What the Butler Saw Study Guide

What the Butler Saw by Joe Orton

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Introduction

Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* was first performed on March 5, 1969, a year and a half after its author's death. Like Orton's earlier plays, *What the Butler Saw* appalled and enraged audiences with its blatant sexuality and attacks on authority and conventional morality. The first audiences were so outraged that they disturbed the performance, yelling at the actors and destroying their programs. In the ensuing years, society's standards have become less restrictive, though there are many who would still be shocked and angered by Orton's work. Orton, however, has gained international respect and recognition as an important playwright. Most critics regard *What the Butler Saw* as his finest play.

The title of the play comes from an Edwardian peepshow, a type of entertainment in which people viewed pictures, often erotic, through a small lens. The implication behind the title is one of voyeurism. The audience is to be given a glimpse of private sexual conduct. Orton's title indicates the sexual nature of the play and implies that the audience will be put in the position of voyeurs, surreptitiously watching other people's lives. The content of the play is frankly carnal, and sexuality and sexual identity are explored at length. *What the Butler Saw* also looks at authority, particularly at the authority of psychiatrists and considers the question of madness, of who is sane and who is insane.

What the Butler Saw is a comedy, more specifically the comedic subgenre known as a farce. Orton's themes, while serious, are intended to amuse. His witty dialogue is reminiscent of that of Victorian playwright Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest*). Like Wilde, Orton offers a criticism and exploration of society's standards. Entertaining as well as enlightening, *What the Butler Saw* is today considered a contemporary classic.

Author Biography

Joe Orton was born John Kingsley Orton on January 1, 1933, into a working class family in Leicester, England. Orton's father earned little as a gardener for the city, and his mother's extravagant taste ensured that the family was almost always in debt. Orton's parents fought continually, and there was little affection within the family; writing in his adolescent journal, Orton always put the word "family " in quotation marks.

As a teenager, Orton found escape from his family situation by acting in local theater productions. In 1951, at the age of eighteen, Orton left Leicester to study acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. It was there that he met Kenneth Halliwell, an older and more sophisticated student who would become Orton's companion, collaborator, lover, and eventually his murderer. Halliwell encouraged Orton to begin writing, and the two co-authored several novels before Orton started writing on his own.

In 1959, the two began a bizarre act of literary vandalism. They would both steal library books, deface them in humorous ways, then return them to the library, where they would secretly watch the other patrons' reactions to their pranks. Orton often pasted over author pictures in the books, in one case replacing the photograph of the author of an etiquette book with a nude cut from a volume on art. Orton also typed his own mildly obscene blurbs onto book jackets. In 1962, Orton and Halliwell were arrested for these acts; each spent six months in jail.

In the meantime, Orton began writing plays and achieved his first success when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced *The Ruffian on the Stair* (1964), which dealt comically with homosexuality and sexual ambiguity, themes which were to become Orton's hallmark. His next work, *Entertaining Mr. Sloan* (1964), in which the title character is blackmailed into granting sexual favors to the son and daughter of the man he murdered, brought Orton critical and financial success but also criticism for the supposed obscenity of the work. After the production of his next major play, Loot, Orton's writing was compared to that of such literary legends as Ben Jonson (*The Alchemist*), George Bernard Shaw (*Man and Superman*), and Lewis Carol (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). Loot was named best play of 1966 by the *Evening Standard*. Orton also wrote a number of one-act plays and the screenplay *Up against It*, which was commissioned by the Beatles as the sequel to their film *A Hard Day's Night* but ultimately rejected for production (musician Todd Rundgren resurrected the text in the early- 1990s, writing the music for a stage adaptation of Orton's unproduced work). *What the Butler Saw* (1969), Orton's last play, was not produced until after his death. It is generally regarded as his finest work.

Halliwell greatly envied Orton's success, and the relationship between the two became very strained as Orton began to draw away from Halliwell. Eventually, Halliwell sunk into a deep depression. On August 9, 1967, he murdered Orton, bludgeoning him with a hammer, then committed suicide. In the years since Orton's death, critical regard for his plays has grown, and he is now regarded as one of the finest playwrights of his era

Plot Summary

Act I

Act I opens in a psychiatric clinic. Dr. Prentice, a psychiatrist, enters, followed by Geraldine Barclay, whom Prentice is interviewing for a secretarial position. Geraldine carries a small box, which she puts on the floor. Dr. Prentice begins to question her, and she reveals that she does not know who her father is and that she has not seen her mother, a chambermaid, in many years. Geraldine was raised by her stepmother, Mrs. Barclay, who recently died from a gas explosion that also destroyed a statue of Sir Winston Churchill. Parts of the statue were found embedded in Mrs. Barclay.

Under the pretense that he is conducting a medical examination required for the job, the psychiatrists asks the young woman to undress. Dr. Prentice attempts to seduce Geraldine, who seems to remain innocent of his intentions. Removing her dress, she lies on the couch, he pulls the curtains around her and puts her underwear on a chair. She is naked but hidden by the privacy curtains when Mrs. Prentice, Dr. Prentice's wife, arrives. Nick, a hotel page, also enters.

When Dr. Prentice leaves, Mrs. Prentice asks Nick to return her dress. The two have had a sexual liaison in a linen closet at the hotel, and Nick has taken photographs of Mrs. Prentice, which he threatens to sell unless she persuades her husband to give him the secretarial position. Dr. Prentice comes back on stage, Nick and Mrs. Prentice leave. Dr. Prentice tells Geraldine to get dressed, but before she is able, Mrs. Prentice comes back. Seeing Geraldine's dress but not Geraldine, Mrs. Prentice demands the dress and reveals that she is wearing only a slip beneath her coat.

Dr. Rance, a psychiatrist and government official, enters the room and asks about the clinic. Seeing the naked Geraldine, he assumes she is a patient and begins questioning her. Dr. Prentice gives Geraldine a hospital nightgown to wear, and Dr. Rance gives her an injection. Mrs. Prentice enters looking for Geraldine Barclay. When Geraldine identifies herself, Dr. Prentice attributes the girl's claim of identity to insanity. Dr. Rance insists that Geraldine was molested by her father, despite her objections. He takes her from the room, and Mrs. Prentice comes in, again searching for "Miss Barclay."

Dr. Prentice leaves, supposedly to search for Geraldine, and when he is gone, Mrs. Prentice tells Dr. Rance that Dr. Prentice is behaving strangely and recounts what were in fact his attempts to keep her from learning of his attempt to seduce Geraldine. Dr. Prentice enters and is asked by Dr. Rance about the whereabouts of Geraldine; Dr. Prentice gives locations and Dr. Rance leaves to look for her. Mrs. Prentice leaves briefly, then returns, announcing that there is a policeman at the door. Nick enters with Mrs. Prentice's dress. Dr. Prentice is alone with Nick, whom he tells to undress. Looking for Nick, Mrs. Prentice finds only his clothes, which she takes with her. Dr. Prentice tells Nick to put on Mrs. Prentice's dress and wig and pretend to be Geraldine.

Fearing arrest for his recent molestation of a group of schoolgirls, Nick hides from Sergeant Match. Geraldine enters wearing Nick's clothes, however, and Sergeant Match reveals that he is looking not only for Nick but also for Geraldine, who is suspected of having a piece of the Churchill statue. Nick enters, wearing Mrs. Prentice's dress and claiming to be Geraldine, and Sergeant Match asks Nick for the missing piece of the statue. Mrs. Prentice takes Nick from the room to give him a physical examination. Dr. Rance returns and, thinking that Geraldine, whom he considers a mental patient, has escaped, pulls the siren bell. Sergeant Match discovers Geraldine, dressed as Nick, and says he needs to talk to him (her).

Act II

Act II begins in the same location one minute later. Geraldine complains to Sergeant Match, who believes her to be Nick, about Dr. Prentice's sexual misconduct. Dr. Prentice denies her account, and Sergeant Match says she must be given a physical examination. Rance says he will examine Geraldine, and Sergeant Match leaves the room. Attempting to avoid an examination, Geraldine says that she is, in fact, a girl. Mrs. Prentice enters, stating that Nick, still dressed in women's clothing, also refuses an examination. Prentice tells Rance that Nick has left and that Geraldine is Gerald Barclay. Rance says that Dr. Prentice is insane, and he relieves Dr. Prentice of his post.

Geraldine and Nick note that they are wearing each other's clothes, and the two confess their true genders. Nick announces that he wants to wear Sergeant Match's clothes so that he can claim he has arrested himself. When Sergeant Match enters, Dr. Prentice gives him a box of pills and orders him to undress for an examination. Sergeant Match takes off his clothes as Dr. Prentice secretly hands them to Nick. Both Dr. Prentice and Nick leave the room, and Mrs. Prentice enters with Dr. Rance. Dr. Rance attempts to explain the strange goings on to Mrs. Prentice, but his explanation is a skewed psychiatric narrative that "explains" everything but is actually professional sounding nonsense. Dr. Rance talks about publishing his "documentary type novelette" and is convinced he will make a fortune.

In the meantime, Sergeant Match enters the room, heavily drugged, and is taken out by Dr. Prentice. Dr. Rance and Mrs. Prentice notice the missing box of bills and first think Dr. Prentice has committed suicide, then speculate that he has murdered Geraldine. Dr. Rance asks for a straitjacket for Dr. Prentice, who now admits that he was trying to seduce Geraldine. When Mrs. Prentice suggests that he admit that he prefers young boys, Dr. Prentice orders her to remove her dress, then slaps her and tears the dress off of her. When Dr. Rance comes in, Mrs. Prentice gives him an exaggerated version of Dr. Prentice's attack.

Nick enters, wearing Sergeant Match's clothes, and says that he has arrested his brother, Nicholas Beckett, and put him in jail. Dr. Rance and Mrs. Prentice tell Nick that Dr. Prentice murdered his secretary, at which point Nick admits his true identity, stating that Dr. Prentice had asked him to pose as a woman. At Dr. Rance's request, Nick attempts to put Dr. Prentice in a straitjacket but is interrupted when Sergeant Match

enters. Geraldine enters and Dr. Prentice tells her to remove Nick's uniform and put on a dress. A shot is heard, and Sergeant Match enters with blood pouring down his leg. Mrs. Prentice enters, holding a gun.

The next few moments are filled with confusion as the various actors enter and leave and Mrs. Prentice shoots at Nick several times. Geraldine enters, Rance announces that "the patient" has been found, and she is put into the straitjacket. Dr. Prentice enters saying that Mrs. Prentice has tried to shoot him because she believes he's mad. Nick attempts to put a straitjacket on Dr. Prentice. Dr. Rance puts a straitjacket on Mrs. Prentice, and Dr. Prentice gains control of the gun and threatens Dr. Rance, who pulls an alarm so that sirens wail and metal grilles come down over the doors. Dr. Rance tells Dr. Prentice to put the gun down, but when he does, Dr. Rance grabs the weapon and points it at the psychiatrist.

Dr. Prentice then tells Dr. Rance the truth about Nick and Geraldine's identities. Dr. Rance then instructs Dr. Prentice to release Mrs. Prentice and Geraldine, who complains of the loss of her lucky elephant charm.

When Dr. Rance produces the charm, Nick says that he has one that's identical, and Mrs. Prentice, seeing both pieces of jewelry, shows that they fit together to form a brooch. She announces that she was given the brooch as "payment" when a young man raped her in a linen closet during a power outage while she was working as a chambermaid. The rape resulted in pregnancy, and when she subsequently gave birth to twins, she broke the brooch, pinned one piece to each of the children, then abandoned them in separate parts of town. She, therefore, is the mother of Geraldine and Nick.

Then Dr. Prentice says he has not seen the brooch since he gave it to a chambermaid he raped. He learns that the chambermaid is in fact his wife and that he is therefore Nick and Geraldine's father. Dr. Rance is delighted, for now he can say that Geraldine really is the victim of an incestuous assault, as is Mrs. Prentice.

As the "family" embraces, the skylight opens and a ladder descends. Sergeant Match is lowered from the skylight wearing Mrs. Prentice's leopard-print dress; he demands the missing piece of Churchill. Geraldine says that the undertaker gave her a box which she has not opened and which she brought with her to her interview. Sergeant Match opens the box and holds aloft the missing section of the statue□an oversized penis (an item that adds to the play's ribaldry when it is recalled that the statue pieces were imbedded in Mrs. Barclay; in the first production, a cigar was used to lessen the sexual outrage). The play ends as all gather their clothes and climb the ladder into the light.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

The scene is set in the examining room of an insane asylum. There are entrances to the main hall; the dispensary, where the drugs are kept; the wards, where the patients are kept; and the garden, where the plants are kept.

Geraldine Barclay arrives for a job interview with Dr. Prentice. She is carrying a large box. As Dr. Prentice conducts the interview, Geraldine reveals that the box contains pieces of a statue of Winston Churchill that exploded, killing her mother. She explains that she was adopted and she never knew who her real mother and father were. Geraldine says that her mother was sexually assaulted at the Station Hotel and after giving birth gave her up for adoption. Dr. Prentice mentions that he once stayed at the Station Hotel, then continues the interview. He talks Geraldine into removing her clothes, saying that he needs to examine her physically to determine whether she can function mentally. Just as a reluctant Geraldine is handing Dr. Prentice her underwear, Mrs. Prentice arrives. Geraldine hides behind a screen, and Dr. Prentice frantically tries to hide Geraldine's clothes.

The conversation between Dr. and Mrs. Prentice reveals that neither can stand the other and that Mrs. Prentice is highly sexed and frustrated with her marriage and has just spent the night at the Station Hotel. Nick, a porter from the hotel, comes in and asks to be paid for bringing in Mrs. Prentice's luggage. Mrs. Prentice asks Dr. Prentice to make sure that her luggage is all there, saying that the staff at the hotel has already stolen some of her things. While Dr. Prentice is out, the conversation between Nick and Mrs. Prentice reveals that Nick was sexually intimate with Mrs. Prentice and is demanding a job in return for the negatives of pictures he and the hotel manager took at the time. Mrs. Prentice takes a drink from Dr. Prentice's supply of scotch, something she does with increasing frequency as the action progresses.

Dr. Prentice returns, bringing Mrs. Prentice's suitcase. He and Mrs. Prentice bicker about whether they have a good sex life, and then Mrs. Prentice takes her drink and suitcase into another room. Dr. Prentice pays Nick for his services, and Nick leaves. Dr. Prentice tells Geraldine, who is still hidden behind the screen, to get dressed. Before he can hand Geraldine her clothes, however, Mrs. Prentice returns and tries to talk Dr. Prentice into hiring a male secretary. Dr. Prentice isn't interested, and he tosses a note to Geraldine. Meanwhile, Mrs. Prentice takes off her coat and reveals she's wearing nothing but underclothes. As she puts on Geraldine's dress, she explains that after she was sexually assaulted, her dress and wig were stolen. She explains that Nick assaulted and robbed her, and she wants to give him a job because she feels an inexplicable sympathy for him. Mrs. Prentice, who knows that Dr. Prentice was interviewing Geraldine, goes out to tell Geraldine that the job is no longer available. Just as Dr. Prentice is promising to find Geraldine some clothes, Dr. Rance arrives.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

What the Butler Saw is a farce, a style of comedy in which characters find themselves in extreme situations and make increasingly extreme choices at an extremely fast pace as they become increasingly desperate. Farce illustrates the often bizarre lengths to which people will go to prevent something they don't want known from being revealed. In this play, the action is driven by the three central characters' fear of being seen as sexually inappropriate. Geraldine doesn't want to be thought of as a "bad girl," Dr. Prentice doesn't want to be seen as being guilty of professional misconduct, and Mrs. Prentice doesn't want to be known as sexually unresponsive. These fears suggest that the play's theme is related to issues of sexual freedom. The play's action, with the characters' increasingly frantic struggles to protect themselves from being exposed, reinforces this idea, suggesting that if people could only feel free to have sex in the way they were inclined to, their lives could be much simpler. The setting of the insane asylum reinforces this point even further, suggesting that obsession with sexuality, both in terms of denying it as Geraldine and Rance do and wanting it too much as the Prentices do is itself a kind of madness.

The style of dialogue in this play is an important element. The characters without exception speak in elaborate and grammatically proper phrases filled with double meanings, ironies, and wit. This illuminates the personal and dramatic tensions in the play in another way. The characters speak extremely well for the same reasons that they want to be perceived as being proper, but at the same time they're behaving in ways that society would suggest are improper. In short, the dialogue illuminates the tension between the way people think they are supposed to be and the way they actually act.

There are two important elements of foreshadowing in this section. The first is the discussion of the Winston Churchill statue as related to Geraldine's birth history, both of which relate to the information revealed at the end of the play. The second is Mrs. Prentice's comment that she feels a mysterious sympathy for Nick, which foreshadows the revelation of exactly who they are to each other, also at the end of the play.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Rance arrives and explains that he's an inspector for the government. This makes Dr. Prentice very nervous, and he starts drinking. As Rance looks around the room, he discovers Dr. Prentice's note to Geraldine, and then he discovers Geraldine behind the screen. Dr. Prentice invents an explanation for Geraldine being there, but Rance doesn't believe him. He assumes Geraldine is insane and a patient in the asylum, and he conducts an interview in which he takes her honest answers to his increasingly bizarre questions as proof that she is crazy. During the interview, Dr. Prentice finds Geraldine a hospital gown. As she puts it on, Rance asks Dr. Prentice for his interpretation of her case. Geraldine comes out from behind the screen in the hospital gown and says that now that she has clothes on she wants to go home. Rance injects her with a sedative, and she collapses.

Mrs. Prentice returns, saying that Geraldine is nowhere to be found. When Geraldine protests that she is Geraldine, Dr. Prentice explains to Rance that she's just pretending and that he was right all along, she is a patient. As Mrs. Prentice goes out to call Geraldine's employment agency to find out whether she's checked in, Rance asks Geraldine questions about her history and jumps to the conclusion that she was molested by her father. Geraldine's denials become more and more emphatic, convincing Rance that she was molested and that she was trying to have sex with Dr. Prentice because he was a more sensitive substitute father figure. Dr. Prentice tries to comfort Geraldine, but Rance takes her out and prepares to cut her hair so that she can be admitted to Dr. Prentice's asylum.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

Rance is a symbol of society's perceptions of, and influences on, sexuality. His generally repressive and judgmental nature represents the way in which society tends to suppress sex in all but its most traditional and "normal" forms. At the same time, Rance's determination to leap to conclusions and assumptions represents the way society tends to believe what it wants to believe and doesn't seem interested in genuine understanding. The fact that Rance is obsessive and bizarre about his opinions suggests that society is a little insane when it comes to dealing with sexuality.

On another level, Rance's single mindedness of interpretation and perspective makes him the play's principal antagonist. Rance's opinions, actions, reactions, and choices oppose the actions and goals of the other characters. This leads the characters to struggle even harder to keep their secrets, suggesting that when people who don't experience "normal sexuality" are faced with the judgment of society, they also have to struggle to keep it secret.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Despite Mrs. Prentice's repeated interruptions, Dr. Prentice finally manages to hide Geraldine's underwear and shoes. Mrs. Prentice announces that Nick has returned and goes out to fetch him. Rance comes back in and announces that he has cut Geraldine's hair quite short and that she's ready to be admitted as a patient. Mrs. Prentice comes back in, and Rance asks whether there is any news of Geraldine. Mrs. Prentice says there is none, but then Dr. Prentice pretends to remember that Geraldine is actually downstairs, already at work making politically correct dolls. Rance angrily tells Dr. Prentice that Geraldine must be stopped at once and that the dolls must be burned because tradition must be upheld. Dr. Prentice goes out to stop the work.

Mrs. Prentice and Rance discuss Dr. Prentice's sanity, or lack of it, and conclude that he's quite mad. As she's searching for evidence, Mrs. Prentice discovers one of Geraldine's shoes and takes it as the final proof of his sexual deviance. Mrs. Prentice collapses into a chair, Rance comforts her, and she tells him all the things she's had to deal with since she has returned from the Station Hotel. Seeing that Dr. Prentice has come back, Rance warns Mrs. Prentice to say nothing to him and then asks Dr. Prentice where Geraldine is. Dr. Prentice tries to convince Rance to stay away from her, but Rance is determined and goes outside. Dr. Prentice and Mrs. Prentice argue about his sanity and her sexual desires, with both of them making nasty accusations about the other's behavior and attitudes.

Nick comes in and announces that he will hand over the photographs but needs a guarantee of employment before giving up the negatives. Mrs. Prentice explains Nick's blackmailing scheme to Dr. Prentice, who can't believe what he's hearing. Nick returns Mrs. Prentice's stolen dress and wig, and Dr. Prentice takes the dress, which is patterned like leopard skin. Mrs. Prentice snaps at him and then takes the bottle of scotch and leaves. As Dr. Prentice explains to Nick the conditions of working at the asylum, Rance comes in and goes out again, still looking for Geraldine.

Mrs. Prentice comes in, saying there's a policeman at the door that wants to speak with Dr. Prentice. He tells Mrs. Prentice to show the policeman in. Nick assumes the policeman has come to arrest him, and he explains that he had a sexual adventure in an all girl's school. Dr. Prentice looks at the box with the leopard-print dress and wig, has an idea, and tells Nick to take off his clothes. As Nick is getting undressed, Mrs. Prentice comes in and demands to know what's going on. Mrs. Prentice goes out with Nick's uniform. Dr. Prentice explains to Nick that if he puts on the dress and wig and impersonates Geraldine, all of their problems will be solved. Nick agrees and goes off to get changed, but suddenly he looks out and asks for shoes.

As Dr. Prentice is searching for shoes Sergeant Match comes in. Dr. Prentice sends him out and continues searching for Geraldine's shoes. A series of interruptions from

Geraldine, Mrs. Prentice, and Match result in Geraldine being able to put her underwear back on, Nick wearing the leopard-print dress, the wig, and Geraldine's shoes, and Mrs. Prentice and Match becoming completely confused by Dr. Prentice's behavior.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

Late in this section of the play we discover that Nick is feeling just as sexually guilty as the other characters due to his adventure in the girls' school. This reinforces the idea that the play's thematic point relates to sexual freedom and again illustrates that there would be less trouble and conflict if people, even schoolgirls, were not sexually repressed.

While Rance symbolizes society's attitudes, Match represents society's authority. Match's attempts to assert control over the chaos in Dr. Prentice's examining room represent society's attempts to control sexuality. Match's lack of success and eventual participation in the chaos suggests that sexuality and human desire are forces too powerful to be controlled.

The leopard-print dress is a symbol of the animal nature of sexuality, while the fact that so many of the characters wear it represents how they are struggling with that side of their nature.

Act 1, Part 4

Act 1, Part 4 Summary

Match explains that he's come to the asylum for two reasons. Firstly, he's looking for the young man who assaulted Mrs. Prentice the night before. When Dr. Prentice says he's never been there, Mrs. Prentice says that's not true and goes out to get Nick's uniform as proof. Match then explains that he's also there to look for Geraldine because she has an important piece of the Winston Churchill statue that blew up and killed her mother. As Match says that the piece is the last one necessary to reconstruct the statue, Mrs. Prentice returns with the uniform. Match asks Dr. Prentice if he has seen Nick or Geraldine, and Dr. Prentice replies that he hasn't. Mrs. Prentice says he's lying, then sends Match outside to find Rance, whom she says can and will explain Dr. Prentice's behavior.

When Match is gone, Mrs. Prentice tries to calm her husband down by saying that she and Rance will help him. She then goes out, also looking for Rance. Geraldine looks out from behind the screen and tells Prentice to be honest, but he refuses and accidentally admits that he was trying to seduce her. Before Geraldine can react, Match comes back in, asking Dr. Prentice to help him find Rance. Dr. Prentice leaves with Match. Geraldine grabs Nick's uniform and tries to find a place to put it on but can't because she sees Nick coming in from one direction and Rance coming from another, and she knows Mrs. Prentice is coming from a third. Geraldine runs behind the screen just as Nick, who is dressed in the leopard-print dress and wig, and Mrs. Prentice come in from opposite directions.

Nick says that he's Geraldine, and Mrs. Prentice tells "her" that she's unsuitable for the job. Dr. Prentice and Match arrive, and Mrs. Prentice introduces "Geraldine" to Match, who asks "Geraldine" to tell him where the missing piece of the Churchill statue is. "Geraldine" says she doesn't know anything about it, and Match doesn't believe her. He says he intends to search her but can't because only women are allowed to search female suspects. Mrs. Prentice offers to examine "Geraldine," and they go off together.

Rance comes in and announces that Geraldine has escaped and that the entire asylum and grounds must be searched. He activates a siren. Meanwhile, Match deduces that Geraldine can only be in this room, pulls aside the screen, and reveals Geraldine, who now wears Nick's uniform.

Act 1, Part 4 Analysis

Match's reference to the missing piece of the Churchill statue reminds us of this plot element and foreshadows the role that the destruction of the statue and the death of Geraldine's mother fulfill in the play's climactic revelations. These revelations, one of

which is that Nick and Geraldine are twins, are further foreshadowed by their posing as each other in each other's clothing.

The action throughout this first act has built to the climax of this final tableau. As the curtain closes we're left wondering what Geraldine will say, what Mrs. Prentice will do when she discovers that "Geraldine" is actually Nick, and whether Dr. Prentice will get away with it all. This classic farce technique moves the story's ever-escalating improbabilities along to the point that they can't possibly get any worse and ends the act. When the audience returns for Act 2 things get worse in ways that nobody can predict.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

The action resumes about a minute after the end of the first act. Geraldine, who is wearing Nick's uniform, says she's glad to see the police because she wants to be taken into custody for her own protection. When she says she's a girl, Match doesn't believe her and accuses her of Nick's crime at the girls' school. When Geraldine denies she was involved and accuses Dr. Prentice of trying to sexually assault her, Match asks Dr. Prentice to explain himself. Before Dr. Prentice can answer, Rance comes in and announces that security cautions are all in place. Match explains to him the nature of the charges against Dr. Prentice, Geraldine says she actually is Nick so she can be taken to prison and get away from this situation, and Rance decides to examine Geraldine to find out how traumatized she is. Rance also decides to examine Match to find out whether he's as sane as he thinks he is. Match leaves, and Rance prepares to examine Geraldine/Nick, who tries to talk her way out of the examination, but Rance insists. Just as Rance is about to undo her trousers, Geraldine shouts that she's Geraldine and she's pretending to be Nick to help Dr. Prentice. Again, Rance doesn't believe her.

Mrs. Prentice comes in, saying that Nick, who is still disguised as Geraldine, refuses to undress in front of a woman. Rance goes out to convince him, followed by Mrs. Prentice.

Geraldine tries to go out through the garden, but Dr. Prentice tells her that strict security is in place and she won't be able to. Rance comes back in, saying that Nick/Geraldine refuses to be undressed. Mrs. Prentice follows, leading Nick/Geraldine and saying that he's been given a sedative and will be much more agreeable to an examination. She asks whether Dr. Prentice assaulted "the other boy," meaning Geraldine, who is still in Nick's uniform. Rance says he's trying to find out. Mrs. Prentice then asks Dr. Prentice what happened to Nick, explaining to Rance that Dr. Prentice assaulted him as well. Rance, Mrs. Prentice, and Dr. Prentice bicker about whether Dr. Prentice is a pervert, then Rance turns to Geraldine and asks who she really is. Dr. Prentice says her name is Gerald. Rance asks what happened to Nick, and Dr. Prentice says he went back to work at the Station Hotel. Rance sends Mrs. Prentice out to find out whether that is true.

Rance announces that he's going to certify Nick and Geraldine insane. They cry out in alarm, and Nick asks Dr. Prentice to help. When Dr. Prentice tries to get Rance to change his mind, Rance takes over as head of the clinic, then runs out to find a sedative to give Dr. Prentice. Nick says that he and Geraldine must quickly switch clothes, and then he asks Dr. Prentice to find a way to get Match's uniform so that Nick can arrest himself and clear the whole matter up. Before they have a chance to put this plan into action, Rance returns, gives Dr. Prentice some pills, and then takes Geraldine to a padded cell. Dr. Prentice agrees to get Match to undress, tells Nick to get some pills from the desk that will make Match more agreeable, and calls Match in.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

The identity and clothing confusion involving Nick and Geraldine suggests that ultimately no one is different from anybody else and that sexual desire and sexual confusion occur in both genders. Meanwhile, the complications arising from this confusion suggest that relations between people would be much smoother if people were honest about who they are and what they want. This is another aspect of the play's theme, suggesting that sexual honesty is a part of sexual freedom.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Match comes in, and Dr. Prentice gets him to undress. As Match is taking off his clothes, Nick is hidden by the screen and takes off the leopard-print dress and wig. Mrs. Prentice comes in as Match drops his trousers. She sees him and screams. Match pulls up his trousers, and he and Dr. Prentice try to explain what's going on, but Mrs. Prentice doesn't want to hear it and goes off in search of Rance. Match finishes undressing, and Dr. Prentice gives him the pills. As Match lies down, Dr. Prentice gives his uniform to Nick and tells him to get changed outside in the garden shed. Nick goes out, then comes back looking for the helmet. Match mentions that it's in the hall, and Nick goes out to get it. Rance goes into the dispensary to get Geraldine's clothes, and Mrs. Prentice comes back just as Nick does, covering his privates with Match's helmet. Mrs. Prentice screams, Nick runs into the garden, and Rance comes in.

Rance and Mrs. Prentice confer. Mrs. Prentice reveals that Nick hasn't returned to the Station Hotel, shows Rance the hospital gown that Geraldine had been wearing, and tells him that she saw Dr. Prentice undressing Match. Rance sums up Dr. Prentice's activities of the day, compares them to past cases, and talks about the dissertation he's going to write on the subject of Dr. Prentice's many madnesses. Mrs. Prentice discovers the pillbox that contained the pills that Match took. She and Rance leap to the conclusion that Dr. Prentice has taken an overdose in an attempt to kill himself, and they run out in opposite directions to try to find him.

Nick and Dr. Prentice, who is carrying the leopard-print dress and wig, run in a moment later. Nick says that Geraldine is hanging from the windowsill in the wards. Just then Match falls out from behind the screen, nearly unconscious. Dr. Prentice realizes the pills he gave him were too strong and that Match needs to have some clothes on and some fresh air. He and Nick struggle to get Match into the dress and haul him outside. Just as they are leaving, Mrs. Prentice and Rance return, saying they can't find Dr. Prentice anywhere. Mrs. Prentice looks out the window into the garden and screams, saying she's just seen her husband carry the body of a woman into the bushes. Rance looks at the pillbox in his hand and theorizes that the pills haven't been used for suicide, but for murder, saying that Dr. Prentice has murdered Geraldine. Rance again talks about his book, saying that the final chapters will prove most interesting.

Dr. Prentice comes in from the garden. Rance accuses him of killing Geraldine, which Dr. Prentice denies. When Dr. Prentice tries to explain the truth of what's going on with the woman in the bushes, Rance doesn't believe him and asks Mrs. Prentice where he can find a straight jacket. Mrs. Prentice tells him, and Rance leaves.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

Because Rance represents society, his eagerness to gain notoriety from writing about Dr. Prentice's "madness" represents the way that society tends to exploit and profit from the sensational and the bizarre. This is the flip side of attitudes we've seen from Rance earlier, when he leapt to conclusions and made quick judgments. This combination of attitudes is found throughout history, such as in the contemporary culture of celebrity and sensation where people are titillated by the unusual or the extreme but also condemn it and exploit it for profit and attention.

Match represents society's authority, so the removal of his clothes represents how authority is broken down when it tries to impose too much order on people's natural desires. Match's being drugged and put into the dress represents the way that society is transformed as a result of those desires turning the tables and gaining influence over society.

Act 2, Part 3

Act 2, Part 3 Summary

Dr. Prentice tries to convince Mrs. Prentice that he hasn't killed Geraldine, but he can't bring her out of hiding because she's wearing Geraldine's dress. Mrs. Prentice, meanwhile, gently tries to convince Dr. Prentice that if he admits the truth of his sexual feelings everything will be fine. Dr. Prentice becomes angry and insists that she take off the dress. Mrs. Prentice happily does so, hoping that they can save their marriage if they have the kind of violent sex she's always wanted. Dr. Prentice grabs the dress and runs out into the garden as Rance runs in with two straight jackets and asks if anyone can help him restrain Dr. Prentice.

Nick comes in dressed in Match's uniform. Pretending to be Nick's brother, Nick says he's just arrested Nick and taken him into custody. He also says that Match is down at the jail, keeping "Nick" company, but then he suddenly confesses that he can no longer tell lies. He reveals his identity and explains how he works at the Station Hotel, got caught up in the disguise of Geraldine, and is now trying to make things right. Rance says the best way for him to do that is help him get Dr. Prentice into the straight jacket. Nick agrees, and they prepare to capture Dr. Prentice. Mrs. Prentice helps by getting two guns out of Dr. Prentice's desk. Rance and Mrs. Prentice go out in separate directions to find Dr. Prentice, who soon comes in, still carrying the dress he took from Mrs. Prentice. Dr. Prentice explains to Nick that Geraldine fell from the window and quite naturally under the circumstances refused to get undressed yet again. Nick tries to get him into the straight jacket.

As Dr. Prentice struggles with Nick, Match, who is wearing the leopard-print dress, appears in the doorway from the garden and says he is ready to be examined. He stumbles into the dispensary just as Geraldine follows him in from outside. Dr. Prentice tries to undress her, but she struggles. Nick struggles to get Dr. Prentice into the straight jacket, and Match stumbles back in and out again. A shot rings out, and Match stumbles through, trailing blood after being hit by a gunshot. Mrs. Prentice comes in, aiming the gun at Dr. Prentice. Geraldine and Nick hide as Mrs. Prentice tries to convince Dr. Prentice to surrender and make love to her. Mrs. Prentice fires, and Dr. Prentice runs out.

Geraldine, Nick, and Match run around looking for a place to hide. Mrs. Prentice keeps firing and hits Nick. Nick runs outside, bleeding. Rance runs in just as Geraldine is running out and holds her at gunpoint, shouting that he has caught the escaped patient. Mrs. Prentice runs out and wraps Geraldine in a straightjacket. Rance shouts happily about yet another chapter of his book, and then he orders Mrs. Prentice to run and get a sedative. While she's gone, Geraldine tries to tell Rance who she is, but Rance doesn't believe her. He suddenly throws Geraldine onto the examining couch and embraces her, saying that offering her love is the only way he knows how to help her.

Mrs. Prentice returns with the sedative and accuses Rance of being inappropriate. Rance says it's a new treatment then grabs the sedative and injects himself with it. He tells Mrs. Prentice to call the police. She goes back out then comes right back in, saying that there is a policeman covered with blood in the hall. Rance calls her delusional, slaps her, and goes out to call the police himself. Mrs. Prentice pours herself another drink.

Nick comes in from the garden, bleeding from a gunshot wound in the shoulder. Mrs. Prentice collapses from the mental strain of everything that's gone on, and Geraldine asks Nick to release her from the straightjacket. As Nick, Geraldine, and the weeping Mrs. Prentice argue about who's insane and who isn't, Dr. Prentice rushes in from the garden. Nick comes after him with a gun and a straightjacket, and Rance rushes in from the hall with the straightjacket and tries to subdue Mrs. Prentice. All four of them end up in a struggling heap on the floor. Dr. Prentice finally emerges holding one of the guns, and he orders the others to stand up and calm down. Dr. Prentice and Rance vow to certify each other, then Rance presses the security alarm. The siren goes off, and bars clank into place across the windows. Everyone is trapped.

Act 2, Part 3 Analysis

The introduction of guns into the action indicates desperate the characters are becoming. The guns also represent how the desperation of society to maintain control can increase to the point of violence. At this point, the play's thematic call for freedom goes beyond the borders of issues around sexuality and illustrates the struggle for freedom from any kind of societal control. Getting out the guns, to coin a phrase, is often society's response when faced with any kind of rebellion or deviation from "the norm," be it political, military, social, or economic. From this perspective, the entire play could be an extended metaphor for the necessity of honest rebellion against traditional, conservative, hypocritical values.

On a technical level, because getting out the guns represents the ultimate in desperate action, the point at which the violence begins marks the beginning of the play's extended, frenzied climax, which peaks when Dr. Prentice and Rance confront each other with the guns and promise angrily to certify each other.

The sealed windows represent the way society, as represented by Rance, and freedom, as represented by the others, are trapped in a constant struggle for control. Only after everyone has realized that they are trapped is it possible for honesty and truth to emerge, for mysteries to unravel, and for confusions to evaporate. That is the essential dramatic action of the play's final section, which makes the thematic comment that once people associated with both freedom and society actually listen to each other, new perspectives on peace and understanding can emerge.

Act 2, Part 4

Act 2, Part 4 Summary

Dr. Prentice puts down his gun, saying there is no point in violence any more. Rance picks the gun up and pulls out the second gun, saying he still intends to certify Dr. Prentice. Nick asks what's to be done with him, but Rance suggests that neither Nick nor Match are actually real and both are products of Mrs. Prentice's recurring fantasy of seeing naked men everywhere. Nick then asks Dr. Prentice where Geraldine is, but Geraldine herself quietly speaks up. She and Dr. Prentice explain what happened between them, and Rance finally believes them. He orders that Geraldine and Mrs. Prentice be released from their straightjackets.

Once Geraldine is free she announces that a lucky charm has gone missing. When Nick hears the description of the charm, he announces that he has one just like it. When Mrs. Prentice sees Nick's charm, she reveals that after a sexual assault years ago at the Station Hotel she gave birth to twins, who she gave up for adoption and gave each half of a brooch to remember her by. She embraces Nick and Geraldine as her children as she confesses that she was assaulted during a power outage, and the man who assaulted her gave her the brooch as a memento. This leads Dr. Prentice to reveal that he was the man who committed the assault, saying that he found the brooch on the sidewalk and just happened to have it with him that day. He embraces Nick and Geraldine as his children. Rance rejoices because Mrs. Prentice's liaison with Nick at the Station Hotel the night before was incestuous, he can still write a sensational book.

Suddenly the skylight opens and Match, still wearing the leopard-print dress and covered with blood, climbs down a rope. He's apparently recovered his wits enough to ask what happened to the missing parts of the exploded statue of Winston Churchill that he came looking for in the first place. Geraldine says they are in the box that she came in. Match looks into it and says that the statue can once more be complete. Match holds up the missing piece, which is a long, thick cylinder. Rance comments that it would have been much more inspiring "in those dark days" if they had actually seen that aspect of Churchill in public rather than just his cigar, which, as a symbol, fell short of the actual object it represented.

Match puts the piece of the statue back. Dr. Prentice asks for assurance from him that all the secrets of what happened that day will remain out of the newspapers. Match assures him of his cooperation, and one by one, they climb the rope to freedom.

Act 2, Part 4 Analysis

The lucky elephant charm is a clear and vivid example of "deus ex machine," a term used to describe a sudden revelation, the sudden appearance of an object or character, or an unmotivated choice that brings about the resolution of the action. The term comes

from the early days of theatre in Ancient Greece, where conflicts between people were often resolved by the appearance of a god or gods on a platform above the action. The phrase translates roughly into "god in the machine," meaning that the gods appeared as the result of some kind of mechanical device. In this play, the sudden mention of the elephant charm and the revelations of its history bring about the resolutions and reconciliations necessary for a happy ending, which in turn represent the harmony possible when freedom and order co-exist.

The relationship between the missing piece of the Churchill statue and Rance's statement about cigars require a somewhat complex explanation. The famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud referred to cigars and other similarly shaped objects as phallic symbols, everyday objects that were created for subconscious reasons to represent the penis, or phallus. Freud explained that the phallus in turn was, in ancient times, regarded as a potent symbol of power and strength, and objects from cigars to skyscrapers were given its approximate shape to denote and express power. Therefore, once we understand that the phrase "in those dark days" is a reference to the Second World War, and once we understand that Winston Churchill was prime minister of England during that war, we can then understand two things.

First, the missing piece of the statue is Churchill's penis. Second, Rance, in his final comments, is saying that wartime would have been bearable for England if Churchill's penis had been on display instead of the cigar, which as he says was only a very small symbol of Churchill's actual power. All of this, in turn, reinforces the play's theme that sexual freedom, if accepted by both the individual and society, can result in personal, and even societal, power.

This means, however, that the final moments of the play in which Dr. Prentice demands assurances that the events and discoveries of the afternoon will remain a secret are deeply ironic. The implication of these final few lines is that the discoveries associated with sexual freedom and freedom in general should remain known only to those who have experienced them because society isn't ready to hear about them or experience them itself. This idea is reinforced by the play's title and when everyone leaves the madhouse only after assurances of secrecy are made.

The phrase "what the butler saw" refers to how butlers, and all servants, must be discreet about the goings on between the people who they serve, summing up the need for discretion about events, circumstances, and conversations that are not to be spoken about in public. Using the phrase as the title for this particular play, therefore, suggests that until society is ready, sexual freedom must be a private matter.

Bibliography

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Characters

Geraldine Barclay

Geraldine is the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Prentice and the sister of Nick. At the beginning of the play, she does not know who her father is and believes her mother was a chambermaid. She was raised by a Mrs. Barclay, who was recently killed in a gas main explosion. Geraldine applies for a position as secretary to Dr. Prentice, but she can only take dictation at the speed of twenty words per minute and does not know how to type at all. She is a satire of an innocent, accepting Dr. Prentice's explanation of why she needs to undress for her job interview, and when Dr. Prentice asks her to help him test his new contraceptive device, she says she will be "delighted to help."

Of all of the characters in the play, Geraldine seems least able to take control of what happens to her. Attempting to hide his sexual misconduct, Dr. Prentice tells the others that Geraldine is a mental patient, and she is consequently dressed in a hospital gown, given a short haircut, and forcibly injected with drugs. At the end of the play, she is alternately described as "tearful," "weeping," and "unable to speak."

Nicholas Beckett

Nick is a hotel page, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Prentice, and the brother of Geraldine, though he only finds out about these relationships at the end of the play. He seems to have virtually no sexual ethics. When he first arrives on stage, through his discussion with Mrs. Prentice, the audience is told that Nick had sex with Mrs. Prentice and has taken photographs of their encounter. He has sold her dress and threatens to sell the photographs as well unless Mrs. Prentice persuades Dr. Prentice to hire him. Later in the play, he and Mrs. Prentice both claim that he attempted to rape her but did not succeed. The audience also discovers that after his encounter with Mrs. Prentice, he assaulted a group of schoolgirls and is trying to avoid arrest. In addition, Nick reveals that he prostitutes himself to strange men.

Nick

See Nicholas Beckett

Sergeant Match

Sergeant Match is a policeman who arrives at the clinic searching for Nick, because of Nick's assault on a group of schoolgirls, and Geraldine, because she possesses the missing piece of the statue of Winston Churchill. A figure of authority, Sergeant Match becomes an object of ridicule when he undresses on stage at Dr. Prentice's request and subsequently appears drugged and wearing a leopard-print dress.

Dr. Prentice

Dr. Prentice runs the psychiatric clinic in which the play takes place. He is married to Mrs. Prentice and is the father of Geraldine and Nick, although he does not know of his offspring until the end of the play. Dr. Prentice is a sexual predator who is completely lacking in ethics. He fathered Geraldine and Nick when he raped Mrs. Prentice, thinking that she was a chambermaid, shortly before their marriage. Because he raped her in a dark closet, he did not realize that she was his fiancee. In addition, he attempts to have sex with Geraldine, who is interviewing to be his secretary, by deceiving her into thinking that he must physically examine her before giving her the job.

The action of the play is set in motion by Dr. Prentice's efforts to hide this attempted rape/seduction from his wife. Dr. Prentice's relationship with Mrs. Prentice is primarily one of antagonism. He admits to having married her for her money, then attempting to beat her when he discovered she was not wealthy. He also physically attacks her during the course of the play.

Mrs. Prentice

Mrs. Prentice is married to Dr. Prentice and discovers at the end of the play that she is the mother of Geraldine and Nick, whom she abandoned at birth and, consequently, does not recognize. She is characterized as a nymphomaniac who pursues young men. When she first comes on stage, the audience discovers that she has recently had a sexual encounter with Nick, but the exact nature of that encounter is unclear. In her conversation with Nick, she indicates that she "gave herself' to him, implying that she willingly had sex with him. However, during the remainder of the play, she claims he attempted to rape her but did not succeed. She does not expect any sort of fidelity in marriage. She admits to numerous liaisons and seems to expect the same from her husband. For instance, when Dr. Rance leads her to believe that Dr. Prentice is attracted to young men, she volunteers to introduce him to some she knows (and with whom she has more than likely had sexual relations herself).

Dr. Rance

Dr. Rance is a government official in charge of psychiatric facilities. He is a figure of authority who boasts that he would "have sway over a rabbit hutch if the inmates were mentally disturbed." Dr. Rance sees everything that happens as a validation of his own preconceived notions. Upon being told by Dr. Prentice that Geraldine is a patient, Dr. Rance imposes his own ideas on whatever Geraldine says, concluding, for instance, that she is the victim of an incestuous attack by her father—an astute observation whose truth no one yet realizes. He even cites her denial of such an attack as proof that it occurred. Dr. Rance is quick to certify Geraldine as insane, again based on his own theories, not on actual symptoms that indicate such an illness.

Rance similarly imposes his own interpretations on the words and acts of all of the other characters, and those interpretations satirize the modern practice of psychiatry. For instance, believing Dr. Prentice to have murdered Geraldine based on the psychiatrist's statement: "I've given her the sack"□meaning that he fired her□Dr. Rance tells Mrs. Prentice: "He killed her and wrapped her body in a sack. The word association is very clear." From the events of the play, Dr. Rance creates a narrative which he intends to publish as a novelette, and he anticipates becoming rich and famous.

Themes

Madness, Psychiatry, and Authority

Orton prefaces *What the Butler Saw* with a quotation from *The Revenger's Tragedy:* "Surely we're all mad people, and they/Whom we think are, are not." The perception of madness and, consequently, who is mad, is central to Orton's play. In the twentieth century, it is given to psychiatrists to answer this question. Although many may question psychiatric methods, it is nonetheless the case that psychiatrists have been given the legal authority to determine who is mad and, consequently, to commit those so diagnosed to psychiatric hospitals, to force them to take medications, and even to submit to electroshock therapy.

In recent years, safeguards against abuse of these powers have become strong; committing a patient to a psychiatric hospital requires clear evidence that he or she is a danger to themselves or others, and involuntary electroshock is used only in the most extreme cases. In Orton's time, however, the authority of the psychiatrist was more absolute. In *What the Butler Saw*, Orton calls the entire system into question, blurring the line between sanity and madness, questioning psychiatric methods, and subverting the authority of the psychiatrist.

It would seem that in a psychiatric clinic, the line between who is mad and who is not would be most clear. Those in the clinic either are or are not patients. In *What the Butler Saw*, however, no one in the clinic is a patient and, to some extent, everyone is mad. There is madness in the way the characters speak; the dialogue is not rational. When Mrs. Prentice tells Dr. Rance that Nick attempted to rape her but did not succeed, Dr. Rance replies, "The service in these hotels is dreadful." When Mrs. Prentice suspects that Dr. Prentice wears women's clothing, her response is, "I'd no idea our marriage teetered on the edge of fashion." In addition, in performance, the appearance of the characters running on and off stage repeatedly, changing clothes and physically fighting each other, gives the audience a sense of chaos, of the abandonment of social constraints, of madness.

Psychiatrists are supposed to be able to treat madness, but that is not the case in this play; Orton satirizes psychiatry, particularly in the person of Dr. Rance. Believing Geraldine to be a patient, Dr. Rance conducts a psychiatric examination that ridicules psychiatric methods. Dr. Rance is convinced that Geraldine was the victim of an incestuous attack by her father, and he uses even her denials as evidence. When Dr. Rance asks Geraldine if her father assaulted her, and Geraldine says, "No," Dr. Rance remarks, "She may mean 'Yes' when she says 'No.'" When he asks her again and she again says no "with a scream of horror," Dr. Rance says, "The vehemence of her denials is proof positive of guilt."

There is nothing Geraldine can say that will change Rance's mind. No matter what the other characters say, Dr. Rance interprets their words to fit his preconceived theories.

His psychiatric methods lead neither to truth nor understanding. He can make the words of others mean anything he chooses.

Orton aims not only at traditional psychiatry but also at new theories of madness that were becoming popular at the time he was writing. Some psychiatrists began to suggest that madness showed only a different way of dealing with reality and that the mad really had a kind of wisdom. Orton ridicules these theories as well. Mrs. Prentice says, "The purpose of my husband's clinic isn't to cure, but to liberate and exploit madness." And Dr. Rance echoes the words of psychiatrist R. D. Laing, a major proponent of new interpretations of madness, when he says, "You can't be a rationalist in an irrational world. It isn't rational." Orton's satirization of psychiatric theory is all inclusive.

Orton also focuses on the psychiatrist himself as authority figure. In much of his work, Orton attempts to subvert established authority, showing those with power as useless or corrupt. When ridiculing psychiatric methods, Orton is also ridiculing the authority society gives to psychiatrists. Dr. Rance and Dr. Prentice, for instance, exhibit what can easily be considered mad behavior. Dr. Rance even tries to certify Dr. Prentice as insane and have him put in a straitjacket. Showing the figures with power as madmen undercuts their authority, causing the audience to call that authority into question.

In addition, the psychiatrists in *What the Butler Saw* blatantly abuse their authority. Dr. Prentice uses his position as a doctor in his attempt to have sex with Geraldine. Dr. Rance is quick to certify the other characters as insane based on his ideas more than their words or actions. He also forces an injection on Geraldine, who is no more mad than he is. It is unimaginable that he could ever be a help to the mentally ill.

In essence, Orton's use of these themes amounts to a criticism of societal conventions. Orton asks those in the audience to question their definitions of madness, their faith in psychiatry, their respect for authority. As funny as they may be, Orton's barbs and jests are aimed at serious issues.

Sex and Sexuality

Much of the action in *What the Butler Saw* revolves around sexual matters. The plot of the play is, in fact, driven by Dr. Prentice's attempted seduction/rape of Geraldine and his subsequent efforts to hide his sexual exploits from his wife. In addition to infidelity, Orton's play deals with rape, incest, and sexual identity. Orton's presentation of these sexual matters is comic, but there is a dark side as well.

Neither Dr. Prentice nor Mrs. Prentice is sexually faithful to the other. In the beginning of the play, the audience sees Dr. Prentice attempting a sexual tryst with Geraldine and Mrs. Prentice returning from a sexual encounter with Nick. The nature of the encounter with Nick is not clearly defined. When talking to Nick she says that she "gave herself" to him. However, later in the play, she claims he tried to rape her and he says this as well. What is clear is that Mrs. Prentice has affairs, and this is accepted within the reality of the play. When Dr. Prentice calls her a nymphomaniac, it seems he takes this condition

as a fact of life. In fact, his simple acceptance of her nymphomania is what makes it funny.

Similarly, when Mrs. Prentice offers to find her husband young men, she acts as if his sexual infidelity is a matter of course. Again, that is what makes it funny. However, in the real world, infidelity is taken seriously. It destroys marriages and ruins lives. While the audience laughs at Orton's jokes, it is also aware of the serious nature of the matter. This adds a dark underside to Orton's play.

Similarly treated as humorous subjects, rape and incest also provide a dark background. Dr. Prentice's attempt to have sex with Geraldine would be construed by many as a type of rape. His deception takes no account of her will. He assumes, in fact, that she would not willingly have sex with him. In addition, Mrs. Prentice may have been raped by Nick, and she was raped by Dr. Prentice before the two were married. Again, these rapes are treated as the subject of humor.

In Orton's time, it would have been more socially acceptable to joke about rape, but recent changes in attitudes toward women have made such joking unacceptable. Even in Orton's time, however, rape was no laughing matter, especially to the victim. Incest, one of the most taboo of sexual activities, similarly, is no longer considered appropriate material for humor, if it ever was. Orton's play however, focuses on double incest, Dr. Prentice's attempt to have sex with his daughter and Nick's possible rape of his mother. Again, this provides a sort of dark humor.

In *What the Butler Saw*, Orton also deals with sexual identity, which he presents as fluid. Mrs. Prentice belongs to a lesbian club, despite the fact that she is married to Dr. Prentice, because the club counts him as a woman. Dr. Prentice's sexual identity can therefore change with other's perceptions of him. Later in the play, Dr. Rance and Mrs. Prentice come to believe that Dr. Prentice is gay. They then treat him as if he is gay, and the actual nature of his sexuality becomes less important than the way he is regarded.

Costume changes in the play also suggest the fluidity of sexual identity. When dressed as Nick, Geraldine is treated as a male, but she identifies herself as either male or female, depending on what is most convenient, saying in one case that she must be a boy because she likes girls. Nick appears on stage as a woman and as a man, but his sexual nature is not clear. He molests women but also has sexual relations with men for money. Thus the sexual natures of Dr. Prentice, Mrs. Prentice, Geraldine, and Nick are all in question. Orton suggests elements of homosexuality for each of these characters.

Orton, himself gay, did not see homosexuality as wrong, and in fact insisted, for other productions, that gay characters be played in the same way as other people, with no campiness. At the time he was writing, however, gays faced great discrimination (homosexuality was even outlawed in England for a time) and were considered by many to be "sick." For the audience, therefore, changes in sexual identity could be perceived as dark, although that would be less likely to be the case today.

Critics have said that Orton uses sex as a weapon, that he wishes to shock and upset his audience. If this is the case, Orton certainly succeeded, in his own time, with *What the Butler Saw* and his other plays. Discomfort often results in laughter, and so Orton's blatant presentation of sexual matters also makes the play funny. In *What the Butler Saw*, the various reactions that an open look at sex causes□shock, disgust, laughter□all mix to create a play that shows sexual matters in all of their complexity.

Style

Farce

Farce is a type of comedy known for its humorous and extreme exaggeration. It is often characterized by a ridiculous plot, full of comic twists and turns and impossible coincidences, absurd dialogue, stereotyped characters, and physical comedy. Elements of farce exist in some plays of ancient Greece. The form first became popular in fifteenth century France, and it continues to this day. Examples of twentieth-century farce include movies by the Marx Brothers and Charlie Chaplin.

What the Butler Saw exhibits all of the attributes of farce, but many critics have said that the play is in fact a parody of a farce. This means that Orton is imitating the form of farce in order to ridicule it. It is difficult to distinguish a farce from a parody of a farce, but some elements of Orton's play move it outside of the traditional form.

The plot of *What the Butler Saw* can certainly be characterized as ridiculous. It begins with a job interview that quickly becomes absurd as Dr. Prentice attempts to seduce Geraldine. Immediately after Geraldine undresses, Mrs. Prentice enters the room. This initial coincidence sets the plot in motion as Dr. Prentice goes to more and more ridiculous lengths to keep the truth about Geraldine from his wife. As he grows more and more desperate, he causes Geraldine to be certified insane, forces Nick to dress in women's clothes, and has Sergeant Match take off his clothes before drugging him.

The madness of his actions convinces Dr. Rance and Mrs. Prentice that Dr. Prentice is himself insane, and so he almost ends up in a straitjacket. Unbelievable coincidences further the action of the plot as Mrs. Prentice finds Geraldine's nightgown and assumes she has been killed, and Sergeant Match arrives at the door looking for Nick and Geraldine. Of course, the most impossible coincidence occurs at the end of the play when Geraldine pulls out her elephant charm, Nick has a charm that matches it, Mrs. Prentice reveals that she is their mother, and Dr. Prentice realizes he is their father.

The absurd dialogue is also characteristic of farce. Throughout the play, the dialogue simply is not rational. Characters rarely say what one would expect them to say. Dr. Prentice remarks casually upon Mrs. Prentice's infidelities. Mrs. Prentice offers to introduce her husband to young men. Geral-dine says she will be delighted to test Dr. Prentice's new contraceptive device. Nick says that the guardian of the schoolgirls he molested reported him because he did not molest her. Much of this dialogue concerns sexual matters. Orton pokes fun at societal conventions by having his characters act as if such mores do not exist. The characters' dialogue is not meant to be realistic.

Orton also uses stereotyped comic characters. Geraldine is the innocent girl, Dr. Prentice the sexual predator, Dr. Rance the mad psychiatrist, Mrs. Prentice the nymphomaniac wife. In farce, all of these characters are made to look ridiculous. They also look ridiculous because of the extreme physical comedy. Dr. Prentice desperately

tries to hide Geraldine's clothes; Sergeant Match, drugged, falls down; Mrs. Prentice, wearing only a slip, crashes into a vase. Characters rush about the stage, dressing and undressing, and the play finishes with a free-for-all that involves screaming, fighting, and even gunplay.

Orton uses the expected elements of traditional farce, but he also upsets some of those elements, and that is what causes some critics to call this play a parody of a farce. In traditional farce, for instance, there may be onstage violence, but the violence is generally bloodless and nobody really gets hurt. In *What the Butler Saw*, Sergeant Match and Nick are shot and bleed and Mrs. Prentice's hands are covered with blood. Also, traditional farce is characterized by a return to the accepted social order after all of the madness of the play has passed.

Although *What the Butler Saw* ends with a scene of recognition that seems it will return the characters to a sort of normalcy, Orton's ending is dark. What is really discovered at the end is that Dr. Prentice raped his wife and attempted to seduce his child, and that Nick either attempted to rape his mother or had consensual sex with her. The play ends with the characters "weary, bleeding, drugged, and drunk," and although Dr. Rance's final words imply a new beginning, there is a strong sense of corruption. Orton uses the basic forms of farce and many of its elements, but he twists those elements and so arrives at a play more complicated than the traditional form of farce.

deus ex machina

The Latin words *deus ex machina* literally mean "god from the machine." The term was first used in ancient Greek and Roman drama. In some of these plays, a complicated situation at the end of the play is resolved when a god appears and tells the characters what to do or creates an ending that does not always follow from the events of the play; the Greek playwright Euripides (*Medea*) was often accused of resorting to such quick fixes to end his plays. The god is "from a machine" because a sort of crane was used so that the god appeared in the sky, then was lowered down to earth.

Today the phrase is used to refer to an improbable event that creates a convenient ending for a dramatic work. For instance, in American western films, it is a well-known cliche to have the U.S. cavalry arrive at the last minute to save a hopeless situation. In modern times, the use of a *deus ex machina* ending, unless done for humorous effect, is generally considered a flaw in the writing.

In *What the Butler Saw*, Orton parodies the *deus ex machina* ending. The appearance of Geraldine's brooch creates an artificial ending for the play. Orton takes his parody further in the final scene, however. Sergeant Match appears descending from the skylight on a rope ladder as a god descended on a crane in ancient Greek theater. But Sergeant Match, instead of a glorified god, is a ridiculous figure wearing a leopard-print dress. Orton imitates the *deus ex machina* ending, but he does so for comic effect.

Historical Context

With the death of Sir Winston Churchill on January 25, 1965, Great Britain lost a major figure of political and moral authority. As Prime Minister through most of World War II, Churchill had become a national hero. During the war years, the British people suffered greatly, enduring daily deprivation as well as the terror and destruction of Nazi Germany's intense bombing of London, known as the "blitz." Churchill's inspired leadership and his stirring radio speeches, still widely quoted today, sustained British morale during those dark years. He was a symbol of British unity and strength and, when he died, the nation and the world mourned.

It is difficult for contemporary Americans to understand the depth of British feeling for Churchill that existed when Joe Orton symbolically castrated the great man in *What the Butler Saw*. Audiences were outraged by Orton's disrespect for Churchill's memory and that is most likely the reaction Orton desired. Orton's *What the Butler Saw,* however, did not exist in a vacuum. The 1960s in Britain saw an unprecedented increase in personal freedom and a rejection of the symbols of authority.

Of particular importance in understanding Orton's work are the changes in attitude regarding sexual freedom. While there had been movements promoting what was called free love in earlier decades, it was not until the 1960s that such movements gained significant public support. There were, as there are today, many who opposed sex without marriage and same sex relationships. Nonetheless, the predominant movement was towards sexual permissiveness, and the support for this movement is well illustrated by the changes in British laws which, before the 1960s, assumed a governmental interest in what are now widely regarded as private matters.

For most of Orton's life, the homosexual relationships with which he was involved were criminal offenses. It was not until 1967 that homosexual acts between consenting adult males became legally permissible. That same year, the Family Planning Act made it possible for local authorities to provide contraceptives, and the Abortion Act allowed for abortions to be performed under the National Health Service□though only if two doctors considered the procedure necessary for medical or psychological reasons. In 1969, the Divorce Reform Act permitted either party in a marriage to obtain a divorce, but only after five years of separation. Some of these laws may seem restrictive by today's standards, but at the time, their enactment was a significant step in the movement away from governmental authority over private lives.

Psychiatry was also undergoing a revolution during Orton's time. Then as now, psychiatrists had the power to deem an individual insane and forcibly place him or her in a locked mental hospital. Psychiatrists also have the authority to force medication or electroshock therapy on such committed patients. Since the 1960s, legal restrictions have made it much more difficult for a psychiatrist to restrict personal freedom unless such restriction is deemed absolutely necessary. During Orton's time, however, some psychiatrists were seeing their patients in a new way. Psychiatrist R. D. Laing popularized the idea that schizophrenia and other disorders were a logical reaction to

living in a mad society (a theory which spawned the classic line from the *Star Trek* television series: "In an insane society, the sane man must appear insane").

The psychotic, according to Laing, emerged from the state of psychosis with a deeper understanding of the world. It was the so-called "normal" individual, in his or her blind acceptance of society's rules, who was truly insane. Laing's belief in a sort of wisdom in madness is also reflected in the widespread use of psychedelic drugs during this period. Those who used such drugs often believed that the experience opened their minds, made them more aware of their surroundings, and gave them a clearer understanding of the true nature of reality. Harvard Professor Timothy Leary, himself a user of LSD, urged young people to take psychedelic drugs, to reject authority, to "tune in, turn on, drop out." Leary's message shocked and angered many who still valued the orderly society represented by men such as Churchill, but rebellion against authority was the hallmark of the 1960s and of the work of Orton.

Critical Overview

The first performance of *What the Butler Saw*, on March 5, 1969, was a critical and commercial disaster. Members of the audience shouted at the actors, disrupting the performance. In his Orton biography *Prick up Your Ears*, critic John Lahr noted that "Shouts of 'Filth!', 'Rubbish!', 'Find another play!' bombarded the actors as they struggled bravely through the lines." Lahr also quoted actor Stanley Baxter, who played Dr. Prentice, on his experience with the audience on opening night:

At first I thought it was a drunk or someone mentally deranged. Then it became clear that it was militant hate that had been organized.... It was a battle royal.... The gallery wanted to jump on the stage and kill us all. The occasion had the exhilaration of a fight.

Barton also recalled "old ladies in the audience not merely tearing up their programmes, but jumping up and down on them out of sheer hatred."

The audience could not have really heard the play itself with all of the shouting going on, but they objected to what they saw as Orton's immorality. This reaction to Orton was not limited to members of the audience. Lahr noted that critic Harold Hobson "ignored the play in his initial review, using the space instead to portray Orton as the Devil's theatrical henchman." In a later essay in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Hobson still focused more on Orton than on the play. Lahr quoted, "Orton's terrible obsession with perversion, which is regarded as having brought his life to an end and choked his very high talent, poisons the play. And what should have been a piece of gaily irresponsible nonsense become impregnated with evil."

According to Lahr, the only review that recognized the play's importance was written by Frank Marcus, who predicted that *"What the Butler Saw* will live to be accepted as a comedy classic of English literature." Marcus's words proved prophetic. The 1975 revival received much more positive reviews, and the play is today widely considered Orton's finest work.

Although there are certainly many people today who would consider *What the Butler Saw* immoral, and even disgusting, in general attitudes toward sexuality have changed greatly since 1969. Most people would still find the characters' actions reprehensible, but sex is not the taboo subject it once was, and today's audiences are much less likely to be shocked. More recent criticism is less likely to focus on whether the play is immoral, but to look instead at what Orton is trying to say and whether the play is successful on its own terms. Nonetheless, Orton's presentation of amoral characters is still an important topic of discussion.

In *Joe Orton,* critic C. W. E. Bigsby suggested that Orton uses his plays to attack. Bigsby wrote that Orton's "primary weapons became parody, sexual affront, visual and verbal humour and macabre juxtaposition." The sexual affront of *What the Butler Saw* is, in fact, what made the earlier audiences so angry. Bigsby called Orton' s work "an act of aggression." Orton, according to Bigsby, believed he lived in "a very sick society" and

attempted to "undermine [that society] at first with absurdist comedy and then with farce."

In *What the Butler Saw*, Orton's use of sexuality can be seen as an attack on the audience, whom Bigsby noted are granted, in all theater, "a privileged position" and "believe themselves to be in possession of a perceivable truth." But Orton destroys the complacency of the audience "at the end when they are made to see that what they took to be frivolous sexual games were in fact incestuous trysts in which a mother is raped by her son and a father attempts to strip and rape his daughter." According to Bigsby, the amorality of the characters serves to disturb the audience, to force them to see beyond convention, to attack their acceptance of society's rules.

In his book *Because We're Queers*, Simon Shepherd suggested that Orton's anger is directed not so much at the audience but at the status quo. Shepherd wrote that "Orton's most extended anger was ... reserved for a male figurehead who had explicit association with nationalism." Referring to the destruction of the statue of Winston Churchill and the symbolic castration of Churchill himself, Shepherd wrote, "To appreciate Orton's daring we have to recall the extent of national mythology surrounding the man."

Orton also shocked his audience with the final display of the statue's penis. "In dominant non-homosexual culture," Shepherd wrote, "it is taboo to make sexual advances to a man and it is taboo... to represent the erect penis. Both taboos preserve the dignity of the penis, defining it as a symbol of order and power." Shepherd further noted that "Conventional masculinity is founded on the notion that biological possession of the penis gives a person cultural or social power."

By exposing the statue's penis as an object of laughter, Shepherd wrote, Orton "has us look with a mocking gay look at the combination of elements family, gender roles, nationalism, masculinity, propriety which make up English fascism." So shocking was the display of the penis at the play's end, that the first production substituted the organ with Churchill's cigar, which can also be seen as a phallic symbol albeit a far less explicit one. Subsequent productions have restored the use of the penis, which is a powerful symbol in the play, in part because of its shock value.

Not all critics, however, see Orton's use of shock and immorality as beneficial to the play. Benedict Nightingale, writing in *Encounter,* found flaws in *What the Butler Saw*. Nightingale reported that he saw the play twice "and twice failed to laugh even remotely as much as the swaggering language and frenetic encounters [seem] to demand." For Nightingale, the amorality of the characters weakened the play but not for the simplistic reason that such amorality is somehow "wrong." Instead, Nightingale believed that the characters keep the play from succeeding on its own terms, as a farce. Nightingale asked, "How can we laugh at someone' s flouting of convention, or desperate attempt to regain respectability, when no one on stage is particularly convention, respectable or shockable? Farce simply can't breathe in an atmosphere of amorality and permissiveness." For Nightingale, the extremity of the characters' amorality defeated Orton's purpose.

There is no doubt that Orton intended *What the Butler Saw* to shock its audience, and early reactions show he succeeded; audiences and critics were shocked, even disgusted, by Orton's final play. Shock in itself, however, is ultimately not enough. There is critical disagreement on whether the play does succeed on its own terms. In spite of such disagreements, however, most critics today recognize the importance of *What the Butler Saw* and consider it Orton's finest play.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Cross is a Ph.D. candidate specializing in drama. In this essay she discusses the use of costume in Orton's play.

Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* is notable for its use of costume. Throughout the play, characters dress and undress, discarding and exchanging clothing, and thus furthering Orton's theme of the fluidity of identity. Orton also uses clothing and the removal of clothing in the play to establish and subvert authority, to highlight the vulnerability as well as the threat of the human body, and to create a confusing and comic effect. Costume in the play provides much more than decoration or even character illumination. In *What the Butler Saw,* Orton's use of clothing is central to the play.

From the beginning of *What the Butler Saw,* the characters' clothing is used to establish who has authority and power and who does not. From the moment he arrives onstage, wearing an expensive, tailored suit, Dr. Prentice is identified as a member of the establishment and a figure of authority. Almost immediately, Orton undercuts that authority with Dr. Prentice's nonsensical dialogue, and the dissonance between Dr. Prentice's words and his sophisticated clothing creates a comic effect. Nonetheless, in the world of the play, he retains his power, power that is highlighted by his appearance, most of the time.

Later in the play, when Dr. Rance decides the psychiatrist is insane and Dr. Prentice loses his power, that loss is highlighted by Dr. Rance's attempt to change Dr. Prentice's clothing□to put him in a straitjacket. In the beginning, however, it is Geraldine whose clothes establish her subservient position. Dr. Prentice soon exchanges his suit coat for the traditional doctor's white coat, clothing that emphasizes his power as a psychiatrist. Geraldine, on the other hand, first appears wearing a dress. As a woman in Orton's time (the 1960s)□and an aspiring secretary□she lacks power.

Dr. Prentice orders Geraldine to undress and, in spite of her doubts, because he is a doctor, she obeys. First standing on the stage in panties and bra, then lying naked behind a curtain, Geraldine is put in an extremely vulnerable position. Her lack of clothing takes away what little power she has. No longer a person in her own right, she becomes the object of Dr. Prentice's desire. Also, from a practical viewpoint, without her clothing, she is trapped; she cannot leave. While she undresses, becoming more vulnerable, Dr. Prentice puts on his white coat, thus increasing his appearance of authority. In addition, in production, as a nearly naked woman standing on a stage, the actress who plays Geraldine becomes vulnerable to the gaze of the audience. This adds a more complicated layer to Geraldine's loss of power. Both actress and character are set up as objects of desire.

After Geraldine undresses, Mrs. Prentice arrives, wearing an expensive coat that marks her as a wealthy woman, with all the power that money provides. Nick comes in shortly afterwards, seemingly subservient to her in a hotel page's uniform. The audience soon discovers, however, that Nick has taken Mrs. Prentice's dress and wig and that he has

sold the dress. He has possession of her clothing, and so the wealthy woman loses power to the hotel page. This creates a loss of dignity, which becomes even more extreme when she later opens her coat, revealing that she is wearing only a slip underneath.

In *Because We're Queers,* Simon Shepherd wrote about the effect of the undressed character on stage, focusing on the difference between the audience' s view of unclothed males and unclothed females. "The man with his trousers down is funny," Shepherd wrote, "because he loses his traditional dignity as he becomes uncovered (whereas the *woman* who is undressed is supposedly sexy)." While Shepherd's assessment of the effect of the unclothed male is correct, his remarks on the unclothed female are too simplistic. While the young undressed Geraldine is certainly a sexual object, she is also a figure of vulnerability. Her innocence in believing Dr. Prentice's reasons for having her undress is funny. Mrs. Prentice's situation, however, is different from Geraldine's. As a wealthy and older woman, she has a certain dignity and power. Her lack of clothing does establish her as a sexual object. Her loss of dignity, however, is also funny. In this respect, she becomes more like the undressed male.

While Mrs. Prentice is briefly out of the room, Dr. Prentice tells Geraldine to get dressed and attempts to return the girl's clothes. When Mrs. Prentice returns before he has done so, Geraldine's clothing becomes an object of humor as Dr. Prentice attempts to hide the garments from his wife. He succeeds in dropping Geraldine's underwear in a wastepaper basket and tries to do the same with the dress, but Mrs. Prentice sees it, asks if he is a transvestite, and demands the dress for herself. She puts it on and thus regains her dignity and authority.

Geraldine, however, is in an even more powerless position. Not only is she not wearing her clothes, they have become unavailable to her. When Dr. Rance enters, his authority and power established by his white coat, Geraldine is completely naked. Dr. Rance, assuming she is a patient, sees her nudity as a manifestation of her madness, and Dr. Prentice gives her a hospital gown. With that change in clothes, she becomes, in effect, a mental patient, and thus loses power altogether. She also loses her identity. When the other characters become concerned because "Miss Barclay" is missing and begin to search for her, Miss Barclay cannot be found because, in effect, she no longer exists. In her place is a mental patient with no name, no power, and no dignity.

Geraldine's clothing change begins a series of character disguises that continue throughout the play. Again, the effect is comic. Writing of farce, Susan Rusinko, in her book *Joe Orton*, remarked that "The single most necessary convention ... is disguise□one that Orton carries to dizzyingly confusing heights. The multiplicity of Orton's disguises results in the expected confusions of names and identities, teeter-totter plot complications caused by a fast-paced series of exits and entrances, the big scene, and the deus ex machina ending."

Disguise in *What the Butler Saw* certainly serves to confuse the characters and does create a comic effect, but for the audience, it raises a bigger question about the nature of identity. To what extent does Geraldine become a mental patient while wearing a

mental patient's clothing? The changes in costume have real effects in the play because they affect the actions of the other characters. Because Dr. Rance believes Geraldine is a mental patient, he treats her as a patient, restraining her and giving her sedatives against her will. In the world of the play, Geraldine's increased vulnerability is real.

In the outside world as well, people are treated differently depending on how they dress. Lawyers routinely advise defendants not to wear their prison clothes in court because those clothes will cause the jury to see them as criminals. Women and men wear suits to job interviews so that the potential employers will see them as capable and responsible. In a sense, such changes of clothing are disguises as well. People are judged by what they wear.

Geraldine is vulnerable without her street clothes, but Dr. Prentice becomes vulnerable because of his possession of her dress, stockings, bra, panties, and shoes. His attempts to hide these articles from Mrs. Prentice are comic, but her discovery of them causes him to lose power as both Dr. Rance and Mrs. Prentice see his possession of women's clothes as a manifestation of mental illness. Their beliefs are reinforced when Nick arrives with Mrs. Prentice's dress and wig, and Dr. Prentice promptly takes possession of them. "The man dressed as a woman," Shepherd wrote, "is ... comic because this is supposedly improper for a man (and usually involves a mocking imitation of 'feminine' behaviour)." Although Nick (and later Sergeant Match) will actually dress as a woman, the idea of Dr. Prentice dressing as a woman is comic. Because women are traditionally considered inferior to men, a man dressed in women's clothing loses power and dignity.

Sergeant Match's arrival as a uniformed figure of authority results in further clothing changes. Nick, worried that he will be arrested for sexual misconduct, needs a disguise, and Dr. Prentice, increasingly under suspicion because of Geraldine's disappearance, needs a Miss Barclay. Nick, therefore, puts on Mrs. Prentice's dress and wig and becomes the traditionally comic man in drag (women's clothing). Geraldine, still wearing a hospital gown and seen only by Dr. Prentice, enters and asks him for the return of her clothes. Dr. Prentice gives her her panties and bra, and she puts these on. Left briefly alone in the room, she takes Nick's hotel page uniform. The effect of these quick costume changes is comic, but also furthers one of Orton's themes. Geraldine and Nick have taken on each other's clothes, and thus, each other's identities. Except for Dr. Prentice, the other characters see Nick as Geraldine and Geraldine as Nick. In essence, it seems that they are identified by their clothes, not by their bodies and minds. In addition, because Geraldine has changed out of her hospital gown, the unnamed mental patient has disappeared, adding comic confusion.

Sergeant Match's interview with Geraldine, whom he believes to be Nick, results in further exploration of the issue of sexual identity. When Geraldine asks to be taken to the police station for protection from Dr. Prentice, Dr. Prentice says, "What this young woman claims is a tissue of lies."

After Sergeant Match replies, "This is a boy, sir, not a girl, "Dr. Prentice begins to refer to Geraldine as he, even though he knows she is a girl. Geraldine initially insists that she

is not Nick but still maintains that she is a boy. For Geraldine, however, her identity becomes a matter of convenience. "I'm not Nicholas Beckett," she says, "I want to go to prison." Sergeant Match replies, "If you aren't Nicholas Beckett, you can't go to prison. You're not under arrest." Geraldine pauses, then responds, "I am Nicholas Beckett."

Still attempting to maintain her disguise as a boy, Geraldine tells Dr. Rance that she wouldn't enjoy sexual intercourse. "I might get pregnant," she says, then catches herself and continues, "or be the cause of pregnancy in others." When Geraldine is told that she must undergo a physical examination, that she can no longer continue her façade, she is finally forced to insist that she is female. Ultimately, gender can be defined clearly only in strictly biological terms. Physiologically, an individual can be male or female. Psychologically and culturally, however, the boundaries are not so clear.

When Mrs. Prentice sees Geraldine and Nick, she asks what happened to the other young man, the boy who assaulted her, Nicholas Beckett. Now Geraldine is re-identified as Gerald Barclay. Nick persuades Dr. Prentice to tell Sergeant Match to undress so that Nick can have his police uniform. Now Sergeant Match loses his authority and his dignity with his clothes. Shepherd wrote, "Orton saves the conventional farce joke for the policeman Match, the figure of law and order. He is the one caught with his trousers down when the woman enters." Wearing only underpants, the officer becomes a comic figure. Mrs. Prentice sees first Sergeant Match, then Nick, wearing only underwear, and the unclothed human body is revealed as a potential threat. "You must help me doctor," she says, "I keep seeing naked men." Later, she says, "Doctor, Doctor! The world is full of naked men running in all directions."

This theme is continued when Mrs. Prentice finds the unnamed mental patient's gown. Dr. Rance takes note of this and of the fact that Nicholas Beckett left without his uniform. "Two young people," he says, "one mad and one sexually insatiable□both naked□are roaming this house. At all costs, we must prevent a collision." The unclothed body is now shown to be dangerous. Without clothing, there is the threat of unbridled sexuality. Of course, this presumed nudity, like the near nudity of Sergeant Match, is comic; the sense of danger lies below the surface. In addition, the naked or nearly naked body is also funny because it creates discomfort in the audience. People laugh when they are uncomfortable. Orton thus acknowledges society's fear of the human body and of sex but simultaneously draws attention to the body and sex as comic material. Orton uses the lack of clothing to reveal the complications of society's attitudes toward sex.

The following portion of the play is a scene of mass confusion and comedy as all characters participate in a wild and violent scene in which clothing is continually added, removed, and exchanged. At various times, Geraldine, Dr. Prentice, and Mrs. Prentice are all put in straitjackets, which creates in them a loss of dignity and power. Geraldine, Nick, Mrs. Prentice, and Sergeant Match all appear wearing only their underwear. Again, power and dignity are lost. It should be pointed out here that, in the last scene, some of the removal of clothing seems rather contrived. There appears to be no dramatic reason for Dr. Prentice to forcefully remove Geraldine's trousers or tear off Mrs. Prentice's dress.

At the end of the play, Dr. Rance and Dr. Prentice retain their white coats and Mrs. Prentice, Geraldine, and Nick all appear in their underwear. In the final moments of the play, Sergeant Match is lowered on a rope ladder from the ceiling. He wears Mrs. Prentice's leopard-spotted dress. Only Dr. Rance does not change clothes throughout the play. For the audience, he is nonsensical or insane, but he retains his power within the world of the play.

It is Dr. Rance who speaks the play's final words, "Let us put on our clothes and face the world." The line suggests a new beginning as, according to Orton's stage directions, the characters "climb the rope ladder into the blazing light." The traditional ending of farce is a return to normalcy, to the previous order. The implication is that the return of the old clothes will bring about the old order, will end the madness of the play. But Orton has shown that, like clothing, power, dignity, and identity can easily be discarded and changed.

Source: Clare Cross, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In this review of a 1994 revival of What the Butler Saw, *noted Orton biographer Lahr offers a laudatory appraisal of both Orton's skill as a farceur and the merits of this new production. Lahr calls* What the Butler Saw *Orton's ' farce masterpiece."*

In May, 1967, Joe Orton sat with friends at a café in Tangier. He had every reason to feel free and full of fun. He was thirty-four, rich, newly famous after the award-winning success of' 'Loot" (1966), which he had turned, by his account, from "a failed farce into a successful farce," and with his new farce masterpiece, ' *'What the Butler Saw"*□now at the American Repertory Theatre, in Cambridge□completed and in the manuscript drawer under his bed in the tiny North London flat he shared with his mentor and eventual murderer, Kenneth Halliwell. Orton had already made a mental note to hot up the new play. "Much more fucking," he wrote in his diary, "and they'll be screaming hysterics in next to no time."

Orton wanted laughter to set off a panic□a combination of terror and elation that would create "a sort of seismic disturbance." Laughter was an exercise in freedom and a furious defense against the stereotyping and the received bourgeois notions that so oppressed him. Although Orton liked to brag about his sexual prowess both to friends and to his diary, his showy brilliance and his sexual athletics were displays of mastery that belied a deep-seated sense of inferiority. On that afternoon in Tangier, as Orton wrote in his diary, a "stuffy American tourist and his disapproving wife" sat at the table next to Orton's. The threat of judgment sent Orton into a comic attack that displayed the same psychic jujitsu that he practiced on the theatre audience, using the thrust of the public's prejudice to throw it off balance:

They listened to our conversation, and I, realizing this, began to exaggerate the content. "He took it up the arse," I said. "And afterwards he thanked me for giving him such a good fucking." The American and his wife hardly moved a muscle. "We've got a leopard skin rug in the flat and he wanted me to fuck him on that," I said in an undertone which was perfectly audible to the next table, "only I'm afraid of the spunk, you see, it might adversely affect the spots on the leopard."

"It isn't ajoke," Orton told his friends after the Americans "frigidly" moved away. "There's no such thing as a joke." He never said a truer word about his craft. Jokes were a method of disenchanting the credulous and of laughing the suffocating stereotypes off the stage. "Marriage excuses no one the freak's roll-call," says the arresting officer in *"What the Butler Saw,'* ' which begins like a conventional boulevard farce, with a psychiatrist trying to seduce a would-be secretary, and ends as a tale of nymphomania, incest, transvestism, and attempted murder. Orton's combative, epigrammatic style demands capitulation, not discussion. When the lecherous psychiatrist, Dr. Prentice, protests to the government inspector, "I'm a heterosexual," the inspector, Dr. Rance, counters, "I wish you wouldn't use those Chaucerian words." The strut of Orton's dialogue□which honored and updated the discoveries of both Oscar Wilde and Ronald Firbank□ was an irresistible amalgam of the highfalutin and the low comic. "My uterine

contractions have been bogus for some time," Dr. Prentice's nymphomaniac wife says to her sexually inadequate husband. All Orton's characters speak in the same idiom. Their syntax is a model of propriety; their lives are models of impropriety. The very act of speaking demonstrates the thin line between reason and rapacity, which is the mischievous paradox that all Orton's comedies explore.

The other great stylists of modern English comedy□G. B. Shaw, Noel Coward, Harold Pinter□ lived long enough to cajole actors and directors into realizing their vision. Orton, who was murdered in August, 1967, has had to endure a period of trial and error before graduating into the modern canon. In England, this elevation has been achieved by Lindsay Anderson's 1975 Royal Court revival of *"What the Butler Saw,'* ' and by Jonathan Lynn's groundbreaking 1984 production of *"Loot"* with Leonard Rossiter. These examples of comic mayhem showed a generation how to stage and to play Orton for keeps and not just for laughs. In America□despite John Tillinger' s firstrate productions of *"Entertaining Mr. Sloane"* and *"Loot"*□Orton's finest play," *What the Butler Saw*," has not fared so well, both because of its verbal requirements, which defeat the diction of most American actors, and because of the nature of farce itself, which usually confounds an audience that likes stories where the self is inflated, not disintegrated. So David Wheeler' s mostly sold-out Cambridge production comes as both a surprise and an improbable delight.

The ungainly fifty-foot-long proscenium of the Loeb Drama Centre, which serves as the American Repertory Theatre's main stage, poses an almost insoluble problem for any farce. Its length means that a sense of boundaries □that illusion of trapped, claustrophobic life which fuels farce's sense of chaos and collapse□is almost impossible to create. *"What the Butler Saw"*□a reference to British peep-show pier entertainments□parodies French farce and at the same time reinvents the farce form for more lethal dramatic purposes. Wheeler makes life harder for himself by eliminating Orton's French windows as well as the skylight, which figures large in Orton's brilliant finale. Derek McLane's set is also full of anomalies, which the production somehow succeeds in overcoming: a pea-green-and-chrome interior that looks more like a public swimming pool than like a private consulting room; and seven doors, five arc lamps, a utility desk, and scaffolding. The set announces the unconventional nature of the evening, whereas Orton's intention is to lull an audience into expecting the ordinary and then to sock them with the extraordinary. In French farce, stage life returns to the status quo ante, but in Orton' s kind of farce, life and comic stereotypes are not just turned upside down but changed. In ' *'Loot,,* " the thieves escape, and the innocent father is framed by his son and hauled off to prison. ("I'm innocent, I'm innocent," Mr. McLeavy bleats, in one of postwar comedy's greatest exit lines. "What a terrible thing to happen to a man who's been kissed by the Pope.") In *"What the Butler Saw,* " promiscuity leads to redemption when the put-upon secretary, Geraldine, and the blackmailing page boy, Nick, turn out to be the abandoned children of Mrs. Prentice, fathered by her husband's anonymous rape of her in a hotel linen cupboard□a revelation that heals the Prentices' sexual standoff.

Orton was a voluptuary of fiasco, and in acting him the challenge is to keep the argument and the action operating at full tilt. Fluidity and reality are hard to deliver for all

but the most experienced of players. Here, Nick, played by the excellent Benjamin Evett, gets closest to the true note of earnestness and agitation in Orton's demented characters. He hits the stage at high energy□a page boy who just wants his blackmail money but ends up in a dress, bleeding from a gunshot wound, and with his sanity in serious doubt. "If the pain is real, I must be real," he says to Dr. Rance, who replies, "I'd rather not get involved in methaphysical speculation." Margaret Gibson may occasionally tip the wink to the audience, but she brings to Mrs. Prentice (a wife Prentice claims "they'll send ... to the grave in a Y-shaped coffin") the crucial requirement of robust comic acting and the added feature of a great pair of legs. Ms. Gibson makes up in comic invention what she lacks in comic gravity. When the frazzled and furious Prentice (played by Thomas Derrah, who is also slow to kindle but finally burns) rips off his wife's dress, the violence turns her on. "Oh, my darling!" says Mrs. Prentice, writhing on the floor in sexual ecstasy while Prentice dives for her abandoned garment. "This is the way to sexual adjustment in marriage." The moment is Ms. Gibson's invention, and it's terrific.

At a certain momentum, all things disintegrate; and *"What the Butler Saw"* acts out the notion of gender-collapsing. The credulous Geraldine (well played by Elizabeth Marvel) is so dizzy from the plots complications that she gets confused about her sex. "I must be a boy," she says, wearing a pageboy outfit and trying to pass as Nick to the police. "I like boys." But not all the actors feed the crazy brilliance of Orton's farce logic. Alvin Epstein, sporting a homegrown white mustache, plays Dr. Rance at a stately pace□a wrong choice, which keeps this excellent actor from maximizing the full comic menace of Rance's ranting psychiatric explanations and from raising the comic stakes for the other characters. "As a transvestite, fetishist, bisexual murderer Dr. Prentice displays considerable deviation overlap," says Rance, in a frenzy of psychoanalytic labelling. "We may get necrophilia, too. As a sort of bonus." But on the night I saw the play Epstein, who lost his way in the speech, also seemed to have lost his bead on the character. William Young's Sergeant Match is serviceable, but his unfortunate accent leaves whole areas of Match's hilarious stupidity unexplored. Still, with the complications of Orton's plot kicking in, the audience hardly notices or cares.

If Wheeler's production can't deliver the antic, it at least serves up intelligence and clarity. Wheeler has pruned Orton's jokes effectively, and in the end even his alteration of Orton's deus ex machina seems to work. Sergeant Match enters to a fanfare and on an automated trestle to demand the return of the missing part of a statue of Winston Churchill. The part, which was blown off when a gas main exploded, turns out to be not the great man's cigar but his penis. "Weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, [they] climb the rope ladder into the blazing light": Orton's final stage direction is a vision of bruised transcendence. In Cambridge, there is no glaring light, no rope ladder, no "Hallelujah Chorus." But there is a comic victory. The actors' final tableau fades out with a pinwheeling of psychedelic light and with the sound of the Beatles, which is what passed for hope and for Heaven in those bumptious, buoyant times.

Critical Essay #3

In this overview of Or ton's plays, Bull delineates the plot and provides background history on the playwright's work, including the comparisons that have been made between Orton and Oscar Wilde.

What the Butler Saw turned out to be Joe Orton's final play, a magnificently comic celebration of excess that for the first time properly, or perhaps improperly, united his interest in the comic potential of language with his wonderment at the absurdities of the physical manifestations of behaviour. It is not only quite easily his best play, it heralds the arrival of what would have been one of the major post-war playwrights.

The plot is not readily summarised, its many and intricate complications being themselves a major part of the play's concern with the way in which rationalising words are ultimately always betrayed by the stronger imperatives of the body. Suitably enough the play is set in an asylum presided over by a psychiatrist, Dr. Prentice, whose intended sexual adventures and his continual attempts to lie his way out of the frustrated consequences are themselves a part of the tension between the desire for liberation and the protective retreat into repression which lies at the heart of the play.

At the outset Prentice is interviewing a candidate for a secretarial position, an interview which inevitably concludes with a demand that the girl, Geraldine, undress for a complete physical examination. Surprised by the unexpected arrival of Prentice's wife, the naked girl is first hidden and then easily persuaded to borrow the clothes of Nicholas, a porter from the Station Hotel who has arrived bearing Mrs. Prentice's luggage.

Add to this initial sexual confusion the potential for chaos afforded by the introduction of, first, Rance, a visiting psychiatrist intent on examining the suitability of Prentice and his clinic for the treatment of the insane, and then a Sergeant Match in pursuit of anything remotely illegal□which covers just about everything that subsequently occurs to the characters or is revealed about their pasts□and one has a fair idea of the kind of revelations to follow. Incest is added to adultery and tranvestisism when it transpires that Geraldine and Nicholas are, unknown to all parties concerned, the twin children of the Prentices, conceived in the Linen cupboard of the Station Hotel□Orton's equivalent of Oscar Wilde's abandoned handbag in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

It is obvious that the further the plot proceeds, the less Orton is concerned with anything like a moral evaluation of the characters' actions or motivations. Farce here is more than a technique; it is a way of life. On his first entrance Dr. Rance asks, "Why are there so many doors? Was the house designed by a lunatic?" It is a question that not only emphasises the function of the psychiatric clinic□a madhouse with openings for all tastes□but also recalls the play's epigram, from Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy:* "Surely we're all mad people, and they whom we think, are not". Orton's redefinition of farce allowed for a complete abandonment of the naturalistic trappings of plot and

character in favour of a world in which the repressions and sublimations of life are allowed a fully-articulated play.

The world of *What the Butler Saw* is a true Freudian nightmare of unleashed sexual repression. It is civilisation without its clothes. Indeed it is Dr. Prentice's inability to admit to the only comparatively straightforward heterosexual act in the entire play that sets things in motion. The wife he would deceive has just returned from a meeting of a club "primarily for lesbians", during the proceedings of which she has availed herself of the body of the young porter Nick, who has actually arrived at the asylum intent on demanding money for the photographs taken during the event; and Nick himself spent a large part of the previous evening sexually harrassing an entire corridor of schoolgirls.

Normality is never the norm in this play; as in the brothel in Genet's *The Balcony*, the asylum converts dreamed fantasy into actable reality. "Marriage excuses no-one the freaks' roll-call", Sergeant Match assures Prentice when he attempts to protest his absolute innocence. What follows is a sort of sexual *Bartholemew Fair* in which clothing is first removed and then redistributed in a confusion of sexual roles□the whole business being observed and interpreted by the lunatic inspector Rance, who offers a succession of psychoanalytical explanations of the characters' behaviour, the unlikelihood of which is only surpassed by the truths of the various cases.

It is a flawed play. It needs, and would certainly have received, considerable rewriting□in particular, the tedious running gag about the lost penis from the statue of Winston Churchill, which is eventually used to bring proceedings to a close, is a part of an interest in the over-facile shooting of sacred cows that characterised his earliest work, and could easily be removed. However, what it promises is a redefinition of farce, a complete liberation of libido in a glorious celebration of chaos and *fin-de-civilisation*. " 'It's the only way to smash the wretched civilisation', I said, making a mental note to hot-up *What the Butler Saw* when I came to rewrite... Yes. Sex is not the only way to initiate them. Much more fucking and they'll be screaming hysterics in no time", noted Orton.

But sex is both the subject of the play and the vehicle which suggests potentially more serious matters. The tradition of farce inherited by Orton was diluted and trivial, confirming rather than questioning the assumptions of its audience. His awareness of the proximity of farce and tragedy□as seen, for instance, in the scene of the mad King Lear and the blind Gloucester on the beach at Dover□both as theatrical modes and as mirrors of psychological reaction to chaos, points to what he was really attempting. While the plays of those such as Tourneur and Webster move easily from farce to tragedy, the presentation of chaos counterpointed by the articulation of a sense of a moral order, in this play there is no possibility of a transition to a tragic definition of farce. The characters end the play bloodied but unbowed; the ending is, however, purely mechanical. As Orton argued, farce had become an escapist medium, on the run from precisely that which it had originally presented□the disturbing manifestation of the human consciousness which threatens the stability of the social order.

Orton has frequently been compared to Oscar Wilde, and in this play in particular it is a useful comparison. But here more than ever there is a key distinction. Where Wilde

invites us to look beyond the brittle and studied brilliance of his characters' dialogue to the hollowness underneath, Orton presents all his cards directly to the audience. What we are being shown is the underneath. What Orton was moving towards was the presentation of a pre-civilised world in which the awakened subconscious, at large in a decadent society, makes everyone a "minority group". Had he lived, his redefinition of the boundaries of comedy would have been a major feature of the modern theatre.

Source: John Bull, " *What the Butler Saw"* in *The International Dictionary of Theatre*, Volume 1: Plays, edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 892-93.

Topics for Further Study

Orton has often been compared to Victorian writer Oscar Wilde. Compare *What the Butler Saw* with Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In what ways does Orton's play reflect Wilde's influence? How might the differences between the two plays reflect changes in society?

Compare *What the Butler Saw* with Orton's earlier play *Loot*. In what ways do the two plays deal with the subjects of sexuality and authority?

Orton has been accused of misogyny, hatred towards women. Discuss the female characters in *What the Butler Saw*. Does a reading of this play support this accusation?

Research and discuss the elements of farce. In what ways does *What the Butler Saw* rely on these elements? Why might it sometimes be considered a parody of a farce? Use specific examples.

Compare and Contrast

1969: Society experiences a growing movement toward sexual freedom. Sex outside of marriage is gaining acceptance, at least in part because of the development of the birth control pill. Homosexuality has only recently become legal, and gays continue to suffer society's rejection and hatred.

Today: The sexual freedom fought for in the 1960s has gained widespread acceptance, but concerns about the AIDS virus have caused more people to consider abstinence and monogamy. Gays have made great strides socially and legally but continue to be the victims of discrimination and hate crimes.

1969: Psychiatrist R. D. Laing hypothesizes that madness is a sane reaction to an insane world, and some psychiatrists join him in opposition to traditional treatments for schizophrenia and related disorders.

Today: Scientific research has shown that many mental illnesses are largely caused by biological factors. New and more effective medications revolutionize psychiatry. Success with medication results in the closing of mental hospitals, but many of the mentally ill will not take their medications on their own and are not capable of successfully living without assistance. Many of the mentally ill become homeless.

1969: Young people protest, sometimes violently, against the restrictions imposed by the authority of the government. Opposition to American involvement in Vietnam gains worldwide support among young people.

Today: Some opposition to the authority of the state continues, but formal protests are less common and less vehement. Many young people become more conservative.

What Do I Read Next?

Loot, an Orton play first produced in 1966, is a farce focusing on twentieth-century taboos surrounding death. In this send-up of the modern detective story, Orton also pokes fun at authority, focusing, in this play, on the police.

The Birthday Party is a 1958 play by Harold Pinter, a British dramatist who influenced Orton's work, particularly in matters of comedy, social satire, and dialogue.

The Importance of Being Earnest, an 1895 play by Oscar Wilde, had a great deal of influence on Orton's work. *What the Butler Saw* relies on dialogue very similar to Wilde's, and the ending of Orton's play parodies Wilde's final scene.

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, a 1962 novel by Ken Kesey, also focuses on the madness of psychiatry, though in a much more serious way.

Made into a 1975 film starring Jack Nicholson, Kesey's novel helped to foster a suspicious attitude toward the authority of mental health professionals the patients they are supposed to help.

A Day at the Races, a 1937 Marx Brothers film, is a good example of farce. The film features Groucho Marx as a veterinarian who impersonates a doctor at a sanatorium and performs bogus medical examinations.

The Politics of Experience, a 1967 work by psychiatrist R. D. Laing, explores Laing's belief that mental illness is the logical reaction to the madness of society. Neurobiological research has since discredited some of Laing's beliefs, but the influence of this work on attitudes toward mental illness is significant.

Further Study

Lahr, John. *Prick up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, Knopf, 1978.

This is the most complete biography of Orton, featuring information on his life as well as his work. Lahr's work on the relationship between Orton and Halliwell was adapted to make the 1987 film on Orton's life, Prick up Your Ears.

Levin, Bernard. *The Pendulum Years: Britain and the Sixties,* Jonathan Cape, 1970.

This thorough book covers many aspects of life in Great Britain during the time in which Orton was writing.

Rusinko, Susan. *Joe Orton*, Twayne, 1995.

Rusinko provides a brief biography as well as extensive analysis of Orton's plays.

Shepherd, Simon. *Because We're Queers: The Life and Crimes of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, GMP, 1989.

In this study of Orton's work, Shepherd maintains that "the Orton industry," as he calls it, reflects society's prejudice against gays. Shepherd seeks to present a "radical gay viewpoint" on Orton and his work.

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Bigsby, C. W. E. *Joe Orton*, Methuen, 1982. pp. 49-61.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
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- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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