



The Novels of William Inge:
Against the Au Courant: Sex and
Identity in American Culture

by Dr. Howard R. Wolf

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

April 13-16, 2011

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30th William Inge Theatre Festival
William Inge Center for the Arts
Independence Community College
Independence, Kansas
April 13-16, 2011

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In a recent review of a biography of Edith Piaf, *No Regrets*, Carolyn Burke, the author of the biography, *The New York Times* book reviewer James Gavin says (Sunday, March 27: 16):

Carolyn Burke highlights the strength of “the chanteuse who reached across social, linguistic and national divides to voice the emotions of ordinary people.”

If it would be extreme to claim that the writing of William Inge had a comparable reach, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he gives a “voice,” often powerfully, to “ordinary people.” This is true of his plays and two novels: *Good Luck, Miss Wykoff* (1970) and *My Son is a Splendid Driver* (1971). In defending Inge against negative criticism shortly after the playwright’s death, Harold Clurman captures this essence of Inge’s work in a 1974 review in *The Nation* (Voss 274): “Inge was the dramatist of the ordinary.”

Although this humanistic aspect of Inge’s work is best represented in his plays – not surprising for a writer who was essentially a dramatist – it may be true to say that we can come to understand with greater clarity this democratic quality of his work through his novels. After all, the form of the novel allows the narrator more easily to probe a character’s motivations, to provide a context for consciousness, to provide a biographical context for action, and to ruminate about philosophical, psychological, and historical matters.

In the main, it is easier for a writer to express “ideas” in prose forms than it would be to do so in a play. Shaw and Brecht might come to mind as exceptions; but Shaw needed his lengthy Prefaces to expand his sense of the significance of the plays. We bring to Brecht’s work some understanding of Marxist commentary, and his plays are “plays” in a special sense. They are musical pageants as well, owing as much to vaudeville and *commedia dell’arte* as they do to traditional theatre.

Characters can express their thoughts at some length through the vehicle of the “soliloquy” and moderns versions of it, but this convention has limits for the 20th century dramatist, and it’s simply easier for prose writers to speak in the first person or for a narrator – in the manner of Henry James’s “foreground observer” – to think *through the mind of a character*. This kind of “limited omniscience” (Charters 984) allows a prose writer more autobiographical freedom than a playwright ever has: autobiography with respect to the writer as well as the character.

This is particularly applicable to *My Son is a Splendid Driver*, barely a novel in the form of a “memoir,” a thinly disguised autobiography in which Inge recapitulates his life somewhat in the tradition of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind* (1798-1839, 1850).

In fact, Inge as narrator recalls Inge-Joey’s discovery of literature in his junior year of high school (131):

But I didn’t know I was waiting or what I was waiting for until my junior year in high school, when I happened to read a few poems of Wordsworth in my English

Literature class...But I found in Wordsworth a pastoral longing, a sad reflectiveness that touched me personally and deeply.

I well can imagine that one of Wordsworth's poems that moved the adolescent Inge (to be recreated later through Joey) is "Tintern Abbey" (1798), especially the lines (88-91): "...For I have learned/To look on nature, not as in the hour /Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes/ The still, sad music of humanity...." The comma after "still" is important because it enables the phrase to carry the sense both of quietness and enduring. I might argue in fact – to make the most pedantic point that I've ever made (though some might disagree with me) -- that this is one of the most important commas in English Literature.

There is a deep connection in Inge's work between "sadness" and loneliness, sadness and social estrangement (Wolf, "After the 1950's: Looking Back at William Inge"). Too often, sex is invoked in the form of a "primitive rite" (*My Son* 137) to close the gap between an isolated self and the person from whom he feels estranged – a person who represents an alien social convention in one of its many guises.

One of the "red threads" that run throughout *My Son is a Splendid Driver* is a portrait of the writer as a young Kansas: "I had discovered the world of poetry and literature" (118); "I had begun to write more poems. Serious poems, and a little fiction (155)."

Like Richard Wright's transformative discovery of "high" literature in *Black Boy* (218), Inge starts reading while "attending the small junior college" (170) -- which

became ICC (?) – some of the modern Masters: “Mann, Proust, Lawrence, Fitzgerald, Kafka, Dostoevski, Tolstoy” (171).

There are traces of all these writers in his novels, but what is important, I think, is the contrast between Inge’s growing awareness of himself as a writer and the background of a “barely civilized” Kansas (10) as well as the contrast between the surface decorum of “Freedom,” Kansas and what he recognizes as an “inner rebellion” (128) in himself and others.

Joey, the writer-to-be, a little like Sherwood Anderson’s George Williard, has an emerging sense that his desire and need to “mold our grief into some shapeful form” will estrange him from his fellow townsmen – especially if he tells some forbidden truths about same-sex sexuality (97, 140) and his father’s (STD) sexually transmitted disease (145).

The tension between his emerging consciousness of himself as writer and the disruptive social implications for a small town Kansan of the post-WWI period *if he tells the truths about his community* seem to me to be a more enduring theme than some of the overstated (one might say “oversize” in the case (145) of Rafe Collins’s “thick penis”) scenes in his work.

In saying this, I am not trying to dismiss the significance of Inge’s Midwestern version of Freud’s great formulation in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (**the drama of the four-part model of the mind**), with its disruptive implications; it is to suggest rather that Inge does best, in my view, when his idiom is predominantly minimal, when deep material ripples at the surface and does not try to have a “tsunami” effect.

Inge is at his best when he maintains a **balance** between what is “common” (*My Son* 95), if oppressive as well, and what threatens to overthrow it – indeed what needs to overthrow it to some degree without destroying it.

Inge is a son of the plains – “the level Kansas landscape that she had come to find so much unadorned beauty in” (*Good Luck* 102) -- and when he loses touch with what is plain, something important is lost: a simple beauty (45):

At sunset we all became quiet. The sky now dominated everything, the earth itself appearing humble and poor, its grass and foliage already seared by the burning sun, the soil dry and hard, not knowing when it would ever receive again the blessing of rain.

Inge stops short of Eliot’s “cruellest month” as a pervasive atmosphere.

There is a balance in his work, at best, between Hopperesque desolation (147) – “Most of the beautiful big homes were empty” – and a subdued version of Fitzgeraldian lyricism (157):

And despite the unspoken gloom that pervaded my home, and despite the misery of the world, there were summer evenings as sweet in my memory as lavender...Nights when the bright orange moon and the crystal stars hung in the sky like the only promises that had been kept for the world.

(I am reminded of Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas" (*Seven Centuries of Verse* 207): "He hangs in shades orange bright,/ Like golden lamps in a green night...").

As the conventional townspeople serve as a choric element of judgment in Inge's work, a reflection, perhaps of his study of Ancient Greek and his help with a translation of *Antigone* (175) at The University of Kansas, so the prairie town, with its flat openness to a limitless horizon gives him a glimpse of the "sublime" (207, 224).

As there may be dark at the top of the stair, so there is light on the "nearby hills" (157).

Like James Agee, another writer shaped by the Depression, Inge is committed to restoring the positive elements of a "lost life" ("Now as Awareness...", *The Collected Short Prose*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald, 142-144).

Inge's tone is elegiac, but not tragic (he saved that for the end of his own life). His music is a blend of Copeland, Cole Porter, and Samuel Barber.

...

Inge's Liberal Humanism is defined further, if in a somewhat failed way, in *Good Luck, Miss Wyckoff* (a weak title, given the sexually charged plot, that fails to arouse the imagination of a possible reader) through Miss Wyckoff's idealism with respect to racial matters. The narrator enters her mind (37):

The thought of this racial blending seemed to Miss Wyckoff to be divine, and she was sometimes moved to tears to see evidence of love between two races. The world in another century should consist of only one race, the human.

Unfortunately, in order to dramatize Miss Wyckoff's willingness to be socially transgressive, to show the extreme she is willing to go, Inge portrays her lover, Rafe Collins, the janitor-student athlete, in stereotypical terms that taint the novel. In an effort perhaps to find an audience he felt he had lost, Inge indulges in some simplistic sensationalism. But Miss Wyckoff's commitment is, in her eyes and Inge's, "human."

Even if the coming together of Evelyn and Rafe seems improbable to us at a social level and as a choice that someone like Miss Wyckoff ever would make, we can understand the degradation and virtual rape (150) at a symbolic level as an effort to overcome a history of repression on Evelyn's part and racial indignity on Rafe's.

In many ways, *My Son is a Splendid Driver*, a novel in memoir-form, **written first** (Voss 259), provides a deeper context for *Good Luck, Miss Wyckoff*. Inge may have thought that it made more commercial sense to publish the more shocking narrative first; but *Good Luck* would have been motivationally enriched with some of the explanatory materials of the memoir.

Still the novel's conclusion is moving, and we hope that Evelyn, though shattered, will, as Hemingway puts it in *Farewell to Arms*, "become strong at the broken places" (249).

In a sense, we have to supply an "objective correlative" for Rafe's brutality and Evelyn's surrender. But Inge's imagination is not well suited for symbolic representation and extra-textual reference. He is not a "poetic" dramatist like Williams. He does better when he is dealing with materials that are "common" and "**plain**" and puts those materials in a context where they are threatened or challenged, but not brutally overthrown.

We can explain in part, perhaps, the distance between "social graces" and "vulnerable feelings" (88) and Inge's attempt, often failed, to bridge them in a unified form by his interest in Freud and Psychoanalysis (67, 126). Inge as analyst-patient-artist comprehends and imagines desires and needs that aren't always given "shapeful form."

In a sense, he may overestimate the explanatory power of Freudian theories as he exaggerates the role of the Jewish psychiatrist, Dr. Rubin, who utters oracular truths about human sexuality in his Wichita Office (123). Even though Dr. Rubin is "not one of the Jewish men who are handsome and sexually attractive," he is, in Inge's and Evelyn's estimation, a superb therapist. It must be said of Inge in general that he is virtuously pro-Semitic. Unlike Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, his work is ecumenically maculate.

Several other possible explanations for overstatement come to mind: Inge's marginal position as a gay writer when the closet had to be kept tightly shut.

Lacking the social possibility of enacting publicly a wholly human relationship in such a way that would have been acceptable in his home town, a place he never really left, he thought in the powerful terms of totem and taboo. "Homosexuality was anathema in our society then (140)."

Like Somerset Maugham, who substituted transgressive hetero-sexual liaisons for same-sex intimacy at a time when such relationships were unacceptable (Wolf *The Matter of Somerset Maugham*) as well as illegal, Inge felt obliged to put the "penis" in the clinical context of the "vagina" (Wyckoff 15), as it were, and asked "it" to bear too heavy a load of symbolic meaning (75, 89, 128, 150, 153, 157). It's as if the male member, *en plein air*, could represent, like an "ancient statue" (53), Man and Mankind.

{If for Protagoras (c. 485 – c. 410 B.C.), “Man is the measure of all things” (“Fragment 1,” Bartlett 87a), the “thing” tends to be too often the synecdochic measure of man for Inge. He has some kinship with D.H. Lawrence in this respect. Evelyn admires the ideal forms of classical sculpture, but she finds that “Nature...equipped men more generously than Praxiteles” (149). At his best, Inge includes the humanism of Leonardo’s 1487 drawing of Vitruvian man in his phallic celebrations. }

He also may have imagined he needed a strong erotic force to overcome “any personal relationship that threatened to be binding” (*My Son* 163).

His melancholy and depressive tendencies led him to alcohol and fantasies of “lust” (*Good Luck* 159) that could obliterate consciousness of his aloneness and loneliness (a leit motif in his work).

And he was trying, of course, to make it big on Broadway at a time when Brando was exuding so much sexual magnetism in *Streetcar* (213).

As with all good dramatists, there are opposing forces in Inge’s world:

He sets conventional social life against sexual passion, “willful independence,” and “bohemian” creativity (176-178).

He longs for creative success that will distinguish him as a “superior” person (above “Jule?”), but he fears that he will be alienated from a “kinship to all men” (200).

He is opposed to the “normal” world and would rebel against it; but he is an ambivalent “Lucifer” and longs at the same time to return to a “mirage of comfort – a comfort he associates with the “womb,” “home,” the “past” (221) and “an inherent longing we all feel for death” (199).

These opposing forces led to a Fitzgeraldian “crack-up,” a half-hearted suicide attempt (200), and institutionalization for a short period after which he gives up teaching (not a bad idea!) and finds a way periodically to deal with his conflicts through writing.

Of these conflicts none is more important than the ambivalence he has felt towards his parents and O’Neill-like family “doomed to failure” (196) with whom he able to come to terms only after his father’s death when he cries out softly: “Spare me, please, from the vision of two people I want to love, whom I must love in order to live....” (169).

I am reminded of Thomas Wolfe’s *cri de Coeur*: “In her dark womb/we did not know our mother’s face... Which of us has looked into his father’s heart?” (*A Stone, A Leaf, A Door* 1). A Kansan Midwesterner, he looks to the East and the West (Broadway and Hollywood); but Inge’s work takes place at the edge of Southern Literature, and like Wolfe and Agee, he is haunted by a sense of defeat and loss.

Inge is a lover at heart, and he does best when he can keep opposing forces in some kind of balance and doesn’t need to dramatize the polarities through melodramatic extremes and the invocations of racial and sexual stereotypes: rapists (202) and “swollen cocks” (*Good Luck* 75).

He is at his best when he recalls his “first sight of the sea, more awesome even than the vast prairies in Western Kansas... something eternal” and can link life’s power “to hurt” with a touch of “sublimity” (224). In such a moment, he preserves a sense, like Chekhov, of “human dignity,” despite everything that seems to deny it (Charters, “The Lady with the Pet Dog” 167).

Inge was aware when he wrote “The Relevance of Theatre” (unpublished) in 1969 that his work was being superseded and displaced by Magritte-like “avant-garde” (Voss

258) movements, and he knew with a sense of sadness and anguish that he was less likely to be “popular” in the coming decades.

He well might have added to his explanation for his loss of an audience, the emerging preferences of the Counter-Culture, and the addictive appeal of television. Street theatre and Theatre of the Absurd challenged his work from one side and “Sit-Coms” from the other, to say nothing of the public’s obsession with the “drama” of sports as presented

on ESPN -- the simplest form of drama, **a perpetual ritual of life against death.**

But The Radical tastes for better and worse of the 1960’s are as far behind us now as the Romantic Revolution launched by the Lake District Poets, and television is giving way to new electronic possibilities so that Soap Operas and other vulgarizations of the Human Drama are beginning to lose their audience.

And it may be that a new examination of Humanism and challenges to it will help bring more attention to Inge’s work. I recently received a “call for papers” for a symposium on “Post-Human Lives” sponsored by the editors of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*.” One of the proposed topics is: “New assemblages of the self that emerge through biotechnology and the machine.”

Some contributors, consistent with “theoretical” trends in the literary humanities over the past few decades, will welcome one or another version of the erasure and transformation of man; others, like myself, sensing an Orwellian agenda (Wolf, “George Orwell and the Problematics of Non-Fiction”) will want to argue that there is an ineradicable set of dimensions to the human experience – many of which are contained in

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