

THE THEME OF MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN WILLIAM INGE'S PLAYS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE EARLY PHASE: 1950-1957

Dr. Mhendra Pratap Singh
Assist. Prof. (Guest) Govt. College Govindgadh Rewa (M.P.)

ABSTRACT: - William Inge (1913-1973) is one of the most talented playwrights in American theater of the mid-twentieth century. In plays after plays, he has brought the lives of ordinary American men, women, and children alive on the stage, and has moved the American audience with their fortunes. His demands on stage craft have not exceeded the resources of familiar realism. He may have intended to portray ordinary people driven, by rejection, to despair, isolation, and violence, but has actually produced a clinical case study of sexual depravity, with none of Tennessee Williams' poetic expression and deference of emotional freedom, though he is known as "the senior Tennessee Williams".

Not many full-length studies of William Inge's plays have so far been brought out. The only book-length study, William Inge, made by R. Blaud Shuman, was published in 1965 by Twayne publishers, Inc, New York. A few general books, however contain significant material relevant to Inge and his work. Loies Broussard's American Drama: contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams, Harold Clurman's lies like truth, Winnifred Dasenburajs The theme of Loneliness in modern American Drama and John Gasser's Theatre of the cross-roads have referred to William Inge and his words, sporadically some of his plays have been dealt with in a few articles published in journals and periodicals.

KEYWORDS: Women relationship, William Inge's plays and Early Phase.

INTRODUCTION

The plays of this phase are very much concerned with the meaning of love. But they are even more concerned with question of personhood and spiritual isolation. The characters in these plays are cast in a given social milieu; but each is hindered in his attempt to find identity in his milieu by his great difficulty in communicating with others on any but a superficial level. More serious and pessimistic than even his situation, however, is the fact that so few of the characters really come to grips with themselves. Most of them serving time towards an end which is unclear to them, living out days and weeks which involves only monotonous repetitions of common place human activities.

THE EARLY PHASE:-

Inge presented life with intense Willard Throp has said, "The realism of his plots and dialogue suggests the kind of dramas with which the playwrights of the early 1920's broke the earlier tradition of sentimentality and melodrama in the theatre." This undeniable realism stems largely from Inge's awareness that there is a great deal of fraud in human behavior. He is quoted as having said:

As a child I was struck by the fact that the women there
Were always protesting, while men. I later came to the
Conclusion that this was an act-that there was certain
Artificiality in their attitude. Women love so passionately
That they are embarrassed about it because it makes them
Dependent on men.

This statement is to an understanding on the man-women relationship in Inge's plays; and in these relationships is found the key to his fundamental realism. Inge's Bring, one face-to-face with the compromises which man is forced to make in a society which is at best impassive and which may often be malevolent.

Inge's first play Come Back, Little Sheba (1950) is the story of Doc Delaney, a benign man who three years three years previous went to Alcoholics Anonymous and has not had a drink since, and his wife Lola, who wears a dreamlike expression and speaks like a little girl to Doc. She talks of "Little Sheba", a dog she lived and who has disappeared; she is lonely and spends her days doing nothing. Marie, their attractive 18-year-old lodger, is engaged to Bruce, a boy from back home, and in the meantime has a boyfriend, Turk. A telegram comes from Marie saying that Bruce is to arrive next day.

Turk spends the night with Marie, and Doc, deeply upset about this takes the whisky from the cupboard. The following evening and Lola is preparing a dinner to welcome Bruce, she notices it has gone and becomes panic-stricken. Leaving Marie and Bruce she goes in search of Doc, who and rants and raves at her. The men from A. A. arrive and take Doc away. Meanwhile Marie has decided to leave and marry Bruce. When Doc returns a few days later he is as we first met him and tells Lola how much he needs her.

A play about the frustration of sensitive alcoholic and a tawdry common place wife, Come Back, Little Sheba was on the surface an unpromising work. But the drama impacted in this main street story had a stirring and perturbing effect as the play rose from a quiet but charged pathos to an uncommonly painful explosion and then simmered down to an unstable equilibrium in the middle-class home, in which every banal detail exuded anxiety and anguish. Whether Inge could attain great stature remained to be seen in the next decade, and whether the narrowness not merely of subject matter but of dramatic vision in Come Back Little Sheba was altogether redeemed by the play's merits was arguable. But Inge made unpretentious reality yield a true dramatic experience with assistance from the principal actors, Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer.

Come Back, Little Sheba is generally considered Inge's best play.³ In it Inge's primary concern is to present human motivations and behavior; however, the play based on one of Inge's early short stories, has greater structural unity and a stronger story line than any of his other plays with the possible exception of his scenario, *Splendor in the Grass* but most of what has been written about Come Back, Little Sheba has not noted the care with which Inge brought unity to his script.

Come Back, Little Sheba is largely a study of contrasts, a presentation of these and antitheses. If there is any synthesis, it is found in the resignation with which the two major characters, Doc and Lola, face the prospect of continuing their lives together. They are not motivated by any very positive forces to face the fact of spending the remainder of their lives together. Lola has no choice. She has tried to escape from her situation by telephoning her mother and asking to come home. "Do you think Dad would let me come home for a while?" Lola asked her mother. Then her speech continued, "I'm awfully unhappy, Mom. Do you thinkjust till I made up my mind?.....all right. No, I guess it wouldn't do any good for you to come her....I...I'll let you know what I decide to do." unhappy, Mom. Do you thinkjust till I made up my mind?.....all right. No, I guess it wouldn't do any good for you to come her....I...I'll let you know what I decide to do." unhappy, Mom. Do you thinkjust till I made up my mind?.....all right. No, I guess it wouldn't do any good for you to come her....I...I'll let you know what I decide to do."⁴ And Doc, having just returned from the "drunk tank" at the city hospital, says to Lola: "Don't ever leave me. Please don't ever leave me. If you do, they'd have to keep me down at that place all the time."⁵

Each has had his decision made for him. Lola has no place to if she leaves Doc; she is thirty-eight years old, she is unattractive, she is untrained, and she has never worked. Doc looks to Lola as his only means of evading the terror of the drunk tank. They will stay together for the rest of their lives; but they will do so only because the alternatives are so hopeless.

Come Back Little Sheba is a tale of personal failure and frustration, and of the attendant loneliness which is inevitable for the two central characters/ Lola and Doc have been married for twenty years when the action of the play takes place. The garrulous Lola sketches in the past in reminiscences with Doc. She has been overly protected by a suspicious father who approved of none of her suitors until Doc, then a pre-medical student, appeared. The audience is told that Doc was a fine figure of a young man, to accept this fact on faith, for there is no real evidence within the play itself that Doc has ever been anything but mediocre and that Lola was a beauty queen in high school. Doc was a shy suitor who courted Lola for a year before he dared to kiss her; and, when he finally did kiss her, the emotional pitch of experience caused tears to well up his eyes. But having sufficiently overcome his basic reticence to kiss Lola, Doc proceeded with great dispatch to get her pregnant and then to marry her. The baby was lost, and Lola was left sterile, apparently because the delivery of the child botched by a midwife to whom Lola went because she felt too guilty to go to a regular obstetrician.

Through Lola's garrulous ramblings to her roomer, Marie, to Marie's muscular lover, Turk; to the post man; the milkman; and the next door neighbor, the audience is told in considerable detail of Doc's alcoholism and of how he so overcame it, of Doc's refusal to let Lola take a job in the early days of their marriage, of the reaction of Lola's father to her pregnancy, and of all manner of other data which provide a background for the play. Inge takes care of the necessary business of the play by using Lola as a one-woman chorus. While the device is contrived and tiresome, it covers the ground efficiently and in relatively little space. It also serves to highlight Lola's present frustration and loneliness-she will talk to anyone, but no one wants to listen-and to heighten the monotony of the early parts of the play to such an extent that the ultimate clash between Lola and Doc will, by contrast have the effect of a tidal wave of action and of emotional intensity.

An overwhelming contrast with in the play is that between Lola and her roomer, Marie, an art student with a very realistic outlook and with the morals of a cat. Lola, beautiful when she was Marie's age, is now overweight, sloppy and shiftless. Marie is planning to

marry her socially prominent, well-fixed suitor, Bruce, but Bruce lives in Cincinnati, some distance from where Marie now finds herself, so she carries on an affair with Turk, a wooden-headed hurler of the javelin.

Indeed, the night before Bruce is to arrive for a visit, Turk stay's in Marie's room. And when Lola asks Marie if Turk won't feel badly about Bruce's coming. Marie say's he'll be "sore for a little while, but he'll get over it..... He's had his eyes on a pretty little Spanish girl in his history class for a long time. I like Turk, but he is not the marring kind."⁶

The slow build-up to the drunk scene in Come Back, Little Sheba has been considered by most critics to be a technical flaw. Most people who have written about the play have considered this scene to be surging with vitality, but they have been distressed that the action was so long in coming. However Inge's design in delaying the crucial action was well calculated. He has said that he conceived the pace of the play to be like the pace of a tornado- frighteningly quite. Then unbelievably violent.⁷ The drunk scene itself was seventeen minutes long in the New York staging of the play which Daniel man directed. Man capitalized on the violence of this scene, and Sidney Blackmer was injured several times when he performed it. But Blackmer said that this climatic scene was "easier to play than the scenes of restraint and repression which lead up to it and which by contrast, make the explosive scene so expressive".⁸ This sudden action provides the most notable structural contrast in a play whose content is largely dependent upon the constant contrasts within it.

The major pleasure in Lola's life now comes from her vicarious experiences through Marie. In Lola's stalwart

approval of Turk and in her acceptance of Marie's affair with him are found, first the basis for a significant cause of conflict between Lola and Doc: and secondly, indication that Lola, who was forced into marriage with her bashful suitor, has always hankered for the sheer animal pleasure which a brute like Turk could provide. Lola's last dream which involves t5he throwing of the javelin reinforces the basic phallic fascination which Turk holds for her. He, of course, holds the same sort of fascination for Marie, and there is no indication in the play that Bruce does; However Bruce is the kind of boy that a girl marries. The implication is that, given twenty years of marriage to Bruce, Marie might well turn into a second Lola.

REFERENCES

1. Willard Thorp, American writing in the Twenty Century (Cambridge : Harvard University press, 1960),P.102
2. "The Talk of the town, "New Yorker, xxix, April 4, 1953, P. 24.
3. Gerald Weales, American drama Since World War ii (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), P.46.
4. Willam Inge, Come Back Little Sheba (New York: Random House,), P. 100 Hereafter cited as Come Back, Little Sheba.
5. Willian Inge, "The schizophrenic woner," Theater Arts, xxxiv, May, 1950, P.23.hereafter cited at "The schizophrenic wonder".
6. Rechard many, Blackmer's big scene, "New York Times, ii April 2,1950,3.