



Images in Picnic: How Far Have We Come?

by Missy Thibodeaux-Thompson

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In determining which play to produce, there are numerous factors to consider: casting pool, audience draw, interest level for the director and production team, and relevancy to current issues in society. Upon deciding to direct Picnic, I was engaged by the wonderful roles for women and also transported to the seemingly simpler time of the early 1950s. I realized that while Picnic may initially appear to be a “period piece”—taking place over fifty years ago—I further recognized that many issues in this play are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago. While Picnic is about passion, dreams, following your heart, and recognizing one’s own place in the world, all of these ideas can be wrapped up in the prominent thematic element of beauty versus intelligence—primarily from a woman’s perspective. Picnic is subtitled, “a summer romance,” but beyond a classic romantic drama, it is a play that explores the expectations and perceptions of women in society. And interestingly enough, today’s women (and young girls) face many of the same identity struggles and issues of image and perception that Inge’s women did.

On one hand, the 1950s in this country really are a lifetime away from our current society. The 1950s have often been portrayed with an idealized innocence, where the nuclear family was the norm, fathers went off to work, and mothers stayed home and took care of the family. At the same time, the realities of the 1950s did not necessarily always match these idealized depictions. While the U.S. was still riding the 1946 victory of World War II in the early 1950s, the Korean War conflict was underway, with more U.S. soldiers being sent half-way around the world. While women had gained some measure of independence in stepping up to the plate and taking on traditionally male jobs during the war, they were quickly relegated back to domesticity in the kitchens of America—the accepted women’s domain—rather than the board

rooms—the accepted men’s domain. Although discourse in feminist ideas and issues existed long before—and during—the 1950s, it wasn’t until the more tempestuous 1960s that those ideas and issues moved to the forefront of American society. Furthermore, society and the media perpetuated the importance of beauty as an equalizer for women’s success, focusing on image, rather than intellect. The first pin-up girls of the 1940s, Rita Hayworth and Betty Grable, were extremely popular, especially among GIs, further idealizing, idolizing, and objectifying women from a purely physical standpoint.

When we look, then, at the 1950s in relation to our current decade, the 2000s, we may initially acknowledge that we are, indeed, a lifetime away from the romanticized simplicity of the 1950s, and that our society has progressed socially and politically. However, as Alphonse Karr said, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” One may compare the Korean War situation in the 1950s to our current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan—if only simply on the level of U.S. involvement in military conflicts overseas. And while women have certainly overcome numerous barriers, including social, economic, and professional hurdles, women today are still judged on a “beauty meter” for acceptance, as well as for their success. To see how far we have not come, simply examine a short list of beautiful and popular women across the decades: Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe in the 1940s and 1950s, Bridget Bardot in the 1960s, Farrah Fawcett in the 1970s, Brooke Shields in the 1980s, Cindy Crawford in the 1990s, and Halle Berry in the 2000s. Certainly styles have changed, but the idealization, valuation, and objectification of women have not. Popular fashion magazines still tout beautiful and sexy women on covers, and even young adolescent girls are socialized to realize that being pretty is a bonus. The mere continued existence and popularity of the unattainable body-perfect “Barbie”

doll, and the newer “Bratz” line of contemporary dolls indicates that beauty and image are still everything in our society—at least as far as advertisers are concerned.

So, Picnic isn’t quite the dusty, historical piece some may initially think. While it is, indeed, a period play, it still speaks to our current society, but how? In short, Inge’s insights into the 1950s – and women in particular – are just as significant and relevant in our era as they were in his. Interestingly enough, an early working title for Picnic was Women in Summer, a title that Inge confessed to being quite partial to. In a 1953 New York Times article, Inge wrote that this working title reminded him of “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” (‘Picnic’ of Women X3). In writing Picnic, Inge says he “remembered all the pretty girls of [his] youth...” and that in making Madge “the prettiest in the town” he gave her “all the sweetness and charm of the girls [he] knew” (‘Picnic’ of Women X3). Growing up, Inge lived with his mother, who kept a boarding house for women, which meant his youth was spent surrounded by women. In commenting on this experience, Inge noted, “I saw their attempts and, even as a child, I sensed every woman’s failure. I began to sense the sorrow and the emptiness in their lives and it touched me” (Inge Center for the Arts). It is no great leap to surmise then, that this experience of being raised in the company of numerous women helped him form a certain sensitivity to women, thereby helping him create the many-faceted female characters in his plays.

As previously mentioned, one of the primary issues surrounding women and image in Picnic is that of beauty versus intelligence, most notably illustrated through the characters of Madge and Millie. This binary view of these two roles is illuminated in critical reactions to the play. Brooks Atkinson, in his February, 1953 New York Times review of the original Broadway

production, described Janice Rule in the role of Madge as “the beautiful maiden whose mind is unclear” (“At the Theatre” 14). In another article in March, 1953, he commented that Madge is “the prettiest girl in the neighborhood,” and that Ms. Rule “conveys the shy misgivings of a local belle whose beauty has projected her into a society she does not understand” (“Inge’s ‘Picnic’” X1). Five months later, Atkinson wrote yet again about the production, and described Madge as “the colorless, insipid beauty” (“‘Picnic’ Revisited” X1).

Janice Rule’s attractiveness most likely influenced Atkinson’s reactions, but Inge’s straightforward description of Madge as “very beautiful” obviously pointed director Joshua Logan in the direction of casting Rule for the role (Picnic, s.d. 8). But it is not merely that simple description upon Madge’s entrance that leads directors to cast an attractive female actor for the role of Madge. Inge’s reference to Madge’s beauty is not done lightly or casually, it is deliberate, and as such, an intrinsic aspect of telling the story of the play. Inge creates anticipation for Madge’s entrance, when Bomber, the gawky teenage paper-boy, bellows to Madge’s kid-sister, Millie, “Go back to bed and tell your pretty sister to come out. It’s no fun lookin’ at you! I’m talkin’ to you, Goonface!” (8). Bomber blatantly belittles Millie, based on his perception of her unattractiveness, and, according to R. Baird Shuman, “mak[es] it obvious that she feels like an ugly duckling” (34). To add insult to injury, Madge’s mere presence even alters Bomber’s gruff behavior. The moment she enters, he is suddenly contrite and apologetic, qualities he wouldn’t dare waste on Millie, when he entreats, “I hope I didn’t wake you, Madge, or bother you or anything” (8). The simple entrance of the beautiful young girl subdues the vulgar teenage boy.

The societal standards for women are not only reflected in comments and responses about Madge. We see from Bomber’s actions and comments that Millie’s role in the world of the play

is clearly identified as sub-standard, simply because she isn't "pretty." Furthermore, Millie is described by Atkinson as "a tom-boy with brains and artistic gifts," ("At the Theatre" 14), as "an awkward adolescent—crude and boyishly belligerent," ("Inge's 'Picnic'" X1), and also by Bosley Crowthers in a review of the 1955/1956 film version as "emerging from the rough chrysalis of tomboy" ("Screen" 13). Even Inge's description of Millie depicts her wearing "a denim shirt, dungarees and sneakers," (s.d. 7) and shortly afterward, Bomber taunts her with, "Lookit Mrs. Tar-zan!" (8), clearly emphasizing her less-than-pretty appearance as a significant factor in the play. Albert Wertheim, in his chapter in Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theatre History, notes the significance of Bomber's choice to call her "Mrs." Tarzan, not "Mr." He suggests that Millie "is turned by Bomber's expression at once into a married woman but also into a female manifestation of Tarzan, an epitome of butch maleness" (201). The use of this seemingly innocuous choice of title is no accident; Bomber declares Millie not only unattractive, but masculine, as well. Within the first two pages of the play, Inge sets up the dichotomy between "pretty, girlish" Madge and "plain, boyish" Millie.

As the play progresses, we continually see Madge's physical good looks pitted against Millie's lack of standard beauty—and also against Millie's talent and intellect. In essence, as Shuman states, "Each envies what the other has. Millie envies Madge's good looks; Madge envies Millie's intelligence" (34). While Millie may, on the surface, lack Madge's classic beauty, and indeed, secretly longs for it, she possesses talent, intellect, and a hidden vulnerability. Madge, on the other hand, feels inferior to those very qualities of Millie's, telling her mother at one point, "It's no good just to be pretty. It's no good!" (15). In Madge's condemnation of her own beauty, we see the universal struggle of what Shuman calls, "the Marilyn Monroe problem," fearing people only appreciate her for her beauty (35). Madge has

already come to the realization that while “pretty” may be the ideal, she recognizes its limitations, and resents not being allowed or encouraged to develop herself beyond her external gift of beauty.

Earlier in the same scene, Inge reveals Millie’s insecurities when she declares, “Everyone around here gets to dress up and go places except me” (12). Madge counters Millie’s complaint with, “...why doesn’t she dress up and act decent?” (13). A fight ensues between the girls that is, on the one hand, typical sibling-rivalry, with each calling the other names. But it ends with Millie’s rant, “It doesn’t hurt what names I call her! She’s pretty, names don’t bother her at all!” (14). Even Millie recognizes that “pretty” is the ideal, and while she has taken pride in her intellect, artistic gifts, and physical prowess, she reveals that deep down, she resents not having the “gift” that Madge has. Even though Millie prides herself on her intelligence, even though she secretly longs for some of Madge’s beauty, it is Millie who attacks Madge’s lack of intellect, during the same argument, when she says, “Madge is the pretty one—but she’s so dumb they almost had to burn the schoolhouse down to get her out of it!”, continuing with a story of how Madge had to cry to a male teacher to get him to give her a passing grade in history (13). Millie is all too aware of how Madge uses her beauty to compensate for her lack of intellect, and uses this knowledge as a weapon against her.

According to others in the play, however, Madge’s beauty is actually her ticket out of her current plight. Flo, the girls’ mother, declares to Madge, “a pretty girl doesn’t have long—just a few years when she’s the equal of kings ...if she loses that chance, she might just as well throw all her prettiness away” (12). It is part of the climate of the 1950s culture, as well as Flo’s own experience that leads her to such a conclusion. Women were expected to find a suitable husband, and through that husband, they would find fulfillment. Unfortunately, Madge is not given any

credit, or even the chance to see if she could have a happy life based on her own intellect, rather than her beauty.

The societal importance of beauty is further exemplified in Act II, when Millie enters, dressed up for the picnic. Inge's stage directions acknowledge the notable change in Millie: "*She has permitted herself to 'dress up' and wears a becoming, feminine dress in which she cannot help feeling a little strange. She is quite attractive*" (s.d. 33). Moreover, the other characters suddenly acknowledge Millie as a viable person, with such remarks as, "You look very pretty. I always knew you could. ... It's a miracle...I never knew Millie could look so pretty....Hey, Millie's a good lookin' kid. I never realized it before" (33, 37, 39). Even Millie proclaims, when dancing with Hal, "I feel like Rita Hayworth!" (49). Perhaps, however, the most poignant acknowledgment of Millie's transformation is when, upon seeing Millie dressed-up, Flo declares, "Now I tell myself I've got two beautiful daughters" (35). It is interesting, and rather unfortunate, that Millie is not considered beautiful, even to her own mother, until she "dresses up." Even Mrs. Potts echoes Flo's sentiment, sharing the storyline of a movie where a woman who was "real plain" was overlooked by her boss, but once she removes her glasses, "her boss wanted to marry her right away!" (37-38). Yet again, the societal expectations of beauty being the determining factor for success are epitomized, which resonates even today.

Through Alan, Madge's suitor, Inge invokes the prototypical Biblical "sex symbol," when Alan playfully calls to Madge, "Hey, Delilah!" and later urges her on with, "Hurry it up, will you, Delilah?" (18, 43).

Comparing Madge to such an iconic beauty, especially one known to be dangerously seductive, further isolates Madge from the rest of society, but again, based on her looks, nothing else. Furthermore, while Alan professes to love Madge, his love is one of objectification,

placing Madge on a pedestal. He proclaims to her, “I don’t care if you’re real or not. You’re the most beautiful thing I ever saw” (32), declaring that her beauty is what is important to him, not her mind. Using the words, “beautiful *thing*” dehumanizes her, and robs her of any possibility of intellect.

In examining the blatant objectification of women in the play, the most egregious offense is perpetrated by Howard, with Hal a complacent accomplice. During Act II, the two of them leer at Madge through her bedroom window as she primps. Howard ogles her, and confides to Hal, “They tell me every boy in town has been on the make for that since she was old enough to go to Sunday School. Seems to me, when the good Lord made a girl as pretty as she is, He did it for a reason, and it’s about time she found out what that reason is” (47). The fact that such a lewd commentary is permissible, even acceptable, in this culture, is quite disturbing, and simply further illustrates the cultural norm of objectifying women, with beauty as the standard aspiration. Of course, Howard and Hal know better than to voice this exchange in front of any of the women. It is shared only between the two of them, and of course, the audience, which enables us to witness the salacious objectification of Madge. The men have no interest in Madge as a feeling, thinking, intelligent person, only as an object of beauty to be admired, ogled, or lusted after.

Beauty and intellect appear to be mutually exclusive in the conflict between Madge and Millie, but if we look at other women in the play, we see that as women age, the beauty factor loses its impact. During an early exchange, Flo cautions Madge, “And next summer you’ll be nineteen, and then twenty, and then twenty-one, and then forty” (12). Clearly Flo is aware that Madge’s opportunities to capitalize on her beauty are limited, and that if Madge doesn’t “get busy,” as Flo warns her, then she may end up without the security and comfort of a husband (12).

Which brings us to the character of Rosemary Sydney, a boarder in Flo's house. She introduces herself upon her entrance as an "old maid schoolteacher," while rubbing on face cream (15). Her own admission of her age status, coupled with the action of performing a beauty ritual, illustrates the cultural belief that beauty for a woman does, indeed, have a shelf life. It also shows that women will continue to attempt to extend that shelf life, trying to recapture the beauty of their youth. After she interrupts Howard and Hal gawking at Madge through the bedroom window, Rosemary declares, "Shoot! When I was a girl I was just as good looking as she is!" (47). While older and perhaps somewhat wiser, Rosemary still longs for the beauty of her youth. Rosemary appears to walk a fine line between the dichotomy of beauty and intelligence. She is, after all, a school teacher, which places her in the locus of intellect, however, her ultimate desire is to recapture her youthful good looks, for without the permanent adorations of a man she feels unfulfilled.

In closely examining Picnic, then, we recognize that while there is distance between Inge's story and characters, and our current society and world, more importantly, there are similarities, as well as lessons to be learned from those similarities. What Inge has given us, then, is a cautionary tale, not merely an entertainment or simply a meditation on small-town folk longing for some excitement, but rather, a warning to society that we must look at the complete picture of an individual, rather than simply the most prominent characteristics. Interestingly enough, in the production I directed, the young woman who was cast as Madge told me she was completely surprised when I read her for (and ultimately cast her as) Madge. She fully expected to be read for Millie, and confessed that she did not consider herself "beautiful," and therefore not appropriate for Madge. Fortunately, her experience enlightened her, enabling her to learn

Inge's lesson first hand. Furthermore, actors and audience members alike appeared not only to be taken aback by the blatant objectification of Madge, but were equally sympathetic for both girls' struggle to be acknowledged beyond a single quality. Indeed, this was one of the reasons I chose to direct the play, hoping that a contemporary audience—consisting largely of young college students—could not only be entertained by the play, but enlightened, as well.

This seemingly archaic battle between beauty and intelligence then, does remain relevant, and while it may appear that we still have a long way to go, perhaps the tide is turning. The new 2009 presidential administration brought with it a “next generation” first lady who has clearly united beauty with brains, thereby creating a new role model not only for young women, but for all women. Perhaps this new paradigm will begin to shift our societal and cultural norms.

Thankfully Inge's play does indeed still resonate today, and even if we do (hopefully) evolve beyond our current proclivity to separate women into binary categories, Picnic will still elucidate Inge's lesson to behold not only the external beauty, but the inner beauty—which is the intellect.

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