

The “Madman” Who Cures the Psychiatrist of Sanity in Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*

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Abstract:

My study on Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* raises issues that I believe are central in the play, namely the debate regarding such concepts as: reality, normality, madness, civilization, truth, right and wrong. I think Shaffer merely needed a background to uncover the relativity of these concepts and of the modern reality itself. Reality has no substance, is an illusion, this is what Martin Dysart, the main character of the play, discovers. Therefore he chooses to make the journey back - with the help of Alan Strang, another key character in the play - from modern society to the purity of perception, leaving behind all conventions.

Key words: reality, normality, victim, diegesis, “limit-modernist”

Peter Shaffer, like most playwrights of his generation, focuses his creative energy on the rebellion against social conformity, which is perceived to be the archenemy of creativity and individuality. Society is perceived, by these writers, as a sterile space filled with lies, falsity and immorality. So the battleground with modern society and its evils is transferred onto fiction. This is the reason their heroes are often teenagers in conflict with the older generations, as in Peter Shaffer’s *Five Finger Exercise*, where Clive is in permanent conflict with his father and the pseudo-values he stands for; or in *Billy the Liar* by Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse, in which Billy, the main character, creates for himself worlds of imagination, rejecting altogether the world of adults. In John Osborne’s plays (*Epitaph for George Dillon*, *Look Back in Anger*, *Inadmissible Evidence*, etc.) we find the same outline: the conflict between the main characters and the mediocrity of social life, which finally overpowers and defeats them.

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The drama developing in most of these plays and also their common feature is the feeling of entrapment between two worlds: the modern civilization and the world of imagination that the characters attempt to build for themselves; while they cannot escape the first, they often cannot make the latter solid enough to support their own weight.

In *Equus*, Peter Shaffer raises the same thematic concerns, represented under the form of several conflicts: the one between the material world and the world of imagination, accentuating the incompatibilities between them, both ontological and structural; between modern and ancient civilization; between sanity and insanity; between real and fake values; between light and darkness, etc. All these contradictory ideas are embodied in two symbolic characters, representing two different fictional realms: Alan Strang, the teenage “madman,” who is the ambassador of a carefully constructed world, “the place of Ha Ha,” but with a real geography (the stables and the field) and a real God, Equus; and Martin Dysart, the psychiatrist, the Priest of the Normal. Judging by his profession and role within the text, he seems to be the character responsible for restoring normality. But during the process of curing Alan, Dysart reaches the problematic core of the play: the unsubstantial concepts of reality and normality, which seem more and more inconsistent to him, as Alan’s reality becomes more and more concrete.

The characters’ journeys to and from “normality”

Alan Strang arrives in Dysart’s psychiatric care at Hesther Salomon’s intervention, after blinding six horses with a metal spike. Hesther, a friend of Martin’s, is one of the magistrates who tried Alan’s case. She considers Alan to be a highly disturbed young man in desperate need of Dysart’s expertise. At the beginning there is no communication between doctor and patient; Alan’s only response to Dysart’s questions consists of television jingles, as a way of pointing out the absurdity of the modern world the psychiatrist represents. He opens up to Martin only as Martin opens up to him.

The psychiatrist reaches him by using means typical for a detective story, recreating step by step Alan's background: he grew up in an environment of conflicting ideas, his mother being a fanatical Christian and his father an atheist; both his parents undermined each other's authority, confusing their child; he constructed his own reality as his parents did not provide him with a solid perception of the world. Then, other important episodes like the replacement of a picture representing the crucifixion of Jesus with the picture of a horse, his mother's stories (inspired by both Christian and pagan thought), the prohibitions imposed by his father, his job in an electronics store, where he met Jill, who got him his job at the stables, all crystallize more and more the geography of his reality. Dysart attempts to determine how all these factors could have driven Alan into blinding the horses. While trying to get to understand the boy's inner motivations, the psychiatrist also undergoes a process of transformation. This is a very short presentation of what happens in the play. But the author's focus is not on what happens.

Shaffer needed merely a background for the real characters of the play, which are the concepts of reality, truth, normality, right and wrong, etc. The author brought them on stage in order to uncover their relativity and also of the modern reality itself. Reality has no substance, it is an illusion. People set up conventions in order to feel something concrete and then they fool themselves that these conventions make up the substance of reality. But what people actually do is deceive themselves and step further and further into a fictitious universe of their own making.

By trying to bring Alan Strang into the "normal" world Dysart makes a life-turning discovery. What he realizes is that if you take away the web of conventions, what you are left with is nothing. So this prompts him to find out some answers for himself:

Why? Moments snap together like magnets, forging a chain of shackles. Why? I can trace them. I can even, with time, pull them apart again. But why, at the start, they were ever magnetized at all – just those particular moments of experience and no others – I don't know. And nor does anyone else. Yet if I don't know – if I can never know that – then what am I doing here? I don't mean clinically doing or socially doing – I

mean *fundamentally*! These questions, these Whys are fundamental – yet they have no place in a consulting room. So then, do I? ... This is the feeling more and more with me – No Place. Displacement... (Shaffer 268)

So, instead of watching Alan's expected journey to normality, the spectator/reader discovers that Alan is not the only character in motion, but Dysart is too. He aims to return to the purity of perception, leaving behind all that is artificial and all the common places of thought by stripping off all social conventionalities.

What makes Alan the perfect character to help Dysart is the fact that he lacks the code of normality, which makes him unable to grasp the modern world:

He can hardly read. He knows no physics or engineering to make the world real for him. No paintings to show him how others have enjoyed it. No music except television jingles. No history except tales from a desperate mother. No friends. Not one kid to give him a joke, or make him know himself more moderately. He's a modern citizen for whom society doesn't exist. (Shaffer 273)

However, this lack of understanding goes both ways, as the modern world is also unable to decipher the logic of Alan's actions.

The victim-victimizer dynamics

At the beginning of the play, when Alan is placed under the psychiatric care of Martin Dysart, after blinding the horses, he is presented as a violent, deeply disturbed young man, whose actions seem to be both cruel and illogical. But right after Alan is presented as a victimizer, Martin has a dream that shifts the entire perspective:

That night I had a very explicit dream. In it I am a chief priest in Homeric Greece. I'm wearing a wide gold mask (...) I'm officiating at some immensely important ritual sacrifice (...) The sacrifice is a herd of children (...) On either side of me stand two assistant priests, and absolutely tireless. As each child steps forward, they grab it from behind and throw it over the stone (...) And with each victim, it's getting worse. My face is going green behind the mask. Of course I redouble my efforts to look professional –

cutting and snipping for all I'm worth: mainly because I know that if ever those two assistants so much as glimpse my distress – and the implied doubt that this repetitive and smelly work is doing any social good at all – I will be the next across the stone. And then, of course – the damn mask begins to slip... (Shaffer 216-217).

After confessing his dream to the audience, he tells Hesther that it was Alan's face he saw on every victim across the stone. So, from the position of the victimizer, Alan is placed on the one of the victim, and Dysart himself appears as the executioner who sacrifices Alan on the altar of the Normal:

The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes – all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. It both sustains and kills – like a God. It is the ordinary made beautiful; it is also the Average made lethal. The Normal is the indispensable, murderous God of Health and I am his Priest. My tools are very delicate. My compassion is honest. I have honestly assisted children in this room. I have talked away terrors and relieved many agonies. But also – beyond question – I have cut from them parts of individuality repugnant to this God, in both his aspects. Parts sacred to rarer and more wonderful Gods. And at what length... Sacrifices to Zeus took at the most, surely, sixty seconds each. Sacrifices to the Normal can take as long as sixty months. (Shaffer 257)

The Normal seems to be the most demanding God of all, swallowing every part of people's individuality and modern society is his hunting ground. Dysart feels like a pawn in this evil game and after having had this revelation he starts thinking that the price to pay is too high. This is the moment his social mask begins to slip and he realizes that he wants to exit this world.

Alan's journey is backwards. Alan's world is set until he starts dating Jill, but from there on everything changes for him. They go to watch an erotic movie and then they return to the stables to make love. That is the moment when the two realities overlap: Alan's sacred reality ruled by God Equus (i.e. "horse" in Latin) and the modern civilization with its temptress, Jill. He desires Jill, but he cannot perceive her, as Equus keeps getting in the way:

ALAN [to DYSART]: I couldn't... see her.

DYSART: What do you mean?

ALAN [to DYSART]: Only Him. Every time I kissed her – He was in the way.

ALAN: (...) When I shut my eyes, I saw Him at once. The streaks on his belly... [with more desperation] I couldn't feel her flesh at all! I wanted the foam off his neck. His sweaty hide. Not flesh. Hide! Horse-hide!... Then I couldn't even kiss her. (Shaffer 294-295).

The two realities clash together, his erotic imagery goes into contradiction with the imagery of the world he had built for himself and he feels like he is about to defile his Temple. That is why he cannot perform erotically. He feels trapped between two worlds: his own, with mechanisms borrowed from the ancient societies, and the one of civilization that has just become enticing to him because of its ambassador, Jill.

In this text Jill's role resembles the one of the harlot in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, who draws Enkidu into the civilized world. Also in the *Bible*, Eve is responsible for the descent from Eden into the world of pain and suffering. In these texts the woman has a double symbolism: she is both an initiator and a vitiator.

Although in this text Jill failed to extract him from his world, what she managed to do, however, was create tension, which will ultimately make him turn against his own beliefs. Alan becomes angry, sends Jill away, and as anger triggers violence, he channels it towards the horses. René Girard underlines the sacred character of the victim and its innocence. So Alan's behavior is justified if we apply the logic of ancient ritualistic sacrifices. But in this case, Alan's act is ambivalent: rage channeled towards the innocent and also the intention of freeing himself from the world he had created, by turning against its God. This act resembles in symbolism the crucifixion of Jesus – parallels between Equus and Jesus are drawn within the text.

Alan's actions however seem meaningless and plain mad in the outlines of modern society. Girard provides an explanation: the modern society fails to perceive the ritualistic background because it lacks the idea of Divinity. (Girard 15) So if this is taken

out of the equation, then the ritualistic sacrifice is perceived as madness, because it makes no sense. This explains why the modern society perceives Alan to be mad and labels him as such. Dysart is able to put things in perspective as he gains access to the mechanisms and logic of ancient societies.

The final push to “normality” is given to Alan by Dysart:

I'll heal the rash on his body. I'll erase the welts cut into his mind by flying manes. When that's done, I'll set him on a nice mini-scooter and send him pattering off into the Normal world where animals are treated properly: Made extinct, or put into servitude, or tethered all their lives in dim light, just to feed it! I'll give him the good Normal world where we're tethered beside them – blinking our nights away in a non-stop drench of cathode-ray over our shriveling heads! I'll take away his field of Ha Ha, and give him Normal places for his ecstasy – multi-lane highways driven through the guts of cities, extinguishing Place altogether, even the idea of Place! He'll trot on his metal pony tamely through the concrete evening – and one thing I promise you: he will never touch hide again! With any luck his private parts will come to feel as plastic to him as the products of the factory to which he will almost certainly be sent. Who knows? He might even come to find sex funny. Bit of grunt funny. Trampled and furtive and entirely in control. Hopefully he'll feel nothing at his fork but Approved Flesh. I doubt, however, with much passion!... Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created. (Shaffer 299-300).

From Dysart's sarcastic discourse at the end of the play we understand that his act of bringing Alan to “normality” is nothing but a reenactment of his dream, a symbolic sacrifice which he has to perform in order to enter his patient's world, just like Alan had to sacrifice the horses in order to exit.

A “limit-modernist” text?

In regard to the construction of the play, one can easily notice a shift from mimesis to diegesis. The play begins with Dysart addressing the audience and there are

several more instances when he confesses directly to the audience, acknowledging the spectators' presence and offering them a position of both observers and participants: "The thing is, I'm desperate...". The frame of the play is narrative: "I'm sorry. I'm not making much sense. Let me start properly; in order. It began one Monday last month, with Hesther's visit" (Shaffer 210).

The impression this character leaves is that of a subjective narrator who stages his own limited perspective and account of the events, doubled by his own thoughts and concerns. He uses mimesis just like a narrator does in rendering dialogues between the other characters. We have unlimited access to Martin Dysart's thoughts, doubts, insecurities (as he expresses them directly to the audience), but we cannot reach the other characters at that same depth because they seem to be nothing more than instruments used by Dysart in order to reenact the events. That is why the other characters come forward, play their parts, and then they resume their place on a bench and expect their turn again, like actors in Martin's play.

By unveiling Alan's reality little by little through Dysart's reconstructing efforts, the author places the content of the play into a modernist matrix. We easily recognize the *epistemological dominant*, as described by Brian McHale (McHale 9). But, although Dysart's attempts to enter Alan's world and understand it are typically epistemological in nature, they prompt Dysart into creating his own reality, based on Alan's. This way the *epistemological dominant* makes way for the *ontological one*, marked at the end of the play by Dysart's questions, which indicate the shift (McHale 10): "What way is this? What dark is this?..."(Shaffer 301)

The main character's need to create himself another world is provided by the incapability of the modern world to give an answer to the cognitive questions stated by him at the beginning of the play. The shift towards the *ontological dominant* appears necessary in this context. The modernist matrix seems insufficient and the need for postmodernist solutions is therefore created.

Alan's projected world reminds Dysart of his own, which resurfaces through repetitive dreams and warns the psychiatrist about the implications of his job. Of

course, the Ancient Greece Dysart refers to is, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, part history, part invention. But for the character it becomes more and more real, as he invests in it.

Reaching the end of the play, I find deeply significant the fact that we do not hear the voice of the marginal, the madman, trying to legitimize his reality. We hear instead the voice of the psychiatrist, who not only understands the reality of the madman, but seeks shelter in it and thus legitimizes it. It's like a reverse *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, from the perspective of the psychiatrist. Here, the voice of the marginal is encapsulated in the psychiatrist's discourse. The implications are far reaching because, surprisingly, the ontological perspective is legitimized by using means that are typical for the epistemological perspective. I think this is what Brian McHale would call a massive, maybe even fatal, hemorrhage of modernist poetics.

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