

# BUS STOP

## Synopsis

The play is set in a diner/bus station about 30 miles west of Kansas City in early March, 1955. A freak snowstorm has halted the progress of the bus, and the eight characters (five are passengers on the bus) have a weather enforced layover in the diner from approximately one o'clock until five o'clock in the morning.

The interaction among the characters and the interweaving of their stories is the sum of the play's plot. Romantic or quasi-romantic relationships ensue between Grace and Carl, Professor Lyman and Elma and Cherie and Bo. Virgil and Will are the older authority figures outside the relationships. A lot can happen in a single night. At least, that is what William Inge, the playwright, is able to convince us of in his three-act romance *Bus Stop*. In a brief four hour period, these eight characters are forced to spend the evening together and to confront their own motivations. There are laughs, tears, and outright frustration.

Inge is a masterful writer, using clever dialogue to paint each person's character just a little more. As interesting as the characters are, the play is less about them and more about loneliness. Loneliness is the motivation that drives every character except the sheriff. It is almost as if Inge is trying to explore the different ways people respond to the same dull ache.

A cowboy can lose his belligerence. A young girl can learn of romance from an unexpected source. A nightclub chanteuse can discover domesticity and a drunken lecher can mend his ways. Even the owner of a roadside diner and a bus driver can find a touch of romance in lives spent mostly in getting left behind or in leaving others behind. At least, all these things can happen until the snow is blown away and the curtain is pulled, leaving us to wonder how many of the changes will stick or whether each character will be back in the same muddle the next time the winds howl.

The cast of characters include:

Elma Duckworth is a young waitress still in high school and very innocent in the ways of people and love.

Grace Hoyland is the owner of the restaurant, long a "grass widow" and an expert at hiding her loneliness.

Will Masters, the local sheriff bent on maintaining order, is tough as nails and brusque in manner; he is also good-hearted and a staunch Christian.

Cherie is a "chanteuse," a nightclub singer and dancer who is trying to escape the over exuberant love of a young rancher and cowboy: Bo Decker.

Bo, a blustering cowboy, is convinced they're going to get married, though he's never really stopped to listen to Cherie's views on the topic.

Virgil Blessing, an older ranch hand on Bo's ranch, has raised Bo and is his mentor and friend.

Dr. Gerald Lyman, a man with many personal problems, is a former college professor who speaks of romance to Elma through the words of poets and playwrights.

Carl, the bus driver, is a fun-loving, if somewhat lonely man who is open in his interest in Grace.

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### Characters:

#### Grace Hoylard —

Grace is the owner of the diner/Greyhound Bus Depot--- a "grass widow". She is in her late thirties or early forties and pretty in a fading, hard-bitten way. She works in the diner and lives alone above the diner. She was once married, but her husband left her. She has a passionate side to her nature, loving a good fight and the attentions of a good man. Lonely and single, she asserts that she is fine with the brief sexual encounters she has with Carl, the bus driver. Yet, when he declines to say if he is married at the end of the play, she realizes that she is dissatisfied with their relationship.

#### Elma Duckworth —

A very intelligent but naïve local high school student, Elma works at Grace's diner as a waitress. A very bright but lonely girl, she becomes the object of Dr. Lyman's attention when he arrives on the bus. Elma is too innocent and inexperienced to realize that Lyman is a duplicitous man with bad intentions. She is so starved for male attention that she is flattered by his interest in her. In the end, she learns that Lyman was trying to seduce her, as he has many other young women. She realizes that she has learned a valuable lesson about men and life.

#### Will Masters —

Will is the local sheriff and; therefore, is bent on maintaining order. Although he is tough as nails and brusque in manner, he is also good-hearted and a staunch Christian. He is described in the play as a "deacon of his church"; a highly "moral" man in the general sense of the word. As a deacon at the Congregational Church, he is admired by Elma and Grace, who assure Cherie that the sheriff will protect her. He ultimately forces Bo to accept responsibility for his actions.

#### Dr. Gerald Lyman —

Dr. Lyman is a college philosophy professor who is articulate and charming, but cannot hold a position, partially due to his resistance to any kind of authority, and partially due to his unfortunate taste for very young women. He also has an obvious drinking problem. Dr. Lyman is a passenger on the stranded bus. He is about fifty years old and has been drinking when the play opens. In fact, he is an alcoholic and has been married and divorced three times. He wants to get out of Kansas as soon as possible; later in the play, it is revealed that he is in trouble with the law for loitering around schools and young girls. This predilection for pedophilia explains his attempted seduction of Elma, the young waitress at the diner. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that he is in need of serious psychological help.

#### Cherie —

Cherie is a pretty young woman who comes from a difficult "hill folk" background, and has left her innocence far behind her. She is an aspiring nightclub singer, but has never worked in any establishment above the level of "cheap dive". Only nineteen, Cherie is dressed in sequins and sandals, clearly inappropriate for the weather and circumstances. Her makeup is overdone, with too much lipstick and eyeliner. She is on the bus because Bo is taking her to his Montana ranch, where he plans on marrying her; however, Cherie claims that Bo has abducted her. Forced to quit school when she was twelve to cook and clean for her five older brothers and two younger sisters, Cherie grew up too fast. She has been involved with men since she was fourteen, but she still has romantic ideas about love. In fact, her dream is to fall in love and get married. Although she displays antipathy towards Bo, what she really wants is romance and tenderness from him. She also wants him to accept her as she truly is, not because he feels obligated or has idealized visions of her.

Bo Decker —

Bo is a wealthy mouthy young cowboy from Montana with boorish manners that hide a naiveté almost as profound as Elma's. Bo is quite infatuated with Cherie. He has convinced himself that Cherie will be his bride, though Cherie wants nothing to do with him. He is brash and aggressive toward others; in his initial appearance in the play, for example, he quickly announces that he owns his own ranch, has won a number of awards at the rodeo, had his picture taken for *Life Magazine*, and thus, deserves everyone's respect and attention. Bo and Cherie have been sexually intimate, and he mistakes that for love. He determines that they must get married, since it would be inappropriate otherwise. When it appears that Cherie has rejected him, Bo reveals to Virgil that he has been very lonely. Bo's approach to women is one of loudness, strength, and obstinacy. He is too insecure about his image and his feelings and therefore acts like a bully. Yet by the time the play ends, Bo has matured enough to show his tender side to Cherie. As a result, she agrees to marry him.

Virgil Blessing —

Virgil is an older (significantly older than Bo), wiser cowboy who not only is Bo's long-time friend, but has become a father figure to Bo, (who was orphaned at the age of ten) as well as Bo's head ranch hand. Virgil has never been married, but he is more knowledgeable about women than Bo and advises him how to behave with women.

Carl —

Carl is the bus driver, who has an ongoing "just passing through" relationship with Grace, which, as referenced repeatedly in the play, is purely sexual in nature. Grace is sweet on him and he seems to be interested in her, but only as a sexual tryst when he is in town. He declines to answer questions on his marital status.