



Power, Corruption, and Class Struggle: John Arden's the Workhouse Donkey as a Political Examination of Local Government and Social Conflict in Post-War Britain

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ABSTRACT

This study examines John Arden's play *The Workhouse Donkey* as a political drama. The purpose is to explore how the play exposes power struggles, corruption, and class conflict within local government. The research shows how Arden uses theatre to critique political systems. It highlights how the play raises social awareness about post-war Britain's urban and social problems. First performed in 1963, *The Workhouse Donkey* reflects the political tensions of post-war Britain. The play belongs to 1960s political theatre, which questioned authority and exposed social inequality. This research uses a qualitative approach. It focuses on close reading of *The Workhouse Donkey*. The study examines dialogue, characters, plot, and staging to find political themes. The research applies political theatre theory and class analysis to understand Arden's methods. The study finds that *The Workhouse Donkey* shows local government as a symbol of class struggle. Arden presents a system ruled by profit, competition, and survival. Political decisions ignore the social good. Through realistic dialogue and complex characters, the play exposes how corruption becomes normal. It shows how the working class is excluded from decisions that affect them. His picture of council life reflects wider social divisions. The play's structure, with fast dialogue and shifting alliances, shows the confusion of a broken system. The research proves that *The Workhouse Donkey* is more than local satire. It is a commentary on post-war Britain's battles with power, urban change, and social justice. This study finds that *The Workhouse Donkey* is a strong example of political theatre. The play is still relevant today. It reflects debates about political responsibility, corruption, and inequality. Arden shows how political systems protect the powerful. His play remains an urgent call for awareness and change.

INTRODUCTION

John Arden is one of the most significant political playwrights in modern British theatre. His work often focuses on social conflict, class struggle, and the misuse of power. *The Workhouse Donkey* (1963) is one of his most important plays, offering a sharp critique of local government and political ambition. Set in a fictional Northern town, the play examines how personal greed and rivalry corrupt public institutions. Arden presents the town council as a site of political games, where self-interest comes before social welfare. Written during a time of rapid change in post-war Britain, *The Workhouse Donkey* reflects the tensions of urban redevelopment, housing shortages, and working-class displacement. Arden uses realistic dialogue and complex characters to reveal the hidden power structures within local politics. His work belongs to the tradition of political theatre that emerged in the 1960s, which aimed to expose social problems and challenge audiences to think critically about injustice and inequality.

Research Problem

While *The Workhouse Donkey* has been praised as a powerful example of political drama, there is still a need to study how Arden uses the setting of local government to explore deeper social conflicts. Much research on political theatre focuses on national or international issues, but less attention has been paid to how everyday political institutions like town councils reflect class struggle. This raises several important questions. How does Arden use local politics to show larger conflicts between the working class and those in power? How does the play use language, character relationships, and plot to expose corruption? What does *The Workhouse Donkey* contribute to the wider tradition of political theatre, and what lessons does it offer today? This study seeks to answer these questions by examining the play's themes and dramatic techniques.

Objectives or Purpose

This study explores *The Workhouse Donkey* as an example of political theatre focused on local government and class conflict. The research has four main objectives: To study how Arden presents power and ambition within local government. To analyze how the play shows class divisions and social struggle. To examine how Arden uses corruption, competition, and political negotiation as dramatic tools. It also aims to explore the relevance of *The Workhouse Donkey* for political theatre in contemporary society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thesis Statement or Hypothesis

This study argues that *The Workhouse Donkey* uses local government as a symbol of larger class struggles in post-war Britain. Arden shows how political systems often serve the interests of the powerful while ignoring the needs of ordinary people. Through realistic settings, sharp dialogue, and complex character relationships, Arden reveals how corruption and competition dominate political life. The play invites audiences to think critically about the systems they live within and to question who benefits from political decisions.

Significance of the Study

The issues Arden explores in *The Workhouse Donkey*—such as corruption, inequality, and political failure—are still relevant today. Across the

world, people face social divisions, political mistrust, and increasing inequality. Arden's work reminds us that political theatre can play a role in exposing these problems. By studying *The Workhouse Donkey*, this research contributes to understanding how theatre can be a tool for social reflection and change. It adds to academic discussions of Arden's work and supports ongoing debates about the role of theatre in political life.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on *The Workhouse Donkey* as the central text. It also draws from Arden's essays and interviews to better understand his political views. The research is limited to textual analysis and theoretical discussion. It does not include performance reviews or audience studies beyond existing sources.

METHODOLOGY

Overview of Methodology

1. Research Approach

- a. **Qualitative Analysis:** Since your study focuses on political themes, corruption, and class struggle, a qualitative approach will allow for an in-depth textual and contextual examination.
- b. **Historical-Contextual Method:** Analyzing the political and social climate of post-war Britain, particularly local governance and Labour politics, will provide insights into Arden's critique.
- c. **Thematic Analysis:** Identifying key themes in *The Workhouse Donkey*, such as power dynamics, bureaucratic corruption, and working-class struggles.

2. Primary Sources

- a. **John Arden's *The Workhouse Donkey*:** Close reading of the play, focusing on dialogue, character interactions, and structural elements that highlight political conflict.
- b. **Arden's Prefaces and Commentaries:** Examining Arden's own writings on the play for insights into his political stance and artistic intentions.

3. Secondary Sources

- a. **Theatrical Criticism and Scholarship:** Engaging with academic analyses of Arden's work, particularly on his political themes and dramatic style.
- b. **Historical Accounts of Local Government:** Using historical studies of post-war British local governance, Labour Party politics, and urban development to contextualize the play.
- c. **Comparative Studies:** Examining how Arden's critique aligns with or diverges from contemporary political theatre, such as Brechtian influences or comparisons with *Serious Money* by Caryl Churchill.

4. Theoretical Framework

- a. **Marxist Criticism:** Applying Marxist theories of class struggle and ideology to analyse how power and corruption operate within the play.
- b. **Political Theatre Theory:** Considering Brechtian and socialist realist influences on Arden's dramaturgy.

- c. **Sociological Perspectives on Local Government:** Exploring how power structures function in bureaucratic institutions and their impact on working-class communities.

5. Method of Analysis

- a. **Textual Analysis:** Identifying linguistic and rhetorical strategies that highlight political tension.
- b. **Dramaturgical Analysis:** Examining staging, character dynamics, and dramatic structure to see how Arden critiques social systems.
- c. **Contextual Analysis:** Situating the play within its historical moment to assess its commentary on contemporary political issues.

6. Structure of the Paper

- a. **The Paper is Organized Into Six Chapters: Section One:** Introduction outlines the research background and aims. Section Two includes Literature Review examines previous studies on Arden and political theatre.
- b. **Section three:** Textual Analysis – analyses *The Workhouse Donkey* as political drama. Section four reflects on the play’s relevance today. Section five comprises conclusion – summarizes the findings and suggests future research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Workhouse Donkey (1963) is set in an industrial town in West Yorkshire during the early 1960s. The play is deeply political, focusing on municipal corruption, power struggles, and social class tensions within local government. Michael Billington called the play “simply ‘the best play ever written in Britain about municipal corruption’” (Leach, 2021: 66). The 1960s in Britain were a time of profound political and social transformation. The decade saw a shift in power from the traditional ruling elites to a new generation of politicians and administrators.

Hence, the Play is:

Arden’s most ambitious attempt at a comprehensive picture of society ... which aims to show corrupt local borough politics in detail. The characters are grouped into factions: the Labour councillors in power, the Conservatives, the police, members of the electorate (Hennessy, 1971: 53).

This period saw debates on urban renewal, the local government’s role, and state intervention in housing, education, and welfare. Amidst national changes, local councils became battlegrounds. Progressive reformers and entrenched conservatives fought over municipal governance. Arden reflects these tensions with a sharp critique of power at the municipal level. He shows that local government is not neutral. It does not simply serve the public interest. Instead, it is compromised by corruption, bureaucracy, and business influence. For them, community welfare becomes secondary. Genuine public concern takes a backseat. Promises made to the electorate often hide hidden agendas. These agendas involve self-interest and collusion with business elites.

By exaggerating the corruption and incompetence of the local government, he highlights the absurdity of political manoeuvring. This approach not only makes the play accessible to a wide audience but also underscores the cyclical nature of political corruption. In this way, the play supports the ideas of a political

agenda. Sir Bernard Crick argued in *A Defence of Politics* (1962) that politics is about negotiation and compromise rather than finding perfect solutions. Arden's play reflects this perspective by demonstrating how local politicians navigate their own self-interests, make deals, and engage in corruption. The play thus serves as a microcosm of political betrayal, illustrating how power dynamics function beyond their specific regional setting.

Secondly, in the play, Arden's reflection on Barnsley (birthplace) highlights his complex relationship with his birthplace, particularly its political landscape. In an interview with Wager and Trussler, Arden discusses the inspiration behind the play centered on a municipal political scandal. "I wanted to set on the stage the politics, scandals, sex life, and atmosphere of Barnsley, as I remember shocked Conservative elders talking about it in my youth, and -while avoiding libel actions- to deal with local personalities in a raucous" (Hennessy, 1966 49). In his interview with Georg Gaston he affirms that the play "deals with what was at the time a very contemporary episode. It was about a row in the city of Nottingham between the Labour corporation and the chief constable, fictionalized, of course" (Georg Gaston, 1971: 160). He explains that the play is not based on a single real-life event but rather a composite of various political scandals he recalled from his hometown. By drawing from his personal memories, he constructed a dramatized narrative that amalgamates multiple incidents into a cohesive theatrical work. It "is a play about a scandal in municipal politics, was based on my own recollections of municipal politics in my native town. I collected from my memory a whole lot of such scandals and amalgamated them" (Gaston, 1971:46).

The Play's Setting and Political Background

Arden's reference to setting Barnsley's politics and social life on stage implies that his plays drew directly from real-life incidents and local political dynamics. "I wanted to set on the stage the politics ... (and the) atmosphere of Barnsley ..." (Arden, John and D'Arcy 1988: 80). He mentions deliberately setting the play "in an unnamed town in the North of England which is more or less Barnsley, where I was brought up" (*Who's for a Revolution?* 45). Arden talks of the completion of this play in an interview with Gaston "When it's being done in northern theaters, the audiences' reactions have always been much better. It's a regional play. It belongs to a certain type of society, and outside that society it doesn't make a great deal of sense. (Gaston, 1971:46160). By incorporating these elements into his drama, Arden was not only documenting but also satirizing and scrutinizing the social and political realities of Barnsley.

John Arden's play is set in a Yorkshire industrial town, "somewhere between Sheffield and Leeds" (*The Workhouse* 116). This location is significant because it reflects a historically working-class area with a strong industrial background. Yorkshire, particularly its industrial towns, was shaped by coal mining, steel production, and manufacturing. Arden's choice of setting is intentional, as it mirrors the social and political struggles faced by the working class in post-war Britain. At this time, economic difficulties and shifting political landscapes created tensions between different social groups, making the town a perfect backdrop for a political drama. Arden describes the town as being dominated by Labour Party politicians whose ideology was largely positive.

However, its long-standing control over local government had resulted in political complacency and corruption. Arden acknowledged the beneficial aspects of Labour's policies, but at the same time, he was critical of the stagnation and lack of accountability that came with their entrenched power. Arden focuses on the local politics of a northern English town and exposes the corruption within the local government in a humorous and exaggerated way. What is shown in the play at a small, local level is actually a reflection of how politics functions on a much broader, even global scale.

The Workhouse Donkey as a Political Drama

The story begins with the introduction of Colonel Feng, the new chief of police. Feng, as a foreign observer from China, embodies a perspective shaped by a radically different political ideology from that of 1960s Britain. He does not interfere in local political affairs but remains a detached yet perceptive witness. His demeanour reflects a blend of curiosity and scepticism as he observes the unfolding events. "He has wrapped himself up, neck and navel, to an unscrupulous political minority. I am preparing a full exposure' (The Workhouse 71). Through his presence, the play highlights ideological contrasts and the complexities of global political discourse. His mission is to "test/The whole community according to/The rigid statutes and the statutes only" (129). Colonel Feng knows how to clean "An extremely different locality where the prevalence of violent crime was such that only the firmest of firm hands could eliminate it. It has been eliminated' (The Workhouse 101). However, he failed to sustain his uprightness in the face of political chaos around him. "Feng asserts his political neutrality, but both Conservatives and Labour suggest privately to him that he investigate corruption in their opponents' ranks" (Leach, 65). Feng, who initially upholds order and precedent, finds his values eroding under the pressures of local intrigue and police inefficiency. Chief Feng, initially perceived as a competent authority figure, ultimately falls victim to the pervasive corruption that defines the political landscape.

Feng is welcomed by the Labour Mayor, Alderman Boocock, and the former Mayor, Alderman Charlie Butterthwaite. "The plot is driven by the intent of both political groupings to enlist Feng's support in exposing and undermining their political opponents" (Nicholson, 2012: 121). This suggests that while both parties acknowledge corruption as an issue, they are more interested in using investigations as a political weapon against their rivals rather than addressing wrongdoing within their own ranks. The nightclub scene at the Copacabana Club reflects the town's moral ambiguity. Sweetman's son is involved with the doctor's daughter. The doctor (Blomax) himself is involved in morally ambiguous activities, such as performing abortions. The club owner, Gloria has an affair with Sir Harold Sweetman. These entanglements show how personal relationships influence political decisions. They also shape the town's governance. Arden critiques moral decay and hypocrisy in the town's leadership. He uses the nightclub as a backdrop to expose the complexities and contradictions of human behavior in politics. These political figures serve as representatives of the town's administration, but they also embody the complexities and contradictions of local governance.

Butterthwaite, the “workhouse donkey”, is an old politician who has been involved in local politics for a long time. He is a “Chairman of the Regional Branch of the Labour Party, Secretary of the Local Mineworkers’ Union, controlling spirit of one-hundred-and-one hard-working committees: and perhaps above all, the man who has held the office of Mayor of this borough not fewer than nine times altogether” (The Workhouse 121). While he has experience and understands the workings of local government, he is also deeply flawed and engages in corrupt activities. The central conflict of the play is initiated by an incident that initially appears minor but quickly escalates into a significant political scandal, underscoring the fragile and volatile nature of power dynamics within local government. A group of Labour politicians, including Boocock, are arrested for drinking after hours – an infraction that, under normal circumstances, might have been dismissed as trivial. However, given the heightened tensions between political factions, this event takes on greater significance, sparking a chain reaction of political manoeuvring and backstabbing. Simultaneously, Chief Feng, a highly placed police official, is observed dining at the home of Conservative Politician Sir Harold Sweetman. This seemingly innocent social interaction is quickly weaponized; raising suspicions that Feng harbours a bias in favour of the Conservative Party, which further deepens the divisions among political players.

One of the key figures who seizes upon this unfolding situation is Butterthwaite, an ambitious and calculating Labour politician who “has risen from extreme poverty to dominate his local Labour Party and the town” (Nicholson, 120). Recognizing an opportunity to consolidate power, Butterthwaite embarks on a strategic campaign to discredit Feng, thereby tilting the balance of influence within the local government in his own favour. His tactics involve exposing hidden scandals that implicate both Feng and Sweetman, particularly the revelation that Sweetman is the secret owner of the Copacabana Club – an establishment notorious for illegal gambling and other illicit dealings. By bringing this information to light, Butterthwaite aims not only to undermine Sweetman’s credibility but also to implicate Feng by association, portraying him as complicit in the corruption that permeates the Conservative establishment.

However, while Butterthwaite’s political strategies are ruthless; his personal struggles add another layer of complexity to his character. He grapples with a severe gambling addiction that has led him into substantial financial debt. He is “A swaggering, charismatic, manipulative scoundrel, he has a gambling addiction, which is bankrolled by the Machiavellian, but self-aware...” (Nicholson, 120) His debts, owed to the formidable moneylender Blomax, pose an existential threat to his career and personal life. Desperate for a way out, Butterthwaite turns to theft, embezzling funds from the Town Hall to settle his outstanding dues. This act of corruption, while a temporary solution to his financial woes, puts him at immense risk, as exposure could lead to his political downfall. In an effort to cover his tracks, he devises a plan to stage a fake burglary, attempting to shift suspicion away from himself while simultaneously portraying the local police force as incompetent. “I was the grand commander of the whole of my universe” (The Workhouse 125). This manoeuvre not only helps him conceal his crime but also furthers his vendetta against Chief Feng, adding another layer

of intrigue to the unfolding drama. He is like Merlin in *The Island of the Mighty* (1972), according to Francis Gray: “the liberal intellectual who no longer knows what is liberality and what is tyranny, who is unable to draw a distinction between poetic ambiguity and political dishonesty” (Gray, 1982: 142).

As the play progresses, the political landscape grows increasingly fraught with tension. Feng, once a respected figure in law enforcement, finds himself ensnared in a web of accusations and manipulations. The revelation of Sweetman’s hidden ownership of the Copacabana Club, combined with the staged burglary that casts doubt on the efficacy of the police force, places him in an untenable position. These accumulating scandals paint him as both corrupt and ineffective, leaving him with little choice but to resign. His resignation marks a crucial turning point in the play. It demonstrates how political power is often determined not by one’s capabilities or integrity but by the ability to manipulate and survive the treacherous waters of political scheming. The subplot involving Sweetman’s concealed ownership of the Copacabana Club further accentuates the play’s exploration of corruption. It illustrates how politicians often engage in the very activities they publicly condemn, highlighting the hypocrisy inherent in governance. Sweetman’s secret ties to illicit dealings underscore the notion that political figures, regardless of their party affiliations, are often driven by self-interest rather than a genuine commitment to public service. The play thus presents a damning critique of the duplicity that characterizes political institutions, where those in power prioritize personal and partisan interests over the well-being of the communities they serve.

Butterthwaite, by contrast, exemplifies the dangers of personal vice intersecting with public responsibility. Boocock questions “Charlie, I don’t know why you’ve done this, but your last remaining friends can do now for you now. You have pulled your own self down’ (The workhouse 124). His gambling addiction, a deeply personal struggle, becomes the catalyst for his political machinations, leading him to compromise his integrity for personal gain. What begins as small wagers in exclusive clubs soon spirals into a compulsive habit that leaves him drowning in debt. The pressure of mounting losses forces him into desperate measures, and in his bid to maintain his outward appearance of success, he turns to deception.

Initially, Butterthwaite assures himself that his actions are harmless. A small misallocation of funds here, a minor favour for an influential acquaintance there—such transgressions seem insignificant in the grander scheme of his political career. Mounting debt fuelled a parallel rise in his disregard for moral and legal constraints. He starts engaging in backroom deals, promising lucrative contracts to business associates in exchange for discreet financial assistance. As his influence grows, so does his audacity; he becomes adept at using his position to manipulate policies in ways that benefit those willing to support his lifestyle. “I am a corrupted individual; for every emperor needs to have his dark occult Playwrights and Plays 121 councillor: if you like, his fixer, his manipulator – me. I do it because I enjoy it” (The Workhouse 123). What began as a mere indulgence in gambling transforms into a pattern of political corruption, revealing the ease with which personal weaknesses can permeate and distort public office.

His ability to deflect accusations, spin narratives, and leverage powerful connections ensures that any whispers of misconduct are swiftly silenced. His charm and rhetorical skill allow him to paint himself as a misunderstood public servant, a victim of political adversaries' eager to tarnish his reputation. Even when undeniable evidence of financial impropriety emerges, he navigates the storm with calculated precision, offering a well-rehearsed apology that frames his actions as errors in judgment rather than outright corruption. The public, weary of endless political scandals, accepts his contrition, allowing him to resume his career with little more than a temporary setback. The fact that Butterthwaite can engage in theft and deception without facing meaningful consequences reinforces the play's cynical perspective on governance—where power is frequently acquired and maintained through manipulation rather than genuine merit. Fletcher McKernie characterizes Butterthwaite as someone who seeks absolute authority. His ambition drives him to overstep boundaries and become Napoleonic. His trajectory reflects a broader critique of a political culture that enables and even rewards those who prioritize personal gain over ethical leadership. According to Malick, "Butterthwaite falls because of his recklessness and refusal to conform to the established norms as well as because of the treachery and betrayal by some of his friends and colleagues" (Malick, 1995: 61).

Blomax's betrayal of Butterthwaite marks a pivotal moment that highlights the instability of political power. Like his play *Ironhand* (1989), this play "deals with politics in the raw – betrayals, lust for power, cunning and ambition – and the freedom of the individual in a changing and violent society" (Leach, 66). Butterthwaite sees himself as a dominant leader, akin to Napoleon, believing he can dictate terms without constraint. However, his understanding of authority is flawed, as he disregards the systems that uphold political structures. Blomax's decision to turn against him stems from the inherent conflict between Butterthwaite's pursuit of absolute control and the necessity of preserving institutional stability. As Butterthwaite grows increasingly reckless and abuses his position, he disrupts the equilibrium of the political order. His downfall ultimately results from his failure to recognize that power relies on the very individuals who sustain it.

Butterthwaite's arrogance blinds him. He assumes absolute authority and unquestioned loyalty. However, he fails to see that power relies on those who enforce it. Blomax, understanding this, seizes the opportunity. By aligning with those seeking order, he eliminates Butterthwaite and strengthens his own position. Political survival depends on strategy, not force. Blomax's betrayal highlights the transactional nature of political power. His decision is not personal but pragmatic. Supporting Butterthwaite any longer would be self-destructive. According to Javed Malick, "the action is made up of a complex network of intrigues and counter-intrigues, involving various degrees and forms of contradiction within and collaboration between the main groups" (Malick, 1990 217). The betrayal is inevitable, revealing the ruthless calculations that drive political manoeuvring. Butterthwaite's downfall is a cautionary tale about unchecked ambition and the illusion of absolute No leader, however formidable, can function outside the system that sustains them. Blomax's betrayal reinforces the supremacy of

institutions over individuals. Those who fail to recognize their dependence on power structures are inevitably consumed by them.

In his final speech, Butterthwaite's highlights the absurdity of the bureaucratic system. "I have lived, I have controlled, I have redistributed" (The Workhouse 125). He sees himself as a grand architect, yet his policies have failures and contradictions. He proposes replacing meagre workhouse meals with "a summation of largesse" which implies prioritizing appearances over social welfare (The Workhouse 125). This positions him as a quasi-messianic figure "Black Barnsley is my washpot" (The Workhouse 125). According to Wallis and Shepherd, Arden is making "a political point out of the contrast between exaggeration and realism" (Studying Plays 217-18). Arden satirizes bureaucratic officials through this speech, and his language reveals the hollowness of authority. It shows the disconnection between governance and the people. The Workhouse Donkey is more than just a story about local politics – it is a powerful critique of the failures and corruption that exist within all political systems. While Arden himself claimed that the play was specific to its setting, its themes resonate across different time periods and locations. By showing how political figures manipulate power for personal gain, Arden reveals the deeper problems within governance itself.

More than just an individual downfall, Butterthwaite's story highlights a systemic failure—one where moral compromises are not merely personal but institutionalized. The criticism of this system comes from Wellesley, fighting for the release of her father. "I don't have to continually involve myself in the curls and contortions of an extraordinary code of ethics" (The Workhouse 138). Butterthwaite's ability to thrive despite his vices suggests that the structures meant to uphold integrity in public office are either ineffectual or complicit. While his actions are deplorable, they are not anomalies; rather, they are symptomatic of a world in which ambition often trumps principle, and self-interest is masked as public service. Butterthwaite stands as a figure both condemned and untouchable.

His personal vice, gambling, may have been the trigger, but the real culprit is a political system that accommodates, excuses, and ultimately perpetuates such transgressions. The play leaves the audience with an unsettling realization: individuals like Butterthwaite do not just exist within the political realm—they thrive within it.

Butterthwaite is positioned as a middle-ranking official; he occupies a liminal space between the ruling elite and the working-class communities. This intermediary role makes him both a gatekeeper and a victim of the system. Arden's portrayal of Butterthwaite highlights the paradoxes of the middle class in a rigidly hierarchical society. He is neither entirely aligned with the upper echelons of power nor fully removed from the struggles of the working class. This duality makes him an essential figure in understanding how institutional structures maintain their dominance—not through sheer authoritarian control, but through the participation of individuals who, like Butterthwaite, uphold the system in the name of pragmatism. He does not actively seek to oppress the lower classes, yet his bureaucratic detachment ensures that their grievances are ignored or dismissed in favour of maintaining order and efficiency.

Butterthwaite's interactions with both his superiors and the working class highlight the contradictions of his position. To his higher-ups, he must uphold institutional policies, even if flawed, to protect his career and the system's stability. To the working class, he is a distant authority enforcing indifferent rules. This dynamic reveals how bureaucratic power shields itself from accountability. Arden critiques not only the institutions but also those who sustain them through compliance or resignation. Butterthwaite embodies the middle class's role in maintaining institutional inertia. His downfall stems less from personal failings than from being trapped in power struggles, where shifting alliances and betrayals determine public figures' fates. He illustrates how power perpetuates itself through willing or reluctant participation. His character serves as a poignant example of how even those who strive to uphold order can become casualties of a system rife with deceit and opportunism. For this reason, Arden writes "a play about imagination and spontaneity opposed to authority and triumphing over it" (Gaston, 162).

Butterthwaite is neither a straightforward antagonist nor entirely sympathetic. Instead, he embodies the impersonal, self-perpetuating nature of institutions. In an interview, Arden is challenged for refusing to provide a clear-cut answer for Butterthwaite's good and evil. Arden retorts:

I admire him in exactly the same way that one admires Richard III, or Tartuffe, or Volpone, and so on. There is a whole host of them. I think this is one of the things that the theatre offers. It is the saturnalia aspect of the theatre - the turning upside-down of accepted moral values. And that is something that is presided over, if you like, by the Dionysian spirit and is an essential part of re-creation (Gaston, 161).

Arden's reference to the "saturnalia aspect of the theatre," is an allusion to an ancient Roman festival where normal social rules and hierarchies were temporarily flipped upside down. Servants could mock their masters, chaos was allowed, and accepted moral codes were suspended. In the same way, theatre allows us to momentarily delight in bad behavior, to see the world turned upside down where the usual moral values (like honesty, kindness and justice) are subverted for entertainment. The mention of the "Dionysian spirit" reinforces this. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, chaos, and theatre, represents the wild, ecstatic, rule-breaking energy that comes alive in drama. For Arden, this kind of mischief and moral inversion—where we get to enjoy the antics of clever villains—is a fundamental and necessary part of theatre. For Arden, it's not just for fun; it's a vital part of the theatre's power to refresh, challenge, and "re-create" us by allowing us to experience this temporary freedom from normal moral constraints.

Therefore, Arden's idea is to critique the limits of institutional power; bureaucracies resist change, uphold outdated ideologies, and ignore the human cost of their policies. His character is a conduit for Arden's exploration of institutional rigidity. By the end of the play, the audience is left with a bleak yet realistic portrayal of political systems. Feng's resignation signifies the triumph of those adept at deceit over those who might possess genuine competence. The fact that Butterthwaite, despite his numerous ethical transgressions, remains largely unaffected underscores the play's commentary on the rewards of cunning and the

marginalization of integrity within the political sphere. Thus, Arden succeeds in exposing “Specific problems and issues impinging on the material and emotional life of the community were chosen as the main themes and were dramatised from an openly partisan standpoint without any recourse to liberal ambiguity in the name of art” (Malick, 2021: 53).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine how John Arden’s *The Workhouse Donkey* uses the setting of local government to explore political power, corruption, and class struggle in post-war Britain. The research focused on understanding how Arden presents local politics as a reflection of wider social conflict, exposing how public institutions can serve the interests of the powerful while neglecting the needs of the working class. The analysis of *The Workhouse Donkey* shows that Arden uses realistic characters, sharp dialogue, and detailed settings to reveal the hidden tensions within local politics. The play demonstrates how personal ambition and greed disrupt the possibility of honest governance. Arden presents local government as a place where political rivalry and self-interest replace social responsibility. The play also highlights the struggles of the working class, who suffer under systems that claim to serve them but often work against their needs.

Through this, Arden successfully uses drama as a tool to expose the failures of political systems and the lasting effects of class conflict. The findings of this study suggest that *The Workhouse Donkey* remains highly relevant today. Its focus on corruption, inequality, and the failure of leadership speaks to ongoing global issues in modern politics. The play shows how local government, though often overlooked in political theatre, is a critical space where decisions affecting everyday lives are made. Arden’s work reminds audiences and theatre-makers that drama can serve as a space to question authority and imagine better systems of governance. This study is limited by its focus on textual analysis. It examines the written play and Arden’s related essays but does not include analysis of specific performances or audience reactions. Additionally, the research focuses on *The Workhouse Donkey* and does not explore Arden’s full body of work in detail. While this allows for a focused study, it leaves room to explore how similar themes appear in his other plays or in the work of other playwrights dealing with local politics. Future research could explore live performances of

The Workhouse Donkey to understand how different productions interpret its political messages. Comparative studies could also be conducted between Arden’s work and other political dramas that deal with local government, both in Britain and internationally. Further research might investigate how contemporary playwrights are influenced by Arden’s methods and how modern political theatre continues to address themes of corruption and class conflict. John Arden’s *The Workhouse Donkey* stands as a powerful example of how theatre can reflect and critique the political realities of its time.

By exposing the hidden dynamics of local government, Arden encourages audiences to question who holds power and why. His work shows that political theatre can do more than entertain – it can challenge, reveal, and inspire change.

In a world where questions of corruption, inequality, and social struggle remain urgent, Arden's play continues to offer important insights for both scholars and theatre practitioners.

FURTHER STUDY

This research is still delayed, so further research is needed on the topic of Power, Corruption, and Class Struggle: John Arden's *The Workhouse Donkey* as a Political Examination of Local Government and Social Conflict in Post-War Britain in order to improve this research and add insights for readers

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