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Family Disintegration in *What the Butler Saw* by Joe Orton

Joe Orton'un What the Butler Saw Oyununda Aile Parçalanması Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

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Abstract

Joe Orton's farcical play *What the Butler Saw* (1967) presents a group of characters of middle-class background who find themselves in unexpected situations throughout the play. These unanticipated situations lead these characters, namely Dr. Prentice, Mrs. Prentice, Geraldine, and Nicholas, to go beyond the predestined limits of their traditional roles that may be regarded as suitable for their class. This breach reveals numerous farcical circumstances which disclose how the portrayed family gradually disintegrates because there no longer exists a strong emotional bond between them, as they look for emotional connection outside their lives. In this respect, various issues and themes such as the illustration of family, incestuous relationship, the use and misuse of scientific

Öz

Joe Orton'un 1967 tarihli *What the Butler Saw* başlıklı oyunu, kendilerini eser boyunca beklenilmeyen durumlarda bulan orta sınıftan gelen bir grup karakteri tasvir etmektedir. Böylesi beklenmedik durumlar, eserde kendilerine yer bulan karakterlerin, yani Dr. Prentice, Mrs. Prentice, Geraldine ve Nicholas'ın, sınıflarına geleneksel anlamda uygun olarak kabul edilen toplumsal rollerinin önceden belirlenmiş sınırlarının ötesine geçmelerine neden olmaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu ihlal, birçok tuhaf durumu da beraberinde getirmektedir. Bu durumun sonrasında ise, tasvir edilen ailenin aşamalı olarak parçalanışı okuyuculara ve izleyicilere çeşitli yollarla aktarılmaktadır çünkü bu karakterler, kendi hayatlarında bulamadıkları duygusal bağı başka karakterlerle olan ilişkileri

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knowledge, the connection between psychiatry and insanity, the problematic projection of gender, and a critique of middle-class manners play a highly significant role in Orton's text, as they reveal the intricate troublesome relationship between the depicted family members. In this article, therefore, brief biographical information about Joe Orton will be first given; his dramatic style will be briefly explained, and family disintegration will be discussed through relevant references to Orton's *What the Butler saw* as well as numerous relevant secondary sources.

Keywords: Joe Orton, *What The Butler Saw*, Family, Middle-Class, Drama

üzerinden dışarıda aramaktadırlar. Bu anlamda, ailenin tasviri, enest ilişkiler, bilimsel bilginin kullanılması ve sömürülmesi, psikiyatri ve delilik arasındaki bağlantı, toplumsal cinsiyetin sorunlu tasviri ve orta sınıfa ait tutumların eleştirisi gibi çeşitli konular ve temalar, Orton'un metninde oldukça önemli bir rol oynamaktadır çünkü bu hususlar, tasvir edilen aile üyeleri arasındaki sorunlu ilişkiyi de ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışmada, oyun yazarı Joe Orton hakkında öncelikle kısa biyografik bilgi verilecek ve sonrasında ise Orton'un kendine özgü dramatik stili kısaca açıklanacaktır. Sonuç olarak, oyunda ortaya konulan ailenin parçalanışı, Orton'un bu çalışma kapsamında seçilmiş *What the Butler Saw* başlıklı metninden ve konu ile ilgili ikincil kaynaklara göndermeler üzerinden tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Joe Orton, *What The Butler Saw*, Aile, Orta Sınıf, Tiyatro

Introduction

The English playwright Joe Orton deals with a group of middle-class characters who are lost in a play of endless tricks that cause them to behave beyond their conventional behaviors and attitudes in his farcical play *What the Butler Saw* (1967), which is "a fast-moving farce with constant twists and turns, involving cross-dressing and physical violence" (Ewans, 2014, p. 149). He presents the disintegration of a family through his depiction of a lecherous psychiatrist and his wife. These characters engage or try to engage in seduction and adultery with younger people that turn out to be their children. Orton's play is rich in that it involves cross-dressing, homosexuality, lesbianism, incest, and the questioning of authority through the acts of the characters in the play.

The plot revolves around the worry of the husband, the psychiatrist to conceal the fact that he has seduced his prospective secretary to take off her clothes from his wife that unexpectedly arrives at his office, which brings forward the action. This action prepares the audience for the potential disintegration of the family, portrayed by Orton whose language "calls attention to discourse, revealing an understanding that language creates the world rather than being just the best or most accurate way of representing it" (Coppa, 1997, p. 11). This study will, therefore, give brief biographical information

about Joe Orton; explain his style briefly, and then discuss family disintegration through relevant references to the issues of madness, heterosexuality, homosexuality, transgression, and the critique of the authority figures (of medicine, clinic, psychiatry) in Orton's *What the Butler saw*.

Joe Orton, born in Leicester in 1933, attended Clark's College between 1945 and 1947. He met Kenneth Halliwell in 1953. They became flatmates and collaborated on many novels such as *The Silver Bucket*, *Lord Cucumber*, *the Mechanical Womb*, *The Last Days of Sodom*, and *The Boy Hairdresser*. 1957 became the year when they decided to write separately and Orton started using pseudonyms such as Edna Welthorpe. In 1959, Orton and Halliwell moved to a flat together. Orton wrote plays, whereas Halliwell wrote novels. Finally, he was killed by Halliwell. It is important to touch on Orton's style and themes to discuss *What the Butler Saw*, which "moves beyond the previously defined boundaries of farce" (Dean, 1982, p. 490). Ortonesque is defined as "a peculiar mixture of farce and viciousness, especially as it expresses itself in the greed, lust, and aggression that lie just beneath the surface of British middle-class proprieties" (Charney, 1984, p. 124). Lahr, an important Orton critic, describes it as "a shorthand adjective for scenes of macabre outrageousness" (1978, p. 5). In his plays, Orton represents corruption, overt sexuality, vice, death, law, order, disorder, chaos, authoritarianism, psychiatry, and religion (Stephens, 1998, p. 4). He does not "posit explicit homosexual identities, rather he transgresses social taboos of sexuality, death, and violence, and creates private lives that hide their lechery, lust, and corruption behind the decorum of public appearance" (Stephens, 1998, p. 8). As a critical playwright, Orton conveys these themes, his thoughts, and feelings in an unusual manner, which can be seen in *What the Butler Saw* that "utilizes the figure of the exploded body" (Beehler, 1981/1982, p. 95).

This play, in which Orton "builds his comedy on a sharp irony" consists of two acts (Şahini, 2017, p. 347). Dr. Prentice, a psychiatrist, tries to seduce his prospective secretary Geraldine Barclay, but his seduction is interrupted with the unexpected arrival of his wife Mrs. Prentice. He tells Geraldine to take off her clothes so that he can check whether she is *fit* for the position or not (emphasis added). At that moment, his wife enters, and he hides Geraldine behind the curtain though she is naked. However, Mrs. Prentice is also seduced by a young man Nicholas Beckett with whom she has sexual intercourse. Nicholas blackmails her with the pictures he has, and in a way forces her to make Dr. Prentice recruit Nicholas as his secretary. As the story intensifies, Nicholas and Geraldine cross-dress. Later on, an unexpected government inspection of the clinic makes the story even more complicated. Dr. Rance as the inspector reveals the truth in the clinic. In the end, it turns out that Geraldine and Nicholas are the children of Dr. Prentice and Mrs. Prentice, which represents an unusual family story. This demonstrates how their family gradually disintegrates. The play ends with Dr. Rance contemplating how to benefit from this story for his new book.

There is no passionate love relationship between Dr. Prentice and Mrs. Prentice since they cannot connect. Dr. Prentice states that:

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. (Orton, 1990, p. 12)

As can be seen, he is not in love with her, but, on the contrary, what matters for him is only the material benefit from his marriage with her. He does not try to conceal the truth about his marriage, as he is outspoken about it, which might be probably to seduce and impress Geraldine. Although he has tried to avoid her, he cannot succeed in his wish and learns to live with her. His remarks, therefore, attest to the fact that material profit plays a more crucial role in their marriage, as they are no longer emotionally bound to each other. In this regard, Dr. Prentice is not happy about the fact that his wife comes to his clinic unexpectedly, and complains about it actually as follows: "I must ask you not to enter my consulting-room without warning. You're interrupting my studies" (Orton, 1990, p. 13). This is not the voice of a loving husband, but the voice of a husband that tries to hide a secret from his wife since he wishes to see the young secretary naked. His aggression demonstrates his anxiety about the situation reflected in his attitude towards his wife.

As he does not find satisfaction in love, marriage, and sexuality with his wife, he transgresses the borders of the marriage institution. He uses certain tricks while trying to seduce Geraldine since he does not permit her to ask questions: "Never ask questions. That is the first lesson a secretary must learn . . . I wish to see what effect your step-mother's death had upon your legs" (Orton, 1990, p. 10). Thus, he makes use of his authoritative position as a psychiatrist to satisfy his sexual desires that he cannot appease in his marriage with his wife.

However, Mrs. Prentice is not loyal, either since she, too, has sexual intercourse with Nicholas Beckett. She remembers that she is married only when she sees the pictures taken by Nicholas: "Oh, this is scandalous! I'm a married woman" (Orton, 1990, p. 14). In response to her remark, Nicholas says: "You didn't behave like a married woman last night" (Orton, 1990, p. 14). Thus, she finds herself in a miserable circumstance due to her sexual experience with the young lover. This is due to the lacking aspect in her marriage, which leads her to look for passion somewhere else.

Homosexuality is given as a possible reason for the disintegration of their family because Mrs. Prentice presents it as the problem why their marriage is not working: "If we're to save our marriage, my dear, you must admit that you prefer boys to women . . . Admit that you prefer your sex to mine. I've no hesitation in saying that I do" (Orton, 1990, p. 74). However, this infuriates Dr. Prentice: "You filthy degenerate! Take your clothes off!" (Orton, 1990, p. 74). This shows how their familial bonds are not strong enough. The reaction towards homosexuality can reflect a critique of middle-class manners in the play. Accordingly, Doğanay argues that "the metaphorical comments Orton makes about tabooed sexuality . . . many forms of sexual orientations like bisexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, and hermaphroditism---are likewise a critique on middle-class manners" (2008, p. 70).

How these issues are perceived by the characters differs from each other, and their appearance does not reflect the reality in the play. Dr. Prentice and Mrs. Prentice do not have sexual satisfaction with each other. Dr. Prentice describes her as "[a] failure in eugenics, combined with a taste for alcohol

and sexual intercourse, makes it most undesirable for her to become a mother” (Orton, 1990, p. 15). These negative features are not proper for a mother in Dr. Prentice’s opinion. When he accuses her of being sexually addicted, she blames him saying: “My trouble stems from your inadequacy as a lover! It’s embarrassing. You must’ve learned your technique from a Christmas cracker. Rejuvenation pills have no effect on you” (Orton, 1990, p. 15). As can be understood from their remarks, there is no longer a strong emotional bond between them, as they experience sexual intercourse with others. This process demonstrates how Orton, who has a desire “to fully explore the farcical endpoints” criticizes the behaviors of these fictional middle-class characters in the play (Farrier, 2017, p. 194).

The effect of the dissolution of the family can be observed in the two children as well, namely, Geraldine and Nicholas, who are unaware of the fact that it is Dr. Prentice and Mrs. Prentice, “the worldly, adulterous, long-married couple of farce” that are their parents (Jayaswal, 1987, p. 169). Their situation is not promising since Nicholas tries to find a job by blackmailing his mother, which he is still not aware of. Likewise, Geraldine is not informed about her father and has not seen her mother for many years as she is brought up by Mrs. Barclay. Thus, their condition demonstrates that they are the children of a disintegrated family and that marriage comes into existence as a result of monetary desires.

Geraldine in this regard becomes a victim of male lechery during her interview with Dr. Prentice, as he tries to attract her sexually by undressing her. She is made to hide behind the curtain, and dress as the opposite sex, which adds to the comical tone of the play. She accepts undressing and apologizes to the doctor in the following manner: “Please forgive me, doctor. I wasn’t meaning to suggest that your attentions were in any way improper” (Orton, 1990, p. 10). To get the post as the secretary, she does not reject showing her body to Dr. Prentice, which shows the problematic position of Geraldine before her future boss. As the daughter of the two *irresponsible* parents, she struggles to survive; however, she finds herself in a play of many tricks due to Dr. Prentice, who is her father, as he goes beyond the limits of his class (emphasis added).

When the situation gets complicated, Geraldine is put into the position of a *mad* person (emphasis added). Dr. Rance accordingly starts to formulate certain medical statements to prove that she is insane. However, it is all due to Dr. Prentice that she is given this position. Although she tries to prove that she is completely sane, the authority figure does not believe in her and regards her suspicious attitudes as the symptoms of her psychological disorder. Rance, therefore, says: “I’d take a bet that she was the victim of an incestuous attack . . . Her attempts, when naked, to provoke you to erotic responses may have deeper significance” (Orton, 1990, p. 26). Thus, he puts forward some remarks pertinent to her situation, which bears partial truth. As she expresses that she does not feel affection for her father, Rance attributes this to some stealthy action between her and her father and tries to come up with certain facts about her psychological problem. This shows how Geraldine, the daughter of a fragmented family, is criticized and mocked by the male authoritative figures due to their male desires.

In a similar vein, Nicholas is another character from a disintegrated family. He causes other characters to trespass the limits of their class in terms of attitudes and manners. It turns out that he has sexual intercourse with his mother through which he blackmails her to get the post as a secretary, which manifests how Nicholas struggles to survive in this competitive and brutal world. Nicholas blackmails Mrs. Prentice as follows: “If you’ll hand over the money, madam, I’ll let you have the photos. However, some guarantee of employment must be given before I part with the negatives” (Orton, 1990, p. 38). He, thus, blackmails Mrs. Prentice and states that he cannot find happiness in one woman while talking to Dr. Prentice: “I’m sorry if my behaviour last night caused your wife anxiety, but I’ve burning desire to sleep with every woman I meet” (Orton, 1990, p. 39). It can be thus argued that his obsession with women shows that he is still in search of a meaningful relationship in life.

Thus, Orton presents the dissolution of a family through the actions of these four characters, namely Dr. Prentice, Mrs. Prentice, Geraldine, and Nicholas that find themselves in a kind of incestuous relationship until the truth is ultimately revealed. These characters are “propelled by situational exigencies over which they have no control yet which allow them the liberation of a dream in which their identities are split, multiplied, dissolved and merged” (Rusinko, 1995, p. 120). However, it is not the only focus of the play since Orton also depicts a critique of middle-class manners by presenting how the characters and authority figures use and abuse their position to free themselves from the current situation, especially Dr. Prentice.

The play also demonstrates how the authority figure Dr. Rance misinterprets certain actions and manners of some characters like Geraldine about whom he produces some allegations to prove her lunacy. Hence, it is possible to argue that the play criticizes the artificial manners of these characters since their manners do not represent reality, as they act out of pure self-interest. They create their reality to maintain their position and interests. Accordingly, Doğanay comments on it as follows:

The world one observes in *What the Butler Saw* a place where all rules and orderly behaviours are turned upside down, and all people behave according to their own interests, listen, and perceive what to them is important. Thus, in the end, obsessive characters and farcical actions come to the fore, reflecting what to Orton was the real nature of people, without the pressure of social orders. (2008, p. 75)

The situation of the characters poses an obstacle to their behaving properly according to the social norms and rules. Therefore, the perception of the events and their interpretation depend on the situation’s importance to the characters, which prevents the ultimate revelation of the truth.

Dr. Prentice tries to protect Nicholas from the situation by giving him a dress of Geraldine and a wig so that they can convince people that Nick is the secretary. Dr. Prentice misuses his scientific knowledge to escape the difficulty and therefore lies to Mrs. Prentice as follows: “My investigations . . . would be strictly ‘unscientific’ and, inevitably, superficial. In order to assure myself that he’s going to be of use to me I must examine him fully. And skinwise” (Orton, 1990, p. 41). As can be inferred

from his remarks, his words do not convey the reality, but they highlight the voice of a scientist that tries to find a temporary solution to the situation by partially exploiting his scientific knowledge.

The situation stems from Dr. Prentice's wish to seduce Geraldine. Thus, he plays many tricks throughout the play like giving the shoes of Geraldine to Nicholas, giving male clothes to Geraldine, changing the places of the goods belonging to Geraldine from one vase to another one, and presenting a bouquet to Mrs. Prentice. He confesses to seducing Geraldine as follows: "My troubles spring from a misguided attempt to seduce you" (Orton, 1990, p. 47). Geraldine trusts in these words and therefore states: "You never told me you were seducing me. You said you were interested in my mind" (Orton, 1990, p. 48). This shows how the reality is not as it seems, and the real motive behind Dr. Prentice's wish is revealed and expressed by himself.

Nicholas and Geraldine, who are "sexually desired by the older characters in the play," are dressed as the opposite sex, which intensifies the action even more in the play. It causes the misinterpretation of the events for the authority figures such as Match and Dr. Rance (Coppa, 1998, p. 284). Nicholas acts like a girl and sets forth that he is not "the kind of a girl to be mixed-up in that kind of thing. I'm an ex-member of the Brownies" (Orton, 1990, p. 49). However, sergeant Match does not become convinced of the situation and therefore decides that Nicholas, who claims that he is a girl, is to be checked: "Only women are permitted to examine female suspects" (Orton, 1990, p. 50). The truth is revealed later in the play through the interrogation of Dr. Rance and Nicholas' following confession: "I am Nicholas Beckett. I've no right to wear this uniform" (Orton, 1990, p. 76). These remarks show how appearance is a mere illusion and does not have a connection with reality in the play.

The story gets more and more complicated as it progresses because someone fires a gun at Match, Nick is naked except for his underpants, Geraldine wears the top half of Nick's uniform, and Mrs. Prentice fires a gun at Nicholas. Mrs. Prentice sees naked men, but they do not believe her. Likewise, Dr. Rance does not believe that he is talking to Geraldine Barclay although she claims the following: "You imagine you're secretary. In fact you're the leading player in one of the most remarkable and sinister stories of recent history. The extent to which you influenced your employer and contributes to his breakdown has yet to be measured" (Orton, 1990, p. 82). Thus, the story gets out of control and becomes difficult to follow since the reality is not as it appears.

These facts present a critique of middle-class manners in the play. Among this class, it is Dr. Rance that represents the misuse and misinterpretation of scientific knowledge, which can be understood in his following remarks: "I'm a scientist. I state facts, I cannot be expected to provide explanations. Reject any para-normal phenomena. It's the only way to remain sane" (Orton, 1990, pp. 83-4). Thus, he is not interested in explanations and interprets the events only by relying on his sight, which causes him to perceive what goes around him in a wrong way. He implies that he is the authority to decide what reality is and gets angry with Mrs. Prentice when she claims that the situation seems real.

Dr. Rance certifies Geraldine and Mrs. Prentice as insane throughout the play although the reality is not so. He interprets the words of Mrs. Prentice as the symptoms of her psychological problem and tells Dr. Prentice the following: “Your wife is subject to a type of nervous disorder which leads her to imagine she is being pursued by unclothed male figures” (Orton, 1990, p. 87). Thus, it is possible to argue that Rance’s words do not communicate the reality and his real motive behind the action is to gather material for his book as well: “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” (Orton, 1990, p 90). Thus, Orton demonstrates that in the world presented in the play, “normative values no longer exist” and the authority figures are also subject to corruption and lying (Bigby, 1982, p. 56).

Thus, Orton presents the dissolution of the familial relationships and a critique of middle-class manners, which can be observed through the issue of incest in the play. The father tries to seduce the daughter and the boy has sexual intercourse with his mother, which is a reference to the Oedipus complex and the Electra complex in the play. Dr. Rance also touches upon this complex relationship as follows: “A respected member of the medical fraternity is married to a dazzlingly beautiful woman . . . The doctor has a charming, but mentally unstable patient . . . At an early age she was the victim of a sexual attack. The assailant was her own father” (Orton, 1990, p. 68).

Furthermore, the title of the play demonstrates selective perception, the relativity of ethics and thought in society. Thus, the characters’ views and perspectives differ from each other. Doğanay accordingly comments on it as follows:

A butler, as is well known, is a part of a fairly upper-class household; he runs the house and deals with daily household chores. In literature, especially in farce, he is used as a tool to bring out the indecencies of the household by comparison, since he is a serious character with his mores far exceeding the qualities of the people he serves, or his social “betters.” Hence, the butler can be anyone: the audience, observing the inconsistencies and disorder of the action, or the characters themselves, each analysing the events through their own irrational view to serve their own ends. (2008, p. 75)

Thus, the butler can reveal what is indecent in a household. The butler can be anyone. In addition, the butler can be the characters perceiving the events for their benefit. Accordingly, Charney argues that “[w]e need the invisible butler in *What the Butler Saw* as a stand in for the cosy and complacent amenities of upper-middle class drawing room life” (1984, p. 97). As can be understood, the title gives hints about the critique of middle-class manners through the reflection of differing perspectives and selective perception.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Joe Orton presents a group of middle-class characters who find themselves in an intricate relationship, representing the disintegration of familial relationships. Through this gradual but radical dissolution, a critique of middle-class manners is

illustrated through numerous examples throughout the play. These characters do not behave in congruence with the limits of their class in Orton's farcical play *What the Butler Saw*.

Moreover, it has also been revealed that Orton deals with the problematic depiction of such issues as family, incest, psychiatry, madness, insanity, gender, and a critique of middle-class manners in this play. Through the representation of such issues that disclose how the portrayed family dissolves, Orton also reveals the topic of hypocrisy. The play ultimately depicts "a paradigm of a world in which authority seeks to define reality, impose rules, coerce the individual, and in which the individual can respond only with corrosive anarchy" (Bigsby, 1982, p. 56).

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