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**SEX AND VIOLENCE
IN THE PLAYS OF
JOE ORTON
A GAY PERSPECTIVE**

by

Ian WILLIAMS

Thesis for Master's Degree in English Literature

Massey University, Palmerston North, 1993

Supervisor: Dr John Dawick

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INTRODUCTION:	4
CHAPTER ONE: A PREDISPOSTION TO ADDICTION	9
CHAPTER TWO: PETER PAN AND WENDY: "YOU BRING THIS ON YOURSELF"	24
CHAPTER THREE: BEFORE LIFE BECAME A FARCE	47
CHAPTER FOUR: PLAYS 1963-64: BED SITTERS, RUBBISH DUMPS, TOASTERS	64
CHAPTER FIVE: PLAYS: 1965-1966: CAMPS, COFFINS, COPS	100
CHAPTER SIX: THE LAST RITES: <i>FUNERAL GAMES</i> AND <i>WHAT THE BUTLER SAW</i>	132
CONCLUSION:	164

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INTRODUCTION

I bring my own biases into this thesis. As a man who has also had sex in toilets with other men, as Orton frequently did, I cannot help drawing on my own experiences and the feelings these generated.

These are mostly to do with guilt and shame but, unlike Orton, I did not take drugs prior to the encounters so I was fully aware of what was going on for me.

Eventually I became aware of *why* I was doing what I was doing and stopped. I discovered that for me, sex on a casual basis was not an empowering process, although being human it happens occasionally, and when it does I try to stop those condemning voices in my head.

I also began this thesis believing that since I could write fairly wittily, I was a similar sort of character to Orton. But the more I read, the more I realised that I was closer to his partner, Halliwell, in terms of my personality and behaviour, and certainly in terms of being in touch with my sexuality. Whatever one thinks of the *form* Orton's sexual expression took, one has to admire his single minded and seemingly confident pursuit of it, a far cry from the timid insecurity of his partner, on whose behalf, Orton was always trying to make sexual contacts. But Halliwell wanted only Orton, which was a dilemma that only death could solve.

But I do identify with Orton's upbringing in a working class, mother dominated environment. My mother was not a powerful, sometimes violent matriarch like Orton's mother, Elsie; mine wielded her power by adopting a different kind of persona. But like Orton, I was my mother's husband substitute, fulfilling her emotional and to some extent her sexual needs.

I believe it is this aspect of Orton's life which sowed the seeds for the sex and violence in his plays, and which this thesis will be discussing. It also sowed the seeds for his genius and unique contribution to the theatre and English literature. For without Elsie Orton, and the dynamics that existed in the Orton family, there would be no Kath Kemp, "in the rude," practically raping her young lodger, Sloane. No Joyce, more upset about her dead goldfish than the young man who has just died on her floor. No Mrs Vealfoy, disseminating advice on sex and parenthood, not from her own experiences, but from some manual of the mind. No Nurse Fay, murderer of eight patients and prepared to sacrifice everything for money. No Mrs Prentice, screwed by her son in a dark closet. No dead woman's fingers in biscuit tins. No monstrous fun at the expense of an audience that often bayed for Orton's blood, while happily making him rich in the process.

How did this unique talent end up dead with his head smashed in? Probably because he swapped one controlling mother figure for another. The archetypal monstrous mum

may well manifest itself in the figure of certain homosexual men. Why not? Such men are obviously cross gendered.

Halliwell was described thus: "He had visions of grandeur. He was always so selfish and preoccupied about himself. Constant talking of self, ego, ambition. He was a great egotist," writes John Lahr, Orton's biographer, quoting a fellow student of Halliwell's at RADA. (*Diaries*, 25) Lahr also quotes G.K. Chesterton on the artistic temperament, the disease that effects amateurs. "The great tragedy of the artistic temperament is that it cannot produce any art," wrote Chesterton. (*Diaries*, 25).

That statement sent a prickle of fear up my spine, as I remembered the times I had given vent to my "artistic temperament." Was I too a poseur? My outbursts of anger sometimes took on the aspects of the rage that Halliwell manifested towards others and his partner. And like Halliwell, at times I was dependent and had few friends.

Such a personality lives in a world of make-believe, putting on varying false fronts to cope with varying situations. The persona that would have sustained Halliwell most would have been that of teacher and older, wealthier friend of a lad from the provinces. Consequently, it would have been a terrible blow to Halliwell's pride when his pupil, Orton, became the

successful writer and celebrity, and then began to build a life which largely excluded him.

But we are all products of our genes, upbringing and environment, and what is clear is that both Orton and Halliwell were shaped by their warped childhood and adolescent experiences which, in Orton's case produced genius, and in Halliwell's produced an individual who was unable to function alone in the world. Letting go of one's only friend and companion of sixteen years would have been almost an impossibility. He must have often thought of the loneliness of such an option and decided that life without Orton would be too painful to contemplate.

So while condemning him, I understand, Projecting one's anger against the world onto those we love is a common practice amongst abused and damaged individuals. It is just a pity that Halliwell never knew what he was doing.

However, Orton lives on in his diaries, plays and photographs, forever thirty-four, his last play, *What the Butler Saw*, forever a flawed masterpiece awaiting a critical rewrite.

We can imagine him bent over the typewriter in his bed-sit in Noel Road, Islington, checking himself over in a mirror prior to an excursion to the gent's toilets, or romping on the beaches of Tangier with teenaged

Moroccan boys. I might even have passed him on the street one day, because during the 1950's I too lived in London, and often used buses and underground stations mentioned in his diaries.

Now I pass by him once again; and with the experience, hopefully learn something of his literature and life.

THE BOY WITH BEADS

You'd drop in on your way home - once a month,
 something like that, a slender, dapper man,
 dark hair sleeked back, black shoes polished.
 You could almost have been a jockey, but you were
 a draper, saddled with German in-laws, and now
 and then you'd escape to your sister's, my mum's.

Before calling you'd visit a west-end club
 where girls wearing beads dance close to the
 customers. Did you ever go back stage when they
 asked? A good way to forget Gerda, Fritz, or whatever
 their names were. Sitting in our front room
 dropping crumbs of your night into my lap,

Thick blood stirred in my young pants
 and shame rushed to my head. Didn't you know
 your sister was German too? And sex was not
 a subject she talked about, except with me.
 I was her boy with beads, turning her naked body
 under the light, she danced especially for me.

Ian Williams

CHAPTER ONE: A PREDISPOSITION TO ADDICTION:

"People who seek, who are driven to seek, love in urinals, do not deserve the best of our attention. They will be forgiven, and, anyhow, sometimes they are not seeking love; they are seeking a means to express their hatred and suspicion of the world. Sometimes."

John Cheever, American short story writer and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, writing in his posthumously published, *The Journals*.

1 January 1993 marked the 60th anniversary of British playwright's, Joe Orton's, birth, so it seems appropriate that this thesis should be written in 1993.

Joe Orton (born John Kingsley Orton) the British playwright, and Kenneth Halliwell lived together in a relationship from 1951 until they died in a murder-suicide in the early hours of 10 August 1967.

They'd met when both were students at RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. After a brief stint in the theatre they moved in together, abandoning thoughts of an acting career and concentrating on establishing themselves as writers.

For the first nine years of their life together, they collaborated on a series of novels, all unpublished, but which served as a starting point from which Orton launched his career as a playwright, with his first play being accepted for performance in 1963, just four years before his death.

The fact that Orton did little to acknowledge Halliwell's influence in his writing success may have been the reason why Halliwell used a hammer to smash in his partner's skull, before taking twenty-two Nembutals, which Orton had laughingly called "Kenneth's suicide pills." (*Diaries*, 201) But most probably, Halliwell's action was a result of a combination of events, plus his own psychological and physical ill health. Halliwell had a high opinion of himself which nobody, especially the literary world, seemed to share. He was the senior partner in the relationship yet it was the younger man who became the acclaimed author and international celebrity.

I do not know what Joe Orton sought in urinals, but like John Cheever, he was a frequent visitor. Politically active gays might say that having sex in toilets, or picking up men in toilets and having sex with them elsewhere, is a legitimate expression of a lifestyle. Since Gay Liberation, they might also say gays have ceased to measure themselves against heterosexist attitudes which have no meaning or relevance to a gay man's life.

Of course, many heterosexual men seek sex outside their marriage or relationship environment. The red light districts of cities all over the world cater for the needs of non-gay men far more than they do for gay men. So who is pointing the finger at whom?

However, if such behaviour is an escape from something, and if drugs and alcohol are part of the escape process, then there *is* a problem, the seeking becomes both an escape and an addiction. John Cheever's *Journals* chart both the double life of a married man who seeks love in urinals, and his alcoholism.

Alcoholism may be the primary addictive substance but it is only one of many addictions. Substance abuse, prescription and recreational drugs, food, sex, television, all can be and are addictive. Patrick Carnes, recognised as the guru on sexual addiction, says that essentially addiction is part of a maladaptive response to stress. Addiction becomes a way in which the abuse events become internalised; childhood events being reenacted through fantasy and behaviour. It becomes a way to survive or cope with crisis, to deaden or escape from pain, to fill the hole, to nurture oneself to make up for deficit or damage. Whether the addiction is alcohol, drugs, food or sex, addictive behaviour is triggered by memories or parallel situations. (Carnes, 129)

It is my belief that Orton's sexual behaviour and use of prescription drugs such as Valium and Librium which frequently accompanied his sexual acting out constituted an addiction; and it is my theory that this stemmed from the role he was forced to adopt in his family of origin.

According to John Lahr, due to an unhappy marriage and her own failed ambitions, Orton's mother, Elsie Orton, placed her eldest son, John (Joe), on some sort of pedestal, pawning her wedding ring so she could send him to a private school. (Lahr, 49)

Lahr, quoting Orton's sister, asserts that Elsie and her husband William never had sex after 1945, indeed "she hated it." (Lahr, 44-45) To fill this gap in her life, Elsie appears to have turned to her eldest son for satisfaction. "Elsie felt that her first child was special. For seventeen years Orton tried to live up to her dream of him. He inherited her belief in himself. He read books...he was handsome and well groomed. Elsie used to hold John up as a model to the rest of the family...Elsie's ambitions were stalled, but her dreams of success were to live again in John." (Lahr, 49)

There is no record of anything "sexual" occurring between Orton and his mother, or with Jim, a truck driver who lodged with the family, but then facts about a family's secrets might be withheld, especially from a biographer. But Elsie's covert sexual behaviour is manifest in her parading before her son, asking him how she looked, and "tarting" herself up when she went out. "Once she got dressed up in gold lame and painted her shoes gold just to go to the pub." (Lahr, 158)

"That's my mum!" Orton's sister, Leonie said, laughing as she watched Beryl Reid's brilliant interpretation of

Kath in the 1975 Royal Court revival of *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, wrapped in a fancy negligee to seduce Sloane." (Lahr, 158) It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Orton was recreating a scene that resembled some aspects of true life situations between himself and his mother. And although it is most likely that Orton was subject to emotional abuse, the possibility of some form of sexual abuse should not be ruled out, if not by his mother, then by another family member.

As Carnes writes, emotional abuse also leads to addictive behaviour: Parents can specialize in one child at the price of neglecting the others: Marilyn (Orton's sister) has memories of Orton's 'lovely speech.' She recollects him on the bus "coming home...his head bent over a book, while other boys giggled and joked around him." (Lahr, 74). Touch deprivation in a family that doesn't show affection is another form of emotional abuse: As Orton's sister recounts: "I never saw my Mum and Dad kiss - not once." (Lahr, 44) So is being screamed or shouted at: "She swore like a soldier;" (Lahr, 50) and violence perpetrated on others: "She got me in a corner with this stick and she wouldn't stop hitting me;" (Lahr, 51) and especially being forced to take on adult roles, such as that of surrogate spouse. (Carnes, 123) As Carnes writes, "Forcing children to face the world like adults gives them a sense of being able to depend only on themselves." (Carnes, 123)

Orton escaped from his Terrible Mother as soon as he was able, first into a teenage diary in which he wrote his sexual thoughts in shorthand, (Lahr, 46) then into anonymous sexual contact with people who could give him temporary relief from the necessity to live up to his mother's hopes and expectations. This escape started early in his teenage years.

Watched an old film on television called *My Favourite Blonde*...This had sentimental overtones...It was at the companion picture, *My Favourite Brunette*...some time in the early forties that I was first interfered with. A man took me into the lavatory of the Odeon and gave me a wank. I re-lived those happy moments as I sat watching the picture today. I remember coming down his mac. I must've been about fourteen.

(*Diaries*, 88)

But although he made his physical escape, Orton never escaped her influence. "He was as dutiful a son as she was a mother. He bought her little presents when he arrived for his two week visit each summer; he wrote letters she rarely answered;" (Lahr, 50) and that influence plays a profound effect in Orton's artistic output.

"A man's personal mother...exerts a dominant influence on his experience of the inner feminine, and consequently on his manner of relating to outer women," writes Loren E. Pedersen in *Dark Hearts; The Forces that Shape Men's Lives*. (Pedersen, 63) But the women in Orton's plays are mostly travesties of everything that the archetypal "Good Mother" represents: fullness and abundance, the dispenser of life and happiness, the

nutrient earth, the cornucopia of the fruitful womb. (Pedersen, 69) If Orton's women do not actively destroy, such as Fay in *Loot*, then they are indifferent, such as Joyce in *The Ruffian on the Stair*; oversexed nymphomaniacs - Kath in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*; arch manipulators - Mrs Vealfoy in *The Good and Faithful Servant*; the stupid cause of violence and death - Eileen in *The Erpingham Camp*; self righteous - Tessa in *Funeral Games*; and alcoholics who are sexual with their children - Mrs Prentice in *What the Butler Saw*. All these manifestations of the Terrible Mother seem to me to be aspects of Orton's mother. And though most get threatened or slapped around in the plays, they retain their power even while misusing it. Thus Orton sees no escape from the dominating, manipulative female, even if, during the course of the plays, they sometimes appear to lose control. Kath in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* being a prime example.

Orton's treatment of such women can obviously be labelled "misogynist," especially in context with his sexist comments and behaviour towards women in his diaries, but it is useful to trace its source and inspiration. However, there is another side to the anger which is directed at a wider audience, an anger which may have been fuelled by his lack of relationship with his father, or more likely by his social marginalisation as a member of an oppressed and criminal social minority - those people whose sexual expression is termed "homosexuality."

Unlike D.H. Lawrence, who came from a similar mother dominated family as Orton's, and whose "great struggle" to suppress his homosexual instincts has been praised by Norman Mailer (*The Prisoner of Sex*, 154), Orton seemed to have chosen a homosexual lifestyle after only a few attempts at contact with females. In Orton's case, however, this did not involve any decisions to adopt a lifestyle or persona that was unmasculine. In fact, the aggression shown by his young male characters may be seen on the one hand as an attempt to masculinise them and on the other as a suppression of his own feminine nature.

In his short career, Orton probably achieved what he set out to do - change the public's perception of what a homosexual male might look like, say and act. In the process, I believe he somehow lost touch with his true sexuality. For sex and sexuality are not the same thing.

Sex is the physical act between pairs of sexual organs; sexuality is a relationship act that involves emotions, feelings and sensations, and the organ is the whole body. It's also a public matter, an energetic force that drives a person to move from isolation to relationship.

The characters in Orton's plays largely operate in isolation. When they come together it is for sex not

relationship, and when it is not for sex it is for control. Unfortunately for Orton, he exchanged a controlling mother for a controlling lover, who may well have had many of the characteristics of Elsie Orton, among them certainly rage and grandiose ideas of his own abilities, and certainly low self esteem. For if Elsie Orton, a woman who sang operatic arias in a "very good mezzo-soprano" (Lahr, 41) thought of herself as being so wonderful, why did she marry William Orton, a man with a "frail, cowed presence" who worked as a poorly paid gardener? Perhaps the answer is that she too was a person who mistook the sexual act for relationship?

BACKGROUND TO TRAGEDY

The crucial event in Joe Orton's and Kenneth Halliwell's lives was their 1962 prison sentence for defacing public library books. Orton and Halliwell, as mentioned, both unpublished writers at the time, took their revenge on a society that refused to recognise their lifestyle or talents by replacing book blurbs and illustrations with semi-pornographic material. After being "doctored" the books were put back on the library shelves. Orton and Halliwell derived great pleasure from watching the reactions of borrowers as they picked up the books and read the mildly obscene blurbs. (Lahr, 81-90)

Some years later when being interviewed about this incident Orton said, "The thing that put me in a rage ...was that I went to quite a big library in Islington and asked for Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. They told me they hadn't got a copy of it... I was enraged that there were so many rubbishy novels and rubbishy books." (Lahr, 83)

John Lahr says that "the trial festered in Orton's imagination," and that "his letters reveal a bumptious energy and an anger at the manoeuvrings of the authorities" who were trying to lay their hands on Orton and Halliwell's bank books. Three days after leaving prison in September 1962 they were back in court and ordered to pay 262 pounds for the damage to the books. (Lahr, 86-89)

Lahr writes that prison proved a turning point for Orton because he found a focus for his anger and a new detachment in his writing. (Lahr, 90) For Halliwell, on the other hand, the pursuit by the long arm of the law precipitated a suicide attempt. Obviously the prison experience was a turning point in both their lives.

The acceptance in 1963 by BBC Radio of *The Ruffian on the Stair*, quickly followed by the hit stage play, *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, was, to coin a linguistic cliché, the beginning of the end for Orton. Halliwell couldn't cope with the changes his partner's success wrought on their lives, continued to threaten suicide,

became addicted to sleeping pills and tranquillisers, neurotic about his health, and eventually psychotic.

So why did Orton stay rather than get out?

In the introduction to *The Orton Diaries*, Lahr writes that Halliwell was the entire creative environment of Orton's adult life and that he persisted so long in the relationship not only out of a sense of loyalty to his partner, but also because it was advantageous to his craft. Halliwell, Lahr goes on, was not only Orton's editor and sounding board, he was his subject matter. (*Diaries*, 31)

However, there is probably a more fundamental reason. Whilst Halliwell's family background was scholarly and seemingly bereft of strong emotions, Orton's, as mentioned, was dominated by Elsie Orton. This archetypal Terrible Mother, who as well as being emotionally abusive towards her children and constantly berating her husband for his weaknesses and lack of income, was frequently violent and sometimes drunk, lived in a make believe world which necessitated her pretending she was someone she wasn't. In Lahr's biography of Orton he reports that in spite of the fact that the family had "no phone, no car, no appliances and...no life...she lived in Cloud Cuckoo-land...she wanted to live like a queen but couldn't afford it." (Lahr, 47)

In such a family, children, according to Patrick Carnes, writing in *Don't Call it Love, Recovery from Sexual Addiction*, "learn conflict avoidance by the rule 'Don't rock the boat.' Painful, unresolved issues continue in the family because no one addresses them. When children express feelings about these issues, they are told they are exaggerating or being dramatic. From this, children learn to tolerate pain." (Carnes, 101)

Perhaps this was the reason why Orton found it difficult to leave the relationship with Halliwell? He had learnt conflict avoidance as a means of coping with a dysfunctional family life, so it was natural that his method of coping with a deteriorating relationship was to avoid conflict. It is odd that soon after he left home Orton should team up with a dominating, shame based person who was self doubting, desperate for approval and who also lived in a sort of Cloud Cuckoo-land.

I believe that gay couples in a long term relationship have the same problems separating as straight couples. It is easy to get out if another, alternative partner comes along, but the prospect of living alone would have been daunting to Orton, as Halliwell probably represented a combination of a father and mother figure to him. Since Elsie Orton had died in December 1966, and he had never been close to his father, Halliwell was basically the only real family Orton had.

However, it is clear from *The Orton Diaries* that the living arrangements Orton had with Halliwell were for domestic convenience only. Orton had long since fled the sexual nest he shared with Halliwell for the type of working class men and rent boys he craved.

The diary is a very provocative document and contains detailed passages on Orton's sexual encounters with other males. What's more, it was left in their bed-sitter so that Halliwell could read it, ostensibly perhaps to comment on its literary attributes. But imagine the effect this passage might have on a neurotic and envious partner who only indulges in wanking and sucking:

I went to the lavatory under the bridge in Hornsey Road. I picked up a negro about twenty-five years of age. We went back to his room...He fucked me and came very quickly. Then I lay on the bed with him and I fucked him. It was a bit difficult getting it in because he had such a big arse..."I like fucking or being fucked," he said, "I've no use for wanking or being sucked off..."

Diary entry Monday 17 July 1967

But as with many of Orton's sexual encounters, it followed a row with Halliwell earlier that day.

Kenneth v. irritating today. Weather hot again. Blue skies. Kenneth's nerves are on edge. Hay fever. We had a row this morning. Trembling with rage. About my nastiness when I said, "Are you going to stand in front of the mirror all day?" He said, "I've been washing your underpants! That's why I've been at the sink!" He shouted it loudly and I said, "Please, don't let the whole neighbourhood know you're a queen."

Diary entry Monday 17 July 1967.

(By implication, in both the above instances, Orton is saying, "I am a man and you are not," and heaping added insecurity onto his already insecure partner.)

Halliwel's suicide note, written three weeks later after he'd murdered Orton was left on top of the diary. It said:

"If you read his diary all will be explained. K.H. P.S. Especially the latter part."

The first things that usually go missing from a statue of a male nude are the protuberances - the nose, arms, head and penis. In Orton's final play, *What the Butler Saw*, written during the months prior to his death, the penis from a statue of Sir Winston Churchill, Britain's war-time prime minister, has also "gone missing" following a gas main explosion. It turns up in the dead body of Mrs Barclay, mother of Geraldine, one of the characters in the play.

Throughout the diaries, it seems to me that Orton attempts to psychologically castrate Halliwel by comparing a "man's" method of having sex with other men - fucking each other, with Halliwel's method - masturbation and oral sex. The blown off penis of Churchill might be said to represent Orton's efforts to blow off what remained of Halliwel's manhood. Yet at the same time, Orton's method of dealing with "rows" with Halliwel is to run away from the problem by having more and more anonymous sex, often accompanied by the use of drugs.

For example, his diary entry for Saturday 22 July, 1967, which records a dinner party with a television producer and other notables, reads: "Went out to dinner

tonight...I'd taken two librium tablets. Lady G. gave me two more. (*Diaries*, 249)

Although the diary may have been Orton's method of trying to psych Halliwell into leaving the relationship, he himself was trapped in a work, sex and drugs cycle which didn't allow him the breathing space to come to what could have been a life saving decision. He was in a prison of his own making and there was to be no escape.

The final scene of *What the Butler Saw*, completed less than a month before Orton died, is a metaphor for his state of mind. The play's principals are on stage and suddenly find themselves trapped:

Dr Rance goes to the wall and presses the alarm. A siren wails. Metal grills fall over each of the doors. The lights go out. The siren wails to a stop. The room is lit only by the glare of a bloody sunset shining through the trees in the garden.

(*Plays*, 442)

Ironically, the play ends with the mostly nude and bleeding protagonists climbing a rope ladder "into the blazing light." Orton and Halliwell were both nude when their bodies were discovered.

It was the Marquis of Queensberry, an exponent of the manly sport of boxing, who smashed Oscar Wilde, the man many theatre critics compared to Orton. It was the failed writer and rejected queen, Kenneth Halliwell, who hammered Orton. Neither playwright knew what hit them.

CHAPTER TWO: PETER PAN AND WENDY -

"YOU BRING THIS ON YOURSELF"

"We are the Peter Pans of the world, the irrepressible ones who believe in magic, folly, and romance. And, in a sense, we never grow old. That's part of what being gay signifies: innocence of spirit, a perennial youthfulness of soul. The gay spirit is a young spirit. Which is why the world needs us. We refuse to become dowdy and dull, we refuse to dwindle into the doldrums, and we never die."

James Broughton, gay poet and film maker, quoted in *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*, edited by Mark Thompson

Although Joe Orton's work contains much that is wildly humorous, it also contains violence, unusual for a homosexual playwright who seems to be totally at ease with himself. But I wonder if Orton identified as homosexual? I rather fancy he saw himself as bisexual. The following diary entry for Sunday 30th July 1967, written ten days before his death, is most revealing:

Oscar (Lewenstein) has been sent two plays by John Osborne..."What are they like?" I said. "There's a portrait of Vanessa Redgrave in the first play which I think is probably libellous...Vanessa discovered when she was twenty years old that her father (the actor, Michael Redgrave) was a homosexual." "He must've been bisexual," I said, "or she wouldn't be alive today." "He hasn't had any heterosexual relations since the birth of his last child." "No," I said, "but he has several children. He must've at least shown willing. He can't be called a homosexual."

(Diaries, 262-263)

The above statement is clear enough. If a man can have sexual intercourse with a woman, Orton says "He can't be called "homosexual." In his biography of Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears*, John Lahr refers to an occasion

when the sixteen-year-old Orton was caught in bed with a bridesmaid at his sister's wedding. (Lahr, 46) There is also an incident recorded in the diaries when Orton gets an erection when standing next to a female in a bus: "She kept rubbing up against my leg. I got a hard on," (*Diaries*, 255) and another occasion when he escorts a German female tourist around in Tangier: "I enjoyed the looks of envy as I walked along with her...and so...for a morning's walk around town, I possessed the most beautiful and desirable girl in Tangier. I was curiously excited by this fact." (*Diaries*, 173).

Speaking of the Orton-Halliwel household, author and critic, Penelope Gilliatt told Lahr that Orton knew it was a fake household and that he hated himself for accepting domesticity and carrying on with it for so long. (*Diaries*, 23)

This may seem to imply that it was the relationship with Halliwel that Orton considered fake. But there is also the possibility that it was relationships with males (as opposed to sex with men) that disillusioned him.

My theory for the sex and violence in Orton's plays, and the form they took, is that as well as being representative of his attitudes towards females and authority figures, they are also projections of Orton's inner ambivalence about his sexuality and his

masculinity. This is not to say that I think he was heterosexual or even bisexual. I believe he was homosexual in orientation and certainly behaviour. But telling newspaper reporters that he had been married and divorced, (Diaries, 20) makes one wonder if he ever totally identified as homosexual? However, men of Orton's class and background are usually reticent about identifying as gay, hence the large numbers of working class men found cruising for sex in public lavatories. This is well documented in Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade*, as it is in Orton's diaries.

Extensive drug taking prior to sex, recorded in the diaries during the last eight months of his life, is an indication of Orton's state of being. "It is common for gay men and lesbians to drink or use drugs again and again because of being unable to accept being homosexual" writes Sheppard Kominars, who also notes that alcoholism and drug addiction amongst gays and lesbians in the United States are three times higher than the national average. (Kominars, 3)

In fact, the only sexually ambiguous character in an Orton play who is identified as homosexual rather than bisexual is Wilson in Orton's first play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*, and as we shall see, the character of Wilson is based more upon his partner, Halliwell, than on Orton himself. Thereafter, the other young males Orton creates are what Nicholas de Jongh in *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*,

describes as, "Orton's shadow, -- the figure of the sexy hooligan, a projection by which he becomes the free, conscienceless subverter of morality, the begetter of sexual anarchy." This figure, de Jongh suggests, was not the real life Orton. (de Jongh, 99)

That Orton, was the dutiful son of an ambitious and domineering working class mother who "remained the socially adaptable, well-mannered young man about town," (de Jongh, 99) and who at the age of eighteen exchanged life in a council house in Leicester for life in a London flat with a man seven years older. This man provided him with some necessities of life - a roof over his head, companionship and a classical education. In exchange, Orton needed only to let the man have oral sex occasionally, an arrangement that might have gone on indefinitely had not Orton broken through to success. Undoubtedly, this led Orton to question both his relationship and his sexual needs, causes of conflict which are explored by the characters in his plays.

Lahr says that "Orton's compulsive promiscuity, the aggression in his humour, showed a need to confirm his maleness...the confusion of man, woman, and youth is always the driving force behind Orton's farces." (Lahr, 123) There's no doubt that through his writing he found a method to escape some of this sexual confusion and this was done by giving homosexuality or bisexuality a masculine face. De Jongh notes that Orton was one of

the first playwrights to write about males who weren't the usual effeminate, effete homosexual stereotypes. (de Jongh, 99) As Orton said in a 1967 interview about his character Ed in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*:

I wrote about a man who was interested in having sex with boys. I wanted him played as if he was the most ordinary man in the world. And not as if the moment you had sex with boys you had to put on earrings and scent. This is very bad and I hope that now homosexuality is allowed people aren't going to continue doing the conventional portraits there have been in the past. (de Jongh, 101)

The point here, and it is not intended to be homophobic, is that by insisting that homosexuals are *not* different to anyone else and are not sometimes effeminate Orton denies an important aspect of himself. He might not have showed or admitted it but in his unique way Orton was just as much a "queen" as his partner Halliwell, whose "pinafore number" he despised. It is just that he sublimates it in an aura of machismo, a not uncommon trait in gay men. This toughness manifests itself in the violence and sexual mayhem in the plays.

Oscar Wilde, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan; there is nothing in the works of these known homosexual authors to compare with the following incident from Orton's first stage hit, *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, although it is possible that many playwrights who write about violence may be homosexual without anyone knowing of their sexual orientation.

Kemp. Weak heart, my arse. You murdered him.

Sloane. He fell.

Kemp. He was hit from behind.

Sloane. I had no motive...

Kemp. Liar...lying little bugger. I knew what you were from the start...

Sloane. You make me desperate. I've nothing to lose, you see. One more chance, Pop. Are you going to give me away?

Kemp. I'll see the police.

Sloane. You don't know what's good for you.

(He knocks Kemp behind the settee. Kicks him.) You bring this on yourself. *(He kicks him again.)* All this could've been avoided. *(Kemp half-rises, collapses again. Pause. Sloane kicks him gently with the toe of his boot.)* Eh, then. Wake up. *(pause.)* Wakey, wakey. *(Plays, 124-126)*

Orton, as *The Orton Diaries* record, was an avid movie fan. He has culled this language and violence from similar sources as his contemporary, Harold Pinter - his family of origin, television slice of life dramas such as *Coronation Street*, inner city streets, and particularly the B grade gangster movie, both British and American. In fact, Orton admitted in a BBC interview that Pinter was an influence. (Lahr, 130)

This language is the banal, commonplace English "as it is spoke" by the masses, and while it may not be funny to the people speaking it, in the hands of a satirist such as Orton, it takes on elements of the most savage black humour.

Orton's violence, however, is different from Pinter's because the audience knows *why* young Sloane is putting the boot into daddy Kemp. The victim has unfortunately

"brought this on himself," which is what an adult might say to a child sent to bed without any supper. Such a colloquialism might be used to describe a minor accident or incident, such as slipping on a banana skin. But a killing? One critic called this language Orton's "South Ruislip Mandarin." (Lahr, 48)

I doubt if Ruislip is the right location. Orton's language has a more inner city feel - Shepherds Bush or Islington, where Orton and Halliwell shared a bed-sitter at the time of their deaths. Ruislip is, or was in Orton's day, much too suburban and respectable for people like Orton and his character Sloane, although even in suburbia people can have "surprising" tastes. (My uncle, who came to see me after visits to Soho strip shows, lived in Ruislip.) By putting the boot in while saying, "You bring this on yourself," the character becomes almost psychopathic, which he is, and belongs not in London's outer suburbs, but on the fringes of the underworld and in the inner London streets which were Orton's habitat.

In *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, Sloane is much more than the sexy hooligan that de Jongh describes. Hooligans indulge in mindless violence, ripping up train seats and throwing stones. Sloane is a killer who has killed once and will kill again. He finds his way into a house containing a middle aged woman, Kath, and her elderly father, Kemp. Kemp needs to be silenced as he recognises Sloane as the killer of a possibly

homosexual photographer whom Kemp once worked for. The death of Kemp will allow Sloane to remain in the house where he is sharing his sexual favours between Kath and her brother, Ed. The play ends "happily" insofar as Kath and Ed desire Sloane so much that they are willing to overlook the killing of their father, provided Sloane will agree to continue to service them sexually on a six monthly take-turns basis. The whole idea is preposterous and, using middle class values as a yardstick, totally immoral. But to a playwright grown sick and tired of the morality that labels his sexual behaviour "criminal and a sin," it is a wonderful joke.

It is notable, however, that the author has Sloane murder those who purport to expose him as homosexual or being connected to homosexuals - the photographer and Kemp. On the other hand, Sloane passively allows himself to be manipulated by those who treat him as a sex object - Ed, and especially, Kath. In fact, Sloane is drawn and can be played (as he was in the New York production of the play) as the victim of circumstance rather than the aggressor. It is rather disturbing to note that not only the old man is dispensable, so was the "queer" photographer. As the following passage and the subsequent action confirms, Orton seems to be saying that it is perfectly justifiable to beat to death photographers who take liberties with young men. This is a little odd for a happily adjusted "gay" playwright.

Sloane: I thumbs a lift from a geyser who promises me a bed. Gives me a bath. And a meal. Very friendly. All you could wish for he was, a photographer. He shows me one or two experimental studies. An experience for the retina and no mistake. He wanted to photo me. For certain interesting features I had that he wanted the exclusive rights of preserving.
(*Plays*, 125)

Given that the young man could be seen as defending his honour, this could make Sloane somewhat of a sympathetic character to a 1964 audience. It also allows us to follow the workings of the playwright's mind to a logical conclusion; if a queer photographer and an old man are dispensable, so is everyone, all sacrificed to fulfil the particular sexual and social needs of the fictional hero.

Some of Orton's theatrical connections considered Orton to have been a model for his character, Sloane. "Joe was Sloane...ruthless, not immoral but amoral, and pragmatic," Peter Willes, a television producer who promoted Orton's plays told Lahr. (*Diaries*, 27) But whereas Sloane gets his kicks from physical violence, Orton seems to get his from recording and recounting his compulsive sexual behaviour in his adult diary which covers the last eight months of his life.

Like Cecily's diary in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is simply a young man's record of his shocking private life and consequently meant for publication. Orton's plays were meant to shock, and they did. But they were not a patch on the realities of his life, as his diaries reveal. He lived the life he

wrote about, at least as far as his sexual life was concerned.

A careful reading of the diaries gives the lie to any idea that Orton was only interested in being the aggressor in his sexual activities. His methods of seeking sex could be termed aggressive - he was a frequent visitor to public lavatories, but he was as much anally receptive (the one being screwed or penetrated), as he was the penetrator. This is as true in Britain as it is with the rent boys in Morocco. (*Diaries*, 175) This may not make him passive in the same sense that his partner Halliwell was passive, but it does point to a possibility that this aspect of his homosexuality was not acknowledged. Three weeks before he died he was writing:

Up against a tree I dropped my trousers and he fucked me. He was quick. Afterwards he tossed me off..."You don't want money do you?" "No," I said, "I've plenty of money."

(*Diaries*, 241)

But a man doesn't necessarily hunt for sex because he's aggressive. Passive homosexuals are just as likely to be found in toilets, parks and derelict buildings. There's real danger in such a lifestyle, and it points to an element of sadomasochism in the participants. For picking up an unknown man in a toilet and anally penetrating each other using spit as a lubricant, as Orton did, can be painful, although at the same time, the pain may be part of the pleasure for some participants. Then, of course, there is the real danger

of an encounter with an undercover policeman or a "queer basher," someone who hates homosexuals.

In an article about compulsive sexual behaviour in the January 1991 issue of *Vanity Fair*, entitled, *A Fever in the Blood*, Ann Louise Bardach quotes sexologist Eli Coleman as follows: "People who are sexually compulsive have experienced some kind of abuse in their family of origin, which can just as well be emotional as physical, and develop a deep shame and anxiety disorder which their sexual behaviour temporarily assuages." She also quotes Peter Trachtenberg, author of *The Casanova Complex* who says that "sexual addiction is an emotional compulsion that arises from the same root as all compulsions - a damaged, shaky sense of self that requires endless grounding and reassurance through some external object." (Bardach)

John Lahr, Orton's biographer, makes the same point in his introduction to *The Orton Diaries*. He writes that Orton had a swagger that betrayed his inadequacy and that when faced with situations that made him feel "weak" or out of control, such as his rows with his partner, the depressing opening of one of his plays, or his mother's funeral, he sought to confirm his strength in the anonymous dangers of the public lavatories. (*Diaries*, 15)

I believe the sex and violence in Orton's plays are the methods Orton uses to give expression to his own feelings of inadequacy. They also allowed him to portray the type of young male he perhaps wanted to be, not living in a closeted "couple" relationship with another man, but free to roam and be sexually available to either sex. That these may have largely been males of a particular type is reasonably clear. They are a far cry from the classically educated Halliwell with his affected manners and emotional tantrums. Orton has no time for pansies or queens like that. His men have a day's growth of beard and wear the uniform of the classic macho gay man, a uniform which became almost a stereotype for the liberated gay male from the 1970's onward. Note that once again Orton is penetrated.

He had pale blue eyes and had a day's growth of beard. He wore jeans and a check shirt, under the shirt a white vest. He was about twenty-five years of age and came from Burnley in Lancashire. He had a softness about his body which wasn't the softness of a woman. I hoped he would let me fuck him....Then, rather to my surprise, the blue-eyed Dave...began to push his prick up my arse. It seemed rude to refuse...so I let him fuck me.
(*Diaries*, 122-123)

Orton justified his lifestyle by saying he needed to be sexually promiscuous as it was a form of creative stimulus. But in hindsight, a rich and famous playwright must surely be desperate to seek "creative stimulation" in such a toilet as this:

I went in. It was v. dark. There was a man in there. Tall, grand and smiling....He showed me his cock. I let him feel mine. 'Oo!' he gasped, not noticing the sinister sore that had developed on the end over the last week or so...I asked if he had anywhere to go back to. 'No,' he said...He

nodded to a dwarf sulking in the corner of the lavatory. 'He'll suck you off though. I've seen him do it.' He made a motion to the dwarfish creature rather as someone would call a taxi. The dwarf sucked me off while the other man smiled benevolently... (Diaries, 264)

It was sexual episodes such as these that possibly promoted Halliwell to call Orton "a selfish little whore." (Diaries, 157) But Orton got his own back in full measure by the most damning way one man can destroy another - by questioning his partner's masculinity.

There's no doubt Orton felt sexually superior to Halliwell because of the latter's form of sexual expression, which seems to have consisted only of masturbation and oral sex. "Mohammed, after swearing life-long friendship to me yesterday, seems content to do the same to Kenneth today. Kenneth said they wanked each other. K. having a psychological (or physical) block about taking it up the bum." (Diaries, 167)

Although Orton tells a Moroccan youth, "I like to fuck wherever possible," (Diaries, 167) the diaries clearly record many episodes of Orton being passive. So it is ironic that when Halliwell says he would like to take a whip to an Arab boy in Morocco, Orton tells him, "You're simply substituting violence for sex...your psychological slip is showing. A whip is a phallic symbol. You're doing on a symbolic level what I do in reality." (Diaries, 223)

However, Orton's ability to fuck gave him the psychological advantage if masculinity is being compared. It was Orton who was the anal penetrator or sodomite, the one whom the gay French sociologist Guy Hocquenghem labels the true homosexual. "Homosexuality primarily means anal homosexuality, sodomy" he writes in *Homosexual Desire*. (Hocquenghem, 84) Interestingly, although Orton was able to fuck countless other men, including "lots of ageing queens," he is never able to fuck Halliwell, a fact he mentions in his diary entry on 3 May 1967. (*Diaries*, 152)

In the introduction to Hocquenghem's book, Jeffrey Weeks writes that "In our patriarchal society, only the Phallus is a dispenser of identity." (Hocquenghem, P.24) Thus the use of the phallus to penetrate, even though it is used for anal penetration by a homosexual, may lead to a more positive self image than that possessed by the totally passive homosexual, such as Halliwell, especially if the passive male has delusions of grandeur and an unfulfilled ambition to be an author.

DOUBLE TALK, THE EROTICS OF MALE LITERARY COLLABORATION

"Double talk is an economy with all expenses and no return, a way of discharging language in a masturbatory folie a deux."

Wayne Koestenbaum quoting Georges Bataille in
Double Talk The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration

Although Orton's sexual promiscuity may have been one reason why Kenneth Halliwell beat his partner's brains out, that was probably only a minor irritation. It was their collaboration as writers that probably lay at the root cause of the tragedy.

The dynamics that exist between men who collaborate with each other to produce literary texts are explored by Wayne Koestenbaum in *Double Talk, The Erotics Of Male Literary Collaboration*. Koestenbaum argues that when two males form a partnership, often to write fiercely revolutionary texts – Marx and Engels forging communism, Freud and Breuer labouring over psychoanalysis – it signals a belief that collaboration makes these texts more effective. (Koestenbaum, 13)

They are more effective, Koestenbaum writes, because the two men adopt active (masculine) and passive (feminine) roles which complement each other; although the "fertilisation" that takes place between heterosexual men usually lies in the seeds that are sown in each other's minds. (Koestenbaum, 20–21)

However, an intense male bonding does take place which puts an emotional seal on the relationship. "Double writing," says Koestenbaum, "like good citizenship, sublimates homoerotic longing." (Koestenbaum, 18)

As well as mentioning Orton and Halliwell, Koestenbaum goes on to explore the dynamics of collaborations between several pairs of men, including John Addington Symonds and Havelock Ellis who collaborated on *Sexual Inversion*, and Wordsworth and Coleridge who each contributed poems to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Koestenbaum explains that *Sexual Inversion* was instigated by Symonds and was intended as a "scientific" response to the Labouchere Amendment of 1886 in Britain which made illegal both private and public "acts of gross indecency between men." Symonds, a homosexual, although not "out" in any modern sense, suggested writing the book to Ellis by noting that inversion ought to be investigated scientifically, historically and impartially. (Koestenbaum, 44)

Symonds died three years before the first edition of the book was published and his executor, to protect Symonds' reputation bought up most of the copies. In later editions, Ellis omitted Symonds' name from the title page, and severely truncated his contribution. (Koestenbaum, 44) Koestenbaum goes on to say that Wordsworth did the same to Coleridge, cutting *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* from later editions of *Lyrical Ballads*.

The key point that Koestenbaum makes is that the story of these partnerships neatly follows Oedipal lines: by cutting Symonds' portion into pieces, Ellis, nineteen

years the younger, castrated a literary father. By cutting Coleridge, Wordsworth performs an equally fratricidal or patricidal act.

Koestenbaum writes that this "alienates his utopian sense of double writing as a male seamlessness, and shows collaboration to be, at times, the use of friendship for unfriendly ends." (Koestenbaum, 44) Apply this to the Orton/Halliwel collaboration and it is easy to see why Halliwel felt abandoned.

While Freud/Breuer, Symonds/Ellis, Wordsworth/Coleridge, and the other collaborators Koestenbaum examines in his book - notably T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound (*The Waste Land*), Robert Louis Stevenson and his step son, Lloyd Osborne (*The Ebb Tide*), Andrew Lang and H.Rider Haggard (*The World's Desire*), and Joseph Conrad and Ford Maddox Ford, had only paper "affairs" with a sublimated homoerotic content, that between Orton and Halliwel was a far deeper collaboration. Their writing took them beyond sublimation into a physical as well as emotional connection which would have bound the two men together in a much more complex relationship. But essentially, the outcome was the same as the examples quoted above; what began as seamless writing, neither partner claiming this or that as their "work," ended with Orton castrating his literary father, Halliwel, and claiming all the glory.

Although the Orton-Halliwel collaboration ended in the murder of one of the partners, this can be seen as Halliwel's last desperate attempt to maintain his active status in their collaboration. For what could be more active than picking up a hammer and smashing in someone's head? Yet as Koestenbaum points out, it is not unusual for the passive partner to die or go mad during the course of collaboration or after it has taken place, Coleridge, Symonds and, to a lesser extent, Pound, all being examples.

In *Visionary Love: the Magickal* (sic) *Gay Spirit-Power*, Mitch Walker distinguishes Double-love, the love for someone of the same sex, from Anim-love, the love of someone of the opposite sex. Double-love he says is distinguished by uncanny feelings of unity, strength, and reinforcement of personal identity. This creates an atmosphere between lovers of profound familiarity; a mysterious joyful sharing of feelings and needs; a dynamic, intuitive strength and understanding. He equates this love with the brotherly love that exists between men in battle. (Gay Spirit, 224) But he also mentions the destructive aspect of the Double - the competitor, which seeks to destroy a person's identity, which when projected onto another person is seen as a threat and an enemy to be destroyed. I believe this is what occurred in the Orton-Halliwel relationship. After collaborating for ten years, the lovers took separate creative paths and so lost a crucial element that made up their Double-love. If one half of the

Double-love team is a winner, the other has to accept the role of loser if he remains in the relationship. Halliwell doesn't seem to have been able to accept this since, as the older man, the one who originally had the money, owned the property where they lived, and had the education and superior social status, he had always been in control.

The description of the gay archetype that opened this chapter does not apply to Orton. His Peter Pan quality, his irrepressible spirit and perennial youthfulness of soul which manifests itself in his unique humour, and which was also possessed by many of the gay playwrights mentioned earlier has, through his compulsive sexual behaviour, become tinged with something that almost resembles a death wish. It is a little like the position that Oscar Wilde arrived at in 1895 when he, like Orton, had two hit plays running in the West End of London, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is the idea that one can do no wrong, that one is all-powerful with a talent that places one beyond the man-made and natural laws of the day. As with Oscar Wilde, Orton could not or would not heed the warning signs, the sinister sore on his penis, the strange behaviour of his partner that preceded the murder. Perhaps, like Wilde, he was too drunk with his own success to notice. But most probably, he simply wanted to escape from a deteriorating domestic environment and sought refuge in drugs and sex.

At the time of their deaths, Orton had come to represent everything that Halliwell would never achieve himself - literary success, fame and wealth, the very essence of the straight society that Halliwell and Orton professed to hate. Betrayed, impotent and unable to express his anger any other way, Halliwell used his fists and finally a hammer on his partner's head. Thus straight society gained its revenge through an unlikely source. But did Orton bring this upon himself?

The targets in Orton's plays are primarily establishment institutions such as religion, the church, the police, working class values, industry, psychiatry and sexual morality as defined by the middle classes. During his years with Halliwell, he changed from a working class lad from Leicester who could barely construct a sentence, to an erudite man of letters able to quote from the classics.

Orton cites Euripides' *The Bacchae* as a source for his play *The Erpingham Camp*. According to Bettina L Knapp in *A Jungian Approach to Literature*, in *The Bacchae*, the action lies in the clash between male/female principles, religious faith and the lack of it, and the violence that these powers strike at each other. Dionysus (Bacchus) is said to come to rectify the balance when the Earth Mother and, by extension, the feminine principle, is being demeaned or violated; he disappears from view when the balance is restored. As Knapp says, "Dionysus was worshipped in antiquity as

the divinity of vegetation, of spring planting and seasonal renewal. Plutarch alluded to him as the god of the tree, Hesiod suggested he brought excitement and revelry wherever he went. The phallus was his symbol." (Knapp, 3-12) Dionysus was an extroverted god and the antithesis of Apollo who was introverted and represented light, spirituality, cerebrality, inner perception and intuition. Dionysus stood for liberty, for uninhibited libido in all its free flowing manifestations. His feelings are bound to sensations. (Knapp, 12)

Orton himself was a scholar of Greek literature and knew about the Dionysian influence:

I always say to myself that the theatre is the Temple of Dionysus, and not Apollo. You do the Dionysus thing on your typewriter, and then you allow a little Apollo in, just a little to shape and guide it along certain lines you may want to go along. But you can't allow Apollo in completely. (Lahr, 15)

Orton may have let a little Apollo into his plays, but he doesn't seem to have let much into his life.

"Providing one spends the time drugged and drunk, the world is a fine place," Orton wrote in his diary on the 3rd of June, two months before he died. (Lahr, 15)

Although homosexual, Halliwell represents the negative aspects of the feminine as found in the figure of Pentheus from *The Bacchae*. "Unlike Dionysus, Pentheus does not live in harmony with his sexuality. He is a prisoner of his own rigid system...behaves like an

automaton ...everything and anything that does not comply with his own logical frame of reference is simply eradicated from consciousness." (Knapp, 17)

Halliwel and Orton may have been compatible during the early stages of their relationship, but once Orton had achieved success, Halliwel's rigidity did not allow him to accept the change this success brought to their relationship. He had constructed a false self in a false world - consisting of himself and his acolyte, Orton, against "them," the enemy. When this world collapsed, the self that Halliwel had constructed based on his life with Orton had lost its point of reference. He had no role to play because his partner in failure had stepped onto the world stage.

The Orton Diaries, although written by Orton, contain footnotes supplied by friends who knew them both which indicate Halliwel's state of mind. Just a few days before he killed Orton, Halliwel had visited the theatre where *Loot* was playing. Sheila Ballantine, one of the stars, said to Lahr. "He told us about the new play, *What the Butler Saw*, as if it was a bit of a secret he was letting us in on. It was a bit sad...I could see he was disturbed." (*Diaries*, 266)

With treatment, a new and healthier ego based on reality could have emerged, but Halliwel was unfortunately treated by doctors who prescribed tranquillisers and sleeping pills for his condition,

allowing a further escape from reality. In fact, he was prescribed them by the hundred. Orton's sexual behaviour, his desire to distance himself from Halliwell by seeking other sexual partners, simply added fuel to the flames. For Halliwell, abandoned by both his mother and father, was obviously not prepared to be abandoned as co-author of Orton's success.

So he picked up a hammer. And Peter Pan departed for the Never Never Land where he would never grow old; and right alongside him, riding on his shadow, there would always be his Wendy - Halliwell.

CHAPTER THREE: BEFORE LIFE BECAME A FARCE

I'm inclined to think that the main fascination of Swift (as with Dylan Thomas, Brendan Behan, and many other writers and artists) is with his life. His art certainly doesn't warrant the merit attached to him.

Joe Orton, Diary entry,
Wednesday 29 March 1967.

Although Joe Orton's life has almost overwhelmed his art as subject material for books and theses, the man must eventually be judged by the quality and impact of his art.

Orton's published and performed literary output was crammed into an intense four year period between 1963 and 1967. Violence and death are common themes in the stage hits, *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964), in which a young hoodlum who has already killed a photographer, kicks an elderly man to death; *Loot* (1965), in which the major prop of the play is a coffin containing the dead body of a woman who has been murdered; and *Crimes of Passion* (1967), a double bill which consisted of a revised version of Orton's first play to be accepted for commercial production (by BBC radio), *The Ruffian on the Stair* (1963), in which a young male hairdresser is killed, and *The Erpingham Camp* (1966), originally written for television, in which a holiday camp owner is hounded to death. Only *What The Butler Saw* of his stage plays, written in 1967 and produced posthumously in 1969, contains no murders past or present, although it more than makes up for this by its other subject material - incest, transvestitism, lesbianism,

nymphomania, blackmail and bribery, not to mention nudity and Winston Churchill's penis.

Entertaining Mr Sloane and *Loot* were made into films, the first mildly successful, the second a total flop. A film script for The Beatles, *Up Against It* (1967), was also completed although the film was never produced.

Orton also wrote two further plays for television, *The Good and Faithful Servant* (1964) about a one-armed man who dies soon after completing fifty years service as a doorman (commissionaire) with a large company, and *Funeral Games* (1966), about a church leader who wants to murder his wife so that he can be arrested and seen as a martyr to his followers, but is instead arrested for a murder he did not commit.

With these plays, and a novel, *Head to Toe*, published posthumously in 1971, Joe Orton has managed to make his mark as a literary figure of some significance on the British and world stages. In 1975, *What the Butler Saw*, which had flopped in 1969 when first staged in Britain, was revived with great success. Similarly *Loot*, which had failed on Broadway (New York) in 1967, was a smash hit when staged there in 1986.

However, John Lahr's perceptive but occasionally inaccurate biography of Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears*, published in 1978, probably did as much to promote

Orton as any of his plays. Similarly the sensational *The Orton Diaries*, published in 1986, gave graphic evidence of Orton and Halliwell's parallel paths to destruction. A 1989 made for television film, also entitled *Prick Up Your Ears*, featured Gary Oldfield as Orton, an actor who in appearance and size could almost have been Orton's double, and Alfred Molina as Halliwell. This may have made the film less credible for students of Orton as Molina is a tall (about 6 ft 2 inches), well-built man, and dominated Oldfield physically to the point of intimidation, whereas in real life Halliwell and Orton were the same height (5 ft 9 inches) and both of slender build. Perhaps the producers thought that the "killer" needed to look menacing, mad and murderous rather than like the pleasant faced man Halliwell appears to have been, smiling out of snapshots in the biography and the diaries, beside him, an often surly faced Orton. In publicity shots, which are also reproduced in the biography and diary, Orton is obviously concentrating on presenting an image of the young, handsome, successful and rather outrageous playwright. But I think that was only a pose, the reality could have been nearer to the photographs that were taken with Halliwell.

Since death figures so prominently in Orton's writing, there may be something in the idea that if someone continuously writes about death he or she might attract it. It is an interesting concept and lies in the realms

of metaphysics rather than literature, although this thesis, because it is about a dramatist, has to take note of dramatic events in both the author's plays and his life.

DIFFERENT STYLES

Reading Orton's plays in chronological sequence, one can see that there is a considerable change in style. In fact, so dramatic are the differences, if we did not know who the author was the plays might well be attributed to various playwrights. They may roughly be divided into:

1. Suburban-speak black comedies, *The Ruffian on the Stair* and *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, in which Orton's creative ear is tuned into the speech and customs of low culture, i.e. the proletariat or working/lower classes. These are the most overtly violent plays with two on-stage deaths and three off-stage deaths between them. The humour lies in Orton's gift for parodying the values and milieu of the British. This, from *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, for example, where Kemp is warning his daughter, Kath, that her brother, Ed, might send her "to Bournemouth" for being sexual with Sloane. One has to know Bournemouth to understand the joke:

Kemp. He may take you away.

Kath. Where to?

Kemp. Edinburgh.

Kath. Too cold.

Kemp. Or Bournemouth. You always said you'd go somewhere with palms. (*Plays, 92*)

C.W.E. Bigsby, amongst other critical writers, claims these plays are heavily influenced by Harold Pinter. (Bigsby, 24) Certainly in Orton's early plays, *The Ruffian on the Stair* and *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, the language has a similar colloquial ring to that found in such Pinter plays as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. But the major "borrowing" might be seen in the plot. Meg wants to mother Stanley in *The Birthday Party* in much the same way as Kath mothers Sloane. Both men seem to find the overtures of the older, middle aged women, equally disgusting.

Meg. Stan?

Stanley. What?

Meg (shyly). Am I really succulent?

Stanley. Oh. you are. I'd rather have you than a cold in the nose anyway.

Meg. You're just saying that...(sensual, stroking his arm). Oh, Stan...

He recoils from her hand in disgust.
(*Pinter Plays One, 13*)

Sloane's opinion of Kath is expressed in more physical terms. As we shall see later, he hits her.

Thus we come to the crucial difference between the playwrights. In early Pinter plays violence exists as a sub-text. It is either about to happen, or when it does, as in *The Room*, happens without any apparent reason. There is an air of tension in Pinter which is missing in Orton. It is quite clear why Sloane decides to kill Kemp and why he hits Kath.

Similarly, the sex in Pinter is a subtle weapon used in the power struggle. Although there is a hint that Meg and Stanley are on very familiar terms, they don't roll around on stage as Kath does with Sloane. In Pinter, sex is as much a mystery as the violence. It may be used to humiliate and distract, it may be on display, as in *The Homecoming*, but we don't know why. The audience can only guess why Ruth is being sexual with her relatives in *The Homecoming*, or why Flora is attracted to the matchseller in *A Slight Ache*. Is he a "real" person? Does he have some sexual quality that is lacking in Edward? Pinter hints, Orton throws sex into our faces. Kath is desperate for love and thinks she will get it through sex. Ed stalks Sloane's bottom and offers a job and money as the lures. Sex is a commodity that is traded, whereas in Pinter, it is a mystery. Most of all, Pinter's humour lies in the menace of the unknown, his characters are lost in time and space, a little like Beckett's, whereas Orton's know exactly where they are going:

Joyce: Have you got an appointment today?

Mike. Yes. I'm to be at King's Cross station at eleven. I'm meeting a man in a toilet.
He puts away his shaving materials.

Joyce. You go to such interesting places. Are you taking the van?

(*Plays*, 31)

(Interesting to note that there is a "van" both in Orton's first play and in Pinter's *The Room*, and both are set in "a room" and end with a dead body on the stage.)

2. Then there are the plays which have a social or political point to make: the waste of a life or lives in *The Good and Faithful Servant*; the downfall of authority in *The Erpingham Camp*; and the corruption of gospel type religions in *Funeral Games*. Once again, on stage or on screen (plays written for television), violence is a key ingredient. Buchanan in *The Good and Faithful Servant* uses a hammer to smash the useless gifts he has been presented with after 50 years with the same firm. The authority figure in *Erpingham* is hounded to death by rebellious, rioting campers. While in *Funeral Games*, the severed hand of a woman whose body lies in the cellar, appears in a biscuit tin in the kitchen.

Of course, much of this violence is balanced by sex and humour: Buchanan's grandson, Ray, has made a girl pregnant in *The Good and Faithful Servant* and she has only ever met him "by accident."

Mrs Vealfoy. Is the young man willing to marry you?

Debbie. I haven't asked.

*Mrs Vealfoy...*Try to win his confidence. Has he any hobbies to which he is particularly attached?...Where do you meet him?

Debbie. He's never asked me to meet him. I usually do it by accident.

(*Plays*, 162-163)

Bigsby says that *The Erpingham Camp* is a farce.

(Bigsby, 24) Although the action might indicate this, the language does not. Some characters speak in the

same suburban-speak as the earlier plays. Even the "political speeches" are a parody of reality. I would also imagine that a visit to a British holiday camp in the 1960's would have revealed a host of pompous Erpinghams, inept Chief Redcoat Rileys, pugnacious Kennys and pregnant Eileens, so I will include that as a satire.

3. Finally there are the farces, *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*, where the language becomes mannered, the action faster, and all pretence at realism is eliminated. Here both violence and sex are on stage. "They pick up their clothes and weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, climb the rope ladder into the blazing light," reads the stage directions for the final event in *What the Butler Saw*. (*Plays*, 448)

Each play in sequence might be seen as a step in Orton's social development, starting with the play written when he was on the dole and did not have much of a future to look forward to, and ending with the "blazing light," of growing fame and fortune. These steps might be seen as part of what Carl Jung called "the individuation process," and Abraham Maslow termed "self actualisation."

As Perry London writes in *Beginning Psychology*, "Self-actualizers are more accepting of themselves, with all their faults and quirks, and have a sense of gusto and vitality in living their lives." Another key trait is

that they are goal oriented, no matter how distant or impossible that goal might be. (London, 403-404)

In the process of self-actualisation, Orton, given the opportunity, may have discovered what it meant to be a gay/homosexual man in his inner core or being. How does a homosexual man perceive himself in a culture that condemns his behaviour as deviant and criminal? As far as the 1963 play *The Ruffian on the Stair* was concerned, not very positively, but by 1967 Orton had completed the transition from writing about homosexual love and death, to writing about madness amongst the psychiatric fraternity. Ironical considering that while he was completing the play Halliwell was going mad and about to see a psychiatrist. True, the vehicle is farce, but Orton has injected all his life force into plays which abound with vitality and outrageousness, hallmarks of the characters as well as the action. In *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*, it would be impossible to imagine anyone contemplating suicide. Murder, perhaps, but not suicide.

The comparisons made between Orton and Oscar Wilde usually centre around both of their final plays, *What the Butler Saw* and *The Importance of being Earnest*. The similarity of their "happy" endings has been mentioned by Lahr and other writers.

In Orton's play, Dr and Mrs Prentice are reunited with their twins, Geraldine and Nicholas, conceived when

they had sex together in a pitch black linen cupboard (there was a power cut) in the Station Hotel, and subsequently adopted out because Mrs Prentice did not know who the father was. In Wilde's play, Jack, the baby left in the handbag on Victoria Station (the Brighton line), is reunited with his birth family and discovers that he was christened Ernest, the name he had invented for an incorrigible, non-existent younger brother who lived in town and whom Jack needed to visit frequently because he was always getting into trouble, thus Ernest is Jack's real name. Jack-Ernest may be seen as representing the moral and immoral aspects of the one person, and to a lesser degree, the twins in Orton's play could be seen to represent the masculine and feminine in Orton. Since they subsequently swap clothes and become each other, this might also be seen as a sign that the author can easily slip into either role, which the diaries show he could. But the most significant events that are revealed in the play must surely be the near seduction of Geraldine by her father, Dr Prentice; and the sexy young hooligan, Nicholas's, carnal knowledge of his mother. As in the Oedipus myth, lack of knowledge of the true relationship is no excuse, and the gods must be revenged. While the Oedipus myth spells out the fate of sons who have sex with their mothers, a "double incest," probably deserved a little more than blinding and exile, if not of the character, Nicholas, then of his creator.

Although *What the Butler Saw* may not measure up to Wilde's masterpiece, Orton's debt to Wilde is apparent. Lahr mentions in the biography that during his teens, Orton would read passages from *Earnest* to his sister. (Lahr, 74) In fact, considering the similarity of their styles, lifestyles and unhappy endings, it might be useful to compare their writings.

ORTON AND WILDE

Ronald Bryden, the critic who called Orton the "Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility," (Lahr, 221) would not have known at the time of writing that both men preferred their sex with "trade," the gay terminology for working class homosexual partners who are either paid for sex or who come from working class backgrounds.

I think the similarity ends there for although his jokes are somewhat epigrammatic, in the Wildean style, Orton's comedy is no respecter of life or limb, whereas with Wilde, the atrocities are verbal - shredding the social norms, reputation and status with gentle, mannered and sometimes barbed wit. His targets are widespread.

Literary critics:

Algernon (to Jack) in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a university. They do it so well in the daily papers. (P.14, Act 1, 218-220)

Marriage:

Algernon. ...You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.

(P.16, Act 1, 270-271)

Widowhood:

Lady Bracknell....I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.

(P.19, Act 1, 299-302)

To which Algernon responds, after some conversation about cucumbers:

I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.
(P.20, Act 1, 321)

Orton's wit was also aimed at turning society's values on their proverbial ears, although it was tinged with a little more madness, the confrontation between Dr's Prentice and Rance in the final few moments of *What The Butler Saw* being a case in point, with Dr Rance recalling how he sacrificed his family to further his professional reputation:

Rance (holding Dr Prentice at bay with one gun and picking up the other). I'll have you in a jacket within the hour. It's a hat trick!

Prentice. Is this a record for you?

Rance. By no means. I once put a whole family into a communal strait-jacket.

Prentice. How proud your mother must've been.

Rance. She wasn't, I'm afraid. It was my own family, you see. I've a picture of the scene at home. My foot placed squarely upon my father's head. I sent it to Sigmund Freud and had a charming postcard in reply.

(*Plays*, 442)

The Oscar Wilde scandal of 1895 and his death in 1900 resulted in his becoming something of a gay hero. Certainly, Wilde was the subject of persecution by the moral majority of his day and deserves to be an icon of gay consciousness. But he also deserves his place in gay history for another reason. "Modern gay fiction in English begins with Oscar Wilde," writes Claude J Summers. He goes on to say that this is not only because Wilde's early story, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." "has claim to being the earliest short story on a gay subject in English literature or that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is among the first novels to feature (though blurred and inexactly) a homosexual subculture." But "most profoundly...because of his (Wilde's) role as a symbolic figure who exemplified a way of being homosexual at a pivotal moment...the crucial final decade of the nineteenth century." (Summers, 29). For Wilde, "being homosexual" meant drawing attention to himself through flamboyant and eventually notorious behaviour, and by filling the role of mocker in chief of English hypocrisy and moralism. This had its serious side, revealed in such pamphlets as *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, in which he enunciated a doctrine of libertarian socialism quite at variance with his mask of frivolity. (Summers, 30-31) Although Orton never published such a pamphlet, he was one of the spokespeople of the 1960's, a decade where similar social changes were taking place; and he, too, adopted the role of chief mocker, albeit in a less flamboyant but no less effective style than Wilde.

What makes the humour of gay playwrights distinctive? Since gay men have sex differently to the heterosexual majority, it might be logical to assume that they see the world and their place in it differently.

Nicholas de Jongh understands the essence of camp humour much better than John Lahr, but I think he misses the point when he says the diction of the characters in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* is camp. Camp language has to be accompanied by artificiality and mannerism, otherwise it is simply language. It is not until the later plays that Orton begins to stylise his speech along Wildean lines. Kath, Ed and Sloane might communicate in a sort of telly-language, but it is not camp.

"Camp" is the special humour of the gay or homosexual subculture which springs from the archetype of the fool or trickster. As Mark Thompson writes in *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*, "it's the role of the fool, the trickster, the contrary one capable of turning a situation inside out. Often cross-dressed or adorned with both masculine and feminine symbols, these merry pranksters chase through history, holding up a looking glass to human folly. Confidants to kings and commoners, tellers of truths, and cloaked in many disguises, these queer (sic) figures seem to spring from the shadow realm that lies between worlds of above and below. It is a role that seems particularly suited to gay men." (Thompson, 52)

There are no outrageously camp characters in Orton's early plays because he is still working through his homosexual angst, but they begin to appear later - men dressed as women, women dressed as men, camp situations and much covert camp behaviour. Examples of these will be outlined when we come to discussing the plays in later chapters. But although the gay writer may use camp humour to revenge himself on a society that marginalises and suppresses him, he seldom resorts to violence. This is where Orton takes a separate path from the archetypal trickster.

Such an archetype has been represented in plays since Shakespeare's time. The Fool in *King Lear* for example would never compromise his position by stepping outside his defined role. His job is to point out man's follies and peculiarities with his weapons, wisdom and wit. Once he takes up the sword he loses his special privileges, the right to free speech and the protection of the king. And perhaps gay men who take up their sword appendage, the phallus, and thrust it up another man's anus, are not tricksters at all, but belong amongst the troops, the hunters, the executioners. "I prefer to fuck," says Orton, and we must believe him.

It is necessary therefore to look at the violence in Orton's plays and see what it represents. My theory is that it is not just an expression of a trickster's outrage against "them," the straights, although that is

part of it. It is also a product of Orton's unresolved relationship issues between himself and his parents, and especially between Orton and Halliwell.

Interestingly, enough, in view of what happened, it is often the young male characters in the plays who are involved with violence, sometimes receiving it (Wilson in *The Ruffian on the Stair* and Hal in *Loot*), and sometimes dishing it out (Sloane in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, Kenny in *The Erpingham Camp*, Caulfield - not very adequately - in *Funeral Games*). This violence may have its origins in the type of sexual practices followed by Orton, but most likely it is simply represents the author's way of using his writing as a sort of cathartic therapy to express what he cannot express directly in his personal relationships. Comedy may be seen as the reverse side of tragedy, which is why this thesis attempts to explore the tragic aspects of Orton's work, aspects that take the plays out of the gay play category into a darker world. As many critics have pointed out, Orton wrote his own epitaph with the W.E. Henley poem that introduces *The Ruffian on the Stair*:

Madam Life's a piece in bloom,
Death goes dogging everywhere:
She's the tenant of the room,
He's the ruffian on the stair.

The death that dogged Orton, the ruffian on the stair, the shadow figure that crushed his life, was the antithesis of the gay spirit mentioned earlier. Society

struck down Oscar Wilde through the unlikely figure of the Marquis of Queensbury, and he and Halliwell have remarkably similar characteristics. As Sheridan Morley wrote of Queensbury:

"Extremely prejudiced and conceited...indifference to his views drove him frantic...he bored people with his atheistical opinions on every possible occasion...he may have been liked by his horses and dogs...but no one else cared for him...he bullied and neglected his wife and children..."
(Morley, P.76)

But the people Queensbury and Halliwell killed also had remarkably similar characteristics. Wilde and Orton believed that their unique talent placed them in a special category, that they had no need to please anyone but themselves, that other people had no rights, as Orton's diary entry for the 25th May 1967 indicates.

"I want nothing to do with a civilisation they made. Fuck them! They'll sit and listen to bugger's talk from me and drink their coffee and piss off," Orton tells his dinner companions at a cafe in Tangier when his conversational topic, fucking men, embarrasses an American couple sitting at the next table. After the couple move away, one of his dinner companions says, 'with an old school teacher's smile,' "It seems rather a strange joke." Orton replies, "It isn't a joke, there's no such thing as a joke." (*Diaries*, 186)

The incident however cannot be quoted in isolation. Prior to going to the cafe, Orton "took a couple of valium...had a largeish slice of hashish cake...and...a

glass of wine because it works well with hash."

(*Diaries*, 186)

Seeking revenge on society is not a joke, it is a deadly serious business. This is not the trickster talking, or the Lord of Misrule, but a homosexual version of John Osborne's angry young man, Jimmy Porter. Nevertheless, Orton is not so cut off from reality that he does not sense it may be coming to an end. On the same day as the cafe incident above, he writes:

We sat talking of how happy we both felt and how it couldn't, surely last. We'd have to pay for it. Or we'd be struck down from afar by disaster because we were, perhaps, too happy. To be young, good-looking, healthy, famous, comparatively rich and happy is surely going against nature, and when to the above list one adds that daily I have the company of beautiful fifteen-year-old boys who (for a small fee) find fucking with me a delightful sensation...I slept all night soundly and woke up at seven feeling as though the whole of creation was conspiring to make me happy. I hope no doom strikes.

(*Diaries* 186-187)

Ironically (and there are a great many ironic happenings in Orton's life), *Crimes of Passion*, the double bill consisting of two of his plays, had just completed a short run at The Royal Court theatre in London at the time of his death. Both plays end with the death of the major character.

CHAPTER FOUR: PLAYS 1963-1964

BEDSITTERS, RUBBISH DUMPS, TOASTERS

THE RUFFIAN ON THE STAIR

Mike. It's the Assistance Board. I'm not a believer in charity. Unless I need it. With the cost of living being so high I'm greatly in need of a weekly donation from the Government. They say my circumstances have altered. I haven't any circumstances to alter. They should know that. I've filled in a form to the effect that I'm a derelict.

Wilson. Yes. My brother and me had the same trouble.

Mike. They haven't the insight into the human heart that we have in Ireland.

(Plays, 49)

It is appropriate that Orton's first play to be accepted for performance, *The Ruffian on the Stair*, should be one which has homosexual love as its theme. He wrote it while receiving National Assistance, three pounds ten a week, and on that amount of money, people don't have a great deal to live for.

The characters in the play are certainly culled from Orton's immediate rather than family environment - an Irish petty criminal, a reformed prostitute and a young man whose brother/lover has just been knocked over and killed by a van.

It is the only Orton play in which the young male character is shown as vulnerable, in fact all the characters are to some extent. After this Orton's young men become more confident, opportunist, and sometimes sadistic, violent and murderous.

The play, which was accepted by the BBC Third Programme in 1963, broadcast in 1964, and then revised for a stage presentation in 1967, was partly derived from *The Boy Hairdresser*, the last novel Orton and Halliwell collaborated on, which Lahr says is important as a testament to their suffering. (Lahr, 120) Even though the plot of *The Boy Hairdresser* and that of *Ruffian on the Stair* have little connection, the angst of the characters has. Peterson, the boy hairdresser, and Donnelly, his older homosexual partner, steal books from bookshops, toilet rolls from public lavatories, pens from post offices, make obscene telephone calls, and put cards in Praed Street windows where prostitutes normally advertise, giving the addresses and phone numbers of vicars' aunts and aldermen's widows, (Lahr, 120) a trick in a similar vein to Orton and Halliwell's library book defacements.

Peterson and Donnelly's world is remarkably similar to Orton and Halliwell's: the seedy back streets of London where those dwelling on the fringe of society inhabit its bed-sits, coffee bars, pubs and pornographic book - shops. Yet it is not this world that Peterson and Donnelly want to wipe out with an atomic bomb, but that of the cathode ray tube, the traffic sign and the semi-detached villas with their Mod Cons. (Lahr, 120) It is people in suburbia who are the enemy, families with nine to five jobs, paying mortgages and raising children.

Martin Esslin says that "the desire to shock at all costs, allied with a streak of extreme violence that runs through all his (Orton's) work, springs from a *saeva indignatio* of great intensity," and compares what he articulates to the same rage and helpless resentment that motivates British hooligans to wreck trains, vandalise telephone kiosks and write obscene graffiti on lavatory walls. (Esslin, 96) Plainly, there is more to Peterson and Donnelly's fun than mere childish playfulness. In *The Boy Hairdresser*, as in Orton and Halliwell's life, the protagonists have some deep seated resentments against the ordinary people who live ordinary lives, for what could be more violent than expressing that anger by using an atom bomb?

But what is the alternative? Esslin says that Orton's work never advanced one positive suggestion for changing those things in society which he lampooned so savagely and so brilliantly. (Esslin, 107) But in *The Ruffian on the Stair*, with its seedy setting and criminal characters, what is perhaps being lampooned is the "play about gangsters and their women," the genre within which the play falls, rather than any particular facet of "ordinary" life?

The Boy Hairdresser and *The Ruffian on the Stair* differ in that in the novel it is the younger man, Peterson, who dies, while the distraught older man, Donnelly, botches an attempt to murder innocent people then kill

himself. He ends up in hospital being cared for by the people he despises. (Lahr, 122)

Originally accepted as a radio play, but later rewritten for the stage, *The Ruffian on the Stair* is a taut little drama about love, death, revenge and sacrifice. The young boy hairdresser, Wilson, unable to bear the pain of living without his "brother," seeks out the brother's murderer, provokes him, and gets himself shot. To ensure that Mike, the murderer, does not miss, Wilson wears a pullover and tells Mike:

Wilson. The heart is situated...just below the badge on my pullover. Don't miss, will you. I don't want to be injured. I want to be dead. (Plays, 54)

It is a symbolic sacrifice that, as it turns out, has little effect on Mike, the man who killed Wilson's brother by knocking him over with a van. For Mike is a seasoned killer who has probably done the same to someone he had an appointment with in a toilet at King's Cross station. But although he has a hint of menace: "I was handy with my fists once. I could make a pulp of you," (Plays, 53) Mike also has a touch of vulnerability, being dependent on his partner, Joyce, for comfort and companionship. By also making Mike Irish and Catholic, Orton ensures there are plenty of opportunities to display his rare comic touch.

Mike. ...Is your mother expected to recover?

Wilson. It's touch and go.

Mike. She's maybe doomed...She's probably being stripped by the angels as we speak. I suppose

we are roasted nude? I've never seen fit to ask. It's not a question you can put to the Father. Though he is a Jesuit.

(Plays, 48)

Wilson, too, is Catholic and perhaps Irish, which allows some snappy exchanges between the two, such as the often quoted one below which stems from the fact that in Orton's day, gents' hairdressers sold contraceptives:

Wilson. I'm a Gents Hairdresser.

Mike. You wouldn't have to be dabbling with birth control devices? That's no way for a Catholic to carry on.

Wilson. I don't handle that part of the trade. My old man does it. He has the free-thinking frame of mind. I can't approve of course. It's the Latin temperament which has been the curse of our religion all along.

Mike. The Pope is Italian.

Wilson. You have something there. I'd like to see a Liffey man on the throne of St Peter myself. I'd be proud to hear the Lateran ring with the full throated blasphemies of our native land.

Mike. What are you thinking of? The Vicar of Christ doesn't blaspheme.

Wilson. He would if he was Irish and drank Guinness. (Plays, 47)

Peter Gill, who directed the play when it was staged in London, says *The Ruffian on the Stair* is the only Orton play where he tried to write about genuine homosexual emotions. (Lahr, 134) In the manner of Greek tragedy, the boy hairdresser, Wilson, proves his love for his dead "brother" by allegorically throwing himself on the funeral pyre of his older mentor, teacher and lover, although what the act achieves, other than also killing a few goldfish, the play does not explain. I wonder, though, if Harold Pinter's character Goldberg, in *The*

**Birthday Party*, had anything to do with Orton's choice of pet?

As mentioned earlier, this play and Orton's next, *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, owe a great deal to Pinter, as Bigsby, amongst others, points out. (Bigsby, 25) Wilson tries to insinuate himself into a room in much the same way that Mr and Mrs Sands do in Pinter's *The Room*. But as with other Orton plays, what makes *The Ruffian on the Stair* unique is the overt sexual and bodily content. The narcissistic emphasis on bodily descriptions and display is an Orton trademark, reflecting Orton's interest and orientation towards bodies, especially penises, which his diaries show he treated as a sort of sexual merchandise. This might be construed as a negative phallic orientation which as Pedersen says, "is conspicuous for its lack of *Eros*, the quality of relatedness. Without *Eros*, love is narcissistic, an unrelated performance." (Pedersen, 201) It is this aspect of Orton which the "straight" critics such as Esslin find offensive, probably because their own world is so very far removed from that of Orton. Relatedness in the gay world is often oriented towards another man's sexual merchandise. In the film *Prick Up Your Ears*, we see Orton, watched by Halliwell, remove his underpants prior to an excursion to the toilets. This is to allow for easier access to the genital area. No other form of communication need take place. Having no underpants on says it all.

In *The Ruffian on the Stair*, it is ironic that Wilson would rather die than face the pain of living without his "brother" Frank. This seems odd as Frank seems to have been able to live without him, having been "engaged" at the time he was killed by Mike.

Wilson. I wasn't with him when he died. I'm going around the twist with heartbreak.

Mike. He's dead?

Wilson. Yes. I thought of topping myself. As a gesture. I would've done but for my strict upbringing. Suicide is difficult when you've got a pious mum.

Mike. Kill yourself?

Wilson. I don't want to live see...In my will I state that I want to be buried with Frank. It's my last request. They'll be bound to honour it. His fiancée won't mind. She's off already with another man.

(*Plays*, 50)

Wilson will not kill himself but hopes to inveigle Mike into doing it for him. Thus the play's "solution" invokes the classic "gay as victim" syndrome which runs through much of the literature of the previous fifty years. One could ask how well developed Orton's gay pride was at that point in his career? But it might also be simply a solution that has been borrowed from another source, the American B grade gangster movie where the "bad girl" from the wrong side of the tracks redeems her life by getting the bullet meant for the hero, dying happily in his arms, his words, "I love you," echoing in her ears. Many gays will have fantasised being part of such a scene, playing, naturally, the lady who got the bullet.

Seen in context, Wilson's nihilism and desire for death may be seen as reflecting both Orton's and Halliwell's inherent masochism. As mentioned, Orton's hero was Oscar Wilde, whom Claude Summers in *Gay Fictions From Wilde to Stonewall*, labels a masochist, saying the theme of martyrdom runs through much of Wilde's work and probably reflects the strong masochistic element in his personality. (Summers, 31)

Suicide is the ultimate form of masochism, and for a great many gay men, sadomasochism is an integral component of their sexual and social activity. Why this is so requires an explanation.

For a male, a conscious act of submission is to take the penis of another male in his mouth or accept another man's penis up the anus. Ordinarily, these acts do not involve pain. But place sex between men in a context where pain is deliberately heightened, through bondage, flagellation, and the use of fists, dildos, uniforms and leather, then the subjects enter a world which is not far removed from Orton's real and fictional one.

I lifted his legs in the air, spat on my hand, wiped my cock and got the end up his arse. "Oh no," he cried. "No, no." I stopped and the realised that this was part of his personal kink. I gripped him hard. "I'm going to fuck you," I said, "keep quiet." I pinned him to the bed with his legs in the air and shoved my cock right up him. He gave a cry. "Oh my God. Oh you're hurting me."
(*Diaries*, P.204)

Wilson *wants* to get hurt, and although lightened by the Irish connection, there is a good deal of emotional pain in *The Ruffian on the Stair*, the confrontations between Wilson, Joyce and Mike are full of it. Wilson shows his sadism by teasing Joyce and his masochism by planning his own execution, although when it comes to actually dying, he may have changed his mind. Are Wilson's final words a contradiction of his real intention?

Wilson. He took it serious. How charming....He's a bit of a nutter if you ask me." (*Plays*, 60)

"Two valiums" assisted Orton's sexual encounter above, which took place immediately following the play's opening night on 6th June 1967. It was the first half of the double bill, *Crimes of Passion*. Orton said *Ruffian* came across as "a sad little play," (*Diaries*, 203) which it probably was. Although revised for the stage, it may well have been originally written as an epitaph for Orton and Halliwell, only the roles are reversed from their real life relationship. This sad little speech of Wilson's echoes the many sad speeches Halliwell must have made to his partner:

Wilson. I wasn't mentioned in the press, so they didn't realise the important part I played in Frank's life. (*Plays*, 35)

Orton's attitude to women also got its first airing in this play. Joyce, Mike's live-in lady friend, is a reformed prostitute, whom Frank, Wilson's brother, has

"had it off with" after seeing *The Sound of Music*.

Wilson tells her, echoing perhaps Orton's own attitude to women:

Wilson... You're like most women, here today and gone tomorrow. My brother's fiancée resembled you in many ways. Fickle in her emotions.
(*Plays*, 58)

And Mike, thinking she has been intimate with Wilson, lets her have it verbally and physically.:

Mike.... You cow! Playing me up....I've heard about you. You'll be taking your clothes off in the street next...Some men would kill you...A fine family. Your mother was doing it in a doorway the night she was killed...Your granny spent Mafeking night on her back. That makes three generations of whores. (*He smacks her face. Joyce shrieks with surprise and fright*). I'll murder you. (*He leaps upon her*).
(*Plays*, 56)

But, as mentioned, Mike is dependent on Joyce, telling her after hitting her, "I don't want to lose you. I don't want to be on my own again. I was so lonely before." (*Plays*, 57)

And there is a line which may have its roots in Elsie Orton's feigned disgust with matters sexual.

Wilson. Is your husband passionate with you?

Joyce draws in a sharp breath.

Joyce. I'm reporting you. Using filthy language.
(*Plays*, 36)

There isn't a great deal of sex in *Ruffian*, but what there is was calculated to provide a minor sensation. In the following exchange, except for the location,

Orton is describing with great accuracy his living arrangements with Halliwell.

Wilson. We lived in Shepherd's Bush. We had a little room. And our life was made quite comfortable by the N.A.B...We were happy though...I was seventeen. He was twenty-three. You can't do better for yourself than that, can you?...We were bosom friends. I've never told anyone that before. I hope I haven't shocked you.

Mike. As close as that?

Wilson. We had separate beds - he was a stickler for convention, but that's as far as it went. We spent every night in each other's company. It was the reason we never got any work done.

Mike. There's no word in the Irish language for what you were doing.

Wilson. In Lapland they have no word for snow.
(*Plays*, 49-50)

However, there is a great deal of sex in Orton's next play, in fact its central theme involves a young man selling his body and soul for sex, not with any degree of emotion, but as a social and business transaction. A similar emotionless transaction to the ones Orton must have made with the men he encountered in toilets.

ENTERTAINING MR SLOANE

In *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, the sex and violence revolve around characters who seem to be drawn from Orton's family of origin. At first glance it may look like a play where everyone wins. Sloane, the young male lodger, kills Dadda Kemp, the elderly father of middle aged Kath and Ed, who then decide that they will condone the murder provided Sloane will service their varying sexual needs. Since Kath is the subject of some

verbal and physical abuse from the men, the fact that she achieves parity in the sharing of Sloane could be seen as a triumph of the feminine.

Kath is interesting in that she is the antithesis of Orton's mother in a sexual sense, yet shares many of her habits and values. Lahr tells us that Elsie Orton was fond of collecting cheap bric-a-brac and pretending it had value, it was the way she gave status to her insignificant life. Kath does this, too, in *Sloane*:

Kath. Isn't this room gorgeous?

Sloane. Yes.

Kath. That vase there came from Bombay. Do you have any interest in that part of the world?

Sloane. I like Dieppe.

Kath. Ah...it's all the same. I don't suppose they know the difference themselves.

(*Plays*, 93)

Kath also has a cracked china shepherdess which "comes up like new when I give her a wash," (*Plays*, 132) and just like Elsie Orton, who had false teeth which she kept in Stergene, so does Kath: "My teeth, since you mentioned the subject, Mr Sloane, are in the kitchen in Stergene. Usually I allow a good soak overnight. But what with one thing and another...I hate people who are careless with their dentures." (*Plays*, 99) But unlike Orton at home, who survived by being the dutiful son, Sloane behaves violently towards the woman, acting out, perhaps, Orton's real feelings towards his mother.

Kath. My teeth! *(She claps a hand over her mouth.)*
 My teeth. *(Sloane flings her from him. She*
crawls round the floor, searching.)
 He's broke my teeth! Where are they?...

Ed. Put your teeth in, will you? Sitting there
 with them in your hand.

Kath. He's broke them.

Ed. They're only chipped. Go on, turn your back.

Kath (puts her teeth in). What are we going to do
 Eddie? *(Plays, 146-147)*

The suburban symbols of Elsie which Orton "rubbishes" in *Sloane* are mostly those which a marginalised working class homosexual (with some classical education) might see as laughable. But Orton's laughter is tinged with sadism. For Kath's "junk," the shepherdess, a vase from Bombay, the trappings of the consumer society by which people signify their "good taste," go hand in hand with a portrait of a mother-whore who will do anything for sex, even to the extent of inviting a nineteen-year-old man she has only just met to visit her at home.

The seduction begins almost as soon as the curtain rises. Sloane is the same age as the child Kath has given up for adoption and the same age as the young man who got her pregnant many years earlier. In no time at all she has persuaded Sloane to remove his trousers and by the end of the Act she is showing Sloane a photo of the spot near the bushes where she got pregnant, all leading to a sexual coupling in which, oddly, the word "shame," crops up.

Kath... (...she is almost on top of him.) Mr
Sloane... (Rolls on to him.) You should wear
 more clothes, Mr Sloane. I believe you're as
 naked as me. And there's no excuse for it.

(*Silence.*) I'll be your mother. I need to be loved. Gently. Oh! I shall be so ashamed in the morning. (*Switches off the light.*) What a big heavy baby you are. Such a big heavy baby. (Plays, 95)

What, one wonders, has Kath got to be ashamed of? Are her words merely hypocrisy, a pretence? Or could Orton be projecting his own "shame" for his sexual activities onto one of his characters? In Kath, has he produced a character partly based on his mother and partly on his own suppressed feminine, that part of himself which his macho attitudes and behaviour try to hide?

Carl Jung coined the word "Anima" to describe a man's internal feminine images and the dynamic role they could play in his psychological and emotional development. (Pedersen, 15) The anima is a composite of the women a man comes in contact with during his life and the archetypal images of women which dwell in what Jung termed the collective unconscious. Pedersen writes that "The anima's projected image appears to be at a developmental level that corresponds to the inner development of feminine qualities. For this reason, a man is going to be unconsciously attracted to women with a developmental level similar to his own." (Pedersen, 37)

Since the anima figure appears in dreams, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the female figure a writer "dreams up" for a play or novel might have elements of his own anima, and in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, "she" gets what she wants by any means at her

disposal, first by seduction, then by adopting a stance of false morality.

According to Lahr, Orton's mother was a sexual prude. "Mum hated sex, she told me she hated it," Orton's sister told him. (Lahr, 44) Yet Elsie Orton also seems to have been covertly sexual. "At the pub, Elsie had a vivacious come-on: How you fixed for a giddy barmaid?... She put on a jolly, rambunctious (sic) face for the world with the same broad garishness that characterized her clothes. Still she was shocked and disgusted by men who...tried to pick her up." (Lahr, 45-46)

It is this sort of hot house sexual climate that may have contributed to the predominance of sex in Orton's work and life and its under-the-counter nature. Sex is "desirable"...but rejected because it is "vulgar and dirty." His mother gets dressed up and goes to the pub in order to attract, then spurns the advances of those she attracts. As Lahr writes, "The taboos of the body were felt by Orton, whose adolescent diary switches to shorthand when describing anything to do with his body or sexual practices." (Lahr, 46) Perhaps as a reaction to the indignant morality of Elsie Orton, Orton was indignantly immoral, not only in his life but especially in his plays. But Kath's statement, that she will be so ashamed in the morning after having sex with Sloane, and her childish illusion that "I never wanted to do rude things. Tommy made me," (*Plays*, 107) points

to a female who may be sexual but is hardly mature, perhaps a little like Orton himself?

The Kath character then, in *Sloane*, is a grotesque parody of the older fallen woman, who seeks love where she can find it, but is thwarted in her desires by controlling male figures. John Russell Taylor describes her as a "Superannuated Baby Doll," (Taylor, 12) no doubt referring to the movie of that name directed by Elia Kazan. Or she could have her roots in the Deep South; the fallen schoolteacher, Blanche Dubois, in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who also had a homosexual husband, springs to mind. But unlike Ms Dubois, whose past life victimises her, Kath is triumphant. The working class mother-whore who has lost her own child and floats around looking for young men to mother love, is not going to make the same mistake twice:

Kath. Stay with me.

Sloane. No.

Kath. There's no need to go away, dear. Don't make me unhappy.

Sloane. I'm going with Ed.

Kath. I was never subtle, Mr Sloane...If you go with Eddie, I'll tell the police.

Sloane. If I stay here he'll do the same.

Ed. It's what is called a dilemma, boy. You are on the horns of it.

Kath. You see how things are, Mr Sloane?

Sloane smacks her face, she screams.

(*Plays*, 145)

From this exchange, obviously it is not love that binds Sloane to Kath but his survival. It is like a child bound to a mother it hates. It will stay within the mother's orbit only as long as there's no alternative. For Sloane, the alternative turns out to be Ed, Kath's homosexual brother. Initially he adopts a high moral tone:

Ed. You've got to realise my position. I can't have my sister keeping a common kip. Some of my associates are men of distinction. They think nothing of tipping a fiver. That sort of thing. If they realised the way my family carry on, I'd be banned from the best places.
(*Plays*, 82)

However, once Ed tests the water, sensing that Sloane could be a man after his own tastes, he becomes his employer and presumably sexual partner, although this is implied rather than made explicit. It also results in what are some of the most highly eroticised exchanges between males ever seen on a public stage in Britain, though their sexual games are less demonstrative than heterosexual ones - no touching and no pregnancies. Amazingly, not one of the cuts to the script demanded by the Lord Chamberlain, who had absolute power of censorship at the time, concerned the sexual manoeuvrings between Sloane and Ed, which as Nicholas de Jongh points out, describe a homosexual transaction negotiated at some speed...relayed in language of code and innuendo. (de Jongh, 101)

Far from having nothing new to say, as Esslin would have it, the subtext in *Sloane* had something very new to say to the audiences of 1964 - that men presumed

heterosexual from their physical appearance may be anything but.

Ed. You're fond of swimming?

Sloane. I like a plunge now and then.

Ed. Bodybuilding?

Sloane. We had a nice little gym at the orphanage. Put me in all the teams they did. Relays...*Ed looks interested...*soccer...*Ed nods...*pole vault...long distance...*Ed opens his mouth...*hundred yards, discus, putting the shot...*Ed rubs his hands together...*Yes, yes. I'm an all rounder. A great all rounder. In anything you care to mention. Even in life...

*Ed...*do you...*(shy)*...exercise regular?

Sloane. As clockwork.

Ed. Good, good. Stripped?

Sloane. Fully...

Ed. Do you wear leather...next to the skin?
Leather jeans, say? Without...aah...

Sloane. Pants?

Ed. (Laughs.) Get away!

(Plays, 86-87)

As de Jongh says, (forgetting Wilson) "All the old signs and codes are discarded. A new convention is being achieved. No homosexual or bisexual is sensitive, artistic, nervous or emotional in Orton's plays."

(de Jongh, 101) But maybe that is what is missing from Orton? Many homosexuals *are* sensitive, artistic, nervous and emotional, even the ones that swim, run in relays, and wear nothing under their leather jeans.

The "street" uniform that Orton wore - high-cuffed blue jeans, white T-shirt, leather jacket and leather cap, (Lahr, 164) - is a forerunner of the urban uniform

adopted by gay men throughout the western world. But not very distant from the apparent nonchalance of this uniform is the ritualised use of leather in dominance and submission, and occasionally abusive situations, between men. How aware was Orton, I wonder, of the more sinister aspects of *this* uniform?

Ed. I might let you be my chauffeur.

Sloane: Would you?

Ed. (Laughs.) We'll see...I could get you a uniform. Boots, pants, a guarantee 100 per cent no imitation jacket...an...er...a white brushed nylon T-shirt... with a little leather cap. *(Laughs.)* Like that?

Sloane nods. Silence.

(Plays, 88)

There appears to be some difference of opinion about the character of Sloane. According to Peter Willes, who was a television producer and enthusiastic supporter of Orton's work, "Joe was Sloane. Ruthless, not immoral but amoral, and pragmatic." (*Diaries*, 27) A former flatmate of Orton and Halliwell's agreed, "He was like Sloane, a tease," he said of Orton. (*Diaries*, 27) And Patrick Dromgoole who directed the first production of *Sloane* said, "Joe was a slippery bloke to talk to. A charmer. A manipulator. He could put on any face. To that extent he was like very much Sloane." (Lahr, 149)

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Nicholas de Jongh says the figure of the sexy hooligan, Sloane, is Orton's shadow, a projection by which he becomes the free, conscienceless subverter of morality, the begetter of sexual anarchy. He says that for all Orton's sex games

in lavatories, and casual pick-ups, despite the Arab teenagers, he was not a transmitter of such freedom in real life, but more the obedient mother's boy who despite his rages against middle-class hypocrisies remained the socially adaptable and well-mannered young man about town. (de Jongh, 99) But if Sloane *was* Orton's shadow, the fact that he is presented as being more interested in heterosexuality than homosexuality is very significant indeed, so is the fact that he has killed a homosexual.

Since part of the individuation process mentioned elsewhere is the incorporation of the shadow into one's personality, all the sexy hooligans from Sloane onwards which Orton created can be seen as an on going process of personal maturation towards a bisexual identification, since none of these characters is homosexual.

I could also guess that Sloane's tough bravado, whilst a composite either of Orton himself or his shadow, probably has connections to the young hoodlum-gangsters in the movies, perhaps the young thug whom Orton's screen idol, Dirk Bogarde, played in the 1950's film *The Blue Lamp*, or Graeme Greene's hero in the movie of his novel *Brighton Rock*. Note that in Lahr's biography there is a photograph of Orton "looking like Dirk Bogarde."

In view of the above, I think it is a mistake to claim, as de Jongh does, that Orton never experienced any negative feelings about his homosexuality or promiscuous lifestyle even if, as de Jongh says, "He (Orton) was the first playwright in Britain - indeed one of the first writers in either Britain or America - to reject the dominant myth of homosexuality as sickness or sin and live without the oppression of guilt." (de Jongh, 94) Orton probably sublimated any guilt with his dominant emotion - anger, with drugs and hashish helping to deaden all feelings to some extent; and being an ironist and detached, he was able to remove himself from any deep emotional connection to the acts, convincing himself that the sex was for "experience."

To summarise: *Entertaining Mr Sloane* is not a play about a young man having a homosexual relationship with an older man and a heterosexual relationship with his sister. It is a play about a young man who, to ensure his survival, is willing to accommodate the social and sexual demands of both an older woman and an older man.

In one of the key exchanges in the play, Sloane states his position:

Ed. ...You've committed a murder!...

Sloane. He had his stick.

Ed. He wasn't strong enough to use it...

Sloane. What kind of a life is it at his age?

Ed. You've abused my trust.

Sloane. I did him a service in a manner of speaking.

Ed. You'll have to face the authorities.

Sloane. Look, I'm facing no-one.

Ed. You've no choice.

Sloane. I'll decide what choice I have.
(*Plays*, 133)

Sloane's choice will be not to murder and run as he has done in the past but to stay and work things out. This is achieved by the simple expedient of bartering with the only commodity he has available, his body.

Sloane. Are you going to help me?

Ed. No.

Sloane. We must find a basis for agreement.

Ed. There can be no agreement. I'm a citizen of this country. My duty is clear. You must accept responsibility for your actions.

Sloane (sits beside Ed. Lays a hand on his knee).
I accept responsibility.

Ed. Do you?

Sloane. Fully.

Ed. Good. Remove that hand will you.
(*Plays*, 134-135)

As Orton writes of the character himself: "Sloane knows Ed wants him. He has absolutely no qualms about surrendering his body. None. He's done it many, many times." (*Plays*, 16)

That this kind of sex drive can be seen as "healthy and liberating" amazes me. In *Don't Call it Love, Recovery from Sexual Addiction*, Carnes quotes from F. Scott Peck's seminal book about psychotherapy, *The Road Less Travelled*, in which Peck makes the statement that the

closest many people get to religious experience is orgasm, and that those lost in the "compulsive, driven" pursuit of sex are really searching for spirituality. He talks about sexuality and spirituality being inextricably linked, with both being a quest for wholeness or completeness. (Carnes, 302)

To me, there is a definite correlation between Sloane's decision to stay with Ed and Kath on their terms, and Orton's decision to likewise live with Halliwell. I also see the violence that erupts in *Sloane* and other Orton plays as the playwright's unconscious desire to free himself from this kind of association.

I have covered the violence in this play in an earlier chapter, but it is worth noting that the feeble, whining yet vindictive character of Ed and Kath's father, Kemp (he hasn't spoken to his son, Ed for twenty years when the play opens), who gets murdered, was probably drawn from William, Orton's father. From Lahr's biography we know that though Orton may have found his mother's pretensions laughable, he despised his father. Here Sloane is talking about Kemp.

Sloane. I've nothing against him. *(Pause.)* But he's lived so long, he's more like an old bird than a bloke. How is it such a father has such a son? A mystery. *(Pause)* Certainly is. *(Plays, 122)*

And the waste land which the Kemps inhabit may be a metaphor for the waste lands Orton inhabited both as a child, and towards the end of his life with Halliwell.

Sloane. A perfect skyline you've got here. Lord Snowden would give you something for a shot of that. Stunning it is. Stunning. Was this house a speculation?

Kemp. Not exactly.

Sloane. Who built it then? Was he a mad financier? The bloke who conceived the idea of building a house in the midst of a rubbish dump?

Kemp. It was intended to be the first of a row.

Sloane. Go on. What happened?

Kemp. They gave up.

(Plays, 72)

Lahr writes that Orton was against violence for its own sake. "I hope that the violence in my plays is not of an inconsequential nature...I'm always horrified by violence in some things, especially American films and novels...I mean, it was necessary for the old man in *Sloane* to be beaten up on purely pragmatic grounds of the plot, and I couldn't have the play working otherwise," Lahr quotes Orton as saying in an interview. (Lahr, 173)

But the question must be asked, what motivates a playwright to write a play where violence is central to the plot if he is "horrified by violence"? Although *Sloane* doesn't quite kick Kemp to death, he kicks him unconscious. Death follows. But by the act of killing he is forced to submit to the control of Kath and Ed. It is a neat variation on the sadism and masochism that permeated the life Orton and Halliwell led together. Orton has multiple sex partners and sadistically tells Halliwell, via the diary, that he has surrendered his life to the pursuit of pleasure, then masochistically absorbs Halliwell's punishment. But it may not be all

pleasure. As Simon Ward says, "it may be an act," during which process, Orton murders his own soul.

Orton's misogyny is worn on Ed's sleeve. The reasons why Ed prefers men may be the reasons why Orton prefers men. "Only a man who's had experience with women can dislike them...he's had the sense simply to see the obvious alternative." (Lahr, 157) Like Orton, Ed either does not like women, has been hurt by them in the past and mistrusts them, or simply cannot be bothered to play the games necessary to form a relationship. Ed makes it perfectly clear where he stands:

*Ed...*She's no good. No good at all. A crafty tart she is. I could tell you things about - the way these women carry on. (Pause.)
...Especially her.

(*Plays*, 112)

But so does Sloane, and that's on the fence.

Ed. What's your opinion of the way these women carry on?
Pause.

Sloane. I feel...how would you say?

Ed. Don't you think they're crude?

Sloane. Occasionally. In a way.

Ed. You never know where you are with half of them.

Sloane. All the same it's necessary.

(*Plays*, 113)

The "Pinter pause" says it all. Sloane does *not* agree with Ed's ideas about women. Even if it is only for their sexual function they are "necessary," and it may be that Sloane is simply "doing it" - having sex with a male, because after killing Kemp his options are

limited. His priority is to save his neck, so he will accept any deal, but at the same time, being an opportunist, squeeze as much from the transaction as he can:

Ed. How do you feel then?

Sloane. On the main points we agree.

Ed. Pack your bags.

Sloane. Now?

Ed. Immediate.

Sloane. Will I get a pay rise?

Ed. A rise?

Sloane. My new situation calls for it.

Ed. You already had two.

Sloane. They were tokens. I'd like you to upgrade my salary. How about a little car?

(*Plays*, 113-114)

The denouement in *Sloane* is a sexual one, and Sloane will lead as much a parallel life with Kath and Ed as Orton lived with Halliwell, selling his body (and his soul?) in exchange for security and home comforts, but perhaps, like Orton, staying emotionally detached. Bigsby echoes Lahr when he says, "Orton's narcissism was undeniable, his callousness raised to the dignity of willed indifference and ironic detachment is apparent in his diary entries and characters." Such a character is Sloane, but like Orton, the bartering of his body for room and board has placed him in a difficult position. Kath and Ed will decide just how long they will him. Sloane might have all the surface characteristics of Orton - outward confidence, sexual proficiency, purposefulness, restlessness, single

mindedness with little conscience; but he is also having to cope with multiple sexual roles: heterosexual - a man who penetrates the passive feminine; aggressive homosexual, penetrating the passive masculine; and passive homosexual, penetrated by an older male. The way out of the confusion caused by these roles is to project one's inner conflict outwards; slap women, kick old men, kill photographers who make "advances." But whereas Orton can sublimate his violence in his art, Halliwell had no such outlet, as he would eventually demonstrate.

THE GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

Using writing as a cathartic process to explore one's life must also include dealing with the past, especially parents with whom we might have had poor or dysfunctional relationships. Orton's father, William Orton, appears to have been a nonentity, a quiet, retiring sort of man who mostly worked as a gardener for the Leicester City Council. Lahr tells us he spent a great deal of his leisure time in a shed at the bottom of his garden, or playing skittles at his working men's club, no doubt refuges from his family and nagging wife. It was a habit his son, John (Joe Orton changed his name from John to Joe in 1963 to avoid confusion with John Osborne) would copy in his adult life, although his escape was into a different type of building.

In his biography of Orton, Lahr gives the impression that Elsie Orton was taller than William and towered over him, just as she dominated her family. However, a photograph of the couple taken in 1964 at the wedding of Orton's sister, Leonie, clearly shows William to be a half a head taller than his wife, even though Elsie is wearing high heels! She must have just seemed big. (Lahr, 112)

Whatever their respective heights, it is clear that the Orton family was a matriarchy, with Elsie not only wearing the trousers but using a poker (a penis?) on her children when they displeased her. Such a thoroughly nasty piece of femininity is enough to give any male a complex about women, for as Pedersen writes in *Dark Hearts, The Unconscious Forces That Shape Men's Lives*, published as recently as 1991, "Although homosexuality is no longer officially considered a pathological disorder...Psychoanalysts generally continue to believe that the early environmental influences are the most significant, with the most common explanation being that a male with a homosexual orientation identified with the overinvolved and intrusive mother and, at the same time, was often unable to form an adequate positive identification with the father, who was often overbearing, cold, distant, and uninvolved in immediate family life." (Pedersen, 197)

Kenneth Halliwell also came from a family with an overinvolved mother, who died tragically when Halliwell was only eleven years of age, and a distant or absent father; so do I, so do many of my gay friends. But today *how* or *why* one *becomes* homosexual is not considered so important. What is important is: how does one *feel* about one's homosexuality? If a gay male feels that whoever and whatever he is, he is O.K., that is the key starting point to self acceptance and the acceptance of others.

A man has a difficult task in defining himself as a man, especially if he has a poor bond with his father. This makes it more difficult for him to break away from the influence of the mother because she is seen as the strong parent while the father is not. As Pedersen says, "One of man's greatest developmental tasks is to achieve a healthy separation from the original bond with his personal mother." (Pedersen, 74) This healthy separation involves identification as a male regardless of one's sexual orientation.

The evolving themes in Orton's plays show him to be separating from both his mother and the mother-father substitute, his partner, Halliwell.

But he must also distance himself from the weak and unsuccessful father, and in *The Good and Faithful Servant*, written for television in 1964, he does this more precisely than in *Stoane* by writing a play that

lets the father character, Buchanan, simply wear out, but not before he has seen some sort of "light."

Whereas Sloane in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* puts a physical boot into the older man, in *The Good and Faithful Servant* it is life that does it. In the final few moments of the play, Buchanan, through the good auspices of the playwright, suddenly sees that his life has been a waste. The clock and toaster, his firm's retirement presents after fifty years' service, have broken down, as Buchanan himself has broken down. In what is the play's only violent moment, he smashes these signifiers of his life's work with a hammer.

*Edith's living room.
Buchanan stands beside the table. On the
table the clock and the toaster. He lifts a
hammer and smashes them to pieces.
(Plays, 190)*

Ironically, Orton seems to judge Buchanan with the values of the society he himself rejects. There is no evidence that William Orton ever smashed anything, but there is evidence that his inability to make any type of mark in the world - in a career or in his family life, was a motivating factor that drove Orton to overcome the obstacles between him and the recognition he eventually achieved. Anger is a prime emotion that when focussed towards a goal produces a tremendous amount of energy.

The Good and Faithful Servant is notable for the first appearance of the archetypal female organiser. She has appeared in earlier plays as a working class woman who

is under male domination and hence is softer and slightly vulnerable. But now she emerges as the type of middle class woman whom Orton professed to hate, the patronising, well-organised "woman in charge," Mrs Vealfoy. She also appears in Orton's next play, *Loot*, as the nurse, Fay, who kills as well as organises, and to a lesser extent as the dead Mrs McLeavy, who is buried in her W.V.S. (Women's Voluntary Service) uniform, an organisation which is largely made up (or was in Orton's day) of well-organised, middle class women.

They also might make speeches like Mrs Vealfoy's to Buchanan's grandson, Ray, who has made his girl friend, who works for the same firm as Buchanan, pregnant.

Mrs Vealfoy.You see, Raymond, I think what you have done is wrong. Not for any religious reason (I'm an agnostic myself), but simply because love-making should be kept for one's marriage partner alone. Outside marriage the act may seem the same, but I have my doubts as to whether anyone derives any real and lasting satisfaction from it. There is no finer sight than two married people making love. (*Plays*, 182)

This last line, an often quoted classic, may be said to sum up exactly where the English are or were in relation to sex. They like peeking but will not admit it.

In her farewell speech to Buchanan, as she gives him his toaster then the clock, Mrs Vealfoy says, "When you look at it, you'll think of us, I'm sure." Buchanan after accepting his gifts replies, "I hope to see you at the annual 'get together' in a month's time. So it

isn't by any means 'Goodbye.'" (*Plays*, 160-161) But it was, for Buchanan crams a lifetime of living and awakening into that month - he gets married, discovers a new grandson has made a girl pregnant, and that in spite of his fifty years at the firm as one of the front door commissionaires, nobody knows him.

It is a rude and sad awakening and at the moment when there seems everything to live for, he dies.

Edith. ...The tickets have arrived for the 'get together,'...It's to be gayer than ever this year. So much laughter, so much joy in people's hearts, so many happy faces all around....I'm buying a new dress for the occasion. And I shall smile a lot, more than usual, because we have so much to be thankful for.

Buchanan closes his eyes and dies.
(*Plays*, 191)

This occurs as his new wife Edith, who had been a charlady at the same firm for as long as Buchanan, shows him the photos of his grandson's wedding (interrupted by the birth of the baby). The fact that Buchanan dies while this is happening might indicate what Orton thought of the institution of marriage and his parent's marriage in particular.

Perhaps Orton had the odd emotional twinge when writing this play, which may either be judged as valid social comment or simply as a vehicle for parading Orton's disdain for his father's life and values, the middle class Mrs Vealfoys of the world, and the faceless organisations they all work for.

"Dad was everything John didn't want to be," says Douglas Orton in *Prick Up Your Ears*. "You could push Dad around. He was domineered." (Lahr, 44) How ironic that Orton would choose a partner who would also push him around and domineer him. What Elsie wanted was some six-footer to give her "a bloody good hiding," William Orton, in hindsight, said to John Lahr. Maybe the same could have been said about Halliwell.

"The choice" of love partner is always an attempt (however amiss the results may be) to fulfil a deep emotional as well as spiritual need," writes Petersen in *Dark Hearts*. "Whether we are homosexual or heterosexual," he goes on, "the search for an outer partner is always an attempt to gain a closer connection to what is missing within." (Pedersen, 203)

As Pedersen says, "Gay men seem to be longing for a lost or incomplete attachment to their fathers." (Pedersen, 196) This is not necessarily the reason *why* they are homosexual, for many heterosexual men must long for a lost attachment to their fathers. And that is a tragedy that no amount of comedy can disguise.

Because the tone of the play is so muted, probably due to the age of Buchanan and Edith, the comic lines are mostly low key. But as can be expected in an Orton play, they centre around sex, specifically the sexual indiscretions of the young, and Orton's attitude

towards the work ethic that chains people to jobs that Orton sees as having no value.

"Mr Buchanan is your grandfather...I should have told you, I suppose," Edith tells Ray, her grandson, "It would have been easier if your fathers were alive."

Ray. My fathers?

Edith. Yes.

Ray. I had more than one?

Edith clasps her hands in her lap and turns to Buchanan.

Edith. Just where to stop when telling the truth has always been a problem.

Ray. How could I have two fathers?

Edith. Your mother was a generous woman. And your fathers - though one of them must surely have been your uncle - loved her dearly. You were the result.

Ray. And my mother?

Edith. Her pedigree couldn't be subjected to scrutiny either. (*Plays, 167*)

And the best lines in the play:

Ray: I don't work.

Buchanan. Not work? (*He stares, open-mouthed.*)
What do you do then?

Ray. I enjoy myself.

Buchanan. That's a terrible thing to do. I'm bowled over by this, I can tell you. It's my turn to be shocked now. You ought to have a steady job.

Edith. Two perhaps.

Buchanan. In what direction do your talents lie?

Ray. I mended the bathroom tap once. (*Plays, 167*)

It is not difficult to imagine Orton and his father having a conversation something like that, for apart from a six months stint at Cadbury's in 1959, Orton lived on National Assistance (and possibly some of Halliwell's money) from 1953 until the BBC paid him for the script of *The Ruffian on the Stair* in 1963.

Finally, the connection between Buchanan and William Orton (whose recreation was playing skittles) is made complete by Buchanan's telling a fellow member of the firm's 'Bright Hours' club: "

Buchanan.

I looked forward to my retirement so's I could play skittles full time. I used to be a fan. I was in line for the cup. I just missed it. The mysterious thing was that I never came in line for it again."

(*Plays*, 185)

Writing this play would have released a great deal of Orton's conscious and unconscious connection to childhood feelings of neglect and loss. "It's his most personal play," writes Lahr. "His most direct and compassionate play," writes Charney (59), and it undoubtedly helped open the door to the next stage in his writing. What it also did was give more than a clue that millions of people actually liked having the security of a regular income, enjoyed earning fifteen pounds a week, and felt very safe knowing that the Mrs Vealfoys of the world are there to take care of them.

CHAPTER FIVE: PLAYS 1965-1966:

CAMPS, COFFINS, COPS

THE ERPINGHAM CAMP - CAMPING IT UP!

*ERPINGHAM...Behave as though nothing had happened.
It's my intention to defy the forces of
Anarchy with all that's best in twentieth
century civilisation. I shall put a record of
Russ Conway on the gram and browse through a
James Bond.*

(The Erpingham Camp, Plays, 308)

TED. We've no authority to force the locks.

KENNY. We'll take the authority then.

*KENNY flings out his arms, embracing the crowd.
I'm an ordinary man - I've no wish to be a
leader - my only ambition is to rest in peace
by my own fireside. But, in the life of
every one of us, there comes a time when he
must choose...*

(The Erpingham Camp, Plays, 309)

In *The Ruffian on the Stair*, *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and *The Good and Faithful Servant*, Orton seems to be exploring his own psyche and inner world, drawing on significant people in his past to supply him with the basis for many of the characters. Only in the last of these plays does he begin to adopt an overtly social and political stance, attacking capitalist and patriarchal institutions; his job at Cadbury's, perhaps, providing inspiration for the firm and some of its employees in *The Good and Faithful Servant*.

There is a year between that play (written in 1964) and his next, *The Erpingham Camp*, also written for television. Now that family influences had been laid to rest, Orton was free to satirise less personal

establishment institutions, in this case the British holiday camp with its mindless daily ritual of activities to entertain the campers: the glamorous granny and the mother and child competitions, the beauty contests, and the disability bonus:

Erpingham. ...won by Mr Laurie Russel of Market Harborough. Both Laurie's legs were certified 'absolutely useless' by our Resident Medical Officer. Yet he performed the Twist and the Bossa Nova to the tune specified on the entrance form.

(*Plays*, 283)

The action of the play centres around the struggle for power between the owner of the camp, Erpingham, representing Authority, and the militant campers led by Kenny, Eileen, Ted and Lou, representing The People. Pawns caught up in the action are Erpingham's employees and the less militant campers.

Can a play be "gay" even if the characters are not? Eric Bentley said that even though Oscar Wilde did not create gay characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* it was the most significant piece of gay theatre because it was by Oscar Wilde who was, of course, gay. George Whitmore, a contemporary writer of gay literature, supports Bentley by suggesting the play is the 'paradigm of gay theatrical style - swift, witty, subversive.' (Carlsen, 166)

Examples of this subversiveness can be found throughout *Earnest* and now begin to appear in Orton's work to a greater degree than previously. Wilde's subversiveness is well illustrated by these examples:

Lady Bracknell....Do you smoke?

Jack. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell. I am glad to hear it. A man should have an occupation of some kind...

(Act 1, 485-499)

and:

Gwendoline. Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face I fear we never will. Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out.

(Act 1, 701-704)

Orton's subversiveness can be more cruel; Laurie Russell appears to be a paraplegic, yet he "performed the Twist and the Bossa Nova." It is also dismissive of low culture - in Erpingham's speech which opened this chapter he terms the pianist, Russ Conway, and a James Bond book, "all that's best in twentieth century civilisation;" and irreligious to the point of blasphemy - one can never imagine Wilde having the courage to write the following exchange:

Erpingham. Have you prepared your sermon for tomorrow?

Padre. Yes, sir.

Erpingham. Is it fit to be preached?

Padre. I hope you'll give me any cuts that may be necessary.

Erpingham. What is the subject?

Padre. The Miracles of Jesus.

Erpingham. I hope we're not in for some far-fetched tale set among the Bedouin?

(*Plays*, 289)

Jonathan Dollimore says that Wilde renounced his subversiveness in *De Profundis* with what he calls a "tame accommodation of self to Christian humility," Wilde's imprisonment being the catalyst for change. (Dollimore, 95-97) But prison had the opposite effect on Orton because his existence was prison-like anyway. Unlike Wilde, who fell from a great height, Orton merely exchanged one low life existence for another, with National Assistance (the Dole) replaced by a different type of government hand out - room and board for six months. Thus prison nurtured Orton's anarchy. He was able to see at first hand what went on in institutions and was toughened by the experience.

However, *The Erpingham Camp* marks the beginning of Orton's journey from a low culture perspective to high style farce, from low camp to high camp, and in the process he attacks both camps.

The play has class struggle at its core, so it could be said to have a serious message. The camp staff, specifically Erpingham and Chief Redcoat Riley, are subject to a number of quite savage attacks by the rioting campers. To some extent this violence is nullified by the set piece speeches made by the major protagonist and his adversary, of which Kenny's declamation which opened this chapter is the prime example. The equally farcical nature of the supporting players, the incompetence and Irish blarney of Riley, and the sexual antics of the pious, sermonising Padre,

also undermine the play's serious message. Orton also used well known classical music pieces to flavour the "big" scenes, a further step in the camping it up process.

Looked at objectively, the most "camp" characters in *The Erpingham Camp* are the camp Padre and the camp owner, Erpingham, who runs it like the "kommandant" of Stalag 13. Both are subjects of much camp humour, some of it visual. But the campers representing the proletariat are just as fiercely parodied, as Kenny's speech which opened this chapter illustrates. In fact, the opposing factions might be described as being in opposite camps.

Orton's knowledge of working class belief systems, behaviour and morality came from his life experiences. One can write so much more accurately about holiday preferences of the working classes if one has taken such holidays, as Orton did with his family in North Wales, a favourite playground of Liverpool's proletariat. (Lahr, 50). He knew that given the least legitimate excuse and opportunity, heterosexual working class men with highly moral attitudes can be willingly persuaded to take off their trousers and dress up in fantasy costumes or women's clothing.

The scene that starts the riot off is culled from the smutty, low camp, heavy with sexual innuendo music hall

and British seaside pier acts which are synonymous with British humour. Orton catches it perfectly:

Riley. ...you'll have to drop your slacks, my lad.

Kenny looks dubious. Mason gives a giggle and a professionally coy smile.

Mason. He doesn't want to take them off in front of a lady.

Riley. Where's the lady? You're not trying to tell us you're a lady, Miss Mason?

Mason. I am.

Riley. We'll have to check your credentials later.
(*To Kenny.*) Go with Miss Mason....but remember to keep your cheques and your legs crossed.

(*Plays*, 293)

These are Orton's people. If he does not know them personally he knows them from the popular culture. He also knows they are possibly the most morally offended by homosexual activity. Smut is their outlet for sexual guilt. It was Elsie Orton's outlet too. Orton grew up in an environment heavy with sexual innuendo but no healthy adult role models. It was all talk and no action, all undercover, hinted at activity. The childhood imagination is left to conjure up its own pictures of what "love" is. And it is often shameful. Women get pregnant but "how" is not known, only implied. And in Elsie Orton's world the implication is that it is a "dirty deed." With such women, the pregnancy allows a brief respite from the sexual attention of her husband, also the subject of low camp humour in the play with Eileen's endless restatement that she is "pregnant."

It is these people that Orton is lampooning. Kenny, "champion of campers' rights," spends almost the entire play naked except for a "Tarzan of the Apes" leopard skin. This defines him as a Philistine, a half naked savage out for blood. His wife, Eileen, is a typical archetype of the Midlands or North of England working class woman who, when she gets pregnant, becomes the total focus of attention of her menfolk.

The other working class couple, Lou (the wife) and Ted, met "outside" the Young Conservatives Club where Lou once acted as scorer for a brain specialist's daughter who was playing table tennis. That was as close as they got to the middle classes but it gives them a certain "standing."

Lou. My husband and I are civil defence workers. This is an emergency.
We're taking over
(Plays, 310)

Ted, in fact, does what many sexually inhibited Englishmen do when given a legitimate opportunity to take their clothes off in public, he can't get his trousers off quick enough.

Riley. One more gentleman? Who else is game?

Ted runs onto the stage.

Riley. Take your clothes off, sir. I'd like you to do the can-can.
Needing no more persuading Ted takes off his trousers and coat, and, to the tune of the can-can from 'Orpheus in the Underworld'...he dances a can-can with his shirt tails flying.
(Plays, 296)

In the mid 1960's, a holiday camp was probably still a favoured holiday resort for certain types of British holiday maker (they would soon discover the Costa Brava); these include upwardly mobile working class couples, and people such as Ted and Lou, described as "middle class prats" by Eileen. What type of middle class they are supposed to represent is problematical. Possibly qualified tradespeople such as plumbers or electricians? Few professional people would take their holidays in a holiday camp.

As Orton would have observed, demarcation lines in British society are fairly strictly observed. At certain levels people like to be regimented and would go to a holiday camp with its programme of entertainment so that they didn't have to think for themselves. (A similar philosophy accounts for the success of packaged holiday tours). So a revolt in a holiday camp is a very unusual event, just as political anarchy in Britain is also an unusual event.

The union movement in Britain, as it was in New Zealand, was at the height of its power in the 1950's and 1960's. It might even be said to have threatened to usurp the traditional power held by the establishment. In his play, Orton seems to be saying that Authority as wielded by the establishment is preferable to that wielded by the anarchists. This might reflect his own changing financial circumstances, for by 1965 he was able to afford to take his first holiday in Morocco. Of

course, over time, it is not unusual for a radical playwright to become an icon of the ruling class.

John Osborne is a case in point. He burst onto the scene in 1956 with *Look Back in Anger*, certainly a watershed in British drama with its lower middle class anti-hero, Jimmy Porter, who as John Russell Taylor says in *Anger and After* was the "stuff of which perennial rebels are made...the self flagellating solitary in self-inflicted exile from his own misery," (Taylor, 41) written by "the first of the angry young men and arguably the biggest shock to the system of British theatre since the advent of Shaw." (Taylor, 39)

By the mid-sixties, Osborne was working on a commission from the National Theatre, adapting Lope de Vega's *La Fianza Satisfecha* as *The Bond Honoured*, which Taylor says was difficult to take seriously. (Taylor, 64-65)

So while *The Erpingham Camp* is primarily a satirical attack on both the pomposity and rigidity of those in authority, specifically Erpingham, and the mindlessness of those who usually abide by the rules, its overriding message is that anarchists are even more stupid than those they attempt to overthrow. Which seems strange when related to Orton's sexual behaviour. This prompts the question: Is the play rather more than a satire on an inter class power struggle? Whatever the message, can one take it seriously amidst the welter of farcical camp situations? These constitute a wonderful

opportunity for some rich satire and great "camp" humour.

"My camp is pure camp," says Erpingham, when at the beginning of the play, someone reports that two plastic ducks, stuck together "beak to beak," have been causing a disturbance in the children's paddling pool; (*Plays*, 279) and, as mentioned, organised religion is heavily satirised:

Erpingham. You're interested in religion then, Padre?

Padre. From a purely Christian point of view, sir...I find great solace in the life of the Spirit.

Erpingham. I'm sure you do....What happened in court this morning?

Padre. I was acquitted, sir. The young woman withdrew her charge.

Erpingham. I'm pleased to hear it. You must give up your evangelical forays into the teenage chalets. They're liable to misinterpretation.
(*Plays*, 291-292)

While the violence in the play is symptomatic of the clash between Authority and anarchy, the sex is suggestive rather than overt. Some people would find the sight of Erpingham in his underwear having his corset laced up by the Padre somewhat tittivating, especially as we know the Padre has a weakness for women's knickers. Orton probably would have made that men's pants if the law had allowed.

There is a hint in this scene that Erpingham might be Orton's second (Wilson was his first) gay victim. There

is no woman in Erpingham's life and he shares some attributes with Halliwell. He's a vain, grandiose figure who smokes cigars and has his clothes "handed" to him while getting dressed. His "grand vision" is very camp, so is the music that accompanies it:

He lights a cigar, blows a cloud of smoke into the air, smiles, and gives an expansive wave of his hand.

Erpingham. Rows of Entertainment Centres down lovely, unspoiled bits of the coast, across deserted moorland and barren mountainside. The Earthly Paradise. Ah...*He stares into the distance.* I can hear it. I can touch it. And the sight of it is hauntingly beautiful, Riley.

Music: 'The Holy City.'

(Plays, 281)

But Orton saves the campiest action for Erpingham's death scene:

The assembled staff and campers stand round the bier. A great cross of coloured light, as from distant stained glass, falls across Erpingham's body. Everyone bows their heads in silence. Music: Bach 'Toccata and Fugue.'

Riley. He was a great man. One of the very greatest of our time. Poet, philosopher and friend of rich and poor alike. Distinctions were foreign to his nature. He was at all times a simple man. Little children loved him...He gave up a career as a missionary to come to us.....It was in the Erpingham Holiday Centre that he found the spiritual peace he had long been seeking. His death, when it came, found him quite prepared.

(Plays, 318-319)

Erpingham, in fact, falls through a hole in the floor and was totally unprepared for death. Every word of this speech, as the audience knows only too well by now, is a parody of what the real Erpingham was like.

This is very much in the Oscar Wilde vein. The most camp touch follows:

*Music The Last Post.
Four dozen red balloons...fall slowly upon
the bier. As they last balloon descends the
trumpet fades. Riley lifts his head.*

*Riley. We will now file past our beloved friend
and leader for the last time...Goodbye, sir.
Be seeing you.*

*...The body...is left alone in the moonlight
with the red balloons and dying flames in a
blaze from the distant stained glass. A great
choir is heard singing 'The Holy City.'
(Plays, 319-320)*

If one sees only the balloons in this final tableau then one misses the joke. Red is the colour of socialism and The People could be seen as triumphant. However, religion has the final word, it usually does. (Even Orton and Halliwell finally ended up in church, although they had no say in the matter).

By killing off the camp kommandant, Orton may have been wishfully killing off Halliwell, his own camp kommandant. Erpingham spends most of the play riding roughshod over his staff and the campers. He refuses to listen to advice on how to deal with the problem or reach a compromise solution:

Riley. Let discretion play the better part, sir.

Erpingham. Never! This is my kingdom. I make the laws. We've our traditions. And they're not to be lightly cast aside at the whim of a handful of trouble-makers. I'll never agree to their demands...

*Riley. Oh, sir, (Pleadingly.) call them back.
Let's thrash it out over a cup of instant...*

Erpingham...This whole episode has been fermented by a handful of intellectuals...To give in now would be madness.

(*Plays*, 307-308)

In 1967, when he rewrote the ending of *The Erpingham Camp* for the *Crimes of Passion* double-bill with *The Ruffian on the Stair*, Orton says in his diary, "Finished *The Erpingham Camp* this evening and read it through. It's by far the best thing I've written for the stage so far." (*Diaries*, 136) He probably liked it because it had such a satisfying outcome. The Authority figure's inability to compromise brought about his own demise, but it was basically an accident rather than deliberate murder. He might have hoped that Halliwell could be disposed of as conveniently.

I have mentioned Chesterton's pronouncements on the artistic temperament, the disease that afflicts amateurs, and which cannot produce any art. Chesterton may not be entirely correct there, but Lahr was certainly correct about Halliwell. The diaries are full of instances where Halliwell gives vent to his "artistic temperament," which in effect are the tantrums of a spoilt little boy. For as Leonard Shengold writes in *Soul Murder, The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation*, "It should be clear from some of the clinical material in this book that over-indulgence (of children) plays its considerable role in soul murder alongside deprivation." (Shengold, 274)

Shengold is making this statement not about Halliwell, or even Orton, who was himself over-indulged within Elsie Orton's limited emotional and financial range, but with reference to Rudyard Kipling's memoirs and stories, which, he says, depict the narcissistic vulnerability that can accompany the grandiosity of the over-indulged child.

"Narcissistic," "grandiose," "pompous," all the words that come readily to mind to describe Halliwell are appropriate to Erpingham. I think that Orton, with his wicked sense of fun, is parodying much of the character of his friend in the play, with the added irony of giving Erpingham's chief adversary, his friend's Christian name:

Erpingham smiles. There is contempt in his smile. He faces Kenny coolly.

Erpingham. You're talking nonsense. You have no rights. You have certain privileges which can be withdrawn. I am withdrawing them.

Kenny. You'll pay for this, you ignorant fucker!
There are cries of horror from the staff.

Erpingham. I think you're forgetting to whom you're speaking. Calm down before I have you thrown out.

Kenny. We want food. We demand bread. We expect shelter.

Erpingham is made angry by the tone of Kenny's voice.

Erpingham. ...No. You must be taught a lesson. There will be no food tonight. I shall not give way. You can sleep in the open. The chalet is closed until further notice.

(Plays, 307)

This is extremely heavy handed treatment on Erpingham's part towards people who presumably have paid for accommodation. But as noted earlier, Erpingham's rigidity reflects that of the male ruling classes as personified by the figure of Pentheus from *The Bacchae*. "His world...focuses on the rational principle alone; all other levels of his psyche have been repressed, rendered inefficient, and fragmented. He has one obsession, one view...No evaluation can take place, no objectivity, no understanding of other processes. Upholder of limited conventional values, Pentheus practises what he considers to be virtues - at least outwardly...he is a prisoner of his own rigid system." (Knapp, 17)

As Bettina Knapp writes, "In Jungian terms Pentheus may ...be called Dionysus's shadow figure...and represents all those traits which the ego considers negative and would like to annihilate." (Knapp, 17)

"We all have to master hate," writes Shengold, "but those who have been abused as children have to master more hate than most." (Shengold, 77) Orton, whose childhood abuse took a different form to Halliwell's, although both were over-indulged to some degree, turned his hatred safely outwards, using his imagination to "kill off" the Pentheus shadow that was part of his inner world.

But the Dionysus shadow that haunted Halliwell's life was Orton himself. As with Erpingham, there was to be no compromise, no talking things out "over a cup of instant." Halliwell, rigid, terrified to let go, moody and subject to fits of depression and tantrums, and finally forced to face the reality of his lack of writing talent, did not have the necessary self knowledge to make it possible. There would have to be a scapegoat, and there was only one person Halliwell could blame for his failure.

LOOT - GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

Although the original version of *Loot* was written in 1965, before *The Erpingham Camp*, the version in *Orton The Complete Plays* is the revised script written in 1966 and staged at the Criterion theatre in 1966 and 1967.

In *Loot*, Orton's social mobility takes his characters into the world that Orton was now moving into more frequently, that of people who can leave an estate worth 19,000 pounds - the semi-professional and professional middle class. As Orton said himself in a *Transatlantic Review* interview in 1967, "The class of my plays is going up all the time," although he had doubts as to whether he could make upper class people as interesting as lower class people. (Hirst, 97)

As farce takes over, the plots of Orton's plays grow in complexity. In *Loot*, two young men, Dennis, who works for an undertaker, and his friend, Hal McLeavy, have robbed a bank and stolen 104,000 pounds which they've hidden in an wardrobe in Hal's house. Next to the wardrobe is a coffin containing the dead body of Hal's mother, the recently deceased Mrs McLeavy. The money and the body swap places, allowing numerous opportunities for farcical situations and sight gags. Inspector Truscott, on the trail of both the robbers and a suspected mass murderer, Mrs McLeavy's nurse, Fay McMahon, arrives at the McLeavy house to investigate disguised as a water board inspector. Fay, Hal and Dennis team up to thwart him but eventually they are caught, only for Truscott to agree to split the "loot" with them, leaving Mr McLeavy to take the blame for his wife's murder and the robbery.

Orton's targets in the play are religion, (the McLeavys are Catholic), the police, undertakers, and to a lesser extent, nurses - the only female character in the play, apart from the dead body of Mrs McLeavy, essential to the plot even though she is a corpse, is Fay, a twenty-eight year old nurse who has murdered seven husbands and latterly her patient, Mrs McLeavy. Fay plans to marry Mr McLeavy, once he gets over the shock of discovering that his wife has left her money to the nurse.

*Fay...*I'll sort out some well meaning young woman.
Bring her here. Introduce you. I can
visualise her - medium height, slim, fair

hair. A regular visitor to some place of worship. And an ex-member of the League of Mary.

McLeavy. Someone like yourself?

(*Plays*, 196-197)

Charney says *Loot* is still highly autobiographical.

(Charney, 83) If so it represents Orton's most savage attack upon the woman who gave him birth. For Mrs McLeavy's son has no qualms about ousting her from the coffin to make way for the "loot," or cramming the body in a wardrobe. It is like selling a cadaver for cash - a Burke and Hareish transaction which has its roots in Orton's attitude towards his mother's body.

When Elsie Orton died, it seems Orton was totally at ease around the body, in fact he appeared to be ghoulishly fascinated by Elsie's corpse and examined it minutely. As his sister Leonie said:

He nearly had mother out of her coffin...He was picking her head up. What's this brown stuff? 'try and get her rings off.' I said, 'I don't want to. He said, 'I do.' He wanted to see her feet, he was opening her dressing gown. It's incredible,' he said, 'doesn't she look bizarre.' The kids were screaming and I said, 'for Christ's sake leave her alone.' (Bigsby, 45)

Mrs McLeavy's false teeth and her glass eyes, one of which goes missing, are key props in the play. Somehow Orton must have inherited his mother's false teeth, for a few days after the funeral he took them into the dressing room at the Criterion where *Loot* was playing and handed them to some members of the cast. A case of life imitating art, perhaps, as Oscar Wilde advocated? Orton records their reaction in his dairy:

I'd taken my mother's false teeth down to the theatre. I said to Kenneth Cranham, "Here I thought you'd like the originals." He said "What?" "Teeth," I said. "Whose?" he said. "My mum's," I said. He looked very sick...Simon Ward shook like a jelly when I gave them to him.

(*Diaries*, 47)

To have disrespect for the dead might be seen as going against the culture's most deeply rooted prejudices. But I wonder if Orton's familiarity with Elsie Orton's body, and his treatment of it, might indicate that he had to pay a price for his status as "favourite son?" Perhaps he'd seen it in different circumstances similarly unclothed? Certainly his behaviour with his mother's body has deep psychological implications. It harkens back to such gruesome scenarios as grave robbing and pulling gold teeth out of bodies at Buchenwald, which begs the question, does Orton's humour in *Loot* verge on the sick side? It might be, I suppose, if Mrs McLeavy's "body" was lifelike, but since it is thrown around with what amounts to gay abandon, getting mistaken for a tailor's dummy in the process, the audience has no doubt what it is "seeing" - no body.

But Orton's lack of respect for Elsie's body is mirrored by Hal's disrespect towards *his* mum. Like Orton, he has no qualms about handling her organs, in fact, he will do anything for money, including defiling the corpse.

He (Hal) takes the screwdriver from Dennis, and begins to unscrew the coffin lid.

Hal. It's the comics I read. Sure of it.

Dennis (wiping his forehead with the back of his hand). Think of your mum. Your lovely old mum. She gave you birth.

Hal. I should thank anybody for that?

Dennis. Cared for you. Washed your nappies. You'd be some kind of monster.

Hal takes the lid off the coffin.

Hal. Think what's at stake

He goes to wardrobe and unlocks it.

Money.

He brings out the money. Dennis picks up a bundle of notes, looks into coffin.

Dennis. Won't she rot it? The body juices? I can't believe it's possible.

Hal. She's embalmed. Good for centuries.

(Plays, 207-208)

They then find that the money will not fit into the coffin while the body is still in it, so they tip the body into the wardrobe.

Dennis. What will we do with the body?

Hal. Bury it. In a mineshaft. Out in the country.

Or in the marshes. Weigh the corpse with rocks.

(Plays, 208)

As in Pinter's *The Homecoming*, when Max reminisces about his father and his dead wife, Jessie, what has occurred before renders the following exchange farcical:

Hal (pause). Take her clothes off?

Dennis. In order to avoid detection should her remains be discovered.

Hal. Bury her naked? My own mum?

He goes to the mirror and combs his hair.

It's a Freudian nightmare. (Plays, 209)

If it is "Freudian" to take off his dead mother's clothes, what is "it" to throw her body down a mine shaft? By far the most Freudian aspect of these exchanges is Hal's detachment, ending with his visit to the mirror and combing his hair. Even Truscott, who is equally callous, is impressed:

Truscott. Your sense of detachment is terrifying, lad. Most people would at least flinch upon seeing their mother's eyes and teeth handed around like nuts at Christmas.
(*Plays*, 272)

But Mrs McLeavy's murderer, Nurse Fay, is also a Freudian nightmare. She may be seen as an aspect of the Terrible Mother who is far more dangerous to men (and women) than Joyce, Kath or Mrs Vealfoy. Murderous, money-hungry, corrupt and totally emotionless, she goes briskly about her business with a sort of icy detachment whilst dressed in mourning and mouthing religious platitudes.

Fay. ...Really, I sometimes wonder whether living with that woman hasn't made a free thinker of you. You must marry again after a decent interval.

McLeavy. What's a decent interval?

Fay. A fortnight would be long enough to indicate your grief. We must keep abreast of the times.
(*Plays*, 197)

Left to her own devices, who knows who would have been next on Fay's hit list but, unfortunately for her, hot on her trail is someone equally murderous and corrupt who happens to be a Scotland Yard detective.

Truscott of the Yard is a new sort of character in an Orton play. Quiet, purposeful, and behind the facade of efficiency, quite mad. Teamed up with Fay, Hal and Dennis to make a sort of flying squad of the criminal class, he may be another aspect of Orton's shadow, latent until Orton became rich and famous: the powerful Authority figure who can buy and sell people as easily as he can arrange a death.

Since the violence in *Loot* is not generated by any criminal outsider, but comes from the representative of the law, it has a special irony. The important point about Truscott is that he represents an aspect of the police that is known to exist. Truscott is said to have been modelled on a real Scotland Yard policeman, Detective Sergeant Harold Challenor, who was the subject of a police inquiry in 1964 over his unscrupulous, dishonest and brutal methods of catching criminals. (Lahr, 196) An enquiry found that Challenor was certifiably insane. Orton defines Truscott along traditional police lines - methodical, heavy handed and somewhat ponderous, and with a traditional method of obtaining evidence from the criminal classes, which would be seen by many people as perfectly acceptable. If he cannot get a confession voluntarily, he will beat it out of a suspect. But primarily, Truscott is Authority gone mad, so the beating could be said to take on a sinister aspect:

He [Hal] half turns away. Truscott brings his fist down on the back of Hal's neck. Hal

cries out in pain and collapses on the floor rubbing his shoulder.

Fay (indignant). How dare you. He's only a boy.

Truscott. I'm not impressed by his sex, miss.
(*To Hal.*) I asked for the truth.

Hal. I'm telling the truth....

Truscott kicks Hal violently. Hal cries out in terror and pain... Truscott jerks Hal from the floor, beating and kicking and punching him. Hal screams with pain.

(*Plays, 235-236*)

Orton's arrest, trial, and subsequent prison sentence for defacing library books, and the occasions when his toilet escapades brought him in contact with the law, would have given him first hand experience of police brutality and police mentality. Apart from the Challenor source, we can be sure that there is some truth in the Truscott character. For what are "the police" but simply the reverse aspect of "the criminal?" Orton's mischief does the rest.

Fay. Can't he fetch the Pope's photo?

Truscott. Only if some responsible person accompanies him.

Hal. You're a responsible person.

Truscott. What proof do I have that I'm a responsible person?

Dennis. If you weren't responsible you wouldn't be given the powers to behave as you do.

Truscott removes his pipe, considers.
(*Plays, 240-241*)

and:

Fay. You must prove me guilty. That is the law.

Truscott. You know nothing of the law. I know nothing of the law. That makes us equal in the sight of the law.

Fay. I'm innocent till I'm proved guilty. This is a free country. The law is impartial.

Truscott. Who's been filling your head with that rubbish?...When I make out my report I shall say that you've given me a confession...

Fay. I shall deny that I've confessed.

Truscott. Perjury is a serious crime.

Fay. Have you no respect for the truth?

Truscott. We have a saying under the blue lamp 'Waste time on the truth and you'll be pounding the beat until the day you retire.'
(*Plays*, 254-255)

As McLeavy says, not quite in character, "You're not bloody human that's for sure. We're being made the victims of some kind of interplanetary rag." (*Plays*, 248)

As it turns out, the crucial irony in *Loot* is that McLeavy, the only seemingly honest and decent human being in the play, will be put in prison and possibly murdered so that a corrupt policeman, a mass murdering nurse, his thief of a son and his son's best friend - who have sex with each other as well as with females - can share the proceeds of a bank robbery.

McLeavy. I'm innocent! I'm innocent! (*At the door, pause, a last wail.*) Oh, what a terrible thing to happen to a man who's been kissed by the Pope.

Meadows goes off with McLeavy.

Dennis. What will you charge him with, Inspector?

Truscott. Oh, anything will do.

Fay. Can accidental death be arranged?

Truscott. Anything can be arranged in prison....

Fay. We'll bury your father with your mother. That
will be nice for him, won't it?
(*Plays*, 274-275)

However, Adrian Page in *The Death of the Playwright?* says McLeavy is not strictly innocent in either a legal sense or in terms of his awareness. This is because McLeavy did what any decent father would do in similar circumstances, he failed to denounce Hal when the loot is discovered in Mrs McLeavy's coffin. What is more, McLeavy failed to demand that Truscott produce his credentials. (Page, 148) However, I believe McLeavy is more a member of that naive section of the public that believes the police are honest.

McLeavy. Oh, we can rely on public servants to
behave themselves...As a good citizen I
ignore the stories which bring officialdom
into disrepute.
(*Plays*, 217)

Susan Rusinko, a professor of English at Bloomsburg University, says that "Orton's social outrage is nowhere focussed so sharply as in *Loot*, which during the 1986 season in New York, received its first unanimous approving notices from American critics." (Rusinko, 90-91,) Perhaps this production succeeded due to the casting. I believe it is necessary in *Loot* for all the major characters, with the exception of McLeavy, to be shamelessly and obviously corrupt and to relish that corruption; and for the really bad eggs, Fay and Truscott, to be visually threatening. Ms Rusinko writes that a critic, John Simon, describes Zoe Wanamaker's rendition of the nurse [Fay] as the "personification of female rottenness," and that *Loot*

is Orton's funniest play, "going about its sacred mission of a total demolition job with unfailing good humour." (Rusinko, 91) Another critic, Frank Rich, saw Orton's lethal farce as one of the funniest and meanest in the contemporary theatre, in which the characters often act like prim, well-mannered, God fearing representatives of the bourgeoisie, even as their private deeds and thoughts reek of greed, blasphemy, sadism and lust. (Rusinko, 91)

The sex in the play does not have a great deal to do with the plot. Hal, one of the thieves, plans to use his share of the "loot" to start up a brothel, and his brothel daydreams are given expression from time to time during the play.

Hal. Afterwards I'll take you to a remarkable brothel I've found...Run by three Pakistanis aged between ten and fifteen. They do it for sweets. Part of their religion. Meet me at seven. Stock up with Mars bars. (*Plays*, 267)

And although Hal and Dennis have slept together, as Fay says to Hal, "Even the sex you were born into isn't safe from your marauding," (*Plays*, 200) there is no doubt they are presented as primarily heterosexual. The homosexual references are somewhat oblique compared to Hal's frequent mention of brothels and both his and Dennis's profligacy.

Truscott. How many women have you made pregnant?

Dennis. Five.

Truscott. You scatter your seed along the
pavements without regard to age or sex.
(*Plays*, 244)

The play ends with Dennis and Fay preparing to wed, for as Dennis confesses early in Act One;

Dennis. I can't go to a brothel.

Hal. Why not?

Dennis. ...I'm trying to get up sufficient head of steam to marry.

Hal. Have you anyone in mind?

Dennis. Your mum's nurse....

Hal. You've had her? (*Dennis grins.*) Knocked it off? Really?

Dennis. Under that picture of the Sacred Heart.
You've seen it?

Hal. In her room. Often.

Dennis. On Wednesday nights while you're training at St Edmund's gymnasium....I'd like to get married. It's the only thing I haven't tried.
(*Plays*, 209-210)

Fay, of course, is a woman, and murderer or not, Orton's misogynistic treatment ensures she is the subject of some verbal violence. Apart from the females mentioned in Hal's brothel speeches, and Truscott's wife: "My wife is a woman. Intelligence doesn't really enter into the matter" (*Plays*, 270), Fay is seen as merchandise as much as the prostitutes described above.

Hal. You'll never make it to the altar without my help.

Fay. I need no help from you to get a man to bed.

Hal. My father holds it as a cherished belief that a whore is no fit companion for a man.

Fay. As a creed it has more to offer than most.

Hal. My mate Dennis has done you. He speaks of it with relish.

Fay. Young men pepper their conversation with tales of rape. It creates a good impression.

Hal. You never had the blessing of a rape.
(*Plays*, 223-224)

Lahr says that, with *Loot*, Orton's laughter found new strength, tilting against death, the Church, the police and British justice. (Lahr, 188) But there is a danger that the outrage - the directing of rage *outwards*, has become outrageous, just as Orton's private life became more outrageous. This was probably because his growing bank balance started to give him a sense of invulnerability. In fact, he was beginning to realise that far from being a downtrodden nobody, he was, as his diary title confirms, very much a somebody, maybe God in fact?

In Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the central figure, Sherman McCoy, mid-thirties wheeler-dealer on the bond market in New York, who lives in an apartment that cost \$2.6 million, and can make \$50,000 commission merely by picking up a telephone, perceives himself as a "Master of the Universe."

Patrick Carnes writes that the Master of the Universe theme emerges in addicts' lives in many different ways. But a constant is the rationale that all is justified because of the addict's uniqueness, specialness or superiority. In their addiction they are set apart from others, either made of "the right stuff" or having some

special right or need others don't have. Being out of control requires that you have no limits. (Carnes, 183-184) For Sherman McCoy, the logic was as follows:

It was in the air! It was a wave! Everywhere! Inescapable!... Sex!...There for the taking....It walked down the street...It was splashed all over shops! If you were a young man and halfway alive, what chance did you have?...Technically, he had been unfaithful to his wife. Well, sure...but who could remain monogamous with this, this tidal wave of concupiscence rolling across the world? Christ almighty! A Master of the Universe couldn't be a saint, after all. It was unavoidable...you can't dodge snowflakes, and this was a blizzard.
(Wolfe, 54)

As Carnes notes, classical Greek playwrights warned of such pride..."Ignoring their human limits was always the undoing of the Greek heroes. It is the undoing of addicts as well. For addicts, the theme of invulnerability postpones the decision to get help."
(Carnes, 184)

In his 1967 diary entries, Orton never acknowledges that his lifestyle might be the cause of his living problems. Being a Master of the Universe, he can manage the sex, drugs and deteriorating relationship with Halliwell and still continue to write. Lahr records, Orton had long harboured fantasies of omnipotence which in his novel *Head to Toe* involved a new kind of writing 'that would create a seismic disturbance' whose 'shock waves were capable of killing centuries afterwards.'
(*Diaries*, 14)

Metaphor contains the clues to a writer's inner world. During 1967, *Loot*, with its coffin crammed with money and its wardrobe crammed with a dead body, was on in the West End of London, enjoying a major run at the Criterion theatre. In fact, it was running at the time of Elsie Orton's death and eight months later when Orton was murdered.

Orton was very money conscious by then; his diary records the ups and downs of the theatre "takings" (loot). Full houses sometimes followed newspaper articles on Orton or radio interviews and television appearances. Halliwell said Orton had become quite a different person following his success, and he had. He enjoyed being a celebrity.

Money was rolling into his bank account. 10,000 pounds for the film script of *Up Against It*, a reported 100,000 pounds for the film rights of *Loot*. *Loot* also became a metaphor for the celebrity status of a young man who won the 1966 *Evening Standard* "Play of the Year" award, was interviewed by the BBC and prestigious Sunday papers such as the *Sunday Times*, and was invited to appear as a guest on TV talk and quiz shows. 1967 was also the year when he was finally recognised in public. "You're Joe Orton," a young man says to him as they wait at Gibraltar airport. (*Diaries*, 205) Orton notes this is the first time he had been recognised.

Loot was seen by Orton and Halliwell on numerous occasions during 1967, which might help to explain why they died. As a sub-text to *Loot*'s major themes of murder, robbery and corruption, there is the not so minor one of sacrificing principles for money. Whether McLeavy helps dig his own grave or not, as Adrian Page claims, he surely does not deserve to die in prison from an "accidental death." This may well have been Halliwell's eventual fate had he merely murdered Orton without committing suicide himself. McLeavy is the Catholic version of Orton's stupidly upright but inherently gullible and eminently disposable older man. Kemp, Buchanan and McLeavy are the sort of people of whom one might say, "He doesn't know what time it is." Their only recourse to the forces that are sent to crush them is anger, self righteousness and a small weapon - Kemp has a stick, Buchanan a hammer, McLeavy various religious icons, a portrait of Pope Pius XII for example. It is Truscott who has the big weapons, the symbolic truncheon all police carry whether it is on their person or not, and his pipe which is stuck in his mouth or carried in his hand throughout the play. What could be more threatening to the criminal class? An archetype of Sherlock Holmes must have all the answers.

Finally, though, what makes *Loot* work as great theatre is its tight plot and some truly great comic lines. As Orton said in an interview with Peter Burton, he

enjoyed writing dialogue but found it could go on and on without a plot and sub plot and ultimately lead nowhere. "A plot gives you something to fall back on and gives rise to the lines itself." (Burton, 80). Many of these have their origin in Oscar Wilde's *Earnest*.

For example, from *Loot*, McLeavy to his son, Hal:

McLeavy. Oh, wicked, wicked. (*Wildly.*) These hairs - (*Points.*) - they're grey. You made them so. I'd be a redhead today had you been an accountant. (*Plays*, 264)

From *Earnest*:

Lady Bracknell. ...I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to be living entirely for pleasure now. [that her husband has died].

Algernon. I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.

Lady Bracknell. It certainly has changed colour. From what cause I, of course, cannot say. (Act I, 318-323)

And the classics. From *Loot*:

Hal. That's typical of your upbringing, baby. Every luxury was lavished upon you - atheism, breast-feeding, circumcision. I had to make my own way. (*Plays*, 209)

And from *Earnest*:

Lady Bracknell. Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished upon you by your doting parents. (Act III, 441-443)

And my favourite - which although there is no corresponding line in *Earnest*, seems to typify Orton's wicked gay sense of the ridiculous:

Truscott: Have you never heard of Truscott? The man who tracked down the limbless girl killer? Or was that sensation before your time?

Hal. Who would kill a limbless girl?

Truscott. She was the killer. (*Plays*, 250)

It is a shame that the limbless girl killer was not a character in the play, casting her would have been interesting.

CHAPTER SIX: THE LAST RITES ~

FUNERAL GAMES AND WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

LONDON. - A 61-year old Anglican bishop has resigned over allegations of indecency with a trainee monk. A spokesman said Bishop of Gloucester Peter Ball resigned after being cautioned by police, who decided not to charge him. The spokesman said, "A pre-requisite of being cautioned is a clear admission of guilt."

"The World" column, back page,
Manawatu Evening Standard, Tuesday
9th March 1993. Item headed,
"Sex life like a monk!" (sic)

Orton knew, as I know, that there are many people who practise homosexuality who do not see themselves as homosexual and, indeed, may live in relationships with a partner of the opposite sex. Socially, they are therefore heterosexual, even though the physical expression of their sexuality may be more with their own sex. As mentioned elsewhere, sexuality and spirituality may be seen as opposite sides of the same coin, which is why many of the clergy in our society are closeted gays.

The Pastor/Bishop, Pringle, in *Funeral Games* certainly does not practice homosexuality. But unlike the Bishop above, who obviously had a secret life, the platitudes Pringle applies to his religious calling are outrageously parodied by his sexual nature. There is no attempt to conceal this in the play. Similarly, McCorquodale, a member of the same profession, if now "unfrocked," has sexual objectives even if his libido cannot quite match his desires.

Orton saw neither *Funeral Games* nor his last play, *What the Butler Saw*, both being produced after he died, but those who did had mixed reactions. Bigsby says that in *Funeral Games*, Orton "created a bewildering complex plot which turns on the neat reversal of conventional morality." (Bigsby, 54) Maurice Charney calls the play "surprisingly unsuccessful;" (Charney, 49) and Martin Esslin says it is "a kind of Albert Memorial of mannerist preposterousness and execrable taste." (Esslin, 104) Written in 1966 for television, between his rewriting of *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*, *Funeral Games* was presented by Yorkshire Television in 1968, after Orton's death, as part of a series entitled "The Seven Deadly Virtues." It was supposed to represent "Charity."

The play is interesting in terms of its presentation of what may be seen as Orton's stock types. The young hoodlum/gangster, who first appeared in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, returns; so do the older, impotent man, the power figure and the female figure who is manipulated by men but not overpowered by them.

It is this last figure, Tessa, who is the most charitable person in the play. She is a "health worker," who visits an elderly gentleman, McCorquodale, an unfrocked priest. His vital organs seem to be on their last legs.

Tessa. I washed your face.

McCorquodale. While I was unconscious? You think of everything. *(He pinches her cheek)* Did I wet myself?

Tessa. No.

McCorquodale. That's because I'm wearing a device. I had it tailored by a young lady.
(Plays, 327)

The play has a complex plot. Pringle, an evangelical preacher, who has sex with members of his female congregation, suspects his wife, Tessa, of being unfaithful with McCorquodale, a former member of his church. Pringle employs a young man, Caulfield, to investigate and while he is doing so McCorquodale confesses that he has murdered his wife, Valerie, for having sex with Pringle. She is buried "under a ton of smokeless" (coal) in the cellar. Pringle decides that Tessa's presumed unfaithfulness must be punished and that she is to be "murdered" by his hired assassin, Caulfield. This will give Pringle "a million pounds worth of free publicity" and make him and his church more attractive to female members of his flock:

He [Pringle] opens a leather case and takes out a silver-backed clothes brush.

Pringle. This was a present from a woman journalist. She wanted the privilege of kissing hands that'd taken human life."
(Plays, 344)

However, between them, Pringle and Caulfield botch the attempt. Tessa suggests that in order to save face her husband "pretends" to murder her. She says she will stay with McCorquodale. The play ends with all the main

characters being arrested, Pringle for the murder of Valerie and the others as accessories.

The most execrable aspect of the play's many execrable aspects is Valerie's hand, which is severed by Caulfield with a meat cleaver and placed in a biscuit tin. Add to the hand and cleaver the necessities which keep McCorquodale alive - hypodermic syringes, enemas, pills, blanket baths, anti-bed wetting devices and smelling salts, plus rubber glove and a rubber apron, and the props create an impression of Dr Crippen or Lizzie Borden at work in an old folks home or mortuary, or a museum of weird practices into which the public is allowed to peek. In other words, the macabre humour is in much the same vein as *Loot's* only more so. That play's false teeth, glass eye and mummified body now seem somewhat tame. *Funeral Games*, in fact, was originally the title given to *Loot*.

It is a play that might be popular with today's radical gay community because to some extent it satirises evangelical religion, the purveyors of anti-homosexual rhetoric. However, while there is no overtly pro-gay message in the play, in the Orton tradition, it does eulogise sexual licence, while at the same time, presenting some brilliant epigrams concerning the sanctimonious religious practices of the fundamentally insane Pringle:

Pringle's study. Caulfield enters.

Caulfield. My name is Caulfield. We spoke over the telephone.

Pringle. I remember you distinctly. Do come in.
Caulfield closes the door.

Pringle. Sit down. Or kneel if you prefer. I want you to behave naturally. *Pause.* Shall I ring for a hassock?

Caulfield. These chairs look comfortable.
He sits.

Pringle. They're unsuitable for trances. Are you a praying man?

Caulfield. I'm lost in thought occasionally.
(Plays, 323)

And:

Pringle. I've a bottle of water here from the Well at Bethsaida...I have to keep it under lock and key. I can't trust the charwoman... Will you have a sip?

Caulfield (pause). Is it pure?

Pringle. It's reputed to have miraculous powers... I use it as a laxative myself.
(Plays, 324)

And:

*Pringle....*What shape is your hot water bottle.

Caulfield. I haven't got one.

Pringle. Too proud. Mine takes the form of a cross. There's piety for you.
(Plays, 324-325)

New for Orton is a hint in the play that the charitable actions of Tessa might lead to some form of romantic attachment between her and McCorquodale. Unlike *Loot*, where it was money and lust that brought Fay and Dennis together, in *Funeral Games*, McCorquodale's feelings towards Tessa seem plain enough:

Tessa (pulling on her gloves). I've laid out the needles. And the sterile wadding. *She kisses his forehead.* Tomorrow is library day.

McCorquodale. Get me something with racy conversation.

Tessa. I'll phone you before lunch.

McCorquodale. You're so exciting across the wires. You could be a terrible flirt if you'd only relax....

Tessa. Nurse will be over in an hour to give you a colonic irrigation. Hum to yourself if you're sad.

She goes out. Door slams. Silence.

McCorquodale. Oh, these contemporary young women. No romantic feelings. Brief and to the point. *(He picks up a hypodermic syringe.)* I must sort out my volumes of photographs. She might be interested in the visual arts. *(He rolls back his sleeve.)* My pictures of dizzy youth in pre-war Berlin.

(Plays, 328-329)

When Tessa survives the murder attempts of Caulfield and Pringle, she graduates from "health worker" to live-in companion to the old man, so there might be some hope for him. This is part of Pringle's insane scheme, for to become a hero by murdering an adulterous wife he decides that Tessa must become Mrs McCorquodale, while the dead Mrs McCorquodale, Valerie, becomes the ex Mrs Pringle. This has a stimulating effect on McCorquodale's flagging organs.

Tessa. Where are your keys? I'm going to pose as your wife.

McCorquodale. Oh, you dreadful up to the minute people with your unhealthy pranks....Oh, my poor heart and kidneys are fluttering like love birds. *(Plays, 342)*

The "romance" of the Tessa/McCorquodale relationship is countered by the lustful sexual appetites of Pringle. Perhaps his character is based on an evangelical figure

who sexually abused his followers? Plenty of such characters crop up in history, especially in the United States. But most likely Orton was merely drawing yet another portrait of a man or woman with religious leanings, who is the antithesis of the Christian religion's spiritual values, especially when it comes to sex and the Seventh Commandment.

Pringle. At the moment I'm caught up in politics. The wife of a top ranking Russian diplomat came to see me at the prayer centre and begged to be allowed to betray the Marxist cause.

Caulfield. You admitted her to your flock?

Pringle. I had no choice. She's heavy breasted and sensuous. I didn't want to trigger off a third world war.

(*Plays*, 343-344)

Orton may not have seen religion as total humbug, but he does not appear to have had much faith in the reasons why people practise it.

*Pringle...*The Lord came to me. I made a Covenant under the memorial arbour in the garden of the Lady with the Wand.

Caulfield. One of the Sisterhood?

Pringle. A woman of great humility and private fortune.

Caulfield. She's wealthy?

Pringle. She's a lost sheep with a golden fleece.
(*Plays*, 335)

Unlike Kemp, Buchanan or Mcleavy, who tamely surrender to life's vicissitudes, McCorquodale, in spite of appearing to be at death's door, is not an older man who is prepared to lie down and die. Although his

sexual non performance is a caricature of the standard British joke, he is not an unsympathetic figure. Being an "unfrocked priest and Pringle's enemy" guarantees it, as does his poverty, for his "valuables amount to one slashed picture and an oleograph of an eighteenth-century lady." (*Plays*, 329) His sexual problem is probably a joke in any culture - old man who cannot perform sexually but would like to, dotes on young woman who can but will not. "I haven't committed adultery. I wish to God I could," (*Plays*, 330) he tells Caulfield, who is as kinky as the rest of the characters. "Have you ever been birched? he asks McCorquodale. Naturally, the latter has, "By experts." (*Plays*, 330)

Finally, the figure of Caulfield is interesting in that although the young hoodlum type and hired to *kill* Tessa, he is not like Sloane and entirely self-centred. In fact, he has a soft centre. As he says to McCorquodale when he breaks in, "You shouldn't offer hospitality to rough young men. They might terrorise you." (*Plays*, 329) At the end of the scene, Caulfield underlines his tenderness by wrapping a shawl around the old man.

There is a hint of Caulfield's possible bisexuality. "*Caulfield enters wearing jeans and a singlet vest,*" (*Plays*, 347) which is today's gay uniform and was probably just coming into vogue in Orton's day. Caulfield's "work" is also interesting:

Caulfield. I've an appointment at the nude calendar shop. I've been commissioned to do February.

McCorquodale. The *Church Gazette* put out a nice calendar. They might be able to use you....Pass me my shawl. I'm quite exhausted. I shan't sleep-walk tonight. (*Caulfield wraps him in his shawl.*) How comfy I am. (*He pinches Caulfield's cheek.*) You're a good boy.

Caulfield. No I'm bad.

McCorquodale. As a bad boy you're a complete failure. Goodnight lovey. Switch off the light. (*Plays, 334*)

And:

Pringle. I've a job of work that wants doing.

Caulfield (pause). I won't be a choirboy. I'm too old.

Pringle. We've no time for choristers in the Brotherhood. We've taken to handmaidens like ducks to water. (*Plays, 325*)

Orton's growing preoccupation with penises also gets another airing; circumcision, mentioned in *Loot*, is to the fore again.

McCorquodale. You're free?

Tessa. I found a dagger at the bottom of the trunk.

McCorquodale ... My knife for circumcising the Faithful.

Tessa. You've been a Muslim, too?

McCorquodale. Well, in Algiers during the depression, I had to live. (*Plays, 355*)

There are one or two tense moments. Tessa is like the silent movie heroines who get tied to a railway track by the villains only to be rescued just as the 6.15

express looms around a bend. Pringle is about to shoot her when Caulfield, again being charitable, hits him over the head with a bottle. She then gets tied to a chair by McCorquodale but resourcefully frees herself prior to another assault. This time it is Caulfield's turn to shoot her. He *"pushes the gun into her face. He pulls the trigger. Click of barrel turning. He pulls trigger again. Click of barrel turning."* (Plays, 357) After surviving that, it is a surprise that she decides that Valerie's unfaithfulness with Pringle justifies her being butchered. She suddenly changes character and sounds almost like Fay.

Tessa. Stealing my husband and concealing the fact that she had one of her own. It's scandalous behaviour.

Pringle picks up Tessa's coat. He holds it out for her.

Pringle. This will have to come out at the trial?

Tessa. What trial? She tempted the Lord. It would be blasphemous to raise a hand in her defence. (Plays, 358)

How the television audience reacted to Orton's outrageous mixture of bodily fluids, religious immorality and murder for publicity purposes I have not been able to find out. Yet we know from our news sources that there is a great deal of truth in what *Funeral Games* parodies. As Bigsby says, "It is an impossible world, but one that is painfully close to our own in which religion has all too often proved simply another face of self-interest and violence, in which the existence of structured actions has been

taken as evidence of cosmic meanings." (Bigsby, 55) For it is not *attitudes* that Orton is parodying and attacking in the play, these are merely surface reflections of the culture anyway, but the *practices* of people who lay claim to authority and respect. This especially applies to characters such as Pringle.

What should be remembered is that by the time the play was written, Orton's lifestyle had undergone a dramatic change. "*Can't Buy Me Love*" was the well-known title of a Beatles song of the period. But that is what Orton attempted to do in his forays to Morocco. "Orton's characters are free to move," says Bigsby, "indeed in later plays they do so in a state of frenzy." (Bigsby, 63)

But it is movement without direction, and like Beckett's characters, imprisoned in sand, urns or dustbins, they too are pulled downwards towards the inanimate. (Bigsby, 63) Here Bigsby seems to be implying that sexual anarchy is as much a prison as a dustbin. For what could be more inanimate than paying for sex or having it anonymously in a public lavatory, or swapping a live wife for a dead one, as Pringle does in *Funeral Games*. But Orton's "movement without direction" may have been in response to forces outside of himself.

McCorquodale. She was taken up to Heaven. In a fiery chariot. Driven by an angel.

Tessa. What nonsense. Valerie would never accept a lift from a stranger...I'm going down to gauge the full extent of your crimes.
She goes out.

McCorquodale. (pause, weary). In the closet you'll find a rope...I bought it a month ago. I intended hanging myself.

Caulfield. What stopped you?

McCorquodale. The weather turned nice.
(*Plays*, 351)

The exchange above might well have been inspired by Halliwell's many threats to take his own life. How did Orton manage to maintain his sanity living with such a man? He wrote about insanity, the perfect antidote.

DEPRAVED APPETITES - WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

Nick hurries into the hall. Dr Prentice hurries into the dispensary. Mrs Prentice enters from the ward. Nick re-enters from the hall wearing only underpants and the helmet. Upon seeing him Mrs Prentice shrieks and backs away. Nick runs into the garden.

Mrs Prentice (at the desk, weakly). Oh, this place is like a madhouse!...
Dr Rance speaks to her gently yet with firmness.

Rance. Your depraved appetites may have contributed in part to your husband's breakdown.

(*Plays*, 422-423)

Orton's final play, *What the Butler Saw*, takes place inside a madhouse or, since he has gone up-market, it is termed "*a private clinic*." In this clinic there are, presumably, patients, but we never meet any, there is

no need, the family and "friends" we are about to meet behave as madly as any inmates.

It owes much to Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Indeed, the name of the leading character, Prentice, is almost an anagram of "importance," and all the letters in "Rance," another character in the play, are culled from importance also.

"I'd like to write a play as good as...*Earnest*," Orton had said in 1966," (Lahr 277) and with *What the Butler Saw* he moves into the middle-upper class milieu that allows him to copy the stylistic speech patterns of Wilde's characters. But the biggest debt owed to Wilde is the play's denouement, with a hotel linen cupboard serving the same purpose as the handbag in Wilde's play, and lost children being reunited with their parents.

Thus Nick and Geraldine, the young man and young woman in the play, brought up by adoptive parents, discover they are the missing twins of Mrs Prentice, who conceived them in the cupboard during a power cut. By "doing it in the dark" she does not know the father's identity, and as she was engaged to a "promising young psychiatrist" at the time, "decided to abandon her children to their fate." When they learn this, the news creates no sense of outrage from either of her children or the father, for lo and behold, the father turns out to be none other than the "promising young

psychiatrist" whom she has married, her husband Dr Prentice. Thus the parents are reunited with their children, and also each other, as the linen cupboard represents their sexual and emotional high point.

Mrs Prentice. From this time on we'll never make love except in a linen cupboard. (*Plays*, 446)

However these revelations also reveal that unknown to any of the parties concerned, Mrs Prentice has had an incestuous relationship with her son and Dr Prentice has spent most of the play trying to seduce his daughter, which gives immeasurable pleasure to Dr Rance, a visiting psychiatrist. For his time at the Prentice's establishment has given him the material for a best-selling book and "double incest" is the icing on the cake of his mumbo-jumbo psychiatric theories.

Rance. (*to Prentice, wild with delight*). If you are this child's father my book can be written in good faith - she *is* the victim of an incestuous assault!

Mrs Prentice. And so am I, doctor! My son has a collection of indecent photographs which prove beyond doubt that he made free with me in the same hotel - indeed in the same linen cupboard where his conception took place.

Rance. Oh, what joy this discovery gives me!
(*Embracing Mrs Prentice, Geraldine and Nick.*)
Double incest is even more likely to produce a best seller than murder - and this is as it should be for love *must* bring greater joy than violence.

Everyone embraces one another. (*Plays*, 446)

That the characters never bat an eyelid over these revelations may be an indication of why the play was very nearly booed off the stage on opening night in 1969, not by the patrons in the stalls or circle, but

by those in the gallery. (Lahr, 276) For people in the cheap seats are most likely to be uninhibited about expressing their feelings, while those in the dearer seats have probably come for the occasion rather than to consider the implications of "double incest." But wherever an audience is seated, those with some sort of finger on the nation's sexual pulse would realise that Orton was not advocating sexual anarchy, but merely presenting variations on the sexual kinkiness and perversions of the British ruling elite which are widely reported in the popular British press. The same may be said of the play's American audience for it caused "nightly walk-outs" when presented at the John Drew Theatre during the prestigious Newport Summer Festival in 1975, although it was not the patrons in the cheap seats who were offended as much as the establishment matrons in the front rows.

(Duberman, 185)

Throughout *What the Butler Saw*, the characters use catch phrases which describe their state of mind and which could apply to Orton's deteriorating relationship with Halliwell. Perhaps through his writing, which he must have shared with his partner, he was expressing what could not be directly expressed in conversation or in his diary.

"Things are getting out of control." (*Plays*, 421) "This place is like a madhouse." (*Plays*, 422) And for anyone who might be influenced by the laws of cause and

effect, "Lunatics are melodramatic...The ugly shadow of anti-Christ stalks this house." (*Plays*, 427) But Orton also wrote "prophetic" lines which apply more to his own behaviour than to Halliwell's. "Your depraved appetites may have contributed in part to your husband's breakdown," (*Plays*, 423) says Dr Rance to Mrs Prentice, convinced that the "naked men" she has seen are delusions and hallucinations. But what Mrs Prentice (and Halliwell) want is simply someone to listen to and heed their requests. "I don't want drugs. I want account taken of my sexual nature," says Mrs Prentice, (*Plays* 423) another way of saying that she wants her emotional needs met too.

There is also the famous phrase that Lahr uses for the title of the last chapter of *Prick Up Your Ears*, "The Freaks Role Call." The complete line reads, "Marriage excuses no-one the freaks' roll call." (*Plays*, 409)

This might be seen as the climactic line in Orton's life. If he had a message to deliver to audiences and readers surely it was that. What the butler saw in *What the Butler Saw*, *Loot* and *The Erpingham Camp* and, to a lesser extent in all Orton's plays, was that people who label themselves "suburban," "authority figures" or "sane" are often anything but, and that, as Lahr puts it, "Society's compulsion to categorise" (Lahr, 268) can provide broadly comic possibilities, i.e. when married couples are seen as "normal" simply because they are married, or boys and girls are defined as male

and female simply because they are wearing male or female garments. That seems to be Orton's almost desperate plea in this play, but is this news?

While admiring Orton's "obvious brilliance and intelligence," and calling *What the Butler Saw* his "most accomplished play," Martin Esslin says that the play provides no insights, the characters are simply not of this world, being pure constructs, and that the idea that psychiatrists may be crazier than their patients is not an insight, not even an observation; it is simply an old, oft-repeated cliché. On reflection, he adds, the play amounts to nothing more than an impressive piece of juggling. (Esslin, 106)

This is probably some sort of testimony to Orton's final few months on the planet. To write a play with as complex a plot as *What the Butler Saw* whilst attending to the neuroticisms of his lover and continuing almost nightly tours of inner London's gents' toilets must have taken a considerable amount of juggling. In fact it takes a great deal more Apollonian characteristics to do this than Dionysian. But I do not entirely agree with Esslin.

While the physical violence in *What the Butler Saw* is confined to a couple of slapped faces and a short exchange of gunfire which wounds two of the male characters, Nick and Sergeant Match, it is farcical compared to the emotional and verbal violence which is

usually seen and heard in the context of sex, much of it of the furtive, clammy hand variety, which is probably what sex is to many people anyway.

The heavy breathing starts immediately the play opens when Geraldine, the first of three intruders, arrives at the private clinic of the Prentices for a job interview. She wants to be Dr Prentice's secretary and although skilled in shorthand cannot type. This, however, may not be a prerequisite for the position.

Dr Prentice. Perhaps you have other qualities that aren't immediately apparent. Lie on that couch...And kindly remove your stockings. I wish to see what effect your step-mother's death had upon your legs...As I thought. You've a febrile condition of the calves. You're quite wise to have a check up
...Undress. (Plays, 366)

So begins the first of many sexually implicit incidents in *What the Butler Saw*, a play which follows the fortunes and misfortunes of a childless married couple who, like George and Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, have a hate/hate relationship built on a bedrock of mutual self loathing.

Prentice. She's an example of in-breeding among the lobelia growing classes. A failure in eugenics, combined with a taste for alcohol and sexual intercourse, makes it undesirable for her to become a mother.

Mrs Prentice (quietly). I hardly ever have sexual intercourse.

Prentice. You were born with your legs apart. They'll send you to the grave in a Y-shaped coffin.

Mrs Prentice (with a brittle laugh). My trouble stems from your inadequacy as a lover!...You

must've learnt your technique from a Christmas cracker. (*Her mouth twists into a sneer.*) Rejuvenation pills have no effect on you. (*Plays, 371*)

When Mrs Prentice first appears we soon learn that she, hearkening back to Kath in *Sloane*, is "in the rude" under her fur coat, having been robbed of her other clothes whilst attending a coven of lesbians at the Station Hotel. By these means Orton announces the status of the leading female character in the play.

Geraldine, too, is the subject of a great number of indignities. She has her hair chopped off, gets injected with drugs, put into a strait jacket, wears only a pair of panties and bra throughout much of the second act, and is almost driven insane.

Geraldine (trussed up and unable to move). What have I done to deserve this? I've always led such a respectable life.

Rance. Your mind has given way. You'll find the experience invaluable in your efforts to come to terms with twentieth century living...

Geraldine (weeping bitterly). This is dreadful. Dreadful.

Rance. I'm glad you're adopting a more responsible attitude. (*Plays, 438*)

With Mrs Prentice, Orton may have been trying to create a character similar to that of Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a formidable, threatening figure who rules the roost. But Mrs Prentice's vindictiveness is no match for that of her husband. She also reaches for the whisky bottle every time a crisis threatens; not very Lady Bracknell-like.

The second intruder is Nicholas Beckett, a young hotel bell boy who has just robbed and also tried, successfully or unsuccessfully, I am not quite sure, to rape Mrs Prentice. A young hoodlum with winning ways, in the mould of Orton's previous young males, his primary interest is blackmail. He offers to sell Mrs Prentice the "photographs" of their sexual encounter:

Mrs Prentice (open-mouthed). When I gave myself to you the contract didn't include cinematic rights.

Nick. I'd like a hundred quid for the negatives.
You've got until lunchtime.
(*Plays*, 370)

But he also wants the same job as Geraldine, which adds to the complications.

Nick. Can you find me a worthwhile job? I had a hard boyhood.

Mrs Prentice. What kind of job do you want?

Nick. I'm an expert typist...

Mrs Prentice. ...I'm willing to pay for the photographs, but I can't possibly recommend your typing.

Nick. I want a hundred pounds and the post of secretary to your husband.

Mrs Prentice. You put me in an impossible position.

Nick. No position is impossible when you're young and healthy.
(*Plays*, 370)

Here Orton reveals one of many neat twists in his plot. The two "applicants" for the post of Dr Prentice's secretary have complementary skills. Geraldine can take

shorthand and Nick can type, which makes them both equal candidates for the job of secretary. What is more, in the play they swap clothes and identities.

This allows Orton to state his case about perversion and so called normalcy. Thus Prentice, accused by Rance and Sergeant Match of interfering with young Nick, is totally innocent for the "boy" is really a "girl" wearing male clothing. Dr Prentice knows this, so does the audience, which makes the "pervert's" behaviour perfectly proper. Similarly, Mrs Prentice can examine the young man with perfect propriety because "he" is dressed as a woman. Swapping garments in *What the Butler Saw* might be a metaphor for a gay man's sexual ambivalence, but it is there to demonstrate how easy it is to jump to the wrong conclusions, simply because the signifiers of sex - one's outer garments - do not necessarily signify reality.

However, while there is no hint that Geraldine's behaviour might include lesbianism, like Sloane, Hal, Dennis and Caulfield in Orton's earlier plays, Nick is of a free wheeling sexual nature.

*Nick...*I met Dr Prentice quite by chance. I took to him instantly. After a short conversation during which we discussed sex matters in an uninhibited and free-wheeling way, he asked me if I'd mind dressing up as a woman. I agreed to his suggestion having heard that transvestitism is no longer held to be a dangerous debilitating vice...

Rance. Have you aided other young men in their perverted follies?

Nick. During my last term at school I was the
slave of a corporal of the Welsh Fusiliers.

Rance. Were you never warned of the dangers
inherent in such relationships?

Nick. When he was posted abroad he gave me a copy
of 'The Way to Healthy Manhood.'
(*Plays*, 433)

The arrival of the third intruder, Dr Rance, a psychiatrist investigating the clinic on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, Dr Prentice's "immediate superiors in madness," puts the cat amongst the pigeons. Dr Rance, the stock figure Esslin mentions, a psychiatrist who is madder than his patients, victimises the lot of them, and is the catalyst for most of the play's subsequent action. His madness is established immediately.

Rance. You may speak freely in front of me. I
represent Her Majesty's Government. Your
immediate superiors in madness. I'm from the
Commissioners.

Prentice (worried, taking off his spectacles).
Which branch?

Rance. The mental branch.

Prentice. Do you cover asylums proper? Or just
houses of tentative madness?

Rance. My brief is infinite. I'd have sway over a
rabbit hutch if the inmates were mentally
disturbed.

(*Plays*, 376)

With *What the Butler Saw*, Orton enters the world of professional, upper class people. This gives him the legitimate opportunity to write dialogue that echoes the epigrams found in his hero, Wilde's, masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It is this aspect of the play that doesn't work too well. As David L Hirst

says in *The Comedy of Manners*, as Orton develops as a playwright, "Not only does the social environment, and with it the style change, but the basic dramatic structure of his plays develops as Orton moves further and further into the realms of farce [and] as his desire to shock becomes more pronounced, the frenetic pace of his last play is matched by the ever increasing allusions to sexual perversion and depravity." (Hirst, 97) Wildean style speech patterns sit rather uneasily with the sexual innuendo of the subject matter. Fast-paced farce which includes numerous entries and exits on a set that has four doors, is melded with heavily epigrammatic speeches which surely rely on a measured delivery to have maximum effect. But, as Hirst says, "the real problem is that Orton has allowed his desire to write funny dialogue to overrule any consideration of true characterization." (Hirst, 106) Hirst seems to be particularly uncomfortable about Geraldine who, he says, as play progresses, is presented as a rather naive, dim secretary, the straight character around whom the farce is built, yet she is given lines every bit as witty as Prentice's. (Hirst 106) Hirst may be wrong there. She might be seen as "normal" rather than "dim," although in the following exchange, there is an element of the "innocent" but very smart Cecily from *Earnest* in Geraldine's replies, rather than their being those of a typist who can do shorthand but hasn't "Mastered the keyboard [can't type]. My money ran out, you see." (*Plays* 365)

Geraldine. I've never undressed in front of a man before.

Prentice. I shall take account of your inexperience in these matters...

Geraldine. I couldn't allow a man to touch me while I was unclothed.

Prentice. I shall wear rubber gloves....

Geraldine. How long would I have to remain undressed?

Prentice. If your reactions are normal you'll be back on your feet in next to no time.

Geraldine. My headmistress made no mention of this in her booklet "Hints to the School-leaver."

Prentice. The chapter dealing with medical examinations may have been omitted from the text.

Geraldine. But that would be ridiculous in a work intended only for use in schools!
(*Plays*, 366-367)

Similarly, Hirst notes that when Dr Rance arrives "it rapidly becomes clear that his mental agility is employed for verbal effect rather than to achieve any concrete aim." As Hirst points out, unlike in *Loot* where the characters have the clear-cut and direct motivations of sex and money as objectives, the figures in *What the Butler Saw* "have very negative responses which govern their actions...they are concerned either to avoid a confrontation with reality or to solve the paradoxes of the situation." (Hirst, 108)

But the most unsatisfactory aspect of the play's language is the juxtaposition of witty Wildean epigrams delivered in a mannerist style with sexually explicit phraseology that belongs in the back streets rather than Harley Street. Much of this is directed at Mrs

Prentice, who is the representative of the middle class woman who first appeared as Mrs Vealfoy in *The Good and Faithful Servant*, and whom Orton said he hated. In *What the Butler Saw*, she is subjected to verbal and some physical violence, mostly delivered by her husband but also from Dr Rance.

Nick. Have you a family, sir?

Prentice. No. My wife said breast feeding would spoil her shape. Though, from what I remember, it would've been improved by a little nibbling.

Mrs Prentice gives a nervy toss of her head and drinks whisky. (Plays, 371)

When Mrs Prentice gets her own back by commenting on Dr Prentice's performance, the humour is appropriate and somehow seems funny.

Mrs Prentice. My trouble stems from your inadequacy as a lover. It's embarrassing. You must've learned your technique from a Christmas cracker. (Plays, 371)

Just prior to this, while interviewing Geraldine, Prentice has revealed more intimate and unsavoury details of his wife.

Geraldine. What is Mrs Prentice like, doctor? I've heard so many stories about her?
She puts her dress aside and stands in her panties and bra.

Prentice. My wife is a nymphomaniac. Consequently, like the Holy Grail, she's ardently sought after by young men. I married her for her money and, upon discovering her to be penniless, I attempted to throttle her. She escaped my murderous fury and I've had to live with her malice ever since.

Geraldine (with a sigh). Poor Dr Prentice...I wish there was something I could do to cheer you up.

She pulls close the curtains. Dr Prentice puts on a white surgical coat.

Prentice. Well, my dear, if it'll give you any pleasure you can test my new contraceptive device. (*Plays*, 368)

And although some people might find the following statement funny, it clearly labels Mrs Prentice as a sex object.

Prentice. ...Despite all appearances to the contrary, Mrs Prentice is harder to get into than the reading room at the British Museum. (*Plays*, 396)

I am not very comfortable about these lines from a "gay" playwright. Far from being "swift, witty, subversive," they are below the belt. If Prentice speaks for Orton he speaks with a tongue still dipped in mother-hate. What is more, Mrs Prentice gets slapped around.

Mrs Prentice. There's a policeman outside. Naked and covered in blood.

Rance. The bounds of decency have long been overstepped in this house. (*He slaps her face.*) Your subconscious cannot be encouraged in its skulduggery. (*Plays*, 439)

The final intruder is Sergeant Match, a policeman, pursuing both Nick and Geraldine, the former for having sexually assaulted at the Station Hotel what Nick calls school girls and the sergeant calls school children, and Geraldine for suspected possession of the life size phallus which has gone missing from Sir Winston Churchill's statue.

This Dionysian fertility symbol spends all but the last few seconds of the play hidden in a cardboard box. Then, as the final, defiant act of the trickster, Orton has the police sergeant hold it up for the play's characters and audience to see. It may only be bronze but how Orton must have enjoyed the idea of a representative of the patriarchal lawmakers handling someone else's prick, and one which has inspirational qualities due to its size!

...Sergeant Match opens the box, looks inside, and gives a sigh.

Match. The Great Man can once more take up his place in the High Street as an example to us all of the spirit that won the Battle of Britain.

Sergeant Match takes from the box and holds up a section from a larger than life-sized bronze statue. Deep intakes of breath from everyone.

Rance (with admiration). How much more inspiring if, in those dark days, we'd seen what we see now. Instead we had to be content with a cigar - the symbol falling far short, as we realise, of the object itself.

The dying sunlight from the garden and the blaze from above gild Sergeant Match as he holds high the nation's heritage.

(Plays, 447-448)

Ever the ironist, in the final exchange Orton takes a jab at the cover ups which are a feature of the sexual indiscretions of the middle and upper classes.

Prentice. Well Sergeant, we have been instrumental in uncovering a number of remarkable peccadilloes today. I'm sure you'll cooperate in keeping them out of the papers?

Match. I will, sir.

Rance. I'm glad you don't despise tradition. Let us put our clothes on and face the world.

(Plays, 448)

Between that exchange and the opening one between Prentice and Geraldine, the peccadilloes that Orton introduces include, as mentioned, double incest - mother with son and father with daughter, (although we do not know of these relationships until the play's denouement), transvestitism, nudity, paederasty, necrophilia, homosexuality, sadism, masochism and last but not least, madness.

On the other hand, considering that the representative of Authority, Dr Rance, presented throughout as mad, has the last word in the play, Orton may be trying to make the point that insanity inevitably rules.

Following an entrance that signalled the beginning of total disorder, Rance's mayhem continues to the point where he gives himself an injection of a drug he was going to give to Geraldine, thus signifying a total descent into madness:

Mrs Prentice. Shall I swab the patient's arm?

Rance. You don't imagine I'm wasting this stuff on her, do you? *(He rolls back his sleeve.)* At five guineas an ounce it would be criminal. *(He gives himself an injection.)* Go and call the police.

(Plays, 439)

Yet he survives to join the others on the rope ladder "into the blazing light." Truly a triumph for Dionysus.

They pick up their clothes and weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, climb the rope ladder into the blazing light. (Plays, 448)

Sex and madness, madness and sex, in the hands of a gay playwright, these certainly constitute ideal subjects for a gay play. *What the Butler Saw* certainly does have a crazy, frenetic pace, plus mad camp characters (who are given occasional camp dialogue). But is it a gay play in the sense that the *Importance of Being Earnest* is a gay play - swift, witty, subversive? Certainly it is swift and witty, but its subversiveness relies on the type of humour I would classify as "British seaside," heavily reliant on smut.

So the answer must be "no." What spoils it is the underlying misogyny and the implicit sexual degradation of females. Once again, violence too comes into the action, but it is the mad or distraught characters who fire the guns, so there is a non-serious quality to it; and even though the playwright's stage directions talk of "Match...streaming with blood," (*Plays*, 446) since Match is wearing a leopard-spotted dress, (shades of Kenny in *Erpingham*), a policeman in a dress, however bloody, is obviously a figure from farce.

However, there is no denying much of the smut would be interesting to a psychologist, especially the progression of Orton's phallic fetishism from the circumcisions mentioned in *Loot* and *Funeral Games*, to the larger-than-life phallus of one of Britain's finest men, Sir Winston Churchill, blown off its statue by a gas explosion and in Geraldine's possession.

It is an old fashioned psychological view that one of the foundations of a homosexual phallus fetishism is a sense of inferior masculinity. "The refined type of homosexual is usually most strongly attracted by a tough, aggressive muscular male, often of a lower social class than his own," went a 1957 article by Anthony Storr in the July 1957 issue of the *Journal of Analytical Psychology*. (Hopcke, 96) So Orton's idea that, in presenting a penis on stage, he had pulled off the ultimate coup might be seen as misfiring. Yet there might be something in the idea that Winston Churchill's phallus is a metaphor for both male sexual power and male political, economic and social power, the very power that Orton was now able to command due to his success. That this phallic power was subtly wielded over Halliwell seems clear, just as Drs Prentice and Rance wield it over the characters they control in *What the Butler Saw*.

The play might be seen as the last of a trilogy that celebrates the grotesqueness of "the family," as seen through the eyes of a playwright whose own family may have been as incestuous as those he wrote about.

Patrick Carnes has no doubts that people who are addicted to sex are often themselves victims of sexual abuse. What follows is therefore pure conjecture, but may have some element of truth.

It is my belief that Orton, whom we know to have been the victim of emotional abuse in his family of origin (Lahr, 37-52), and whose diaries chart the multiple use of drugs and sex as an escape from dealing with the realities of his relationship with Halliwell, might also have been, like the Prentices, a member of a family that indulged in incestuous practices. These practices may well have been common knowledge within the wider family circle but certainly would not be disclosed to anyone, least of all to Orton's biographer, John Lahr. Incest and sexual abuse within families are not subjects that are freely discussed, especially by working class families.

It does not take a quantum leap of the imagination to "see" Elsie Orton returning drunk from the pub perhaps seeking solace and sympathy from her eldest son, even if she only went into his room and gave him a cuddle. There are sexual ways of cuddling, and Lahr says that she never had sex with her husband after 1945.
(Lahr, 44)

As Carnes point out, sexual addiction becomes a way to survive or cope with crisis, escape from pain, and nurture oneself. It is also "triggered" by memories or parallel situations. (Carnes, 129) It seems more than a co-incidence that Orton's desire for anonymous sex outside his relationship seems to have got out of hand when he began to write about incestuous relationships in his three major stage plays.

In *Sloane* the young protagonist becomes involved with a semi-incestuous brother and sister set up. In *Loot*, as the death of the McLeavys disposes of one set of parents, a far more grotesque set, the murderer Fay and the bisexual thief, Dennis, takes their place. Finally, in *What the Butler Saw*, the "happy family" is presented in its most grotesque form with the incestuous intimacy of the Prentices and their twin children who clamber up the rope ladder to face the world at the end of the play.

Denial is a key ingredient in families where abuse takes place, (Carnes, 130-135) and denial seems to have been a key factor in Orton remaining with Halliwell long enough for him to be butchered. That the pair had little in common other than a familiarity which, like the Prentices,' had bred contempt, seems clear enough. In fact, the relationship between Dr Prentice and his wife is a continual battle to achieve dominance through the use of violent language, or by using a third party as the revenge catalyst. Thus Dr Prentice uses Geraldine, and Mrs Prentice, Nick and Dr Rance, to score points off one other. In fact, with Mrs Prentice, it is more than points scoring, she never has a qualm in assisting Dr Rance either to certify her husband or shoot him.

But whatever the dynamics of the play's relationships, it must be said that the play does not work at the most

basic level. With *What the Butler Saw*, Orton has finally gone up-market enough for him to use the language of the upper classes as it was spoken in the life and times of his hero, Oscar Wilde. Thus he presents an over the top French farce which requires frenzied rushing about with the epigrammatic language of a Wildean comedy of high manners, the former aimed at the region between navel and knee, the latter requiring polish and finesse and aimed at the intellect. These styles are incompatible and the play, though an incredibly brave attempt, falls between these stools.

CONCLUSION

Once Oedipus discovers he has sexually penetrated the mother, he tears out his eyes while she commits suicide. The dark linen cupboard where the Prentices conceived their children and where their male child has sex with his mother, is indeed a metaphor that connects *What the Butler Saw* to the larger issues of Joe Orton's life. So too is the rope ladder up which the play's characters "drugged and drunk" ascend into the blazing light.

That this life might one day be the subject of a fruitful psychological study, as Martin Esslin suggests, (Esslin, 106) is an interesting possibility. For the Orton of the dark cupboard and the ascent are interconnected in ways which only a thorough and expert investigation might uncover.

We can only surmise what the dark cupboard meant to Orton. Perhaps the attitude his parents had towards the act which resulted in the birth of four children? Certainly, there seems to have been very little love between his mother and father, and their empty, surface life together is reflected in the diatribes which the Prentices launch against one another.

Did Orton finally "kill" Elsie off with the rape of Mrs Prentice? Certainly his anima figure would have been greatly changed during the years of his success. Nurturing females such as Penelope Gilliat; the very important mother substitute, his agent, Margaret (Peggy) Ramsey, and actors such as Sheila Ballantine and Andrienne Corri, would have given him a whole new concept of women. It is as if the Unconscious, knowing that the psyche needs to be healed, directs the damaged man towards the archetype Good Mother. Note that these women were also available to Halliwell, but although they would have been helpful, his wounds were deeper.

Much is made in Lahr's book about what Halliwell meant to Orton in terms of father figure or father substitute, but to understand their relationship it is obviously necessary to understand what Orton meant to Halliwell. Quite clearly, the younger man was the older man's possession, his acolyte and pupil. In fact, for much of their life together, Halliwell must have bathed in the light of the younger man's admiration if not adulation. This would have sustained Halliwell through all their shared failures, but could not sustain him when Orton became a published and performed author. Thus the worm turned, and when the pressure went on Orton to remain within Halliwell's orbit, he made the

decision to stay and yet go - to stay within the living arrangements but to sexually disengage.

Thus the cramped living room of their shared bed-sitter became both womb and eventually the tomb of Orton's talent. The plays gradually descend morally as they ascend socially, pointing to some sort of decay in Orton's philosophy, possibly connected to his lifestyle.

In the film of *Prick up Your Ears*, Gary Oldfield, the actor playing Orton, enters an underground public lavatory and after a quick reconnoitre removes the light bulbs from what was already a dimly lit establishment. Then, with a background of dripping toilet cisterns, the shadowy figures of men are seen embracing each other and having sex.

Whatever Orton himself said about "Sex being the only way to infuriate them," and "Much more fucking and they'll be screaming hysterics in next to no time," (*Diaries*, 125) one gets the impression that this "angry Orton" had reached some sort of vitriolic high point with *What the Butler Saw*. Where could he have gone from there? What more was there to say about sexual unmentionables such as those observed in his last play?

Charney says Orton delighted in the grandiosely illuminated final tableaux of *What the Butler Saw* and *The Erpingham Camp*. (Charney, 24) But it is interesting to note that Orton said this latter play was his favourite, and presumably he was delighted with the ending of his final play also.

Why? Because in *Erpingham*, the holiday camp slave master, responding to the inmates baying for revenge, conveniently kills himself by falling through a collapsing floor, solving the problem of what to do with a character who is full of sound and fury but has no sense. However, as with many "fine" funerals, the words spoken about the dead man make nonsense of the real man, so do the dramatist's stage instructions.

The body of Erpingham is left alone in the moonlight with the red balloons and dying flames in a blaze from the distant stained glass. A great choir is heard singing 'The Holy City.' (Plays, P.320)

Of course, this is meant to parody, (or should that be "paradise?") the death of Erpingham, whose intractable behaviour has been the cause of his own downfall. Indeed it is a parody of all funeral/death rites as practised in Britain and the West. But on a deeper level it is a signifier of the death of a

particular type of individual as celebration. It does not take too much psychological know-how to connect *that* death with Orton's desire to have the same event befall his intransigent partner.

In his next and last play, *What the Butler Saw*, the celebration is upwards, towards the light, and although this too is a parody, it points to Orton's possible vision for the future. "Drugged and drunk" *together* they ascend. Whatever events have taken place to mar the past are forgotten and forgiven.

Orton's relationship with Halliwell had been part of his healing process which had been further extended through his writing. As Matthew Fox says in *Original Blessings*, "Sex is the manifestation of the driving force of the universe (and) sexuality is an expression of the moving force that underlies everything and gives it life." (Fox, 58) Yet he also writes that "to repress the child is to repress the divine." (Fox, 59)

Somehow, through discovering his own unbridled sexuality, Orton had given his writing life, but as a repressed child that writing had been largely directed at negative aspects of the divine expression that is humanity. I am sure that if Halliwell could have conveniently fallen through the floor, Orton would have gone on to new heights and

perhaps discovered a different way to express himself in his plays.

However much a parody, the reunion of the Prentices with each other and their children signifies the return of Eros which as Fox says, is deeply salvic. (Fox, 121)

Halliwel's sin was not just his murder of Orton, it was his murder of himself. His failure to trust the process of change meant he would always be a prisoner of the past, living his life through his partner's success, and like all jealous, envious lovers, thus failing to celebrate his own uniqueness.

What more could Orton have done? His plays plot his own rise and rise, from the bed sitter environment of *The Ruffian on the Stair* to the classy offices of a private psychiatric clinic; but not his fall.

That took place in a dark cupboard in the middle of the night. Unheard, because who can hear a hammer beating out brains at 2 am? Unseen, because who can see into a rejected lover's soul? But never, never forgotten.

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New Zealand,
7 December 1993.

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