Joe Orton’s *Loot*: A Study Guide

Samantha Mitschke
This study guide was created as part of ‘Joe Orton’s Loot: A 50th Anniversary Celebration’. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the project – with Dr Emma Parker as Principal Investigator and Dr Samantha Mitschke as AHRC Cultural Engagement Fellow – ran from February-May 2016. Working with the Orton Archives in Special Collections in the David Wilson Library at the University of Leicester, Dr Mitschke curated a public exhibition of rarely-seen photographs, scripts and letters charting Loot’s evolution from disaster to success. The exhibition went on display from 24 September-30 October 2016 at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery in Leicester, accompanied by a one-day public event celebrating the 50th anniversary of the London premiere of Loot. Hosted by Dr Parker, the event featured a series of talks and readings by Orton’s friends, fans, and family, including director Braham Murray (who helped Orton rewrite the play); actor Michael Elwyn (who played Hal in Braham Murray’s 1966 production of Loot); novelist Jake Arnott (whose work has been influenced by Orton); and Orton’s sister, Leonie Orton Barnett.

About the author:

Samantha Mitschke is a playwright and theatre historian, specialising in British and American Holocaust theatre. She holds a PhD in Drama & Theatre Studies (2015) from the University of Birmingham. Her primary research interests are in English-language Holocaust theatre, historiography, adaptation and the socio-political contexts of theatre and performance.
Introduction

This study guide is intended for post-16 students studying Loot as part of an A-Level English Literature or Drama course. A supplement to in-class teaching, its purpose is to offer students an in-depth insight into Joe Orton’s most well-known play. It provides biographical details of Orton’s life and career; analyses the themes and form of Loot; charts the progress of the play from a humiliating flop to the winner of an Evening Standard award; examines critical reviews; and considers influences on Orton’s work, including the real-life police officer who inspired the character of Truscott, and key events of the early 1960s.

As well as offering a deeper understanding of the play, the guide aims to help students develop their critical, analytical and creative skills both inside and outside the classroom. It does this by suggesting topics for discussion, encouraging students to consider links between society, politics and theatre, and offering a variety of practical exercises for students to complete in groups and individually, as well as recommending further reading and resources.
1. From Prisoner to Playwright: Orton’s Career

Born on 1 January 1933 in Leicester, there was little to suggest that John Kingsley Orton would grow up to change the face of British theatre in the Sixties. ‘John’ Orton – who would later change his name to ‘Joe’ to avoid being confused with fellow playwright John Osborne – was brought up on the Saffron Lane estate. By the time he was sixteen his ambition was to be an actor. He joined local amateur dramatics societies, and the joy he took in theatre helped him to overcome what he saw as the ‘grinding tedium of work’.

He decided to apply to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and in 1950 began to take elocution lessons. His teacher saw little promise or talent in him, but in January 1951 Orton successfully auditioned for RADA. There he met fellow student Kenneth Halliwell. Seven years older than Orton, Halliwell owned a car, a flat, books and records, and Orton was impressed by both his material wealth and his grammar school education. The pair became friends and then lovers, and after graduating from RADA in 1953 they worked separately in provincial repertory theatres before, disillusioned with acting, moving back to London together. Halliwell encouraged Orton to educate himself with extensive reading and acted as his mentor. The pair dreamed of careers as writers and collaborated together on various novels. In 1955 – his take on the ‘grinding tedium of work’ – he successfully auditioned for RADA. There he met fellow student Kenneth Halliwell. Seven years older than Orton, Halliwell owned a car, a flat, books and records, and Orton was impressed by both his material wealth and his grammar school education. The pair became friends and then lovers, and after graduating from RADA in 1953 they worked separately in provincial repertory theatres before, disillusioned with acting, moving back to London together. Halliwell encouraged Orton to educate himself with extensive reading and acted as his mentor. The pair dreamed of careers as writers and collaborated together on various novels. In 1955 they submitted a science fiction spoof to Faber & Faber, The Mechanical Womb, but it was rejected on the grounds that it was “not good enough.” They submitted a second novel to Faber & Faber in 1955 entitled The Last Days of Sodom, a comic assault on morality and social conventions; it was rejected as ‘too rarefied’. In 1956 they tried again with The Boy Hairdresser, a satire in blank verse, but this ‘overwritten meditation on suicide and revenge’ was rejected as an ‘entertaining but uncommercial project.’

Despite failure, Orton’s fiction established many of the themes that he would later pursue in his plays.

In 1962 Orton and Halliwell were sentenced to six months in prison for defacing library books. As a protest against what they saw as the lacklustre material available to the reading public, the pair had undertaken a prolonged campaign of stealing books from Hampstead and then Islington Library. They removed pictures from the books, ‘doctored’ the covers with their own images and/or often obscene blurbs, and replaced the books in the library, often hiding to witness the reactions of unsuspecting readers. Both Orton and Halliwell believed that they were given a harsh sentence because of their homosexuality, a criminal offence in Britain until 1967. Orton found that his experiences – including separation from Halliwell – led him to find the ‘detachment’ required to find his own unique literary voice. In a 1964 interview with the Leicester Mercury, he asserted: ‘Being in the nick brought detachment to my writing. I wasn’t involved anymore. And suddenly it worked.’ In a demonstration of his contempt for mainstream society – a defining feature of his plays – he famously observed: ‘It affected my attitude towards society. Before I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere, prison crystallised this. The old whore society really lifted up her skirts and the stench was pretty foul.’

Upon release from prison Orton wrote a radio play called The Boy Hairdresser (later entitled The Ruffian on the Stair) and his first stage play, Entertaining Mr Sloane. The former was accepted by BBC Radio and Orton’s producer, having read the first few pages of Entertaining Mr Sloane, advised him to approach agent Peggy Ramsay. Ramsay was a well-known figure in British theatre who championed new writing, and she was enamoured with the play. First staged in May 1964, Entertaining Mr Sloane, centres on dysfunctional family relationships and the sexual sharing of a teenage psychopath by a brother and sister. The play ‘stunned the British public’ and brought Orton ‘immediate international attention.’

In June 1964 Orton wrote The Good and Faithful Servant, a satirical representation of the bleak waste of life brought about by unquestioning dedication to work and social conventions. In August The Ruffian on the Stair was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme. It was also in 1964 that Orton wrote Loot, a satire on police corruption, religion and blind obedience to authority. After a major rewrite, it went on to win the 1966 Evening Standard Award for Best Play. Like Entertaining Mr Sloane, the play confronts conservative social attitudes. In 1965 Orton wrote The Eppingham Camp – his take on The Bacchae, set in a holiday camp. In 1966 he penned a television play, Funeral Games.

In 1967 Orton wrote what was to be his final play, What the Butler Saw – a farce set in a psychiatric clinic that deals with a range of non-normative sexual relationships, including incest – and a screenplay for The Beatles entitled Up Against It. In June, under the title Crimes of Passion, Orton’s one-act plays The Ruffian on the Stair and The Eppingham Camp were staged at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Confirming his success and celebrity, in 1967 Orton appeared on the popular radio show Call My Bluff and was interviewed on ITV’s The Eamonn Andrews Show.

Tragically, Orton died at the height of his success. On 9 August 1967 he was found dead in his flat, battered to death by Halliwell, who in turn had committed suicide by overdose. The exact reasons for the murder-suicide remain unclear, but Orton’s legacy of resistance to authority, questioning of social attitudes and celebration of the unconventional endures in his plays.

2 Ibid, 108.
4 Ibid, 120, 123.
5 Ibid, 110.
7 Ibid.
8 Chambers, Peggy, 154-55.
9 Ibid, 154.
10 Lahr, Prick Up Your Ears, 144.
11 Coppa, Joe Orton, 12.
12 Ibid, 12.
2. *Loot*: Themes and Form

**Themes in Loot**

The central themes in *Loot* are social hypocrisy, primarily in terms of an obsession with maintaining the appearance of morality and upholding convention, and blind faith in corrupt authority.

**Social Hypocrisy, Morality and Convention**

The characters in *Loot* are driven by their own wants and desires, outwardly masquerading as respectable members of society but inwardly self-serving: all of their actions advance their own gains. Even apparently religious Fay makes her victims change their wills in her favour before killing them; policeman Truscott, ostensibly a public guardian against crime, is physically and verbally abusive; Hal and Dennis are innocent young men - they possess ‘a kind of cherubic insouciance’ - and also bank-robbing criminals. Even McLeavy, outwardly mourning the death of his wife, is more interested in the ‘rituals and accessories of death’ - primarily the floral tributes – and does not genuinely grieve, making scathing remarks about Mrs. McLeavy’s ‘slanderous tongue’ and, when the coffin is returned to the house following the accident, her inability to make up her mind. Orton’s mockery of McLeavy’s hypocrisy, accompanied by the fact that the corpse is stripped, continually moved between the coffin and the wardrobe and generally treated as an inconvenience, outrages social taboos relating to the sanctity of death.

In terms of sexual convention and morality, the outward appearance of the characters conceals sexual activities that go against perceived social norms. The outwardly respectable Fay has been having a sexual relationship with Dennis, a younger man; Dennis has fathered five illegitimate children; and both Hal and Dennis frequent brothels, with Hal intending to establish his own. Moreover, Hal and Dennis are sexually active with each other and their homosexual relationship does not fit with the stereotypical perception of gay men as ‘camp’ or effeminate. Orton explicitly noted that ‘I don’t want there to be anything queer or camp or odd about the relationship of Hal and Dennis. […] They must be perfectly ordinary boys who happen to be fucking each other.’ In this manner, several social taboos regarding sex during Orton’s time – and which, to varying extents, still exist in society today – are broken: promiscuity, particularly in a woman; having a child outside of marriage; and homosexuality.

Fay, in particular, personifies the social hypocrisy that Orton mocks in *Loot*: she has killed Mrs. McLeavy, plotted to kill McLeavy, has been having a sexual relationship with Dennis and bargained for a share of the stolen money – yet *Loot* ends with her insisting that she and Dennis move out of the McLeavy residence once they are married in order to ‘keep up appearances.’

**Corrupt Authority**

Truscott is the main representative of corrupt authority, initially appearing as a determined police officer who seemingly is not above bending or breaking the law in order to further justice (disguising himself as a Water Board official in order to gain access to the house and thus catch the criminals responsible for the bank robbery). This perception of him is changed when he kicks, punches and hits Hal during interrogation, and is ultimately transformed completely at the play’s conclusion: Truscott accepts a bribe from Hal to cover up the robbery and it is implied that, following Fay’s suggestion, he is going to arrange McLeavy’s ‘accidental’ death in custody.

McLeavy is the only innocent character in *Loot*, and the only one who has faith in the police; Dennis and Hal are suspicious of Truscott from the moment they first encounter him (aided by the fact that Dennis has had dealings with Truscott before and is aware of his brutality). McLeavy is the embodiment of the faithful and upstanding citizen, offering unquestioning obedience to authority – in this case, the law. However, he is the one who suffers most. While Dennis, Hal and Fay are wary of Truscott, McLeavy offers no resistance and asks no questions until it is too late: he is framed for Mrs. McLeavy’s murder and is helpless against Truscott’s authority, especially as the ‘removal’ of McLeavy will benefit Truscott’s own interests in securing a share of the stolen money without detection. Blind faith in authority, it is implied, will ultimately lead to downfall. Hal, Dennis and Fay, who are suspicious of Truscott and the authority he represents, ultimately get away with their actions – although Dennis’s survival as Fay’s next intended husband is by no means assured.

Fay represents corrupt authority as well, but to a lesser extent, in the context of the corruption of the medical profession. It is especially interesting that both the Law and Medicine are represented as immoral, unethical and dishonest in *Loot*, particularly with the knowledge that Orton was gay, as both of these institutions denounced homosexuality - as a crime and a sickness.

**Form in Loot**

Many plays dealing with serious subjects and offering social commentary are naturalistic in their approach, presenting a ‘slice of life’ and creating the impression of an invisible ‘fourth wall’ through which the audience watches the onstage action. However, Joe Orton scorned naturalism: ‘I write in a certain way because I can’t express in naturalistic terms. In the whole naturalistic movement […] you can’t ultimately have anything except discussions of Mavis’s new hat. You can’t have people. With the naturalistic style I couldn’t make any comment on the kind of policeman that Truscott […] is, or on the laws of the Establishment.’ Orton chose the medium of farce for his plays. Its status as ‘low’ comedy was part of its appeal to a writer who,
as a working-class ex-convict and gay man, saw himself as a social outsider: “I’m from the gutter […] and don’t you forget it because I won’t.” Despite its low status, Orton defended the legitimacy of farce: ‘Loot takes a farcical view of things normally treated as tragic…Farce is higher than comedy in that it is very close to tragedy. You’ve only got to play some of Shakespeare’s tragedies plain and they are nearly farcical.'

Yet Orton did not utilise all aspects of farce: for example, he shunned overt theatricality on the part of performers in favour of a more straightforward and even plain delivery of language.

The antecedents of farce as performance were moments of comic relief within medieval mystery plays, utilised to relieve tension, as well as within Ancient Greek and Roman performances.

Farce is ‘a primitive and coarse form’, excluded from the bounds of so-called ‘good taste’, and is thus seen as being lower in status than straightforward ‘comedy’.

Farce usually comprises:
- ‘Intense theatricality’
- ‘Attention to stage mechanisms’
- Elaborate ‘body techniques for actors’
- ‘Typical characters’
- ‘Grotesque masks’
- ‘Clowning’
- ‘Comical expressions [and] grimaces’
- ‘Lazzi’ (Improvised comic routines)
- ‘Puns’
- ‘Heavily comical situations, gestures and words’
- ‘Copiously scatological or obscene colouring’ (the use of ‘toilet’ or sexual humour)
- Stylistic language and verbal artifice

These are used to varying degrees depending on the preference of the playwright.

- The characters drive the action forward, rather than the other way around. As a result the plot is usually improbable and fast-paced.
- Stock characters or crude characterisation allows only basic emotions to be expressed as opposed to complicated emotional encounters.
- Farce has a ‘subversive nature’: it is ‘against moral or political authorities, sexual taboos, rationalism and the rules of tragedy.’
- “Through farce the spectators have their revenge on the constraints of reality and reason; liberating laughter and drives win over tragic inhibition and anxiety, in the guise of buffoonery and ‘poetic license.’”

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1 Andrew Mayne, commentary on Loot, by Joe Orton (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), xx.
2 Ibid, xix.
6 Lahr, Pick Up Your Ears, 106.
7 Orton, The Orton Diaries, 54.
10 Ibid, 147.
12 Ibid, 148.
EXERCISE:

How many conventions of farce can you identify in *Loot*? Give examples, using extracts from the text and/or your own analysis.

GROUP EXERCISE:

‘Playing it straight’: Performance Styles

Orton insisted that the characters in *Loot* be played ‘plain’ – without any attempt by the actors to be ‘funny’ or to exaggerate lines and actions for deliberate comic effect. But what happens when *Loot* is performed in any other style?

In groups, choose one of the following extracts from the text:

- **The exchange between Fay and Truscott about the deaths of her husbands:**
  
  TRUSCOTT: [...] Who sent the large wreath that has been chosen to decorate the motor? to TRUSCOTT (pleasantly): I’m a council employee who has let his imagination wander. Please forgive me if I’ve upset you. (pp. 25-27)*

- **McLeavy’s account of the accident:**
  
  MCLEAVY: We set off in high spirits... to TRUSCOTT: She sounds an unstable kind of person to me. (pp. 49-51)

- **Truscott’s discovery of the glass eye:**
  
  TRUSCOTT closes the door... to He gives a brief exclamation of horror and surprise. (p. 58)

- **Fay’s confession:**
  
  FAY (drying her eyes): My name is Phyllis Jean McMahon... to I am sorry for my dreadful crime. (She weeps.) (p. 67)

Taking it in turns to act and to be audience members, experiment with playing your chosen extract in the following styles:

- Naturalistically – ‘slice of life’
- Melodramatically – heavily-emphasised gestures and speech
- Comically – playing for laughs
- Dramatically – a sense of heightened suspense and mystery
- ‘Plain’ – no attempt to embellish/evoke particular reactions from the audience

As actors, consider:

- Pace/speed of delivery (Faster? Slower?)
- Pronunciation (Sharp and crisp? Emphasis on certain words?)
- Accents (For example, McLeavy is Irish)

As audience members, consider:

- Movement (Gestures? Physical interaction? Stage directions?)
- Which style works best? Why?
- How does changing the performance style change the meaning and effect of the language?
- How does the speed/pronunciation/accent of the actors’ speech have an impact?
- What effect does movement have?

Once the actors have performed, give audience feedback and then swap places as actors and audience to repeat the exercise. When the whole group has participated as actors and audience, give a three-minute presentation on which performance style works best and why, using examples from the exercise to support your argument.

Fay (Rosalyn de Winter), Hal (Michael Elwyn) & McLeavy (Roger Swaine) in the 1966 Manchester production of *Loot*, University of Leicester Library, Joe Orton Collection, MS237/5/76/4. Photographer: Gillian M. Herring.
3. From Disaster to Success: The Evolution of Loot

While today Loot is Orton’s most well-known play, it originally failed. The story surrounding its initial failure and ultimate success shows that even though Orton was a talented playwright, he still had to work hard to hone his craft and to attain critical – and popular – approval. Multiple drafts of the play were needed, from its provincial premiere in 1965 to its London premiere in 1966, for Orton to fully master his literary skills and fulfill his artistic aims and ambitions.

Orton began writing Loot in 1964. While doing so, he met actor Kenneth Williams and, fascinated by him, decided to write him a part.1 The first draft of Loot was given to producer Michael Codron in October, and Williams agreed to play Truscott. Codron was keen to capitalise on Orton’s name while it was still in the public mind after Entertaining Mr Sloane, and enthusiastic to have a star of Williams’ standing in the cast to increase box office success.2 By December 1964 an all-star cast had been gathered, including Duncan Macrae and Geraldine McEwan. Peter Wood was signed to direct, but was commuting between London and New York while directing a play at the National Theatre and another on Broadway. He was thus unable to help in crucial work on the script before rehearsals began.3

Rehearsals started in January 1965, and both Codron and Williams later claimed to have had misgivings about the play. Codron recalled that ‘it needed a lugubriousness and dopiness. Ken is a bright person. […] I thought, ‘This is obviously not Ken’s play. Ken must turn it down.’ But he didn’t.” Williams stated that:

Instead of finishing his play and starting something else with me in mind, he [Orton] dovetailed the two. As a result, Fay, […] who begins as the prime mover of the plot and should go on being the prime mover, […] almost becomes an appendage. […] I never had the courage to say what I felt […]. I did really feel that Joe had overbalanced the original intention.5

There were two main areas of concern: the play was now skewed more towards Truscott than Fay, the original protagonist; and for Truscott to work, the character needed to be written as less an apathetic or hysterical. The audience seemed to take the most extraordinary lines with dead seriousness. […] K. Williams wants to go back to the original ending […] The end of the coffin which is supposed to fall off and reveal the money didn’t work. Land of Hope and Glory [originally played by Truscott in a final triumphant exit] went wrong […] Hal’s ‘stupid’ scene [in which Hal confesses the robbery to Truscott] was awful – no one laughed. […] If we decide to cut Meadows [Truscott’s sidekick] completely I shall have to do some surgery. […] It’s all so dreadful.16

In his diary, Kenneth Williams recorded a similar feeling of helplessness and dread amongst the cast:

Wednesday, 10 February 1965
Rehearsed on the rewrite all day. In the evening the result was an unconfident performance and a gain of one laugh for the loss of another. And it had the effect of taking away the character of Truscott. […] After the show I felt so suicidally [sic] depressed I just didn’t know what to do. The utter shambles of this production is totally unbelievable. The cast is demoralised and the script practically in rags and some of it complete nonsense. I wish I had never set foot near the whole rotten mess of it all.16

Tuesday, 16 February 1965
[…] Morale so low that people are getting either apathetic or hysterical. […] The performance was dreadful. […] Geraldine [McEwan] came off stage shouting ‘I can’t go on with this stuff any more’ and crying.17

Friday, 19 February 1965
[…] Playing this stuff is like trying to catch bath water. It keeps slipping thro’ yr. fingers. Geraldine shaky & ill and tonight in the hotel David Batley [playing Dennis] started crying uncontrollably & ran out of the room. What an effect this show is having!18

In Bournemouth, local newspapers interpreted audience walkouts as ‘a protest at the moral tenor of the play’; in Manchester, the police were at performances in response to ‘objections from the local Watch Committee’.19 When Loot reached Wimbledon – meant to be its last tour destination before transferring to London – Codron announced that no London theatre wanted to take it. However, there was still a chance that the transfer could go ahead if the cast were willing. Cast members refused and Loot closed at Wimbledon, with Williams commenting: ‘So it died tonight after 56 performances of about 3 different editions.20

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The play is a disaster. There were hardly any laughs for Truscott. The audience seemed to take the most extraordinary lines with dead seriousness. […] K. Williams wants to go back to the original ending […] The end of the coffin which is supposed to fall off and reveal the money didn’t work. Land of Hope and Glory [originally played by Truscott in a final triumphant exit] went wrong […] Hal’s ‘stupid’ scene [in which Hal confesses the robbery to Truscott] was awful – no one laughed. […] If we decide to cut Meadows [Truscott’s sidekick] completely I shall have to do some surgery. […] It’s all so dreadful.16

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Orton’s agent Peggy Ramsay promised Orton that she would arrange a London production of *Loot* within six months. Codron contacted Braham Murray, a twenty-two-year-old Oxford University graduate and successful director, to ask if he would like to direct it. Murray had just been appointed Artistic Director of the Century Theatre in Manchester, and told Codron he would be happy to direct the play but only if it could be put on there. In January 1966 Ramsay sold an option to the play to producer Oscar Lewenstein. With no immediate prospect of a London production, a Manchester production was again proposed and this time agreed.22

Murray worked with Orton on the script to make it more ‘compressed, focused and real.’ Orton cut 621 lines from the Wood version, ‘allowing the characters to react more immediately to each other’s demands rather than be sidetracked by their own verbal felicity.’ *Loot* reopened in Manchester on 11 April 1966, this time receiving positive reviews, before transferring to the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre in London to be directed by Charles Marowitz. Marowitz was an ‘energetic and abrasive’ American who had created a name for himself as an experimental director. He was committed to the development and exploration of the newest performances, ‘enjoyed controversy and took […] delight in making enemies of the Establishment’.25

Marowitz found *Loot* ‘very funny but overwritten’ and asked to work from the original version; Orton gave him a retyped copy of the Manchester script. Orton and Marowitz streamlined and restructured the play. Of particular note are ‘two large comic bits of business’ that Marowitz helped Orton to realise fully: the dropping of Mrs McLeavy’s glass eye and Truscott’s discovery of bits of business.26 Marowitz found *Loot* ‘compressed, focused and real.’ Orton cut 621 lines from the Wood version, ‘allowing the characters to react more immediately to each other’s demands rather than be sidetracked [sic] by their own verbal felicity.’

On 27 September 1966 *Loot* opened in London. Ramsay and Orton were not impressed with the production, finding the set dull and the direction too deliberate; Orton questioned if it would be better to replace some of the cast with actors more experienced in performing comedy. The quality of the writing impressed the critics, though, who responded to *Loot* with glowing reviews. On 1 November *Loot* transferred to the Criterion, where it ran for 342 performances. The play was published; proposed as an option for Broadway; and was staged in twelve countries within the year. Finally, on 11 January 1967, it was announced that *Loot* had won the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Play.
4. ‘A Night To Forget’: Critical Reactions to Loot, 1965

In January and February 1965, the British press eagerly anticipated the opening of Loot – particularly given the impact of Entertaining Mr. Sloane the year before:

Mr. Orton’s first play, ‘Entertaining Mr. Sloane,’ caused considerable comment when presented in London last year, where it won the ‘Variety’ award, and now with ‘Loot’ he has turned his hand to farce, in which his flair for unusual characters and situations, humourous [sic] complications and, above all, verbal flights of fancy which twist and turn with ever-increasing comic effect, has full rein. (Author unknown, ‘New farce at Arts Theatre,’ Suffolk Free Press, 28 January 1965)

But when the play premiered on a provincial tour, the critical response was vastly negative. Some critics took exception to the kind of humour and jokes, such as those aimed at the Roman Catholic church. And, for some, in emetic strength. (J.W., ‘Farce – but it’s so sick,’ Bolton Evening News, 9 March 1965)

The majority of the critical censure was aimed at the play’s structure and Orton’s use of language, with many critics disparaging Orton’s verbose style and asserting that the verbal word-play weakened the structure and lessened the impact of the onstage action, thus reducing the effect of the play overall:

[…] [T]his highly-original farce […] will certainly enhance Joe Orton’s reputation as a writer of unconventional comic powers, and provide an unusually entertaining evening at the theatre. (Author unknown, ‘Duncan Macrae to play an Irishman!’ Brighton & Hove Herald, 5 February 1965)

Joe Orton’s new comedy, Loot, starts off as amusingly as any I have seen, but by the end of the first act it becomes doubtful, to say the least, and the humour – at first very funny – then sinks to the level of lavatorial wit. I do not find a situation where a body gets thrown out of its coffin particularly funny, and the innuendoes employed by members of the cast invariably never rise above schoolboy humour. (Author unknown, ‘Pavilion,’ Bournemouth Times, 5 March 1965)

This was sick humour gone mad. There were witless and pointless ‘jokes’ against the Roman Catholic church. And, of course, there were sexual undertones worthy of a varsity end-of-term revue. (Bill Boorne, ‘This play makes a night to forget,’ Evening News, 22 March 1965)

Other critics recognised that Orton was trying to impart social criticism through Loot, but felt that the play had missed its mark by simply not being strong enough:

To shock an audience genuinely – i.e. rock beliefs, make it look at assumptions and conventions anew – an author must do better than haphazard sniping. His assault, surely, must emerge out of some thought-out view of the scheme of things. Mr Orton offers instead a certain vivacity and a vague cynicism. We shall have to hope for something better in the future. (Benedict Nightingale, ‘LOOT at the Opera House, Manchester,’ Guardian, 9 March 1965)

Perhaps ‘Loot’ is just another instalment of what we have to take in the fashionable name of satire. The send-up seems to be chiefly of thrillers in general, although there are some glancing hits on the police. The effect on me was less that of being in a theatre than in bed with a temperature and persistent delirium. (I.W., ‘Farce – but it’s so sick,’ Bolton Evening News, 9 March 1965)

The ‘fun’ consists in extracting the embalmed, mummified and (incidentally) murdered occupant, so that the coffin can be used as a cache for stolen banknotes. […] The plot, however, can scarcely be said to thicken except in obscurity and, for some, in emetic strength. (J.W., ‘Farce – but it’s so sick,’ Bolton Evening News, 9 March 1965)

[…] [T]his whole formless affair was […] strangely unfunny and artificial. Mr. Orton’s verbal twists and contortions produced an unending variety of damp comical squibs, urbanely prepared but poorly executed, and one could be forgiven for feeling let down after so much repeated promise. (Keith Nurse, ‘Experiment in fun fails to amuse,’ Telegraph (Northern edition), 9 March 1965)

[…] [A] ghoulish, idiotic charade […] which, in its infancy, would have reached the standards of a university revue […] mainly because its most seriously funny lines are anti-religious, anti-police, with vaguely obscene undertones. […]
One can excuse mistakes, but not tragedies. (Alix Palmer, ‘Oh, not again Ken... please!’ The Sun, 9 March 1965)

It is all incorrigibly flippant and pointless [...]. [...] Mr Orton has to rely on jabs of surprise, the display of wit, and the excellence of his actors. [...] Surprise and wit both seem self-conscious and contrived: as if the author was more interested in bringing off particular effects, designed to spark instant laughs, than in steeping himself in any well-imagined character or situation. (Benedict Nightingale, ‘LOOT at the Opera House, Manchester,’ Guardian, 9 March 1965)

The play is an uneasy mixture of broad farce and verbal acrobatics. The [...] situation which must pass for a plot [...] involves a body and sack of stolen banknotes, and the frenzied efforts of assorted rogues to dispose of both satisfactorily. [...] No cliché is left uninverted, no platitude untwisted. (John Stevenson, ‘Dazzling at times but so easy to forget,’ Daily Mail (Northern edition), 9 March 1965)

The piece is too flimsy and high-spirited to be labelled Black Comedy. It is too sprawling and ill-constructed to be termed a comedy at all. [...] It is quite simply a well-written mess. (Gerard Dempsey, ‘Beyond our Gerard!’ Daily Express (Manchester edition), 9 March 1965).

The reviews were ‘disastrous’ and Orton concurred with the critics’ comments, declaring that the play was a ‘disaster’ in a letter to Kenneth Halliwell after its opening.1 Outwardly, Orton ‘put on a brave public face’, but he confessed to Halliwell that it was the ‘most depressing few weeks I’ve ever lived through.’2

Orton dealt with his anger and disappointment through humour. In 1958 he had created ‘Edna Welthorpe (Mrs.),’ a ‘[w]atchdog of public morals’ with ‘fatuous suburban tones’.3 Under this nom de plume he wrote to various institutions, ‘spoofing Edna’s idiocty and goading’ those who replied ‘into betraying their own’.4 While ‘Edna’ remained quiet during the furor of Loot’s first production, she wrote to the magazine Plays and Players in response to an irate letter from a member of the public after the editors chose Loot as the best play of 1966:

I agree that no one should seriously nominate as the play of the year a piece of indecent tomfoolery like Loot. Drama should be uplifting. The plays of Joe Orton have a most unpleasant effect on me. [...] I saw Loot with my young niece; we both fled from the theatre in horror and amazement well before the end. I could see no humour in it. Yet it is widely advertised as a rib-tickler. Surely this is wrong?

These plays do nothing but harm to our image abroad, presenting us as the slaves of sensation and unnatural practice. Mr Benedictus does well to point out the inadequacies of our present honours system!

Edna Welthorpe

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1 Lahr, Prick Up Your Ears, 199.
2 Ibid, 199, 203.
3 Ibid, 115.

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EXERCISE:

Write an ‘Edna Welthorpe’ letter of complaint about Loot. Use examples from the text to support your argument.
When Loot was restaged in 1966, the critical reactions were almost completely reversed: some critics still decried the play, but the majority praised it. The 1965 reviews had concentrated on plot and language; in a curious twist, the critics now praised what they had once condemned and the 1966 reviews focused on Loot’s relevance as a social critique:

Audiences at present seem disposed to accept the theatre’s new range of permissible subject-matter only if some ‘serious’ purpose is involved. Mr. Orton’s play ventilate the atmosphere by claiming this material as equally legitimate for farce. [...] Mr. Orton is concerned with official attitudes to authority, crime, and death. And his method is to transpose set patterns of thought and speech which would pass without notice in one context into an alien context where they seem ludicrous (Drama Critic, ‘Transposing the serious into the ludicrous,’ The Times, 28 September 1966).

[...] ‘Loot’ [is] a brilliantly realised cautionary tale [...] Mr. Orton is at pains to question the blind, passive affection the British show for their police (Herbert Kretzmer, ‘Robbers’ haul is rich in fun,’ Daily Express, 28 September 1966).

One of the duties of a playwright is to hold up a mirror to contemporary life. [...] Mr. Orton says we live in a very sick society. [...] The real power is money, which can corrupt anyone, and the figure of authority, the police inspector, is utterly corrupt. [...] This [...] drops a block-buster on our moral attitudes [...] (Anthony Seymour, ‘Block-buster’ on moral attitudes,’ Yorkshire Post, 28 September 1966)

‘Loot’ is concerned with the police, [...] with religion, death and lastly with money [...] Sad topics are unfortunately touched by reality in this modern age, but wrapped up as first class entertaining comedy by a cloak of brilliant farce, make valid social comment on the contemporary scene. (D.M.H.A., ‘Theatre,’ Socialist Leader, 15 October 1966)

[...] Mr. Orton [...] [is] much concerned with good and evil, with tracking them down and isolating them in the contemporary jungle [...] This is a horrifying and hilarious play, a modern equivalent of the moral shockers which used to beguile the groundlings of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. (Author unknown, ‘Untitled,’ Times Educational Supplement, 28 October 1966)

It uses shock tactics to reach an audience accustomed and no longer responsive to the politely dull polish of standard British comedy. [...] The play [...] draws a grisly picture of an obviously ‘average’ family and the private motivations of its ‘ordinary’ members, and says some frightful things about police ethics. One might see it as a brutal, cynical vision of contemporary decadence [...]. (Author unknown, ‘Untitled,’ The Village Voice, 8 December 1966)

The plot and language of Loot were praised, although to a lesser extent:

No synopsis could do justice to the quality of the fooling, which depends on the rapid change of situation and on the furious, formalised wit of the dialogue to carry the grisly joke from one absurdity to another. The secret lies in the style of both the writing and the performance: the puppet self-absorption of the characters and the grave banality of their response to the outrageous going on. (Eric Shorter, ‘Plotting of comedy fast and frivolous,’ Daily Telegraph, 12 April 1966)

[...] Joe Orton’s anarchic, quirky, irrelevant dialogue is aimed chiefly at undermining Catholics, policemen and the dead, and [...] one of the insane exchanges are close to the genius of a Marx Brothers’ film, (Milton Shulman, ‘Tasteless – but a gem!’ Evening Standard, 28 September 1966)

Taken seriously, Joe Orton’s Loot [...] would be a horrible play. A degutted corpse is lugged about the stage, ownerless eyes, teeth and innards are handed round like snapshots. Yet odd as it might sound the whole thing is screechingly funny. The success of this sicker than sick comedy lies in both the acting and in the crackling dialogue. (P.M., ‘Untitled,’ Jewish Chronicle, 11 November 1966)

The type of humour also appeared to be more acceptable to critics, possibly spurred by their new-found perception of the play as satirical social commentary:

There are jokes about death, jokes about religion; a coffin, or a corpse, is on the stage all the evening. But the jokes are remarkably good ones, the coffin and the corpse play a vital part in a story as ingenious as it is hilarious. Let those who are sure they could never laugh at jokes about death or religion not go [...] they will miss one of the best comedies to come to London for a long time. (B. A. Young, “Loot,” Financial Times, 28 September 1966)

[...] A[n uproarious black farce. Some Roman Catholics like nothing better than jokes about Roman Catholicism. Some policemen [...] vastly appreciate sharp cracks at the Police. Some find death and corpses the very stuff of humour, and they will be in stitches. But then so was I [...]. (J. W. Lambert, ‘Untitled,’ Drama, Winter 1966)

[...] [T]he reason I liked ‘Loot’ [...] was its audacious reversal of human values. It sent up the hypocrisy which surrounds death sky high in a gale of laughter. (Author unknown, ‘An elegant piece of midnight whimsy,’ Evening Argus, 31 January 1967).

Loot had always been a social critique, but as can be seen from the reviews in this section, it was only when Orton reworked the language – making substantial cuts and revisions – that the critics were able to successfully receive it as such.
6. ‘Never Had It So Good’?
Dramatic Context

All of Orton’s plays have generated controversy. Today Loot may not seem quite as controversial as it did in the Sixties, especially given the evolution of British theatre since then to include even more outrageous aspects. Examples range from cannibalism and male rape in Sarah Kane’s Blasted (1995) to disturbing accounts from mothers of sexually-abused children in Amanda Stuart Fisher’s verbatim play From The Mouths of Mothers (2013). But what was it that made Loot so provocative at the time? Clues can be found in the types of plays that were being staged immediately before and during the time of Orton’s career, from the late Fifties to the London premiere of Loot in 1966.

1737-1968: Theatre Censorship and the Lord Chamberlain

The Licensing Act of 1737 meant that all plays had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain, the most senior official of the Royal Household, in order to be officially approved and granted a licence for performance. Theatre companies who knew that their plays would not be approved under the Lord Chamberlain’s strictures mounted productions at ‘private theatrical clubs’, such as the Royal Court Theatre in London. British theatre censorship was not abolished until 1968 – after Orton’s death. As all plays until this date had to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain before production, it is perhaps little wonder that most were written in a ‘safe’ style, in complete contrast to the brazenness and daring of Orton. According to guidelines issued by the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee in 1909, ‘Proposals with Respect to the Licensing of Plays’, the Lord Chamberlain could refuse to grant a licence if a play could be considered ‘indecent’; contained ‘offensive personalities’; represented ‘in an invidious [offensive] manner a living person, or a person recently dead’; did ‘violence to the sentiment of religious reverence’; ‘was calculated to conduce to crime or vice’; ‘was calculated to impair friendly relations with a Foreign Power’; and/or ‘was calculated to cause a breach of the peace.’ It is easy to see how Loot fell foul of most of these guidelines, from the ‘indecency’ of descriptions of Dennis’s sexual activities, the ‘offensive personality’ of Truscott and the violation of ‘religious reverence’ in murderess Fay’s outward piety to the ‘crime and vice’ of the robbery and Hal’s brothel-running ambitions, and even references to foreigners – such as Hal’s description of child prostitutes from Pakistan. However, the Lord Chamberlain’s relaxation of stringent moral attitudes in the latter years of censorship meant that plays could become increasingly bolder in their subject matter – epitomised by Orton’s work.

In the early-to-mid-1950s the West End stage was ‘completely indifferent’ to contemporary events, from continued shortages caused by rationing and the impact of the welfare state to the manufacture of Britain’s first nuclear bomb. There was very little new English writing on the stage — rather, the West End was seemingly dominated by melodramas, drawing-room comedies that ‘contrived to insinuate a rather general human wisdom through witty dialogue and careful plotting’, epitomised by the works of Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan. Shakespeare, French plays (by playwrights such as Jean-Louis Barrault, Edwige Feuillère and Jean Anouilh) and American musicals (such as Porgy and Bess [1952] and Guys and Dolls [1953]). In addition, the advent of the television age in 1953 provided challenges in terms of attracting theatre audiences. Yet theatrical tastes changed abruptly after 1956 and demanded more ‘social realism’.

In 1956 John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger was staged by the newly-founded English Stage Company (established specifically to accommodate new drama at the Royal Court). The play was a ‘kitchen-sink drama’, exploring the ‘sexual battleground’ of the marriage between characters Jimmy and Alison. Its theme of social conflict – and even its title – reflected Osborne’s anger at the ‘flaccid conformism and hypocrisy of the British public’ and the ‘empty sham’ of ‘national ideals’. The play – and Osborne himself – became representative of the ‘Angry Young Men’, a literary group of playwrights and novelists that emerged in the Fifties. Usually of working- or lower-middle-class origin, the Angry Young Men were intellectuals who scorned the prevailing socio-political situation and expressed outrage at the ‘hypocrisy and mediocrity’ of the upper classes. Although gay himself, working class Orton shared Osborne’s contempt for plays by (middle-class) homosexual writers like Coward and Rattigan: ‘unreal, chintzy plays, gorgeous décor and a glamorous selection of theatrical lords and ladies glittering over all’ that rendered theatre ‘over-traditional, conservative, narrow, parochial, self-congratulatory, [and] narcissistic.’

1957 saw the premiere of Harold Pinter’s first play The Room. Pinter was an Angry Young Man whose plays are often associated with Theatre of the Absurd (‘The preferred form of absurd dramaturgy is that of a play without a plot or clearly defined characters in which chance and invention reign supreme’). Pinter’s work is renowned for his utilisation of the mundane and everyday, and especially the famous ‘Pinter Pause’. According to director Sir Peter Hall, ‘A pause in Pinter is as important as a line. They are all there for a reason. Three dots is a hesitation, a pause is a fairly mundane crisis and a silence is some sort of crisis.’ Pinter wrote 32 plays in his career, including The Birthday Party (1958), The Caretaker (1960) and The Homecoming (1963). He had a profound influence on Orton, although Orton ‘could never quite get himself’ to admit it: ‘I suppose he influenced me […] I think there are other influences on my work far more important than Pinter, and of course […] the things which influenced Pinter, which I believe are Hollywood movies in the forties, also influenced me.’ Despite points of similarity, the queerness of Orton’s plays distinguishes the work of these two playwrights.

EXERCISE:

Imagine that you are a theatre critic who has been to see Loot. Choosing one aspect – humour, social criticism, or plot and language – write a review highlighting what you perceive to be the strongest points of the play and using examples from the text to support your argument.
In Britain the Sixties saw the emergence of a counterculture and new youth cultures, sexual liberation (it was the decade of ‘free love’), and profound political and cultural change. The following timeline outlines some of the events that took place in 1963 and 1964 – the year leading up to, and the year of, Orton’s writing of Loot.

1963

March: The Profumo Affair. In 1961, John Profumo – British Secretary of State for War – had an affair with showgirl and dancer Christine Keeler, who also had a sexual relationship with a Soviet spy. In June 1963 the affair is revealed and Profumo, who initially lied, is forced to resign. The Profumo affair ‘concentrate[s] the attentions of the press and the public on […] issues of morality, security and sheer incompetence’ in the government.

18 April: Thousands of people take part in the third annual Easter march ‘from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston, Berkshire’ to London, ‘organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).’ The CND is typified as an anti-political, middle-class movement, also campaigning against the death penalty, immigration restrictions and the monarchy. The demonstration marks an example of the new counterculture.

2 May: Reflecting the rise of a new youth culture, The Beatles’ single *From Me To You* tops the Record Retailer chart (which later becomes the Official UK Singles Chart). On 11 May their album *Please Please Me* goes to Number 1 in the UK Albums Chart, where it stays for 30 weeks. The Beatles’ popularity in Britain is partly attributed to the contrast between their status as ‘Northerners’ – instantly associated with ‘honesty, dynamism and authenticity’, thanks to working-class entertainers – and the ongoing scandals and corruption seen in the aristocratic government.

8 August: The Great Train Robbery takes place, one of the most infamous robberies of all time. A gang led by mastermind Bruce Reynolds hijacks a Travelling Post Office train and steals £2.3 million (equivalent to £30 million today). After lengthy and intensive police investigations, the gang are sentenced to a total of 307 years in prison. (It is not clear if *Loot* was a response to the robbery, but in the world of Orton the criminals go free.)

October: Statistics indicate that just under two million worshippers attend Roman Catholic Mass on a regular basis, marking a high for the century that lasts through the Sixties before a downward decline. Around 2.75 million parishioners attend Church of England services on a regular basis, a gradual decline from previous years. Both Catholic and Anglican attendance decreases steadily after the end of the decade.

1964

1 January: Iconic show *Top Of The Pops* is broadcast for the first time on BBC television.

29 March: The new popularity of pop music – and counterculture – is demonstrated by the establishment of pirate radio stations. The most popular station, Radio Caroline, begins broadcasting on 29 March, hosted by disc jockey Simon Dee on ‘an old passenger ferry’ anchored just outside UK territorial waters.

30 March: There are violent clashes at Clacton Beach between groups of ‘Mods’ and ‘Rockers’. The Mods are ‘Modernist fans’, middle-class teenagers associated with ‘rhythm and blues music, Italian scooters, a hectic, amphetamine-fuelled social life and, most of all, the latest fashions;’ The Rockers take their inspiration from groups like the Hell’s Angels; they wear jeans and leather jackets, ride motorbikes, and listen to rock and roll, ‘projecting an image of aggressive masculinity’. The two groups epitomise the youth culture of the Sixties.
6 May: Joe Orton’s Entertaining Mr. Sloane premieres in London.

July: In a further development of youth culture, The Rolling Stones have their first UK Number 1 single with It’s All Over Now.14

July: Helen Brook establishes the first Brook Advisory Centre in London, offering contraception and sexual health advice to young women unable to access such services anywhere else.15 This heralds a new era of sexual liberation.

6 August: Pope Paul VI publishes Ecclesiam Suam, an ‘Encyclical Letter on the Ways in which the Church Must Carry Out its Mission in the Contemporary World.’ Intended ‘merely to communicate a fraternal and informal message’ the encyclical sets out the paths of the Church, the need for awareness, the renewal of – and ongoing need for – ‘moral vigilance’, and the need for dialogue between the Church and the people.16

13 August: The last two executions in Britain are carried out. Peter Allen is hanged at Walton Prison in Liverpool and Gwynne Evans is hanged at Strangeways Prison in Manchester, both executed for the murder of John West on 7 April. Two months after the executions Labour come into power, ‘bringing a Commons vote to suspend capital punishment for five years in the 1965 Murder Act, a move made permanent in 1969.’17

16 October: The Labour Party, led by Harold Wilson, wins the General Election by a margin of five seats.18 It is the first Labour government since 1951.19

GROUP EXERCISE:
Using the timeline above, discuss the extent to which the events of the day influenced or are reflected in Loot.
In Loot Orton presented a homosexual relationship between the characters Hal and Dennis. At the time he wrote the play, homosexuality was a criminal offence in Britain – meaning that Orton himself risked arrest and imprisonment as a gay man. The timeline below charts key events in the social, political and legal history of homosexuality in Britain up until its decriminalisation in 1967.

- **1533**: Henry VIII passes the Buggery Act, making sexual relations between men a criminal offence punishable by death. Sodomy remains punishable by hanging until 1861.
- **1885**: Parliament passes the Labouchere Amendment, creating the offence of ‘gross indecency’ and enabling the prosecution of any sexual behaviour between men. It becomes known as the ‘The Blackmailer’s Charter’.
- **1895**: Playwright Oscar Wilde sues the Marquis of Queensberry for libel after Queensbury, father of Wilde’s lover Lord Alfred ‘Bosie’ Douglas, publicly accuses Wilde of homosexuality. Wilde withdraws the case but is arrested, convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to two years’ hard labour.
- **1913**: The British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP) is founded by Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis. It is aimed at greater openness and the overcoming of prejudices in the discussion of sexual matters, particularly homosexuality, and more sexual freedom in society.
- **1939-1945**: During World War II, over five million men serve in the British armed forces. It is estimated that around 250,000 were gay or bisexual. According to the post-war Little Kinsey Report, the war ‘is thought to have contributed to the high number of homosexual experiences logged in the survey’. Out of two thousand male and female respondents, one in five men had had a homosexual experience. This number reflects the laxer sexual morals brought about during the war: ‘When people are getting blown up all around you by a bomb or something or other you only care about the moment.’
- **1950s**: In the early 1950s arrests and court cases involving sodomy, gross indecency and indecent assault rise – from 719 in 1938 in England and Wales to 2,504 in 1955. Newspaper reports become increasingly sensationalist, calling gay men ‘predators’ and ‘evil’.
- **1953**: In the House of Commons, Desmond Donnelly (Labour) and Sir Robert Boothby (Conservative) call for a Royal Commission to be established, investigating the law relating to homosexual offences.
- **1954**: March: In a controversial trial, Lord Edward Douglas Scot Montagu, his cousin Michael Pitt Rivers and journalist Peter
Wildblood are prosecuted: all three are charged with sodomy, attempted sodomy and gross indecency with two RAF airmen. Pitt Rivers and Wildblood are also accused of sexual relations with each other. All three men are convicted and imprisoned – Montagu for a year, Pitt Rivers and Wildblood for 18 months.\textsuperscript{14}

- **June**: British mathematician and computer science pioneer Alan Turing, who was instrumental in cracking the Nazis’ Enigma code during World War II, commits suicide aged 41. He had been subjected to chemical castration – oestrogen injections – as an ‘alternative’ to prison after being prosecuted over his relationship with another man.\textsuperscript{15}
- **September**: Following the public uproar surrounding the Montagu trial, Home Secretary Sir David Maxwell Fyfe announces that a committee has been set up under Lord Wolfdenden to investigate the laws relating to homosexuality and prostitution.\textsuperscript{16}

- **1957**: The Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences and Prostitution – The Wolfdenden Report – is published. It recommends that ‘homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private be no longer a criminal offence’.\textsuperscript{17}

- **1958**: The Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) is ‘founded to lobby the Government to implement the Wolfdenden recommendations.’\textsuperscript{18}

- **1959**: ITV broadcasts the first gay drama, *South*, starring Peter Wyngarde.\textsuperscript{19}

- **1961**: The film *Víctim*, starring Dirk Bogarde, brings the issue of the blackmail of gay men to mainstream audiences. Bogarde plays ‘a repressed, married homosexual taking on the blackmailers who drove his partner to suicide.’\textsuperscript{20}

- **1964**: The North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (NWHLRC) is established, campaigning alongside the HLRS for law reforms. It later becomes the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE).

- **1965**: In the House of Lords, the Earl of Arran makes a motion to demand the implementation of the Wolfdenden recommendations.\textsuperscript{21} It is narrowly defeated in a vote in the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{22}

- **1966**: In the House of Commons, Humphry Berkeley (Conservative) introduces the Sexual Offences Bill. After a five-hour debate, the House voted to allow the Bill a second reading. 164 MPs voted in favour, 107 opposed it. However, Parliament is dissolved soon afterwards and the Bill is abandoned.\textsuperscript{23}

- **1967**: The Sexual Offences Bill is reintroduced in Parliament by Leo Abse. The Bill is finally passed on 4 July and receives Royal assent on 27 July: ‘Homosexual acts undertaken in private by two consenting men of twenty-one years of age or over’ are legalised. The Act only covers England and Wales; Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, the armed forces and the Merchant Navy are excluded.

\begin{footnotesize}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{1} The Statutes at Large, From the Fifth Year of King Edward the Fourth To the End of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth. Boston Public Library digital archives. Accessed 24 April 2016, https://lal003303.us.archive.org/5/items/statutesatlarge02grea/statutesatlarge02greaf.pdf.}


\footnote{\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.}


\footnote{\textsuperscript{9} University of Sussex, ‘Sussex archive reveals secret sex lives of 1940s Britain.’ Created 7 September 2005, accessed 11 May 2016, http://www.sussex.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressrelease/media/media505.html.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{10} Hugh David. On Queer Street: A Social History of British Homosexuality 1895-1995 (London: HarperCollins, 197), 144.}


\footnote{\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.}


\footnote{\textsuperscript{14} Matt Cook, ‘Queer Conflicts,’ 169.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{15} Andrew Hodges. ‘Alan Turing: Creator of modern computing.’ Accessed 22 April 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/timelines/z8bgr82.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{16} David, On Queer Street, 177.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{17} Charles Berg, Fear, Punishment Anxiety and the Wolfdenden Report (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1959): 12.}


\footnote{\textsuperscript{20} LAGNA, ‘1967 and all that.’}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{21} Hugh David, On Queer Street, 213.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 214.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 217-18.}

\end{footnotesize}
When Orton accepted the Evening Standard award for Best Play on 11 January 1967, he stated: ‘In the early days we used to give complimentary tickets to various organisations. We sent a few to Scotland Yard. And the police loved the play so much that they rang up asking for more tickets. Everyone else thinks the play is a fantasy. Of course the police know that it’s true.’1 The truth of Loot’s representation of the police stems in part from the inspiration Orton drew from an infamously brutal and law-breaking officer of the time: Metropolitan Police Detective Sergeant Harold Challenor.

Challenor was born in 1922 near Wolverhampton, son of an unskilled and brutal father who worked in an ‘asylum’ — ‘one of those custodial institutions whose architecture and regime bore great similarity to those of prisons and in which disturbed patients were often harshly manhandled by the attendants.’2

He left school at the age of fourteen and held a variety of jobs — including a nurse at the same institution as his father — before joining the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1941.3 He served in North Africa and volunteered to join the SAS, where he undertook dangerous operations behind enemy lines.4 He was twice captured by enemy troops, managing to escape on both occasions and receiving the Military Medal.5 He stayed in the army until 1947, when he was demobilised as company quartermaster sergeant.6 The culture of abuse at the mental hospital, the life-or-death sense of ‘right’ (‘us’) and ‘wrong’ (‘them’) inculcated in the SAS, and the authority instilled in him by his continued promotions, are reflected in Loot through Truscott’s physical abuse of Hal, his relentless pursuit of the three criminals, and his determination to stay in control.

In 1951 Challenor joined the Metropolitan Police CID. He made more than a hundred arrests across a period of seven months, became a detective constable in 1956 and joined the ‘Flying Squad’ in 1958.7 In 1962 he transferred to West End Central, covering Soho, as a detective sergeant.8 Yet while his police career was ostensibly successful, with hundreds of arrests and over a dozen commendations, his reputation was also shaped by ‘allegations of brutality, forced confessions, planted evidence, and increasingly erratic behaviour.’9 For example, ‘in the case of a Barbadian called Padmore, brought in on suspicion of living off immoral earnings, it involved singing ‘Bongo, bongo, bongo, I don’t want to leave the Congo’, while repeatedly punching the suspect.’10

On 11 July 1963 a protest took place during a state visit to Britain by Queen Frederika of Greece, who had previous Nazi associations.11 The police were called in to break up the demonstration and among those arrested was Donald Rooum, a cartoonist for Peace News and a member of the National Council for Civil Liberties.12 Challenor greeted him with the words ‘You’re fucking nicked, my beauty. Boo the Queen, would you?’13 — words which Orton subsequently used verbatim in Loot for Truscott’s arrest of the innocent McLeavy — assaulted him, and alleged that he had been carrying an offensive weapon, a half-brick that Challenor claimed to have found in Rooum’s pocket.14 A solicitor ordered an independent forensic examination of the clothes that Rooum had been wearing at the time of his arrest, and no trace of brick dust was found.15 Rooum was thus found to be innocent, and this led to the reopening of twenty-six cases in which innocent men had been convicted following violence and perjury by Challenor.16 In June 1964 Challenor appeared at the Old Bailey, charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice alongside three other detectives. However, he was found unfit to plead due to mental illness and, while the other defendants each received three years in prison, he was sent to a mental hospital.17 The trial led to an enquiry, directed by Arthur James QC, into how Challenor had been permitted to serve in the police force while suffering from mental illness.18 The resulting report, published in 1965, was seen as a whitewash: ‘Where there was a conflict of evidence between police and other witnesses, James almost invariably accepted that of the police.’19

According to Kenneth Williams, Joe Orton was ‘obsessed’ with Challenor: ‘He never stopped reading the reports and giggling uncontrollably. He said, ‘This man’s mad.”20 Across multiple drafts of Loot, Truscott gradually ‘assumed Challenor’s salient characteristics’: unpredictability, psychopathic tendencies, violence towards suspects, and the ruthless ability to frame an innocent man.21 While the events in Loot may seem extreme and ridiculous, Orton used farce to highlight what was real and true in the society around him.

9. ‘The police know that it’s true’: Harold Challenor, the Real-Life Inspiration for Truscott

4 Morris, Challenor.
5 Ibid.
6 Morton, Harold Challenor.
7 Ibid.
8 Morris, Challenor.
9 Ibid.
11 Morris, Challenor.
12 Ibid.
13 The Telegraph, Harold ‘Tanky’ Challenor.
14 Morris, Challenor.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Lahr, Pick Up Your Ears, 196.
21 Ibid, 197.
10. Contemporary Relevance

Loot was written fifty years ago, but Joe Orton’s critique of society is still pertinent today. The following examples highlight how the play’s themes of moral hypocrisy, corruption and the abuse of power are still relevant in the contemporary moment.

Religious Hypocrisy: Sex Abuse Scandals and the Catholic Church

From the early 2000s details of priests sexually abusing children began to surface around the world. For example, in 2002 Pope John Paul II called an emergency meeting with US cardinals after it emerged that two Boston priests had abused young boys in the 1990s and that there were suspicions that ‘Church leaders had sought to cover up their crimes by moving them from post to post.’1 In Belgium in 2010 the Bishop of Bruges resigned after admitting sexually abusing a boy, and a subsequent commission that was established to investigate the extent of abuse in the Belgian Church discovered 300 cases of alleged sexual abuse.2 In 2009, following a nine-year investigation, a 2,600-page report concluded that ‘Rape and sexual molestation were ‘endemic’ in Irish Catholic church-run industrial schools and orphanages’, and that when ‘confronted with evidence of sex abuse, religious authorities responded by transferring offenders to another location, where in many instances they were free to abuse again.’3 Cases of alleged sexual abuse also emerged in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Malta and Spain.4

Police Corruption: The Hillsborough Disaster

On 15 April 1989 the FA Cup semi-final took place between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Sheffield Wednesday’s Hillsborough ground. More than 53,000 fans headed to the stadium and the Liverpool fans were allocated the smaller end of the stadium, Leppings Lane. Entry to the standing terraces of the ground was slow due to limited turnstiles, and after several hours Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, the South Yorkshire Police officer in charge, ordered a gate opened. This resulted in an influx of several thousand fans, crushing those already on the terraces. 96 Liverpool fans were killed.5 Senior police officials lied and blamed the fans for the disaster, claiming that they had been drunk, unruly and had deliberately forced their way into the ground, and national newspapers reported this accordingly. The victims’ families campaigned for the truth for 27 years, and in April 2016 an inquest jury ruled that the 96 victims had been unlawfully killed. Amongst other conclusions the jury also found that, despite extensive efforts by South Yorkshire Police to cover up the truth – including altering witness statements – police errors had caused a ‘dangerous situation at the turnstiles’; failures by commanding officers ‘caused a crush on the terraces’; and that Duckenfield ‘was responsible for manslaughter by gross negligence’ due to a breach of his duty of care.6

Sexuality: Homophobia Around the World

Homosexuality is still illegal in many countries including Algeria, Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe (African countries); Afghanistan, India, Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates and Yemen (Asian countries); Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago (countries in the Americas); and the Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tonga (countries in Oceania). Homosexuality is no longer illegal in Europe, but in 2013 Russia enacted an anti-gay propaganda law banning the positive mention of homosexuality in the presence of minors. Northern Cyprus was the last European country to decriminalise homosexuality in January 2014.7 Despite marriage equality and the ongoing positive representation of homosexuality in the UK and USA, gay bullying and homophobia still persist and the need for projects such as the ‘It Gets Better’ campaign and charities such as Stonewall is critical. This is exemplified by the ‘Religious Freedom’ law passed in Mississippi in 2016, which gives businesses the right to refuse goods or services to people they perceive to be gay.
EXERCISE:

Researching Loot’s contemporary relevance

Research the following examples and consider to what extent they make Loot relevant now:

• Police brutality: the case of Ian Tomlinson, who died following an altercation with a police officer after he was mistaken for a protest demonstrator
• Police corruption: the case of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager who was murdered in a racially-motivated attack
• Homophobia: the case of Steven Simpson, who had insults written on his body and died after being set alight in 2013.
• Homophobia: the debate about the place of gay men and women in the church

GROUP EXERCISE:

Debating Loot’s contemporary relevance

Split into two teams. One team will argue that ‘Loot is a play about the Sixties and has lost its relevance and power to shock.’ The other team will argue that ‘Loot transcends its moment of production and still speaks to contemporary society.’ Which argument is most persuasive?
Further Reading and Resources

Books


YouTube Clips

An interview with actor Kenneth Williams about Orton: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mz2P8qppqY

A rare video clip of Orton being interviewed on *The Eamonn Andrews Show* (1967), five months before his death: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRmV5sEHEIPc&ebc=ANyPxKqogbh-LkGhZGWmNlUjsZFeo1AIFz2LR6xW0BED1hRshBy02J5JjPD0iq71c8s1TjEgV0oLgocCH4MIELNvWumbQg

Excerpt from a documentary examining the personal and professional relationship between Joe Orton and Kenneth Williams: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6MbkSjixNY

Excerpt from Richard E Grant’s documentary *Dear Diary*, in which he talks to Leonie Barnett and considers the role that Orton’s diary may have played in his death: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4K3kJrkJMA

Braham Murray, who directed the first successful production of *Loot* in Manchester in 1966, is interviewed by Dr Emma Parker, School of Arts, at ‘Joe Orton’s *Loot*: A 50 Anniversary Celebration’, New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, 25 September 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWVkJKpQw

Michael Elwyn, who played Hal in the 1966 Manchester production of *Loot*, is interviewed by Dr Emma Parker, School of Arts, at ‘Joe Orton’s *Loot*: A 50 Anniversary Celebration’, New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, 25 September 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsATYwmZ80s

Websites

A website devoted to Joe Orton, including his life and plays, news and events, and the influence that both he and his works have had: http://www.joeorton.org/

The Joe Orton Collection page of Special Collections at the University of Leicester. Includes podcasts and a catalogue of items available in the Archive: http://www2.le.ac.uk/library/find/specialcollections/specialcollections/joe-orton-collection

Articles about Orton and reviews of his plays from The Guardian newspaper: http://www.theguardian.com/stage/orton


Archives

The principal collection of primary source material relating to Orton is the Joe Orton Collection, held by the University of Leicester Library, Archives and Special Collections. The collection is available for individual consultation by appointment and group visits. www.le.ac.uk/specialcollections