seek to warm my heart as I seek a fire to warm my hands.
> ELMA. Now I am kind of embarrassed. I don't know what to say.
> DR. LYMAN. Then say nothing, or nudge me and I'll talk endlessly about the most trivial

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[21] Ibid., p. vii.

[22] Ibid., p. 165.

> matters. (They laugh together as CHERIE comes back in, shivering.)
> CHERIE. Brr, it's cold.[23]

Inge not only juxtaposes action and dialogue, but his characters as well. His characters are drawn and related in such a way that each character comments on and gains significance from the other characters. Inge has written,

> I seek dramatic values in a relative way. That is, one character in a play of mine might seem quite pointless unless seen in comparison with another character.[24]

Juxtaposition is one of Inge's essential techniques.

There is, of course, nothing unusual in using characters as foils. What distinguishes Inge's use is the constant utilization of this dramaturgical device. His plays are composites, and he depends on interrelation for much of his meaning. This is why in Picnic, Bus Stop, and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, it is especially necessary to be aware of how each character comments upon the others. Citing Bus Stop as a play in which character counterpoint made the characters meaningful, Inge wrote:

> The cowboy's eagerness, awkwardness, and naivete in seeking love were interesting only when seen in comparison, in the same setting, with the amorality of Cherie, the depravity of the professor, the casual earthiness of Grace and Carl, the innocence of the school-girl Elma, and the defeat of his buddy Virgil.[25]

These three plays are particularly clear demonstrations of what Inge meant when he wrote, "I regard a

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[23] Ibid., p. 189

[24] Ibid., p. viii.

[25] Ibid., p. viii.

play as a composition rather than a story, as a distillation of life rather than a narration of it."[26] Rejecting the concept of story and narration, Inge denies the predominant importance of those compositional factors, complication and resolution, which depend on time. Instead he concentrates on what he calls the "texture" and "fabric" of life.[27] Wishing to avoid "conclusions" which imply a time orientation, he insists on negating the effect of any incident which might imply resolution. Writing of Bus Stop, he noted:

> I felt quite proud of the fact that I had held the audience's interest long after what would normally be considered the final "pay-off" (when the cowboy and his girl are reunited and go off together). I guess maybe I was trying to prove that a play's merits can exist, not in the dramatization of one soul-satisfying event, but in the overall pattern and texture of the play.[28]

It will be recalled that Inge followed Bo's exuberant victory with Virgil's quiet farewell, Grace and Elma's discussion of Dr. Lyman, Virgil's lonely exit, and Grace's final exit.

The endings of all of Inge's full-length plays are equally inconclusive. The deceptively conclusive episode near the end of Come Back, Little Sheba, in which Doc begs Lola for forgiveness, is followed by a series of sure, familiar, everyday details and events which are calculated to prevent the audience from going into an unthinking romantic stupor. The curtain comes down on Lola fixing eggs

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[26] Ibid., p. vii.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., p. viii.

at the stove while Doc slowly sips his orange juice. The original ending of Picnic has already been discussed in detail. It provides a clear illustration of Inge's rejection of the stereotyped terminal conclusion.

The essentials of Inge's dramaturgy can be reduced to three principles: (1) A play's structure should derive from character interaction; (2) a play's meaning is most effectively communicated by using characters and dialogue according to a contrapuntal pattern; and (3) a playwright should avoid Procrustean structural patterns, especially at the end of the play, and maintain as Naturalistic a sequence as possible.

Inge's purpose, like that of all playwrights, is to evoke a response. "I have been most concerned with dramatizing something of the dynamism I myself find in human motivations and behavior," he wrote.[29] This concept of dynamism is essential to Inge's working methods.

Inge uses the term in two capacities: first, to indicate the vital, action-producing tensions in his characters provoked by diverse motivations; and, secondly, to indicate the response he seeks to evoke in his audiences, a dynamic empathy which involves the playgoer completely, compelling him to search back into the past action of a play to "find the reasons for . . . events after they happen," and motivations which have been "previously overlooked."[30] Such an audience involvement is essential to effective

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[29] Ibid., p. vii.

[30] Ibid., p. ix.

aesthetic experience. By bringing each individual playgoer's experience and judgment to bear, the play acquires depth and individual meaning.

Like all contemporary dramatists, Inge is aware that the playgoer's experience does not take place on the stage, but rather in the mind of the playgoer. He knows that the aesthetic experience which the dramatic production is designed to stimulate can only be evoked with the viewer's cooperation, and that a successful playwright must somehow compel the playgoer willingly to contribute his cooperation. Inge seeks this dynamic involvement primarily through juxtaposition. When characters and action are juxtaposed, but the relationships are not stated, it is necessary for the playgoer to relate them. In the moment that these relationships are clearly made, the playwright succeeds. He has engaged the minds of the audience, and he has tapped the vast resources of their own personal experience. This is the essence of Inge's artistic technique.

Conclusions

The evaluation of any work of art is complicated by the fact that the critic is dealing with three factors: the intent of the artist, the work of art itself, and the impact of this work of art on a specific audience. Value judgments are applied collectively and indiscriminately to this triad. We have discussed the first two of these areas. There only remains that of identifying the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of Inge's dramas and suggesting

his place in contemporary theatre practice. The following qualities distinguish Inge's plays:

Inge's plays are true to life, utilizing realistic characters and situations in an unobtrusive manner. All of his plays are striking in their apparent sincerity. Inge is a plain-speaking playwright, fluent yet prosaic, who exploits both sentiment and dramatic conventions. His plays are filled with irony, humanity, and objectivity, and they are freely constructed to the demands of character interrelation. The plays reflect a philosophy of resignation, interpreted and expounded in Freudian terms.

It would, of course, be possible to add to this such characteristics as Midwestern locale, naturalistic presentation, inconclusive conclusions, and colloquial dialogue. The single most characteristic and most significant feature of Inge's plays is his philosophical outlook, a subject that has already received considerable attention.

Inge has not been an innovator. He has neither introduced new dramatic techniques nor changed the course of contemporary American theatre. The qualities which characterize his plays are not unique. Colloquial dialogue, which he uses so shrewdly, has long been a legitimate aspect of literature. Organic dramatic form, which he uses to present a "fabric of life," has been used continuously from the days of Chekhov. Freudianism and Naturalism are equally familiar, as is the dramatization of middle-class life. Inge's skill lies in his ability to combine these factors

effectively. His originality lies in what he has chosen to bring together: authentic, Midwestern Americana and dark, Freudian torments.

With this choice Inge places himself in the company of two other American playwrights and a long list of European dramatists. Like Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, who have investigated psychological stress in the lives of people living in other parts of the country, Inge has sought to find and dramatize a dynamic explanation of human motives and behavior. In addition, nostalgia for his own Midwestern past has engendered in his plays a wistful romanticism which relieves Inge's fundamental fatalism.

Inge does not belong to the most recent group of serious dramatists to find their way to Broadway, playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Albert Camus, who have created the so-called "theatre of the absurd." Stylistically he is in fact a conservative, employing long-accepted techniques and materials. Inge writes plays that are episodic, Freudian, and resigned, but he is working within the traditions established by Wilder, Saroyan, and Williams. Inge's plays are structural conglomerates with a minimum of plot, like Thorton Wilder's most familiar plays, Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth, and William Saroyan's The Time of Your Life and The Cave Dwellers. By interpreting his characters in terms developed and employed by psychoanalysts he has aligned himself with such contemporaries as Lillian Hellman and Robert Anderson whose

Toys in the Attic and Tea and Sympathy demonstrate the same involvement. Finally, Inge has adopted the most prevalent philosophical attitude to be found in current dramatic and literary writing: a concern with man's anxieties, frustrations, and inability or unwillingness to adjust his personality to the society in which he lives. This concern with man's loss of identity, his sense of guilt, and his emotional castration was recently identified by John Howard Lawson[31] as the most significant feature of contemporary drama. It is clear that Inge's plays reflect these concerns.

In summary it can be said that Inge has been an effective playwright whose plays have succeeded in speaking to the American public. He belongs to a small group of men who are capable of producing drama which reflects a personal point of view and yet is compatible to the stringent demands of current commercial play production. He is a determined, sincere playwright, a skillful practitioner, and a productive artist. The fact that he has been writing in a period in which serious drama is being seriously challenged by shallow comedies and musicals makes Inge's Broadway success doubly impressive.

At this point it is impossible, of course, to predict what Inge will accomplish in the future. The fact that both of the plays he is currently working on, "Natural

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[31]John Howard Lawson, Theory and Technique of Playwriting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. ix-xvi.

Affection," and "Bus Riley's Back in Town," are set in the Midwest and deal with the psychology of personal relationships, suggests that he will continue to use the Midwestern scene and family conflicts and relationships as subject matter. His success as a film scenarist, and the capacity of that medium to handle with ease the structural complexities of his art, suggest that he will continue to write for the films. Inge's future at this juncture appears very bright. He is certainly among the best American playwrights writing today. The plays which he wrote between 1948 and 1960 are convincing evidence of both his awareness of the demands of the commercial theatre and his sensitivity to the temper of his times. It seems certain that his future work will continue to reflect contemporary American man and his problems effectively and sincerely.

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