

## Summer Morn and Winter Weather: William Inge’s Debt to Shakespeare

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Despite winning both a Pulitzer Prize and an Oscar during the 1950s, Kansas playwright William Inge has been all but forgotten today. Incredibly, he enjoyed his greatest success at the same time that radical innovators such as Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter were revolutionizing the very idea of the theater. Compared to the grotesque characters of the former or the latter’s daring experiments in mood and structure, Inge’s steady, quiet plays—which tend to revolve around the normal domestic problems of ordinary Midwesterners—do seem rather old-fashioned. And yet, Inge has not been totally forgotten: the Inge Festival is still celebrated, every year, in his hometown of Independence, Kansas. His alma mater, the University of Kansas, has also named a theater after him, which featured at the start of its 2022-23 season Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. How fitting for Inge’s namesake theater to host a play by the great Elizabethan playwright, for, if anything, Inge seems to share more affinity with Shakespeare than he does with his contemporaries. As in many of the latter’s works, the use of conventional settings and archetypes by Inge tends to belie a perceptive interrogation of cultural attitudes towards love and romance, familial relationships, and other subjects.

This paper will explore Inge’s interest in Shakespeare, which is evident even in some of his earlier, minor works, such as the one-act play, *People in the Wind*. But our focus will be on two of his major dramas from the 1950s: *Bus Stop* and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, both of which feature prominent references to Shakespeare. In the former, a pair of characters act out a pivotal scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, highlighting the poignancy of the play’s numerous romantic entanglements. In the latter, the recital of the “To be or not to be” monologue from *Hamlet* foreshadows an untimely and tragic death. Inge’s frequent allusions to Shakespeare suggest that, despite his

closeted homosexuality and lifelong struggle with depression, he may have viewed human nature in similar terms as his Christian predecessor. In this flawed and fallen world, Shakespeare reminds us, “Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall,” and it is often difficult to determine the right thing to do (*Measure for Measure* II.i.42). Excepting his “problem” plays and certain tragedies, however, he usually posits that there is, in the end, a right thing to be done. The happy endings favored by Inge and his redemptive treatment of even the most incorrigible philanderers and drunks suggest that he would have concurred. Given his continued obscurity, it may be helpful to provide a bit of information about Inge’s life and work before examining his creative interest in Shakespeare.

#### INGE’S LIFE AND MINOR WORKS

Inge was born in 1913 in Independence, Kansas, and enjoyed his greatest professional success as a New York-based playwright during the 1950s. Most of his plays were set in small towns like the one in which he was raised, and feature characters who were based on people he had known in childhood. Aside from their Midwestern settings and themes, Inge’s works are characterized by an unusual sensitivity towards the plight of childless women, who have historically been ostracized for their failure to live up to traditional conventions regarding femininity and motherhood. Inge “evokes our sympathy for such women by implying that cultural expectations have actually contributed to the problem, creating more pressure—and more lingering disappointment—in the characters’ lives” (Koprince 254-55). His first play, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, was produced in 1950, and proved an immediate success; it was followed by the Independence-set *Picnic*, which won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and remains Inge’s best-known work. His early plays, especially, reveal the strong influence of Tennessee Williams, whom Inge had befriended while both were living in St. Louis during the 1940s. The two homosexual playwrights “shared a vision,” writes S. E. Gontarski, “a queering of masculinity in their hyperbolic images of the masculine amid a

repressed age” (18-19). In contrast to the flamboyant Williams, who made no secret of his sexuality, Inge remained closeted throughout his life.

As a child growing up in Independence, KS, he had enjoyed performing before local audiences, and earned a reputation as a skilled actor, custom designer, and orator. Friends and family recall him putting on elaborate shows in a neighbor’s barn, often involving other children from the neighborhood, for which he charged a modest entrance fee of one penny (Voss 19). He may have been exposed to Shakespeare then, or as a student at Independence High School, where he participated in productions overseen by long-time drama instructor Anna Ingleman. Even if he hadn’t been active in the school’s drama club, most high school students then would have been expected to read *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet* in a British Literature class. At the University of Kansas, Inge majored in Speech and Dramatic Art, taking classes in English Literature and the Theory and Practice of Modern Drama that surely included plenty of reading in Shakespeare. In an article written for the *New York Herald* in 1950, he reflected on the influence of one of his teachers at KU, who had overseen the production of several productions involving Inge. “Professor Allen Crafton ... seemed unaware of Broadway and under his direction students got a reliable background in the plays of Shakespeare, Moliere, Shaw, and O’Casey” (qtd. in McClure 17). Although Inge does not seem terribly impressed with Crafton’s choice of material here, the exposure to Shakespeare made a lasting impression on him, as is demonstrated by the prominent references to him in his major plays.

Indeed, even his minor works contain a number of allusions to Shakespeare. In 1962, Inge published a revised version of *Picnic*, along with eleven short plays he had been working on through the years. The new *Picnic*, called *Summer Brave*, focuses more on the female relationships and includes his original ending, in which Madge chooses to stay behind in Independence (rather than run off to Tulsa with Hal). When preparing *Picnic* for its Broadway debut, Inge had been pressured by the play’s director, Joshua Logan, to change this ending, which everyone but Inge found too depressing. Logan also

convinced Inge to change the title from *Front Porch* to *Picnic* (Voss 127-33). Inge's desire to restore some of his original vision for this play may have prompted a reconsideration of its title, as well. The phrase "summer brave" is taken from one of the poems traditionally attributed to Shakespeare in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, a collection of verse published by William Jaggard in 1599 (Zukerman 256). Inge also uses a couplet from the same poem as his epigraph: "Youth like summer morn, age like winter weather, / Youth like summer brave, age like winter bare" (Inge, *Summer Brave* 2). This poem's attribution to Shakespeare has recently been questioned by numerous scholars, but there is no reason to suspect that Inge would have doubted its authenticity. In any case, its appeal to him as a source for the title of his revised *Picnic* is clear enough, due to the greater emphasis he places upon the female characters in the new play. This brings into sharp relief the contrast between the youthful impetuosity of Madge and her older, wiser mother—a contrast that leads to dissolution in *Picnic*, but which Inge manages to turn into reconciliation in *Summer Brave*.

Shakespeare is mentioned by name a few times in the short play, *People in the Wind*, which would later be expanded into *Bus Stop*. The Dr. Gerald Lyman character, known here only as "Drunk," mentions having a PhD in literature from Harvard. "Oh yes! You wouldn't believe it, would you? I wrote my thesis under [George Lyman] Kittredge. My subject was an analysis of the love element in Shakespeare's plays" (Inge, *Summer Brave* 135). The references to Kittredge, a noted scholar of Shakespeare, and to the subject of Lyman's thesis are missing in *Bus Stop*, though the former survives in the obvious resemblance of Lyman's name. As in *Bus Stop*, Drunk recites from memory a few lines from Shakespeare's well-known Sonnet 18: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate." Lyman's recital follows a brief confrontation between Man and Girl, the play's versions of Bo and Cherie. Man is more brutish than his later counterpart: at one point, he grabs Girl by the wrist and twists "until a little grimace of pain comes over her face" (Inge, *Summer Brave* 140). The allusion here is, therefore, probably intended to highlight the ironic contrast between the kind of immortal love celebrated by Shakespeare and Man's sordid, infantile infatuation with Girl.

In *People in the Wind*, there is also a resonance between the sonnet and the play's setting that is minimized, if not altogether lacking, in *Bus Stop*. In the earlier play, it is not a snowstorm that has left the travelers stranded in this Kansas diner, but "[r]ough winds" like those mentioned in the second line of Shakespeare's poem. Here is Inge's description of the setting:

Outside there is a strong prairie wind that sounds angry with intent to destroy. It comes and goes, creating a great blast against the windows and seeming to shake the very foundation of the frail building, and then subsiding, leaving a period of uncertain quiet. (*Summer Brave* 131)

More extended and thematically complex allusions to Shakespeare can be found in the major plays *Bus Stop* and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, as we discuss in the following section.

#### SHAKESPEARE IN THE MAJOR PLAYS

*Bus Stop* was the third of Inge's remarkable string of Broadway hits during the 1950s, following *Come Back, Little Sheba* and *Picnic*. As has already been noted, Inge wrote the play as a revised and expanded version of *People in the Wind*, featuring a more satisfactory ending, as well as greater interaction between the various characters, who tend to be much better developed than their counterparts in the earlier play. There is still a strong focus on the central relationship between Bo and Cherie, though in *Bus Stop* they have been sexually intimate, which has the effect of making Bo's pursuit of her seem more pathetic and less aggressive. Bo is paired with an elderly male, Vergil, who functions as a kind of father figure to the young cowboy, restraining his more reckless impulses and offering him advice about women. In the end, after Bo demonstrates his willingness to respect Cherie and love her in a realistic rather than idealistic sense, she agrees to marry him and accompany him to his ranch in Montana. The play received largely favorable reviews from contemporary critics, with Robert Coleman of the *Daily Mirror* hailing it as an "endearing, though deceptively simple comedy," and Walter F. Kerr praising Inge's "sharp, honest,

down-to-earth eye for character” in the Herald Review (as qtd. in “Bus Stop” 62). *Bus Stop* premiered on 2 March 1955 and ran for almost 500 performances. It received four Tony Award nominations and was adapted into a popular 1956 film that starred Marilyn Monroe and Don Murray.

Through the expansion of the Drunk character, Inge is able to work in a large number of additional references to Shakespeare. Dr. Gerald Lyman’s very first words, in fact, allude to a line from *Macbeth*: “Ah! ‘This castle hath a pleasant seat.’” (Inge, *Four Plays* 159). Those words are spoken by the Scottish king, Duncan, as he arrives with his entourage at Macbeth’s castle (I.vi.1), and represent one of the play’s many examples of dramatic irony, for the audience knows (or soon learns) that the king’s hosts are planning to murder him. In *Bus Stop*, Lyman’s irony is more deliberate: surely he does not intend to compare the play’s setting, a “dingy establishment with few modern improvements” on the eastern fringe of Kansas, to a “castle” (Inge, *Four Plays* 153)! A short time later, after telling the pretty young waitress, Elma, about his third failed marriage, Lyman quotes the opening lines of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73:

**Dr. Lyman** (*Musingly he begins to recite as though for his own enjoyment*)

“That time of year thou may’st in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs—” (165)

This allusion illustrates one of Inge’s primary intentions in referring to Shakespeare, which is to compare or contrast their respective treatments of common themes, such as love and youth. In this case, there is a notable difference between the pure ideals of Shakespeare’s poem, in which the promise of immortality is extended “to both its author and to its object, the beloved, through its status as a Christian monument,” and the ignoble intentions of Lyman towards Elma (Herron 52). In contrast to Shakespeare’s speaker, Lyman has neither the intention nor the ability to grant Elma eternal life through the power of his art. He quotes the lines in a superficial manner, seeking to elevate his attraction to her—and reassure himself of its propriety—by comparing himself to the elderly speaker of Shakespeare’s poem. But that is as far as the comparison goes.

How might a potential relationship between Lyman and Elma actually work out? Inge offers a tantalizing clue to the answer to this question in yet another of Lyman's quotes from Shakespeare, which occurs just as he first catches sight of the young waitress:

**Dr. Lyman** "Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered!"

**Elma** (*Smiling*) I'm sorry your bus is held up.

**Dr. Lyman** Oohh! Is that a nice way to greet me?

**Elma** (*Confused*) I mean ... (Inge, *Four Plays* 161)

Elma's response indicates that she does not understand the reference, which is to a crucial scene in *Hamlet*. The Danish prince has just delivered his famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, in which he contemplates suicide, when he spies his love interest, Ophelia, approaching, and utters the words quoted by Lyman. The request that Ophelia pray for him is followed by increasingly bizarre behavior, which includes the repeated, nonsensical demand: "Get thee to a nunnery" (III.i.131). The encounter leaves Ophelia shaken, for, unlike the audience, she does not know that Hamlet has decided to feign madness for a while in order to avoid suspicion. After Hamlet accidentally kills her father, Polonius, Ophelia begins a genuine descent into madness, which culminates in her death by drowning. Whether a deliberate suicide, or an accident caused by her precarious mental state, Ophelia's manner of death (which happens off-stage) only serves to underscore her extreme isolation from Hamlet and the other characters. Would Emma be doomed to such a lonely, unhappy fate were she to give in to Lyman's attempted seduction? His choice of words in greeting her would seem to indicate that Inge believed that to be the case. At the same time, Lyman is no Hamlet: he recognizes that his own selfishness would prevent him from loving her in a genuine manner, as it has with each of his ex-wives. "But two people, *really* in love," he insists, "must give up something of themselves," which is something he knows himself to be unable or unwilling to do (189). After realizing how disastrous such a relationship would prove for Elma, he calls off their planned tryst in Kansas City.

The impetus for doing so is provided by one of the most extended treatments of Shakespeare in all of Inge's works: the performance of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* by Lyman and Elma in

Act II. The characters decide to put on a “floor show,” featuring Vergil’s guitar-playing, Cherie’s singing, and the recital by Lyman and Elma. Lyman’s acting is “pure ham,” Inge reveals, and he is a “thoroughly selfish performer,” but the two get off to a good start, trading lines they have only committed to memory within the past few minutes (*Four Plays* 194). But Lyman, who has been drinking heavily throughout, suddenly falters when he reaches the lines in which Romeo decides that he is willing to forgo his identity as a Montague favor of his love for Juliet, a Capulet: “Call me but love, and ... I’ll be new baptiz’d; / Henceforth ... I never ... will be Romeo” (*Four Plays* 196). As Lukas Erne observes, Shakespeare subtly highlights Romeo’s evolving conception of himself throughout this scene by repeated mentions not only of his name, but of the very word, “name” (95). The numerous ellipses inserted by Inge suggest that, as he reads these lines, Lyman, too, is undergoing a similar crisis of identity. Indeed, he is unable to continue with the recital, muttering a last, revealing line as he departs from the stage: “My name ... is hateful ... to myself ...” (*Four Plays* 196). For Romeo, these words represent the scorn he feels towards the past, as symbolized by his name, an attitude he can well afford both because he is young and because the future looks so bright and promising. Lyman, by contrast, is middle-aged, if not old, and has repeatedly proven himself a romantic and professional failure. He hates his name and the past it represents in a very different, more poignant, sense.

Overcome with remorse, Lyman withdraws to the back of the stage, to his liquor and his broken dreams. He continues mumbling lines from the play, while ruminating over the intended moral of Shakespeare’s doomed lovers. Eventually, in a rare moment of sobriety, it hits him:

**Dr. Lyman** It takes strong men and women to love ... (*About to fall, he grabs the back of a chair for support*) People strong enough inside themselves to love ... without humiliation. (*He sighs heavily and looks about him with blurred eyes*) [...] People big enough to grow with their love and live inside a whole, wide new dimension. People brave enough to bear the responsibility of being loved and not fear it as a burden. (*He sighs again and*



looks about him wearily) I ... I never had the generosity to love, to give my own most private self to another, for I was too *weak*. I thought the gift would somehow lessen *me*. *Me!* (*He laughs wildly and starts for the rear door*) Romeo! Romeo! I am disgusting! (200)

Though only teenagers, Romeo and Juliet possess the necessary courage, strength, and generosity of heart to love each other in a genuine, honest, and selfless manner. Lauren Weindling points to the balcony scene as the moment in the play in which Juliet “establishes herself as a tragic heroine capable of interrogating and resisting the terms in which her family and society see the blood feud” (8). The sort of heroism demonstrated by both characters here and throughout the play is beyond the weak and philandering Lyman, who has never been able to love in that same way. But he is not wicked, and Inge allows him the grace to at least recognize the error of his ways. More than that, by canceling his plans to meet Elma in Kansas City, he reveals a willingness to take the initial steps towards his eventual redemption. “Ah!” he confesses to her sheepishly, “Sometimes it is so gratifying to feel that one is doing the ‘right’ thing, I wonder that I don’t choose to always” (*Four Plays* 213). One suspects that, after the events of the previous evening, he will, at least, be making that decision more often in the future.

Aside from the allusions to Shakespeare in *Bus Stop*, Inge quotes him again in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, one of his most autobiographical works, and the last of his string of Broadway successes in the 1950s. The play, which ran for 468 performances and earned five Tony nominations, was made into a 1960 film that was relatively well-received by critics and earned Shirley Knight an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress (Abbotson 102). *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* is set in Oklahoma and revolves around young Sonny Flood, who likes to collect photos of celebrities and perform before others, just as Inge did as a boy. His father, Rubin, is an alcoholic salesman struggling to make ends meet and chafing under the nervous attentions of his wife, Cora. Sonny’s sister, Reenie, has decided to attend a birthday celebration at the country club with a young Jewish cadet at a nearby military academy, Sammy. After he arrives to pick her up, he and Sonny spend a few minutes playing

around. Much of their banter has a sexual undertone to it, as in the following exchange:

**Sonny** (*Jumping up and down*) Can I have a sword? I want a sword.

**Sammy** Do you, Sonny? Do you want a sword? Here, Sonny, I'll give you *my* sword, for all the good it'll do you. (*Four Plays* 267)

In an attempt to impress the older boy, Sonny recites about a dozen lines from Hamlet's "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy, after which Reenie and her friends depart. The play ends with Sammy's shocking death by suicide, a dark reminder of the underlying unhappiness that threatens to overwhelm the Floods at any moment, as well as an unfortunate foreshadowing of Inge's decision to take his own life in 1973.

The use of dialogue from *Hamlet* in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* raises intriguing questions about the plays' respective treatments of similar themes. In both, for instance, the relationship between mother and son is fraught with tension, some of which may be sexual in nature. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, famously argued that Hamlet hesitates to act after learning about the murder of his father because he is trying to work out long-suppressed desires for his own mother—a psychological complex that applies to every young man, Freud insisted, and which he named after the mythical figure of Oedipus, who unknowingly marries and has children with his mother (Robson 54-55). Indeed, certain conversations between Hamlet and Gertrude suggest that the young prince may feel more for her than is healthy or natural; at one point, he describes her sleeping with Claudius as living "In the rank sweat of an unseamed bed, / Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty" (III.iv.94-96). The incestual undertones here are unmistakable, and have been analyzed extensively by scholars. The relationship between Sonny and Cora in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* is also uncomfortably close in several respects, most notably in the growing boy's insistence on sleeping in the same bed. Cora recognizes that he is getting too old for this: "For a moment," Inge writes, "mother and son lie together in each other's arms. Then Cora stands, as though fearing her own indulgence" (*Four Plays* 250). Perhaps the most revealing conversation between mother and son is at the start of Act III:

**Sonny** (*Suddenly solemn and apprehensive*) Have I done something bad?  
**Cora** Well, don't know if you have or if I have. Anyway, we've got to talk about it. Sonny, you mustn't come crawling into my bed anymore. I let you do it last night, but I shouldn't have. It was wrong. (289)

It is worth noting that, just as Hamlet waits until his father is dead before expressing any interest in his mother's bed, so does Sonny always wait until his father has left for work to join Cora in hers. Inge, furthermore, underwent psychological counseling throughout much of his life (Voss 68), and was familiar with Freud's theories and their application to *Hamlet*.

Although it is Sonny who recites the "To Be or Not to Be" monologue, he does so mainly out of a desire to impress Sammy. Hamlet's suicidal musings better describe the Jewish cadet's mindset, and certainly foreshadow his sudden, untimely end. As the son of a Hollywood actress, Sammy is basically part of American royalty; a lonely prince not of Denmark, but California. Inge describes him as, "*a darkly beautiful young man of seventeen with lustrous black hair, black eyes, and a captivating smile ... He could be a Persian prince strayed from his native kingdom,*" further emphasizing the character's status as a foreign noble (*Four Plays* 262). Like Hamlet, Sammy often feels as if he has been abandoned by his mother, who has placed him in various boarding schools for most of his life while pursuing her dreams of cinema stardom. A stark dissimilarity between the two characters is how they answer the central question raised by Hamlet's monologue: is life worth living despite all of the "slings and arrows" we must suffer? For Hamlet, the need to avenge his father and the sincere fear of Hell provide a sufficient deterrent to taking his own life. Sammy, by contrast, sees very little reason to live, since he is unloved by his family and faces anti-Semitic discrimination on a regular basis. Nor does he fear what might befall him in the afterlife. For Sammy, therefore, the answer to Hamlet's opening query is "not to be." Curiously, for such a dramatic event, Inge dwells little on the suicide itself, preferring instead to focus on how Sammy's death affects the Floods.

Aside from the performance of this soliloquy, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* seems to evoke *Hamlet* in other, more subtle ways. The protagonists of both plays, for example, face criticism from an

elderly male for behaving in a supposedly feminine manner. Early in *Hamlet*, Claudius chides the prince for spending too much time mourning the death of his father. “But to persever / In obstinate condolement is a course / Of impious stubbornness. ‘Tis unmanly grief,” he warns (I.ii.96-98). Rubin expresses similar reservations over the smothering effects of Cora’s relationship with her son: “You’re always kissin’ and makin’ over the boy until I sometimes wonder who’s top man around here” (*Four Plays* 228). Unlike Claudius and Hamlet, however, and reflecting Inge’s preference for happy endings, Sonny and Rubin manage to reconcile their differences by the final act. Sonny expresses an interest in becoming less dependent on Cora, and Rubin compliments him on his theatrical abilities, something he had regarded with indifference or suspicion earlier. Finally, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* may contain a brief textual echo of Hamlet’s mocking disparagement of human exceptionalism in Act IV. “Your worm is your only emperor for diet,” he says. “We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes but to one table. That’s the end” (IV.iii.24-28). When Cora’s sister, Lottie, confesses to suffering from what might now be described as an eating disorder, she uses remarkably similar terms: “I talk all the time to convince myself that I am alive. And I stuff myself with victuals just to feel like I’ve got something inside me” (280). “Victuals,” an incongruous word for the solidly bourgeois Lottie to employ, would be more appropriate coming from one of Shakespeare’s characters—and, indeed, quite a few of them do use it.

#### CONCLUSION

In his poem from *The Passionate Pilgrim*, Shakespeare describes the relationship between youth and old age in terms that capture something of the contrast between him and Inge: “Youth like summer morn, age like winter weather / Youth like summer brave, age like winter bare.” Despite having died centuries ago, Shakespeare cannot help but strike us as the more youthful, optimistic playwright.

Throughout his comedies and romances, especially, he celebrates the paramours and adventures of the young. Many of the last plays he wrote, including *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, are characterized by a gentle, nostalgic tone. By contrast, as Inge aged, he became convinced that his magic touch for the theater had begun to fade, and turned to thematically adventurous works that reflected his own unhappiness and sense of estrangement. His final days were spent in a drug-addled haze, talking openly of suicide (Voss 265-66). Although he died on a warm summer day in June, the world around him must have long ago turned cold and gray: "like winter weather ... bare." Perhaps Inge would take comfort in knowing that, in contrast to his fears of irrelevance, he is still honored and remembered. Not only is there a theater named after him at his alma mater, which has graduated countless successful artists and playwrights over the years, but his hometown also maintains a William Inge Center for the Arts; the Inge Collection, featuring thousands of books and other manuscripts; and the Inge Family Home, which in 2017 was placed on the National Historic Register. Above all, like his great predecessor, Inge lives on in his classic plays: indelible snapshots of the rural Midwest during the 1950s, and the lonely people who lived and loved there.

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