



A Place of His Own:
Inge's "The Tiny Closet" as Outside
Sexual and Political Orders

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Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

May 3, 2013

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William Inge Theatre Festival and Conference

May 1 – 4, 2013

Independence Community College

Independence, Kansas

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William Inge's works, among a variety of themes, explore issues of homosexuality, sociology, and politics. Arguably, his one-act plays have been some of his greatest contributions to the studies of these issues. With Inge's 1963 one-act *The Tiny Closet*, Inge allows readers to engage in the social politics of a 1950s culture. The play focuses on a Mr. Newbold, a boarding-room tenant in a small Midwestern city. In this rented room is a small, locked closet. The secrecy of this borrowed closet fascinates his landlady, Mrs. Crosby, who is determined to discover its contents, but Mr. Newbold is unable and/or unwilling to unlock the closet for anyone. At the close of the particular afternoon of the play, the landlady's curiosity is satiated with the discovery that Mr. Newbold does not fit her image of masculinity. Inge's *The Tiny Closet* not only depicts the collective prejudice of the 1950's towards homosexuality, but also towards Communism. Inge's own sexual identity parallels Mr. Newbold's identity, thus revealing both playwright and play as sexual and political outsiders of the 1950's. Utilizing Ralph F. Voss's discussion about the dramatist's biography and work, this paper will describe how *The Tiny Closet* is Inge's critique of an intolerant society and an exploration of the "place" Inge and Mr. Newbold were trying to protect for themselves and other outsiders.

***The Tiny Closet* and Closet Homosexuality**

The Tiny Closet was one of several one-act plays written by William Inge in the early 1950's, just when his "big four" full-length plays (*Come Back, Little Sheba*; *Picnic*; *Bus Stop*; and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*) were beginning to establish his greatness as a playwright. Inge famously developed one of his one-acts, *People in the Wind*, into the full-length *Bus Stop*, but many of Inge's other one-acts continue to stand on their own as expert examples of short drama.

In *The Tiny Closet* Mr. Newbold's emphatic wish is to have his rented contain a closet

that is kept off-limits to all but him. The shattering result of his landlady Mrs. Crosby's breach of his trust is probably the most memorable section of the play, worth describing here: Mr. Newbold, his secret hobby creating women's hats outed by Mrs. Crosby's breaking and entering, becomes as "a shy and frightened young girl" (Inge 65). As he carefully picks up the hat Mrs. Crosby has casually tossed aside and tries it on, Newbold's described body language illustrates how his world has collapsed. He looks into a mirror "in an effort to create some image of beauty, but he does not succeed. The image has been destroyed for him. He...cries like a hopeless child" (Inge 65).

It is easy to read Mr. Newbold's secret hobby as an allegory of homosexuality in a heterosexual world, especially given Inge's own homosexuality. It is perhaps most telling to analyze Mrs. Crosby's behavior, as well as her less brazen but equally guilty friend Mrs. Hergesheimer, as indicative of the egregiously insensitive attitudes toward alternate sexualities common in post-World War II America.

William Inge as the "Queer Outsider"

Inge lived and worked in the paradoxical theatre world of the time, a world that marginalized homosexuals even as it benefitted enormously from their talents.

In his introduction to the collection of essays called *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner writes, "...queers live as queers, as lesbians, as gays, as homosexuals, in contexts other than sex. In different ways queer politics might therefore have implications for any area of social life" (vii). In the conservative times of the 1950's, the consequences arising from Inge's sexuality were a burden under which he continually struggled. Although his creative achievement was nonetheless remarkable and now widely recognized, Inge was tortured by the effort to keep his sexuality hidden, so much so that he sought refuge in alcohol. As Voss writes,

Inge's alcohol abuse required a stay in a sanatorium and ongoing treatment from therapists and psychiatrists (114).

Alcohol abuse was one of the negative results of society's refusal to allow people like William Inge to disclose a true identity. For, as most of us understand about the time period, the mainstream American view was that "true" masculinity and femininity at least partially depended upon heterosexuality; sexual identity outside of this confine was, simply, wrong. In 1956, Paul Welch wrote an article for *Life Magazine* titled "The Gay World Takes to the Streets," with the revelatory subtitle: "A secret world grows open and bolder. Society is forced to look at it – and try to understand it." Welch's use of the word "forced" inspires the image of the writer reaching out and physically turning the reader's head so that he/she must finally look at the undercurrent of society, the explicit message being that, for our own safety, this deviant and dangerous world has to be watched closely. Homosexuals knew their public careers could not survive if their private lives were made known, so they suffered in solitude. A playwright such as William Inge, whose talent had brought him to the Broadway theatre pinnacle, simply could not, or would not, risk the probable guilt-by-association career destruction the accusation of homosexuality could bring. The effort it took to essentially live two lives was devastating on the playwright's psychological well-being, right up to his tragic death (Voss 149).

Although one might imagine William Inge's world of playwrights and theatre artists to be more open to difference, sexual and otherwise, it was not. Goodman, in his book *Growing Up Absurd, the Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*, wrote of the disaffected young men in postwar America, angry, delinquent and otherwise outside of the "normal" American male (143). Certainly, homosexuals were lumped in this general category of nonconformity, along with political outsiders such as communists and anarchists. The term "psychopath" became a catch-

all term for those who did not or would not fit into their allotted roles, such as homosexuals or drug users or homeless persons. All in this category were considered threats to the integrity of America as a land of purity, particularly when it was trying so hard to distinguish itself from the Communist “other.” Of course, the irony was that this vision of American purity and innocence existed in stark contrast to the bloody results of American military interventions worldwide. It was as though the more American foreign policy connected to bloodshed, the more the domestic center had to exalt an image of purity, in the same way that certain tainted televangelists battled sordid stories of their personal lives with more of a “commitment” to a moral God.

What is unique about the 1950’s—ironic, too, in that artistic envelopes were pushed with increasing regularity—is that the decade was marked by regressive tendencies such as a push for a return to “traditions.” These traditions included marriage, where women were dissuaded from realizing themselves outside of marriage and gender roles. For example, according to David Francis from the National Bureau of Economic Research, statistically speaking, women's presence on college campuses decreased from previous decades.

Living and working in a society with a repressive emphasis on traditions and fear of the “psychopath” meant living and working under conditions of outright prejudice. It was not until Mart Crowley’s 1968 play *The Boys in the Band* that the general public was given a frank treatment of homosexuality in America. Inge kept himself and his characters closeted, and it is not surprising that the strain of doing such drove Inge to self-destructive behavior, even within his family of theatre associates who knew of his sexual identity. Voss notes, “...a recurring emphasis in his greatest writing is upon the struggle of individuals within families to achieve their idealized sense of ‘home’” (166). The tragic characters in Inge’s work, like Mr. Newbold, who unsuccessfully sought balance between their self-image and society’s demands were a

reflection of the playwright's own personal turmoil. Mr. Newbold symbolizes Others, such as William Inge, who simply could not live free in the land of freedom.

The Other Outsider: A Threat of Communism

Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's allegations of Communism shook the very foundation of American politics throughout the 1950's. This period, often referred to as the McCarthy era, affected Americans across the country. Threats of being placed on a Black List and being labeled a Communist and unpatriotic citizen drove Americans to turn on each other by the masses. Theatre seemed like much a distant, different world that would provide a sanctuary for creative and artistic expression. Although Barry Witham argues that 1950's theatre was "wistful and inoffensive" (qtd. in Wertheim 212) and turned away from political tension, Inge's *The Tiny Closet* suggests that dramas also criticized the political state of the United States and gave voice to those that been cast out and labeled as Others.

Inge's subversive criticism of the Anti-Communist is most apparent through Mrs. Crosby, the landlady. Her character is vividly eccentric from the start of the play. She is described as a "sort of woman who continues talking until someone stops her" (Inge 58), which depicts her as selfish and senseless. Her initial conversation with Mr. Newbold allows the reader to merely suspect her of being overly curious about her tenants. However, her lack of understanding and lack of willingness to stay away from his "place", his closet, forces the shattering resolution. Mrs. Crosby's understanding of something "[that is] private to us, where we [do not] invited the world to see" (Inge 59) is not only false, but she also uses that pretense to manipulate Mr. Newbold and acquire his trust. Mrs. Crosby clearly embodies the skepticism of the McCarthy era as she acts duplicitously towards her tenant and friend. Her concern to uncover Newbold's "true" identity becomes an obsession throughout the one-act, and emphasizes the

paranoia Americans experienced during this period. Though Mrs. Crosby initially upholds Mr. Newbold as an exemplary gentleman and houseguest, her suspicions about the contents of the closet do not allow her to overlook her own curiosity about his character. Ultimately, the truth can only be exposed to Mrs. Hergesheimer, her neighbor and confidant, because both women are blinded by mistrust. As Mr. Newbold departs, both women discuss their suspicions regarding the tenant, and Mrs. Crosby fears that she is harboring a Communist. Mrs. Hergesheimer's character is also significant, because she contributes almost like an alternative Greek chorus. Instead of echoing reason and wisdom, she echoes the paranoia that the government instilled in the public during the 1950's. Mrs. Hergesheimer encourages Mrs. Crosby's fears by telling her that "you [cannot] tell" when they are Communists, because their behavior could be a "cover-up" (Inge 62) of the truth.

The Tiny Closet intersects various Outsiders in order to reveal the hypocrisy of an intolerant society. Even Elsie's role, the Black housekeeper for Mrs. Crosby, functions as an additional lens in which to view the sociological and political state of the 1950s and 1960s. Though Mrs. Crosby refers to her as an inferior character, Elsie is able to recognize Mrs. Crosby's and Mrs. Hergesheimer's ridiculous behavior and suspicions. After the two landladies go upstairs to search Mr. Newbold's closet, Elsie "comes in from the kitchen, looks up the stairs with curiosity. Then, as though the behavior of the two women was too much for her to understand, she shrugs her shoulders, laughs gently, and returns to the kitchen" (Inge 63). The simple and subtle recognition by Elsie emphasizes the point Inge is establishing with *The Tiny Closet*. Mrs. Crosby, symbolizing the result of McCarthy sensationalism, casts down Elsie because of her race and class position. Thus, Elsie is also viewed as another Outsider like Mr. Newbold. Elsie's "Otherness" in the play enables her to respect Mr. Newbold's privacy and

closet, and is also able to recognize the women's behavior as deceitful and wrong.

The women's ascent into Mr. Newbold's room and their invasion of his singular space in society, allow the reader to witness the ultimate breach of privacy. After the women discover the hats he has crafted, Mrs. Crosby comments that she would "rather be harboring a Communist" (Inge 64). The hypocrisy that Inge reveals through these events effectively critiques the ideologies set forth by a mainstream society. Homosexuality, which is merely implied by the tenant's hat making, makes Mr. Newbold an outcast and a "creature" (Inge 64) outside of social acceptance. As Mrs. Crosby screams "Hats! Hats! Hats! With flowers on them" with disbelief, Mrs. Hergesheimer leaves and says that she hopes "he never finds out" (Inge 65) what they have done; however, the women's actions lead to the destruction of Mr. Newbold's sense of self at the close of the play.

The condemnation of the McCarthy Era and a homophobic society is effectively expressed in William Inge's *The Tiny Closet*. The reader understands the social infraction both Mrs. Crosby and Mrs. Hergesheimer commit upon unlocking the "tiny closet [Mr. Newbold calls his] own" (Inge 65). These dynamic characters in this one-act provide the audience with extensive insight regarding issues of politics, sociology, and Queer studies during the 1950's. Both character and playwright, as well as homosexual and Communist, experience a degree of "shame" (Inge 65) as Outsiders of the political and social orders of the McCarthy Era, which Inge both voices and critiques in *The Tiny Closet*.

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