



Maternal Instinct:
The Portrayal of Mothers in the Works of
William Inge

by Philip Middleton Williams, Ph.D.

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

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One of the most pervasive characters in the works of William Inge is the role of the mother. She is a strong presence in two of his major works; Picnic and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, is the central character in his *roman a clef* novel My Son is a Splendid Driver, and appears in several his short works, most notably in The Boy in the Basement. The apron strings were an unbreakable bond in his life, and they are an unmistakable presence on stage in his plays.

This paper will offer an introduction to an examination of Inge's portrayal of the mother figure, not only as an actual person but as a foundation for other characters in his works, including Lola in Come Back, Little Sheba, and Grace in Bus Stop. In comparison to other playwrights of his time who also brought the family on stage, William Inge's portrayal of the mother, motherhood, and the impact on the lives of their family is

a key element in understanding his place in 20th century
American theatre.

Maude Sarah Gibson was born in 1871 in Hamilton County, Missouri¹. Her family moved to Garden City, Kansas, where her father was a harness dealer. It was there that she met Luther Inge. They were married in El Dorado, Kansas in April 1896, and in January 1897, their first child, Lucy Helen, was born. (Lucy would later marry Joseph Mahan and give birth to a daughter, Jo Ann, who married Peter Kirchmaier of Toledo, Ohio.) She gave birth to four more children: Luther Jr., known as Luther Boy, in 1899; Irene Madeline, in 1901, who died at the age of three in 1904; Helene Grace, in 1907; and lastly, William, known as Billy, in 1913².

The Inge family moved to the house at 514 North Fourth Street in Independence when Billy was a year old, and it would be where he would grow up and base two of his best-known works on that stately house: Picnic and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs.

It became the domain of Maude; Luther Sr. was often on the road as a salesman, and it was a refuge for her to raise her children. According to Inge's biographer, Ralph F. Voss,

For Maude, Billy's birth was very important: here was a new and helpless infant to love in ways that Lucy, Luther Boy, and even Helene no longer needed. Billy ensured that several more years of Maude's family devotion would be needed before,

her children grown and gone, she would be left with only Luther and whatever regrets she felt. Maude had held her previous children close to her as a kind of compensation, but Billy she was to hold closest of all.³

What we know of the Inge family's private life as a married couple is colored and flavored by the passage of time, memories handed down through family stories, and viewed through the lens of Inge's plays and novels where, as any good writer would do, he used it as the foundation for his fictional families. It became the basis for creating some of the most meaningful characters in modern American drama.

In doing so, Inge was following in the footsteps of playwrights going back to the beginning of time. From Medea through Jocasta to Clytemnestra, through Shakespeare with Gertrude in Hamlet and Volumnia in Coriolanus and on to what we loosely call the modern era of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, along with Inge's contemporaries such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, the character of the mother, be she the primary focus or not, is a foundation on which these writers built their families on the stage. They gave us a chance to understand what it was in their own life that inspired them to make them so. Even in what passes for family drama on

television from the Goldbergs to the Flintstones to the Simpsons or the Bunkers with their stereotypes of Mom, Dad, the kids, and the dog, we're seeing reflections of dramatic history going back to the Dionysia.

In Inge's four best-known plays - Come Back, Little Sheba, Picnic, Bus Stop, and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs - the mother is ever-present, even when she is off-stage. In Come Back, Little Sheba, the aura of Lola Delaney looms over the living quarters of their house before she enters, depicted in the set description.

The house is extremely cluttered and even dirty. The living room somehow manages to convey the atmosphere of the [nineteen] twenties, decorated with cheap pretense of niceness and respectability. The general effect is one of fussy awkwardness. The furniture is all heavy and rounded-looking, the chairs and davenport being covered with a shiny mohair. The davenport is littered and there are lace antimacassars on all the chairs. In such areas, houses are so close together, they hide each other from the sunlight. What sun could come through the window, at right, is dimmed by the smoky glass curtains. In the kitchen there is a table, center. On it are piled dirty dishes from the night before. Woodwork in the kitchen is dark and grimy. No industry whatsoever has been spent in making it one of those white, cheerful rooms that we commonly think kitchens should be.⁴

When Lola enters, following her husband Doc and her young boarder, Marie, the description Inge gives her matches the rooms.

She is in contrast to DOC's neat cleanliness and MARIE's. Over a nightdress she wears a lumpy kimono. Her eyes are dim with the morning expression of disillusionment, as though she had had a beautiful dream during the night and found on waking none of it was true.⁵

The story of Lola and Doc's marriage - a shotgun arrangement only to lose the baby after the wedding - and her care and feeding of both Doc and Marie, reflects the sense of loss that pervades the play. The sameness of the days passing with no let-up are the reminders of what could have been and what has been lost. They are manifested in Doc's alcoholism and Lola's desperate need to establish human contact to the point of waylaying the milkman, the postman, and the next-door neighbor as well as the perpetual ache over the loss of the little puppy, Sheba, that ran away and who haunts her dreams.

Lola wanted to be a mother, but she cannot, so in her own way she mothers everyone she can reach. She calls Doc "daddy," and her relationship with Marie, the college student, is clearly - at least in Lola's mind - that of mother and daughter. (It should be noted that Doc's relationship with Marie is also one of parental framing and, to some degree, suppressed lust which he is barely able to control.)

Lola mothers Marie with a gentle hand, perhaps in contrast to the treatment she got as a daughter, and her admiration and approval of her suitors - the muscular rascal Turk and the solidly conservative Bruce - shows us that Inge felt the need to portray her as a loving parent who is willing to indulge her children so as not to lose contact but still raise them with the discipline and respect that a parent needed to have.

This was likely a reflection of how Inge himself was raised. We know through both family anecdotes and Inge's own words that Maude doted on Billy. This was different than how she treated her eldest son, Luther Boy, who is thinly disguised as Jule Hansen in Inge's 1971 *roman a clef* novel My Son is a Splendid Driver. While Billy was allowed to indulge in his play-acting, dress-up, and putting on shows for the neighborhood, Luther became the surrogate father, replacing the nearly-always absent Luther Senior.

Luther Boy's sudden death at the age of 21 changed the course of the family. As Dr. Voss noted,

The death of Luther Boy was a shocking loss for the whole family, but especially for Maude, who still counted on him to drive her on errands and be a male presence in Luther's absence. Billy, then only seven, also lost his only brother, one who might have had a decisive influence on Billy as he grew into adolescence.⁶

The portrayal of Inge's family and home life is depicted most notably in two of his full-length plays, Picnic and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, and the mothers in both of those plays are reflections of certain aspects of his own mother.

Picnic portrays several versions of motherhood: Flo Owens, who most closely resembles Inge's mother's life situation, is described as a widow lady of about forty with two young daughters: Millie, a tomboy of sixteen, and Madge, "an unusually beautiful girl of eighteen."⁷ There is no explanation of how the father died; in fact, he is barely mentioned. Their next-door neighbor, Helen Potts, is described as a "merry, dumpy little woman close to sixty"⁸ who lives with her elderly invalid mother and is her sole caretaker. Her widowhood is a bit different than Flo's. The gossip in town is that she eloped with Mr. Potts only to be dragged home by her scandalized family who had the marriage annulled and Mr. Potts was never heard from again. But she remains Mrs. Potts, and despite her single burdened life, she is, as Inge describes her, merry and all too happy to appreciate the well-muscled Hal when he shows up looking for work in exchange for breakfast. Her patient treatment of her mother's constant calls for

help gives her an almost angelic air as if taking care of her is her lot in life.

The depiction of Flo Owens as the mother of two girls is as a protective but practical influence. Madge's beauty has made her the object of leering attention by her share of horny teenaged boys. Madge has learned well how to dismiss them, but she has also earned the attention of Alan Seymour, son of the richest man in town, something that Flo is encouraging with motherly caution; after all, men are dogs, a theme repeated by the worldly-wise Grace to young and innocent Elma in Bus Stop. This is counterbalanced with a subtle nudge from Flo towards roping Alan in for the social advantages of status, including invitations to the country club and charge accounts at the stores.

Her advice to Madge is to make the most of her situation without gaining the wrong kind of reputation. Flo tells her,

A pretty girl doesn't have long - just a few years. Then she's the equal of kings and she can walk out of a shanty like this and live in a palace with a doting husband who'll spend his life making her happy. [...] Because once, *once* she was young and pretty. If she loses her chance then, she might as well throw all of this prettiness away.⁹

This is a recurring theme in several other plays, including Bus Stop - Cherie knows she won't be pretty

forever. The viewpoint of the status-conscious mother is seen again in Inge's screenplay for the film Splendor in the Grass where young Deannie is being encouraged by her mother to marry Bud Stamper, the son of the richest man in town.

Splendor in the Grass also provides us with portraits of two different mothers. Deannie's mother is pushing her daughter into the arms of Bud while her father stands nearly mute. The roles are reversed in the Stamper family. Bud's bullying father wants his son to wait to marry Deannie until he finishes college, and if he feels the need to satisfy his male urges, there are women who will accommodate him. Bud's mother is nearly silent and deferential to her husband, and both parents are ashamed of their flapper daughter Ginny, who smokes, drinks, and is "popular."

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs is Inge's most autobiographical play, portraying the Flood family with parallels to his own: Rubin, the father, who is philandering while he is on the road selling harnesses; Reenie, age sixteen, the shy daughter preparing for her emergence into society; and Sonny, age ten, who is absorbed in his world of scrapbooks of Hollywood stars that serve as his escape from the neighborhood bullies. Cora, the wife

and mother, endures her life only so far before contemplating leaving her unfaithful husband.

They live in a small town in Oklahoma that has the same small-town culture that we've seen in Inge's previous works: a heightened sense of moral superiority, the prejudices, jealousies, and casual bigotry against those who are not like them. It is, as Inge noted in Come Back, Little Sheba, a cheap pretense of niceness and respectability.

Cora does the best she can in dealing with the torments that life has given her: trying to be a good mother to her fragile children, but standing up to her husband who is both physically and mentally abusive to her. She bears it all while trying to hold the family together for the sake of her children, yet, as she explains it to her sister Lottie and her hen-pecked brother-in-law Morris, she is teetering on the edge of walking out and taking the children with her. In the end, she reconciles herself to a life with the now-unemployed and awkwardly apologetic Rubin, surrendering to his brusque but pitiful pleas to take him back, and as the curtain falls, she is climbing to the top of the stairs and into the bedroom with Rubin for the sake of the family.

The play is considered to be one of Inge's most powerful works in showing the realities of life with harsh words, physical and mental abuse, and suicide. But Inge himself didn't seem to think so.

This play was developed out of the first play I ever wrote, called *Farther Off From Heaven*. Margo Jones produced it at her Dallas Theatre in June, 1947, and I didn't know what to do with it at the time but felt it contained too much good material on the shelf. I had been working on the play off and on for over six years, then in the winter of 1957, settled down on it for serious. It is formed from pretty nostalgic memories of childhood, without being very autobiographical. I suppose it represents my belated attempt to come to terms with the past, to rearrange its parts and make them balance, to bring a mature understanding to everyday phenomena that mystified me as a boy. Again, the story is very slight. I deliberately divert the audience from the main story in order to bring them back to it at the end of the play with a fresher viewpoint. In the play, I try to explore some of man's hidden fears that motivate us all. There is a suicide in the play, of a young, homeless, part Jewish boy who has no sure connection with anyone in the world. Some people felt upon reading the play, and others upon first seeing it, that the announcement of the suicide came as too much of a shock; but every suicide I 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. It was this kind of dynamism that I wanted to achieve.¹⁰

Inge wrote that as part of the introduction to Four Plays, a collection that includes Come Back, Little Sheba,

Picnic, Bus Stop, and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs.

It was published in 1958 when he was still seen as one of America's most important playwrights along with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. His protestation that Dark at the Top of the Stairs is "very slight" and that it isn't autobiographical don't really pass muster: it is as intense as anything he's written about his family, and checking off all the boxes about what we now know about his childhood. To include the suicide of Sammy Goldenbaum, apparently driven by his being bawled out¹¹ at the party for being Jewish and an outcast, parallels all too closely Inge's own path to his suicide in 1973.

Inge's plays are populated by characters who don't fit into the prudery and the manners of the small-town gentry, and Cora's response to Sammy's death makes that point.

A nice young man like that, bright and pleasant, handsome as a prince, caught out here in this sandy soil without a friend to his name and no one to turn to when some thoughtless fool attacks him and he takes it to heart. (REENIE sobs uncontrollably) Tears aren't going to do any good now, Reenie. Now, you listen to me. I've heard all I intend to listen to about being so shy and sensitive and afraid of people. I can't respect those feelings any more. They're nothing but selfishness. (REENIE starts to bolt from the room, just as FLIRT did, but Cora's voice holds her) Reenie! It's a fine thing when we have so little confidence in ourselves, we can't stop to think of the other person.¹²

Cora was talking about Sammy, but she could also be speaking for Sonny, her son who suffers at the hands of bullies but found friendship, however briefly, in meeting Sammy, who seemed to understand what the boy was going through. For the moment, Cora becomes the mother to all of the people who are hurting: Sonny, Sammy, Reenie, and even her husband.

There is, however, another side to Inge's portrayal of mothers: the controlling, guilt-inflicting, and soul-crushing figure that seems to draw power from her domination. This comes through most strongly in The Boy in the Basement, a short play that Inge wrote in the early 1950's but was not published until 1962 as part of a collection of eleven short plays. It is, as described on the blurb, "[A] gripping play about a middle-aged man who still lives with his parents, and suffers the misery of a terrible and secret shame."

The middle-aged man is Spencer Scranton, an undertaker in a small Pennsylvania town near Pittsburgh. The "terrible and secret shame" that he suffers from is that he is gay. The word is never used; neither is homosexual. The boy in the title is his friend, Joker Evans, a handsome and muscular eighteen-year-old boy who delivers groceries. He and Spencer have a playful friendship; they tease each

other about going out with girls, but clearly Spencer has a crush on this carefree and husky young man.

Looming over him is his mother, identified only as Mrs. Scranton, who rules the house with an iron glove while taking care of her invalid husband who is immobilized and speechless because of a stroke... or because he just got tired of listening to his wife and her constant passive/aggressive behavior. In one breath she is berating and belittling her son followed almost immediately by her self-pitying whining.

She discovers through gossip at a ladies' meeting that Spencer has been going out nights to a bar in Pittsburgh that is, in her words, "a meeting place for degenerates."¹³ She confronts Spencer, using every guilt-inflicting weapon in her considerable arsenal, finally driving him out of the house. He packs a bag and drives off, vowing to never return. But he does return the next morning, cowed, defeated, and miserable; he had no place to go. His mother welcomes him back - all is forgiven - and now he must go to work preparing another body for a funeral. She tells him it is a young man who drowned while swimming in the river. Spencer realizes to his horror that the boy in the basement is Joker, and as Spencer prepares to embalm him, he says, "Jesus Christ, Joker, I wanted you to live."¹⁴

The Boy in the Basement is the only published play in which Inge addressed the closet he kept himself in for his entire life, and it may be the truest indicator of how he viewed himself as a man and as a son. As Dr. Voss notes:

That Spencer Scranton, the mother-dominated, profoundly ashamed homosexual mortician is representative of Inge himself can hardly be denied. Spencer is trapped in his small-town life of repression and frustration, and his mother's discovery of his secret homosexuality gives her a bleak, consuming, and triumphant power over him. Inge's striking simile describing Spencer's invalid, speech-impaired father as being "like a piece of patient wreckage" could just as well be a simile for Spencer by the end of this play. Spencer's life is wreckage because his mother now knows his awful secret of homosexuality and will use it to hold him not only near but under control. He believes that he has no choice but to wait patiently until his mother dies - or until he dies - to be free of her. Likely, he will never be free of his sense of guilt and shame about his sexuality.¹⁵

There is no indication that his own mother resembled Mrs. Scranton to the degree that he paints her in this play, but it's also a fact that The Boy in the Basement was not published until four years after Maude Gibson Inge died in June of 1958. Perhaps he wanted to spare her the inevitable comparison that would be drawn to his own life. But as he also notes in the preface to these plays, this is the one play in the collection that he "hope[d] to do more with in the future."¹⁶ He never did.

Dr. Voss also notes that this play and others in the collection were written at a time when Inge was in therapy, most likely to deal with his feelings about his family, his sexuality and his drinking. It happened at the time when he was teaching at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, and beginning to find his footing as a playwright. As many others have learned, writing is in itself a form of therapy.

It is a dangerous path we take when we attempt to assign motives and objectives to the work of a playwright, especially one who is no longer with us. Indeed, it is dangerous to attempt it with a living one since even they may not fully grasp their intentions. When he was here in 2001, Lanford Wilson was asked about the meaning of one of his plays. He replied, "How should I know? I only wrote it."

In the case of William Inge, we have the plays and the insight that examining his works and our knowledge of what his life was like. We understand the innate nature of story-telling and how writers use it as a combination of rite of exorcism and the psychiatrist's couch to discern what the story is telling us about the playwright and ourselves through the characters and the plot. They are the medium through which his message is delivered.

That is what makes these characters - Flo, Helen, Lola, Cora, Grace, and Mrs. Scranton - so instrumental. Not only are each of them different, we as members of the audience see each of them in our own way depending on our own life experiences. The widow in her forties in Independence raising two daughters makes a connection with a single mom in the Bronx or a mother of a gay son in the mountains of New Mexico. The story of Rubin and Cora's failing marriage isn't unique to a small town in Oklahoma or a shtetl in Russia. The apron strings are indeed a universal bond, or, in the case of Mrs. Scranton and her son Spencer, a noose.

In the beginning of this paper, I stated that the mother is one of Inge's most pervasive characters. But perhaps labeling the role as a character is not quite accurate. Unlike some of Inge's other roles that are iconic, such as the Idealized Male he depicts in several plays - Turk in Come Back, Little Sheba, Hal in Picnic, Bo in Bus Stop, and Joker in The Boy in the Basement - or the controlled and castrated male such as Howard in Picnic and Morris in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, there are so many dimensions to the mother that she becomes a presence in the lives of the other characters and a foundational element in telling the story. They are the catalyst in

moving the action forward, and without them there would be no story to tell. Significantly they are not the main character or some cases the focus of the plays, but just as Maude Gibson Inge was in his own life, it is clear that Inge intended Mother to be an ever-present figure in each of the plays we've looked at, whether or not they have the most lines. They are the ones who are there throughout, and they are the ones who are still on stage when the lights fade to black and the curtain falls at the end of the play.

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If I may be allowed a personal moment, I'd like to pay tribute and thanks to Ralph Voss, who left us since we last gathered here. Ralph was not only a devoted scholar, teacher, and passionate supporter of this festival and conference, he was also dear friend. We first met in the pool at the Apple Tree Inn in 1991 when both of us could still look halfway decent in swimming trunks, and over the past thirty years I came to both appreciate his insight to the man and his works that this festival honors, and what a gentle and good friend he truly was. I will miss him very much, and I know that this room is a little emptier without him here to contribute, and that I would not be standing

here were it not for him and his encouragement and love.
Thank you, Ralph. I hold you in the Light.

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Ralph F. Voss, A Life of William Inge: The Strains of Triumph, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas 1989)

Notes

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- ¹ Ralph F. Voss, A Life of William Inge: The Strains of Triumph, (University Press of Kansas, 1989), page 5
- ² Ibid, pages 5-8
- ³ Ibid, page 8
- ⁴ William Inge, Four Plays (New York: Random House 1958; rpt. New York: Grove Weidenfeld 1979) page 5
- ⁵ Ibid, page 7
- ⁶ Voss, page 14
- ⁷ Inge, Four Plays, page 77
- ⁸ Ibid, page 75
- ⁹ Ibid, page 81
- ¹⁰ Ibid, page xi
- ¹¹ Ibid, pages 291
- ¹² Ibid, pages 293-294
- ¹³ William Inge, Eleven Short Plays (New York: Dramatists Play Service 1990), page 48
- ¹⁴ Ibid, page 54
- ¹⁵ Inge Four Plays, page 146
- ¹⁶ Inge Eleven Short Plays, page 3