Who Receives a Therapy in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*?

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Abstract: Twentieth century has become a pivotal period in the production of literary works that emphasise human beings' inadequacy to experience what they sincerely wish for. Peter Shaffer (1926-2016), an English playwright with an acute sense of understanding of human nature, is one of the authors of the twentieth century. His careful examination and empirical observation of people around him helped him to write *Equus* (1973), a remarkable play about 17-year-old Alan Strang and his doctor, a child psychiatrist Martin Dysart. The play mainly focuses on people's inability to give ear to their sincere emotions and desires. Alan's violent acts with his horse lead him to meet Dysart and, this consequently, leads to Dysart's re-evaluation of his current way of life. This study will develop a discussion about who receives a psychiatric therapy in the play? Is it Alan, who harshly harms his horse, Dysart, who symbolically empties children's insides, or the society that imposes these exceptionally harsh deeds on the individuals?

Keywords: Peter Shaffer, *Equus*, modern man, English drama

INTRODUCTION

Peter Shaffer (1926-2016), a well-known and much applauded English playwright of the 20th century, created plays through which he invoked intellectual concerns in his audience. Similar to the Brechtian Epic Theatre effect on the audience that is "intellectually involved" in the play (Kaya 2020, 57), Shaffer's plays invite the audience to think about themselves in the roles shown on the stage. In his plays, Shaffer brings to mind such notions like familial peace, lack of passion in a routine life, human beings' desire to seem different than they are in reality or high expectations and, at the same time, he questions these notions. Being highly motivated by the success of his first play *The Salt Land* (1955), Shaffer decided to follow his career in theatre. His plays bring Shaffer important awards and some of his plays were

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successfully adapted into films. One of these inspiring and questioning plays is *Equus* (1973), which brought several significant awards to Shaffer within one year, 1975. Shaffer wrote the play after he heard about a 17-year-old young man's violent crime in which six horses were involved. This event made Shaffer question the motive of the boy to behave in this way. Thus, the play was written, in which a child psychiatrist Martin Dysart has several therapy sessions with 17-year-old Alan Strang in order to understand the boy's motive to blind his horses.

The play largely employs the Greek tragedy elements, which, according to Klein (1993, 118) are used to make the audience discover the story in the play. Actually, these references to the Greek tragedy make the reader notice the elements of Greek mythology in the play, particularly two Greek gods, Apollo and Dionysus. One of the twelve Olympian gods, Apollo, is the god of archery, music, dance, truth, medicine and diseases. Apollo symbolises order, divine law, intellect and harmony. Apollo's antithesis, Dionysus is the god of wine, fertility, insanity, ritual madness, festivals, and theatre. In other words, Dionysus is regarded as the god of freedom. According to Greek mythology, yet, both are the sons of Zeus, the king of the gods on Mount Olympus. Alan Strang, with his irrepressible desire to worship his horse Equus, displays outlandish acts by revealing his most intimate and hidden instincts. On the other hand, there is Dysart, with his deep attachment to his profession and intellect. So while it is quite clear that Alan is close to Dionysus and Dysart to Apollo, it can be argued that Dysart, though subconsciously, incorporates both gods. This article will uncover Dysart's Dionysian characteristics by claiming that Alan's case is the turning point for Dysart. Dysart's psychological transformation from an ordinary doctor into a passionate person will be analysed in three main aspects: professional doubts, beliefs, and social restrictions.

DYSART'S CHANGE

Alan's case awakens a sense of a new understanding in Dysart; a new understanding of human beings. Thus, Alan with his bizarre crime – blinding the horses in a riding stable – is the catalyst (Plunka 1988, 153). The working mechanism of Alan's mind throws Dysart into a whirl of various questioning schemes after which Dysart starts to see the inevitability and necessity of passion for a human being. What is more, this passion makes itself evident in the most bizarre ways.

Actually, Dysart has his doubts about his profession from the beginning: “The doubts have been there for years, piling up steadily in this dreary place. It’s only the extremity of this case that’s made them active.” (Shaffer 2005, 210) Apparently, Dysart admits the accumulation of thoughts inciting him to question his job. Alan’s extraordinary expression of his passion reminds Dysart of these thoughts. Dysart even calls this period in his profession a “professional menopause” (Ibid, 217). Dysart, as a child psychiatrist, loses his main function of remedying children because his ability to produce sensible decisions in his work is diminished by Alan’s glance. “He has the strangest stare I ever met.” (Ibid, 218) Dysart is affected by Alan’s way of looking at him, because Alan’s eyes glare with passion, a feeling so rare in Dysart’s surroundings. Thus, Dysart’s doubts about his job are just activated because there has been a light indication of his questioning nature hitherto.

Every meeting with Alan throws Dysart into an uneasy feeling the reason of which is hardly understandable for the doctor: “It’s exactly like being accused. Violently accused. But what of?” (Shaffer 2005, 218) Dysart starts to feel that there is something missing in him and Alan instinctively feels it. Being a psychiatrist, Dysart wants to know this gratuitous lose of self-confidence and his inability to find the reason makes him question his professional skills. In other words, Dysart subconsciously leads himself into a kind of therapy to find out the cause of his uneasiness. Eventually, his dream provides some clues to his questions about his job. In his dream, he is a chief priest in Greece and he wears a mask. His job is to sever the main inner organs of children. In fact, Dysart’s dream reveals his hidden knowledge about his job as a child psychiatrist – standardizing children according to social norms. Dysart’s job is to erase all the unique colours of the children that mark their individuality and difference. His job is to train their minds work in the same direction and with the identical mechanisms. These unique colours are blindly accepted as the symptoms of insanity which should be treated and got rid of as soon as possible. And passion for something is one of the most intensive and, consequently, dangerous symptoms in a human being, especially in children. Passion has been accepted as a strong feeling that diverts a human being from the mainstream ideology. This neatly ordered and absolutely sterile world cannot accommodate passionate people with their so-called weird behaviour. Dysart’s job is precisely this – guaranteeing the order in the world and predictability of people.

However, what about Dysart's uniqueness? Alan makes Dysart dig out something that is specific to him only, something that is not common.

Dysart starts elaborating on the concept of passion and the ways of expressing it. Alan's limited circumstances to practice his pseudo-religious passion make Dysart feel a kind of admiration for him:

> He lives *one hour* every three weeks – howling in a mist. And after the service kneels to a slave who stands over him obviously and unthrowably his master. With my body I thee worship! … Many men have less vital with their wives. (Shaffer 2005, 273)

Dysart's sagacious evaluation of Alan's passionate ritual with the horse depicts Dysart's understanding of Alan's needs. In fact, Alan is not a specific case in this regard; Dysart understands that most of people are devoid of such freedom. It is freedom of expression, freedom to break free from everything that suffocates a human being. It is a volcanic eruption and the molten lava is the repressed passion, fear, emotions, and desires. The more Dysart plunges into Alan's case, the more he abhors his profession the main aim of which is to mould individuals into an appropriate norm for the society. As MacMurraugh-Kavanagh (1998, 90) states, in this way, these individuals will not divert from normal behaviour. Dysart's considerable irritation with the function of his therapies, though quite suppressed during the day, becomes visible in his dream in which he has a green face.

Being an absolute Apollo-like doctor, who delivers medicine and treats sick people, Dysart becomes aware of a Dionysus inside him. He has always been a psychiatrist whose main job was to suppress these Dionysus-like attitudes in people. This time, however, the case is his mental mechanism. Contrary to Alan, who is not aware of what he goes through when he creates his own god and worships him, Dysart is absolutely conscious of what is going on: "But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it." (Shaffer 2005, 274) Dysart is aware of not only his lack of passion, but also of the reasons behind this lack. And this complete knowledge of all sides of the situation drives Dysart into the sense of envy. It is where Dysart's Apollo-like function is threatened because what Dysart actually wants is ignorance, which is bliss in this case. Indeed, by treating Alan, Dysart tries to eliminate this ignorance in Alan by filling it with knowledge. Alan should know what will happen if he goes on with his bizarre nightly going out, if he goes on worshipping a horse, if he does not healthily

accommodate himself into his social environment. This is precisely what Dysart's job is – killing this blissful ignorance and bringing fear and intimidation instead. Yet, Dysart does not repress the Dionysus in him from now on. He knows that a fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian features can give birth to a more coherent and mentally healthy individual because, as Erdem Ayyıldız (2019, 73) claims, if Dionysian elements are suppressed, creativity is also under threat. A small scene from Dysart's routine evening with his wife reveals that there is a gradual awakening of a Dionysus inside Dysart:

> Occasionally, I still trail a faint scent of my enthusiasm across her path. I pass her a picture of the sacred acrobats of Crete leaping through the horns of running bulls – and she'll say: 'Och, Martin, what an *absurred* thing to be doing! The Highland Games, now there's *norrmal* sport!' (Shaffer 2005, 253)

Similar to the meaning of his dream, Dysart's choice of pictures also reveals his desire to experience something out of order, something that can make his heart leap with joy. Burying himself into books about the primitive Greece is not satisfying for Dysart anymore. Dysart's sterile and ordinary existence is incomparable with what Alan has; Alan is free to ride a horse for several hours in a week, through which he profoundly satisfies his passion. Dysart's realisation of the fact that books about primitive Greece are not enough to add meaning to his life turns on in his mind after he meets Alan. It is the experience of physicality, as MacMurraugh-Kavanagh (1998, 91) states, that healthily pacifies the strike of passion.

Eventually, Dysart starts to think whether he should set Alan "free" from his violent tendency to act in an extraordinary manner. He understands that freeing Alan actually means imprisoning him; it is putting him into a frame of socially accepted behaviour: "When Equus leaves – if he leaves at all – it will be with your intestines in his teeth." (Shaffer 2005, 299) Equus' leaving, in this case, means the withering of a human's soul, leaving behind a dry shell, colourless human body. For Dysart, as MacMurraugh-Kavanagh (1998, 95) correctly states, getting rid of Equus is exorcising his own individuality; an individuality that Dysart re-gained, or started to possess, after his meeting with Alan. Dysart says: "There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it never comes out." (Shaffer 2005, 301) These two ambivalent sentences suggest various interpretations, in fact. It might mean Dysart's irrepressible aspirations with reference to his following

his passion; he will try to find out a way to satisfy his desires. Or, it might mean his inability to behave in the same way as Alan has done; Dysart now knows that passion is an indispensible element in a human being's life. However, can he integrate a passionate life and his profession? In other words, Dysart is in an inner conflict between his reason and his instincts (MacMurraugh-Kavanagh 1998, 102). Apollo and Dionysus are struggling with each other to possess Dysart's soul.

Besides the re-evaluation of the function of his profession, Dysart also lapses into a Nietzschean–like "God is dead" mood after his therapies with Alan. Apparently, his deity is the notion of "normality", which is shattered because of Alan's case. Dysart realises that his god does not satisfy his needs and that he feels emptiness in his existence. If compared to Alan, Dysart's spiritual strength is impeded by his "normalcy", which he, in turn, imposes on other people. A pervasive analysis of the details of Alan's quasi-religious rituals with the horse enthrals Dysart so much that he necessarily compares them with his own behaviours: "I watch that woman knitting, night after night – a woman I haven't kissed in six years – and he stands in the dark for an hour, sucking the sweat off his God's hairy cheek!" (Shaffer 2005, 275) Dysart's devaluation if his wife, his alienation from her becomes evident in his poignant phrase "that woman", especially in the same statement with the phrase "his God". The details of Alan's worshipping rituals open up through Dysart's inner communication in which he depicts the breakdown of his beliefs. He becomes particularly dubious about the notion of being normal, which throws him into an impoverished state of observing a wife whom he has not touched for six years.

Another concept of deity for Dysart – Greek mythology – has always taken a role of soothing and imagining. It has become a realm of symbols of freedom and freshness. Interest in Greek mythology can be explained as Dysart's craving for something unexplainable, dark, and inexperienced (MacMurraugh-Kavanagh 1998, 83). However, even the trip to the land of this mystery requires one to have a strict planning and arrangement, which intensifies Dysart's suffocation in his profession and modern world:

> Such wild returns I make to the womb of civilisation. Three weeks a year in the Peloponnese, every bed booked in advance, every meal paid for by vouchers, cautious jaunts in hired Fiats, suitcase crammed with Kao-Pectate! Such a fantastic surrender to the primitive (Shaffer 2005, 274).

Thus, Dysart's ambition to enjoy the mystery of Greek mythology is desperately flattened by the pedantic scheduling of every step. Dysart feels that even this mythological world is somewhere among the modern every day routines. In other words, reaching Greece is not something that can satisfy his passionate feelings in life. Indeed, what Dysart comes to understand is the idea that a person can satisfy his/her passion everywhere, without even trying to reach it. It is something that lies within each person; he/she needs only to discover the ways leading to it, just like Alan does. "The sharp chain" (Shaffer 2005, 301) of passion is Dysart's new possession from now on. It is both a hard job to have it and a satisfying feeling to experience. On the one hand, it requires one to shatter the social boundaries and appear in a nearly mad form in front of the others, just like Alan does. Yet, on the other hand, it makes one feel that he/she does something that he/she wants sincerely.

Not surprisingly, Dysart starts to understand that social conventions are the chains that actually specify the frame into which a person should fit. Otherwise, he/she becomes the misfit, a person with strange behaviour. In other words, the people who try to fit into these social frames are devoid of feeling and instincts (Plunka 1988, 161). Dysart finds a term to compensate for the loss of these feelings and instincts: "The *extremity* is the point!" (Shaffer 2005, 210) It is this extremity, this desire to shatter this social frame that people need to feel that Alan's behaviour is actually quite explainable. Alan's violent act is the burst of all this energy that has been repressed by this social frame. For Dysart, Alan has become an important figure because he shows the need for passion and the way how to satisfy that passion. Dysart says: "But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it." (Ibid, 274) Dysart resents Alan's freedom to express his deficiency whereas Dysart does not even acknowledge that he has this deficiency. Dysart resents Alan's ability to listen to his hidden and repressed world within him and his ability to understand it. Meanwhile, such people like Dysart pretend to be quite satisfied with what they have. In other words, while Dysart is content to be just Apollo, Alan discovers the beauty, strength, passion, and importance of Dionysus. As MacMurraugh-Kavanagh (1998, 94) states, the modern world leads people to the verge of bankruptcy in relation to spirituality, instincts and passion. Moreover, those people who react to such an ambiance by

creating their own means of survival are labelled as insane. On the contrary, those individuals who submit themselves to the strict precepts of civic codes and perform their lethal roles given to them by such a society are regarded as normal.

CONCLUSION

Shaffer's play is a window onto the actual human nature which is like a volcano, always ready to explode. Through Dysart's thoughts and exclamations, it is possible to understand the reasons for Alan's violence towards the horses. Although on the stage, the audience sees Dysart and Alan, the main role in this play belongs to society. Dysart's therapy with Alan is directed not only at Alan, but also at Dysart and at the society by which he is shaped. The audience, in fact, is invited to elaborate on the play and go through a reflexive thinking process. Thus, Dysart's therapy is channelled towards the social strata that tend to impose strict norms on its members. The play prefigures human beings' state of mind under the strong social dictates. What Dysart goes through is his vision of the world because presumably most of the people who live under strict social norms will experience the burst of energy that has been accumulated throughout years.

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