William Inge : The Loneliness of People

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1. William Inge (1913—1973) wrote *Come Back, Little Sheba*, his Broadway debut, in 1950, which brought him The George Nathan Award and The Theatre Times Award. His later plays, *Picnic* (1953), *Bus Stop* (1955), and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957) achieved a remarkable success and all the plays were filmed.

What is common to his four plays is that there is no dramatic event to speak of in the plays. His plays are characterized by the treatment of trivial events which may happen to the audience and readers. The lives of ordinary people are not always filled with dramatic events. People lead changeless and monotonous lives and they have dreams, agonies, or regrets in them. Inge crystalizes and presents one aspect of such a life. Therefore, the audience and readers of his plays can identify their own lives with the lives in the plays. About his attitude of creating plays W. Inge himself says as follows:

> I have never written a play that had any intended theme or that tried to propound any particular idea. I am moved to write a play only when I find, sometimes with a little shock to myself, that I have seen inside a person's heart.[1)]

As the expression "inside a person's heart" shows, Inge exhibits his ingenuity in presenting problems that may have been ignored, but that have come to the surface by chance. His plays give a definite shape to something ambiguous or to something which is unexpressed but is felt in our daily life. In this paper I'd like to analyze his four major plays from the point of "loneliness." I am going to survey each play from this point

of view in the following chapters.

2. In *Come Back, Little Sheba* I'd like to consider the way of life of middle-aged Doc and Lola and that of young Marie. I am going to show how inwardly lonely they are.

They live in a Midwestern city. Doc has stopped drinking for almost one year. His wife Lola, and Doc himself, believe that he has overcome alcoholism, but a certain incident causes him to drink again. This play ends with his recovery from his intoxicated condition. Alcoholism, by which Doc and Lola are haunted from the beginning to the end of this play, is one of the major social problems. But alcoholism as a social problem is not significant in this play. Jain says,

> Inge's main concern is with people and not with social issues.[2)]

I agree with this opinion. Inge deals with alcoholism as a family problem. How alcoholism influenced Doc and Lola is the major concern of Inge in this play. In this case, alcoholism is used as a symbol of weakness, despair, or escape from reality. Why did Doc become an alcoholic? What is alcoholism for Doc? These questions are more important than alcoholism as a social issue in this play.

Doc and Lola have been married for twenty years. He was forced to marry her because she became pregnant. Her pregnancy forced Doc to give up his pre-med course and Lola to leave her parents. But the result of her pregnancy, which obliged them to sacrifice themselves, was ironical. Their baby died and Lola became unable to have any more children.

Judging from this, giving up his ambition may be one of the reasons for his alcoholism. It is true that this is a basic reason, but I don't think that this is the primary reason, because most people have an experience in which their dreams are shattered. However, it does not mean that all of them give themselves up to alcoholism. Doc, who is really a chiropractor, could not realize his dream of becoming a doctor. In spite of this, he is trying to live for the present without clinging to his past dream. He says

to his wife,

> 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.[3)]

Although he feels some regret for abandoning his pre-med course, he is making an effort to forget the past and live only for the present. This may be a false show of courage, but it seems to me that he has already brought the matter to an end.

Then, what is the primary reason for his alcoholism? I think it is the gap between Doc and Lola which has been widening little by little during these twenty years. In other words, it seems to me that the disappointment in his wife or the loneliness that comes from it, is the major reason for his alcoholism. They got married at a considerable sacrifice, therefore, their relation should have been closer.

The irritation at his wife who is still mentally immature, and the discontent with her who is not aware of his irritation at all—these make Doc desperate. The following dialogue shows conspicuously the gap between the two:

> Doc: . . . Most alcoholics are disappointed men . . .
> Lola: You weren't disappointed, were you, Daddy?[4)]

Doc is explaining the cause of his alcoholism indirectly in these words. In this dialogue Lola's words are important. The inconsistency of her logic

shows that she doesn't understand him at all. Doc says to her after an evasive pause,

> The important thing is to forget the past and live for the present.[5]

He answers neither "yes" nor "no" to Lola. His answer ought to be 'yes." He'd like to say "yes." But, he doesn't say "yes" because he knows the meaninglessness of the answer. In my opinion, when he became aware of the fact that they couldn't understand each other, he became desperate.

Lola doesn't understand at all what made him desperate and what made him drink. She worries about the phenomenal aspects of alcoholism only and is quite indifferent to the cause.

As I stated earlier, Doc is trying to forget the past. On the other hand, Lola's attitude toward life is quite different from his. She cannot forget the past. She still lives in the past when she was young and beautiful. As she is a slave to the memories of the past, she is not conscious that her husband lives in a different world. Sheba, their missing dog, symbolizes the past. She cannot give up Sheba. At the beginning of the play, Lola says sadly,

> I had another dream last night.[6]

Doc can understand the contents of her dream instantly. He says,

> About Little Sheba?[7]

This may be a conversation that has been repeated without a break since they lost Sheba. Their monotonous life seems to be summarized by the repetition of the same topic.

As she doesn't live for the present, her heart must be empty even if it is filled with past memories. She must be passing her time idly. The following dialogue shows it:

Doc: Baby, you've got to forget those things. That was twenty years ago.

Lola: I'll soon be forty. These years have just vanished—— vanished into thin air.

Doc: Yes.

Lola: Just disappeared...like Little Sheba.[8)]

Lola uses the phrase "vanish into thin air" when she feels the vanity of life.

I have sketched the differences of Doc's and Lola's attitudes toward life so far. What I'd like to say is that the gap between them is caused by their different attitudes toward the past. Next, I'll describe another reason for the gap between them.

The untidy rooms. The dirty dishes piled on the kitchen table. Slovenly Lola. Doc cannot endure these things, though he dare not complain. He even cooks breakfast himself. The following is a conversation between Doc and Lola who woke up later than Doc:

Lola: I oughta be gettin' your breakfast, Doc, instead of gettin' mine.

Doc: I have to get up anyway, Baby.[9)]

Doc restrains his complaint like this.

The difference in the realm of ethics also produces conflicts. The following is one of the examples and it shows a big difference of outlook between Doc and Lola. Noticing that Mary, a lodger in their house, and her boy friend are flirting with each other in the living room, Lola speaks to Doc:

Lola: Come and look, Daddy.

Doc: (Shocked and angry) No!

Lola: Just one little look. They're just kids, Daddy. It's sweet. (Drags him by arm)

Doc: (Jerking loose) Stop it, Baby. I won't do it. It's not

decent to snoop around spying on people like that. It's cheap and mischievous and mean.

Lola: (This had never occurred to her) Is it?

Doc: Of course it is.

Lola: I don't spy on Marie and Turk to be mischievous and mean.

Doc: Then why do you do it?

⋮

Doc: I give up.[10]

The next quotation is the conflict concerning a telegram. Lola steams open the telegram sent to Marie and reads it. Doc gets mad at this. But she does not feel a prick of conscience:

Lola: ...She'll never know the difference. I don't see any harm in that, Doc.

Doc: (Gives up) O. K., Baby, if you don't see any harm in it, I guess I can't explain it.[11]

Doc is disgusted with her behavior but Lola does not take his anger seriously. He gives up trying to persuade Lola. This is not the person whom he once loved, or rather, he thought he loved and married—I think this is what he wants to cry. She cannot understand that the repetition of such behavior has made her husband disappointed in her and in life with her. The disappointment is also a reason for his alcoholism.

Doc who once nearly overcame alcoholism begins drinking again. We must take into consideration Marie and her boy friend Turk to understand the reason. Jain explains the reason as follows:

> When he (i. e. Doc) sees Turk leaving Marie's room in the early hours of the morning the reality of the situation knocks the bottom out of his world of conventional moral values and he seeks solace in alcohol.[12]

Jacobus is of the same opinion.[13] According to their explanation, Doc began drinking because he was betrayed by Marie whom he believed to be innocent. But I doubt whether he began drinking because of disappointment at a third person's immoral behavior. Marie is a mere lodger after all and I don't think she has such an influence as to make him an alcoholic again. In my opinion, Marie's behaviour triggered his indulgence in alcoholics. As Suzuki says,[14] I also think that Doc is essentially the sort of person who finds a place of refuge in alcoholism when he faces a problem that he can't deal with. When the helpless relationship with his wife reached the critical situation, Marie's incident occurred—I interpret the play like this.

Doc goes on a wild rampage under the influence of liquor. He curses Lola and chases her with a hatchet. He is taken to City Hospital by the members of Alcoholics Anonymous. After a week he comes home. The play ends with the dialogue between Lola and Doc who has just left the hospital. Doc doesn't remember what he said when he was drunk, and exposes his dependence upon her. Lola talks to him about the dream which made her realize she had to abandon Sheba. Brustein gives an optimistic view about their future:

> After this threat has been removed, Lola, who has up till now been letting her husband fix the breakfast, starts about the business of making his eggs. Significantly enough, she reverts to the wifely role . . .[15]

In spite of this, I don't think their future will be optimistic. Because, if the relationship between Doc and Lola is not improved fundamentally, or if the real cause of his alcoholism is not found by Lola, their conflicts will be repeated.

Marie also has an importment role in this play. She is a roomer in Doc and Lola's house and is a student majoring in art. She represents the younger generation and symbolizes youth or new values.

While she has a lover named Bruce in Cincinnati, she is now

associating with a sportsman named Turk. She shares her bed with Turk the night before Bruce comes to see her from Cincinnati. She explains to Lola:

> 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.[16]

Marie is going to marry Bruce someday. When Lola asked her whether she liked Bruce as well as Turk, she evasively described Bruce as follows:

> Bruce is so dependable, and... he's a gentleman, too.[17]

These words show that she feels some dissatisfaction with him. She thinks Turk is not the marrying kind even though she is associating with him now. Turk is only a temporary partner. I wonder when she gives her whole heart to others. She is leading a pleasure-seeking life, but, to put it the other way round, she seems to be a lonely woman. Because, I think Marie and Bruce had such an understanding as quoted, because a lack of sincerity lay at the bottom of their hearts.

Brustein calls this play a naturalistic play about reality and illusion.[18] Jain interprets this play as the process from illusion to reality.[19] But, the schema that Doc and Lola are in the realm of illusion at the beginning of the play and both of them return to the realm of reality at the end is too simplistic and leaves some things unexplained. In my interpretation, Doc was too conscious of the reality to endure it, so he wanted to flee into the realm of illusion. As far as Lola was concerned, she was deeply absorbed in illusion and couldn't cope with reality.

3. In *Picnic* a young bum comes to a small town in Kansas, disturbs the human relations there and leaves. I will take up a young girl named Madge to consider "loneliness" in this play.

Madge is such a pretty girl that she has won The Queen of Neewollah

contest. She is going steady with Alan, the son of a rich family. Flo, Madge's mother, is expecting her daughter to marry him. She says to Madge,

> It'd be awfully nice to be married to Alan. You'd live in comfort the rest of your life, with charge accounts at all the stores, automobiles and trips. You'd be invited by all his friends to parties in their homes and at the Country Club.[20]

Flo simply believes that marriage with Alan is the passport to her daughter's happiness and a carefree life.

But Madge gradually begins to show her irritation, since others admire her only for her beauty. Millie, her younger sister, has a sense of inferiority because she is not as pretty as Madge. On the other hand, Madge also has a sense of inferiority because her sister is smart enough to have won a scholarship for four years of college. She cannot bear the fact that others mention only her beauty, ignoring her personality. She is on the verge of an identity crisis. What am I?—this identity problem makes her depressed. However beautiful she may be, the beauty is limited to her youth. It is ephemeral. What will be left when she has lost that beauty? It's unbearable for her to be judged by her outward appearance only. She sometimes feels lonely and whispers,

> It's no good just being pretty.[21]

Nobody notices her inward conflict. Even Alan does not notice it. Those who are going to get married ought to have mutual respect, trust, and understanding. Alan who sets great value on her beauty regards Madge not as a human being but as a mere accessory to set him off. Alan's attitude toward Madge is shown in the following words in the last scene:

> Madge is beautiful. It made me feel so proud—just to look at her—and tell myself she's mine.[22]

Madge is dissatisfied with Alan who treats her like a doll. After all, she parts with the passport to a prosperous future and follows a young bum named Hal in spite of mother's persuasion. Even if she gets married to Alan in the future, the loneliness which derives from the fact that her husband does not understand her inwardly will grow.

It is true that Hal himself is attracted by her beauty, but, unlike Alan, he treats Madge like flesh and blood. He tells her all about himself. He confesses to her that he was sent to a reform school when he was fourteen years old. She is pleased rather than surprised to hear it. She says,

> I . . . I'm proud you told me.[23]

In Alan's words quoted earlier, the word "proud" is used likewise. But the meaning is quite different from that used by Madge. Hal treats her like an equal human being. Madge conveys her joy in the word, while Alan is proud of, figuratively speaking, having a precious jewel.

4. In *Bus Stop* Inge describes the happenings in a street-corner restaurant in a small Kansas town during four hours when a long-distance bus was stopped there due to a heavy snowfall.

A few lonely people appeare in this play. The relation between Bo, a young cowboy, and Cherie, a singer of a night club, is a typical one which shows loneliness derived from the lack of mutual understanding.

The cowboy is on his way to his ranch to get married to the singer, but the problem is that she is forced to get married to him. While the bus is snow-bound at the restaurant she seeks the sheriff's protection. She cannot bear Bo, who ignores her intentions and simply believes that everybody will love him if he says, "I love you." She says,

> All he wants is a girl to throw his arms around and hug and kiss, that' all. The resta the time, he don't even know I exist.[24]

Grace, an employee of the restaurant, is also a lonely woman. Her

husband has left her and she keeps herself busy at the restaurant to drive away her loneliness. When Elma, a student worker, suggests that she write him a letter asking him to return, she refuses, saying,

> 'Cause I got just as lonesome when he was here. He wasn't much company, 'cept when we were makin' love. But makin' love is one thing, and bein' lonesome is another.[25]

It makes no difference whether her husband lives with her or not. It is not the cause of her loneliness. She is seeking an intellectual relationship more than a physical relationship.

At the beginning of this play Grace tells this to young Elma. Inge repeats the loneliness through Bo and Cherie.

5. Inge presents a couple of lonely people in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, too. Cora, a housewife in her thirties, is always complaing that Rubin, her husband, is on the road so often. She feels that she is like a widow. They live in a small Oklahoma town and and the time is the early 1920's. The town has gone oil-boom crazy. Rubin's job, harness sales, is already behind the times. She wants him to quit the job. She insists on it so that he can have enough time to spend with his family, but, to put it the other way around, her insistence shows that she is too self-centered to consider why Rubin clings to the job.

On a Monday afternoon they quarrel about trifles. Rubin hits Cora and leaves the house. Losing his long-time job, he comes home on Saturday. While he is away from home, Cora realizes through various incidents that not only she but also a lot of people are oppressed by a sense of solitude and that to live is not so easy.

After Rubin leaves home, Cora invites her elder sister Lottie and her husband Morris to dinner in order to ask them if Cora and her children can move into their house. But the request is refused. Lottie confesses that she has her own trouble. Cora can't imagine that her sister who is always bossing Morris is unhappy. It is not easy to read other people's inmost thoughts by the outward appearance. Lottie is talkative, bossy,

and has a keen appetite. But such characteristics are necessary for her to know that she is alive. They show that she is not inwardly satisfied. She says,

> 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.[26]

Morris sometimes goes out for a walk suddenly. Although he says walking is good for digestion, Lottie knows the truth. She interprets his walking as follows:

> Did you notice the way Morris got up out of his chair suddenly and just walked away, with no explanation at all? Well, something inside Morris did the same thing several years ago. Something inside him just got up and went for a walk, and never came back.[27]

From Lottie's point of view, Cora is much happier than she is, because to quarrel means, in a sense, to drop their masks. However bossy Lottie may be, Morris will never fight back, which means that their bond has already been broken.

Reenie, Cora's daughter, is an introvert and all she wants to do is practice on the piano and go to the library to read books. She has no confidence in her looks, so that she hates to attend parties. One day she is invited to a friend's birthday party. She does not want to go, but her mother forces her to go to the party.

Sammy, a young Jewish man, comes to her home to escort her. His mother is a minor actress and she has lived separately from Sammy since he was a child. His home life has been anything but blissful, but the character he acquired under the circumstances makes him behave cheerfully. He tells his life story, which must be essentially sad, in a casual manner as if he did not care a fig. Observing Sammy's attitude, Morris describes him as follows:

Sometimes the people who act the happiest are really the saddest.[28]

At the party he is treated with contempt because he is a Jew, and he ends his life by leaping from a hotel building. His mother does not come to his funeral. Furthermore, she wants her name kept out of the papers because it isn't generally known that she has a son.

A young man who behaved cheerfully to hide his loneliness died a lonely death.

The confession of Lottie and Sammy's suicide make Cora regret her attitude toward her husband. The day after Lottie and Morris returned home, Rubin came home unexpectedly. He utters his long-cherished irritation against his wife:

> All these years we been married, you never once really admitted to yourself what kinda man I am. No, ya keep talkin' to me like I was the kinda man you think I oughta be. Look at me. Don't you know who I am? Don't you know who I am?[29]

Look at me as I really am and abandon the false image—these words are cries uttered from the bottom of his heart. This time Cora can accept his words with good grace.

Rubin who has just lost his long-time job and who is about to venture into the unknown world is overcome with apprehensions. When Cora tells his son to go upstairs and go to bed, he answers that he is scared of the dark at the top of the stairs. The word "dark", which is used in the title of this play, symbolizes anxiety about the future or the unknown. It may be natural that children should be scared of the future. But, even adults are always threatened by anxieties. Their lives are all the more bitter because they must conceal their feelings. To live is so hard. Each person is essentially lonely. But, if there exists a mutual understanding between a wife and a husband, or among a family, they can live, dealing successfully with loneliness.

Cora and Rubin retrieved their trust which was on the verge of

breaking up.

6. I have sketched Inge's major plays so far. In this last chapter I'd like to consider Inge's message, that is, what he wants to convey through the plays.

Doc and Lola in *Come Back, Little Sheba* have been married for twenty years, but they "live in isolated and unsatisfactory worlds."[30] In other words, they are formally a husband and a wife, but they lack communication and mutual understanding which should exist in a married couple. This relationship between Doc and Lola is a basic pattern and it is found in Inge's other plays. Armato generalizes the relationship and calls it "male/female strife" or "deterministic pattern of eternal recurrence."[31] This relationship is applied to the two couples in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. The case of Lottie who is conscious that Morris has built a wall around himself is sad. Cora and Rubin were able to avoid their critical situation in the end. After Lottie and Morris return home, Cora says to her daughter as follows. She is talking to her daughter, but in reality she is talking to herself:

> The people we love aren't always perfect, are they? But if we love them, we have to take them as they are. After all, I guess I'm not perfect, either.[32]

These words show that she has perceived a truth of human life. Consequently, she accepts her husband with good grace. In this respect, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* is a little different from other plays. Inge shows the overcoming of loneliness through Cora and Rubin.

Bo in *Bus Stop* and Alan in *Picnic* deal with women from a fixed frame of reference. They are satisfied if women are beautiful. Bo and Alan are not able to understand the reason why Madge and Cherie resist being with them. Flo, in *Picnic*, who simply believes that beauty leads to happiness and who forces the opinion on her daughter will not be able to understand the reason for Madge's resistance, either. They make the same mistake. What Inge wants to say through the resistance of Madge

and Cherie is that human beings are not dolls but flesh and blood. Madge and Cherie's irritation may be summarized in such an expression as "Nobody understands me." People get lonely from this despair. Understanding is not an outward problem but an inward one. Inge seems to have considered that understanding in the real meaning is very difficult and that there are lots of people who take no notice of it.

Even a trifling difference of opinion may produce a big gap between close people as the years go by. It occurs even to a husband and a wife or to lovers whose relationship should be the most intimate. Unlike a big quarrel, the slight differences in views are not prominent but make quiet progress; therefore, they are all the more dangerous. There are husbands and wives who feel lonely even though they live with their spouses under the same roof. Loneliness is not confined to a big city or to an isolated island. Inge shows this very adroitly in his plays.

Inge pursued the ordinary people in small Midwestern towns in his four plays and described skillfully what he had found inside people.

Notes

1. William Inge, *Bus Stop*, ed. Ryoichi Nakamura (Tokyo: The Eihosha, Ltd., 1959), p. vi.
2. Jasbir Jain, "William Inge: Confrontation with Reality," in *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 4 (1974), p. 75.
3. William Inge, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, ed. Hiroshi Narumi (Tokyo: Kinseido Ltd., 1970), pp. 55-56.
4. Ibid., p. 10.
5. Loc. cit.
6. Ibid., p. 5.
7. Ibid., p. 6.
8. Ibid., p. 53.
9. Ibid., p. 5.
10. Ibid., p. 63.
11. Ibid., pp. 61-62.
12. Jain, p. 73.

13. *The Longman Anthology of American Drama*, ed. Lee A. Jacobus (New York: Longman, 1982), p. 344.

14. Shuji Suzuki, *Gendai Amerika Engeki* (Tokyo: Hyoronsha, 1982), p. 191.

15. Robert Brustein, "The Men-Taming Women of William Inge," in *Harper's*, 217 (1958), 55.

16. Inge, op. cit., p. 85.

17. Ibid., p. 17.

18. Brustein, p. 53.

19. Jain, p. 73.

20. William Inge, *Picnic*, ed. Yoshio Masuda (Tokyo: Nan'un-do, 1958), p. 11.

21. Ibid., p. 16.

22. Ibid., p. 113.

23. Ibid., p. 84.

24. Inge, *Bus Stop*, p. 54.

25. Ibid., p. 14.

26. William Inge, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, ed. Hiroatsu Asada (Tokyo: Kinseido Ltd., 1974), p. 95.

27. Ibid., p. 91.

28. Ibid., p. 85.

29. Ibid., pp. 123-124.

30. Jain, p. 75.

31. Philip M. Armato, "The Bum as Scapegoat in William Inge's *Picnic*," in *Western American Literature*, 10 (1976), p. 280.

32. Inge, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, p. 103.

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