Abstract

Peter Shaffer (1926-2016) is an English playwright and award winning plays namely as Equus, Amadeus, The Royal Hunt of the Sun, The Private Ear, The Public Eye and The Salt Land. He experimented with various forms to convey his messages to his readers. Shaffer borrowed many stage techniques from Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, particularly in his plays Equus and The Royal Hunt of the Sun. He used certain stage techniques to increase the dramatic effect on stage: sounds, period costumes, masks, lightning, mime, chorus, gesture and physical language to create a ritualistic experience which could surround the audience. Equus (1973), a major return of Shaffer’s ritualistic drama in his career, won Shaffer the 1975 Tony Award for Best Play. The story of Equus is based on the relationship between a young boy, Alan Strang, who has blinded six horses and his psychiatrist, Dysart. Within a ritualistic staging, Shaffer not only questions the dilemmas of the British people caused during the transition from the traditional Victorian norms to the advanced modern society but also presents the themes of human dilemma, worship, freedom, passion and normality. This study involves the thematic analysis of the striking play Equus by Shaffer, who brings his messages on an innovative platform with unique stage techniques for his audience’s objective evaluation.

Keywords: ritualistic drama, worship, passion, normalcy, objective evaluation, Equus

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EQUUS: ALAN’IN MODERN TANRISI

Özet


Anahtar sözcükler: ayinsel drama, tapınma, tutku, normallik, objektif değerlendirme, Equus

1. Introduction

Peter Shaffer was born in 1926 in Liverpool England. He graduated from History at the University of Cambridge. Before becoming a famous playwright, he worked as a coal miner, clerk and assistant at libraries. Peter Shaffer wrote many plays such as Amadeus, The Royal Hunt of the Sun, The Private Ear, The Public Eye, The Salt Land and Equus.

Premiered in 1973, Equus, won Peter Shaffer a universal enthusiasm of the public and the praise of the critics (Klein, 1993: 3). The play is considered to be one of the most controversial plays with its disturbing story derived from a real life story in English literature. Shaffer criticizes the conflicts of human beings in a scientific and mechanical age, which transforms men into senseless individuals that have lost the sense of passion. In Equus, Peter Shaffer illustrates the British society that faced a transition from traditional Victorian traditions to the modern age that started in 1960s. The period, when Equus was published, was under the impacts of social and economic changes, particularly in terms of the innovations in technology and religious doubts in 1960s (Marwick, 1990: 110). Sexual freedom, liberalism, abortions and media brought a huge gap between the older traditional Victorian generations and the younger modern members of the society (Marwick, 1990: 145). The play Equus presents Shaffer’s themes (worship, freedom, passion and normalcy) indicating the dilemmas of transition period within a story of the treatment of a young boy, who has blinded six horses with a spur, at a hospital.

2. Thematic Analysis of Equus

The play includes two acts and two protagonists: Alan and Dysart. Alan Strang is a seventeen-year-old boy, who has been remitted to a psychiatric hospital after blinding six horses. His psychiatrist, Dysart, is a well-educated child-psychiatrist, who during his treatments
realizes his own doubts about his professional and personal life. Alan Strang comes from a middle-class English family in which Dora Strang, a religious mother, and Frank Strang, an atheist father, have clashed with each other while raising their only son.

The first theme in the play is the human dilemma in individuals’ lives in modern world. Alan’s parents, Dora and Frank, are the perfect examples of the dilemma between Victorian traditional norms and modern beliefs of a typical British family. Dora is a highly religious ‘middle-aged ex-school teacher’ (Shaffer, 1973: 28). Alan’s father, Frank, labeled by Dysart as an ‘Old-type Socialist’ (Shaffer, 1973: 28), is an atheist who is ignorant to his family. Both Dora and Frank are questioned by Dysart during the treatment process and are considered by Dysart as the reasons of Alan’s crime.

One of the most evident reasons why Dysart indicates that Frank is the leading figure of Alan’s crime is highlighted during the sessions of the psychiatrist with his parents. In the session, the reader learns that Frank has forbidden his son to watch television, claiming that it causes stupidity for young people:

Frank: You sit in front of that thing long enough; you’ll become stupid for life – like most of the population. [To Alan.] The thing is, it’s a swiz. It seems to be offering you something, but actually it’s taking something away. Your intelligence and your concentration, every minute you watch it. (Shaffer, 1973: 27).

Frank has always wished his son to read books instead of watching television, yet only for his selfish ends: ‘You the son of a printer, and never opening a book! If all the world was like you, I’d be out of a job’ (Shaffer, 1973: 27). It is obvious that Alan is afraid of his father and sees him as a god-like tyrant who only creates rules (Plunka, 1988: 153-4) while he spends almost all his time with his mother, who has let Alan watch television at the neighbor’s house without his father’s knowledge.

Another clash between Dora and Frank is based on their perception of ‘sex’. For Dora, sex should be spiritual rather than physical and she warns Alan about ‘magazines and dirty books’:

Dora: That sex is not just a biological matter, but spiritual as well. That if God willed, he would fall in love one day. That his task was to prepare himself for the most important happening of his life. And after that, if he was lucky, he might come to know a higher love still…… (Shaffer, 1973: 35).

As described by Alan, his first encounter with a horse, Trojan, involved sexual feeling at the age of six. However, his experience was disturbed by Frank who pulled him down. Alan ‘could have bashed him [Frank]’ (Shaffer, 1973: 48) and this experience initiated a sexual repression on the boy. The attitudes of Dora and Frank have caused Alan to repress his sexual desires in his adolescence period, which led to sexual repressions and frustrations as a young man. Notwithstanding, when Alan caught Frank at a pornographic movie at a local picture house, he realized that his mother was averse to sex. These conflicts created the obsession of Alan to the horses in the stable he works at to fulfill his love. That is why; Alan concludes about the privacy of sexual desires and refuses to ride Nugget when others are nearby.
For Frank, Dora is the only reason of Alan’s crime because he believes religion is at the root of Alan’s mental problem. For, acting against Frank’s wishes, Dora had spent much time reading the boy stories from the Bible and for Frank this confused the young boy’s mind:

Frank: ….A boy spends night after night having this stuff read to him: an innocent man tortured to death – thorns driven into his head – nails into his hands – a spear jammed through his ribs. It can mark anyone for life, that kind of thing. I’m not joking. The boy was absolutely fascinated by all that. He was always mooning over religious pictures. I mean real kinky ones, if you receive my meaning. I had to put a stop to it once or twice! ….(Shaffer, 1973: 34).

On the other hand, Dora blames the devil for Alan’s psychological problems and his crime:

Dora: Let me tell you something. We’re not criminals. We’ve done nothing wrong. We loved Alan. We gave him the best love we could. All right, we quarrel sometimes – all parents quarrel – we always make it up…Whatever’s happened has happened because of Alan. Alan is himself. Every soul is itself. If you added up everything we ever did to him, from his first day on earth to this, you wouldn’t find why he did this terrible thing – because that’s him. Not just all of or things added up…I only knew he was my little Alan, and then the Devil came. (Shaffer, 1973: 78).

The power struggle between Dora and Frank while raising Alan has led the boy to escape to the stables and develop a sense of passion for the horse, Nugget. Having been confused mentally, Alan created a ‘god’ and prepared rituals to worship his god on Saturday nights at the stables. In his religious ceremonies in the stable with the horses, particularly Nugget, Alan’s impulses and sexual desires were associated with the horse, as told by his mother in bedtime stories: ‘Behold – I give you Equus, the only begotten son!’ (Shaffer, 1973: 51).

Influenced by his mother who told the story of the first appearance of Christian cavalry united with the horse, Prince, in the New World (Shaffer, 1973: 30), Alan becomes obsessed with the idea of becoming one with Nugget. Attracted by her mother’s teachings of ‘equitation’ (the Latin word for horse) (Shaffer, 1973: 32), Alan has developed a belief that Equus is his god and it is also the son of God, like Jesus Christ.

Alan’s diagnosis is simple: his perception of religion and sexuality was intermingled which led him suffer from delusions and have a spiritual pleasure with the horses. He has searched for an identity and becomes ‘a spiritual communion with a personal god’ (Plunka: 155). For Dysart, the complicated family background of Alan and his repressed passion have caused the typical symptoms of a mentally disordered mind: alienation, divided self and fantasies.

Between these two opposing forces of his life, Alan has started to believe that horses are his god, which is clarified throughout the end of the first act. The audience witnesses important events that have shaped Alan’s pathological obsessive religious fascination with the horse Nugget. The flashbacks within the flow of the action present the journey into the mind of a boy, who has developed a religious obsession with the horse.
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The religious education of his mother has led him to unite the love of Christ with that of Equus. When he was a boy, his father gave him a picture of a horse whose eyes were ‘staring at you’ (Shaffer, 1973: 40), yet as he witnessed Alan praying in front of it by calling it Prince, Frank got furious and Alan replaced the picture with the picture of Christ loaded with chains on his way to Cavalry (Shaffer, 1973: 44). Alan also has considered the stable of the horses as his temple or ‘the Holy of Hollies’ (Shaffer, 1973: 67), where his unsuccessful sexual encounter with Jill in the stable has been resulted with frustration. On the night of his crime, Alan kneels on the stable floor and asks for forgiveness from Equus, his god (Plunka, 1988: 171). At the end, he has blinded six horses for two reasons: one reason is the frustration that he had when he was his father at a pornographic movie. Realizing the secrets of his father, he decided to have a secret relation with Jill. However, as he experiences a kind of frustration because of his impotence, it leads him to crime. Secondly, Alan’s blinding the horses seems to be related to his god, Equus (Klein, 1993: 106). It can be concluded that Alan could not stand the fact that ‘God’ sees him doing ‘it’ with someone else, with a girl. Besides, as told in terms of Dora’s Christianity, there is a punishing God, which implies the ‘merciless’ god of Alan in the stables (Kavanagh, 1997: 112) as indicated in the below sample:

Dysart (gently): What was it? You couldn’t? Though you wanted to very much?

Alan (to Dysart): I couldn’t … see her.

Dysart: What do you mean?

Alan (to Dysart): Only Him. Every time I kissed her – He [Equus] was in the way.

(Shaffer, 1973: 102).

That’s why, after his sexual affair with Jill, Alan kneels down before Nugget and asks for forgiveness: ‘Equus the Kind…The Merciful! …Forgive me!’ (Shaffer, 1973: 104).

In Act I, Peter Shaffer presents his second theme: worship and the human need for a religious worship, which can be merely detrimental as fulfilling. For centuries, the idea of worship has been associated with primitivism. In primitive cultures, men worshipped animals and gods. Worships were accompanied by rituals in history and Equus is considered to be a religious play which questions the concept of worshipping and rituals with its striking scenes. Alan in the play worships ‘Equus’, the image of Christ perceived by Alan in his fantasies. During the treatment, the audience/learner learns about secret ‘sexy’ (Shaffer, 1973: 47) night rides of Alan and his organized rituals. At nights, Alan ‘puts on his [Nugget] sandals’; ‘takes it to the path’; ‘takes off his own clothes’; ‘touches the horse and gives it a lump of sugar as ‘His [Christ’s] Last Supper’; kneels down and prays as ‘Take my sins’ in his secret rides by the wooden rails (Shaffer, 1973: 70-73). In these rides, Alan fights with ‘His [Christ’s] Foes and completes his ritual by riding Nugget frantically:

Alan: Feel me on you! On you! On you! On you!

I want to be in you!

I want to BE you forever and ever!

Equus, I love you!

Now! –
Bear me away!
Make us One Person! (Shaffer, 1973: 74).

When Dysart learns about the worship of Alan to the horse, Nugget, he believes that Alan has combined a religious worship and sexuality in the horse. Alan at the beginning of the story explains Dysart that the ‘nakedness’ (Shaffer, 1973: 49) of the horses have always attracted him and the religious stories told by his mother provided him the idea of worship to the horse, Nugget in his secret rides at nights to become ‘like a necking couple’ (Shaffer, 1973: 17). Dysart is the only character in the play who admires this worship of Alan to the horses: ‘Real worship! Without worship you shrink, it’s as brutal as that…I shrank my own life’ (Shaffer, 1973: 82).

Themes of freedom, passion and normality are presented by Shaffer in Act II. During his treatment of Alan, Dysart realizes the significance of individual freedom. The whole idea of the play presents the freedom that detached Alan from the rest of the world around him. That is why, in the play, Dysart believes that curing Alan means removing imagination power of the boy by cutting from parts of his individuality (Shaffer, 1973: 62) and he feels , as stated by Kavanagh (1997), that he becomes the ‘God of death’ (113-4) for the passionate boy.

Shaffer presents the ideas of passion and religion in a young man’s abnormal mind. Passion, the core of life, turns into a religion, a ritual act in Alan, who is defined as ‘abnormal’. Having been trapped between the dilemmas of his parents, Alan has never given a chance to find his own identity. In his freedom, Alan could create his own identity at the stables. Dysart, a talented child-psychiatrist, has dedicated his career to curing children to lead normal lives. It is Dysart’s duty to convert Alan to a normal being to conform to the society’s conventions and norms. The treatment of Alan is based on the removal of passion in the boy in order to be accepted by the society.

Obsessed with obeying to the set of rules imposed by the society, all the characters, except Alan, live in hypocrisy shadowed their masks. Alan’s parents are forced to live in an unhappy marriage because divorce is not accepted by society. Dysart, the cold and rational man, has had fascination to ancient Greece and lacks spiritual fulfillment in his marriage as he explains to Hesther: ‘Do you know what it is like for two people to live in the same house as if they were in different parts of the world?’ (Shaffer, 1973: 61). Apart from questioning his private life, Dysart also doubts about the definition of ‘normality’:

Dysart: What am I trying to do him?
Hesther: Restore him, surely?
Dysart: To what?
Hesther: A normal life?
Dysart: Normal?
Hesther: It still means something.
Dysart: Does it?
Hesther: Of course.
Dysart: You mean a normal boy has one head: a normal head has two ears?
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(Shaffer, 1973: 62-3).

He has doubts about curing Alan, which could mean returning Alan to a normal life by destroying his identity. Dysart is jealous of Alan’s passion as he once admits to Hesther:

Dysart: …All right, he’s sick. He’s full of misery and fear. He was dangerous, and could be again, though I doubt it. But that boy has known passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it. (Shaffer, 1973: 82).

During his treatment of Alan, the reader realizes the conflicts of Dysart, who questions ‘normalcy’:

Dysart: 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…The Normal is the indispensable, murderous God of Health, and I am is Priest….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 their parts of individuality repugnant to this God, in both his aspects… (Shaffer, 1973: 65).

Dysart envies Alan because he cannot experience passion, yet witnesses it and tries to feel it at ‘second-hand’ (Kavanagh, 1997: 63). Besides, by curing Alan, he will be killing the boy’s adorable passion: ‘Passion you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created’ (Shaffer, 1973: 108). That is why, Dysart declares that he has nightmares of ‘carving children’ (Shaffer, 1973: 24). He is the doctor who can cure Alan by carving him to adapt the society and become a typical ‘normal’ boy.

At the beginning of the play, Martin Dysart appears as a man fitting the normalcy. He is a man who is confined to the norms and rules of society. As he questions the passion that Alan has created, he realizes that he has lacked passion and enthusiasm in all his life: ‘many men have less vital with their wives’ (Shaffer, 1973: 81). Therefore, Dysart gradually is convinced that curing a man by eliminating passion is killing his soul:

Dysart: ….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 (76).

This realization not only provides Dysart self-recognition and an awakening about his professional and personal life but also leads readers to question the social drawbacks on individuals’ identities and freedom. Individuals were, in Shaffer’s time, struggling between the strict rules of the Victorian period and the opportunities derived by the changes of modern society.

The audience/reader is presented with two main problems: the psychological problems of Alan and the dialectical conflicts of Dysart, who realizes that the passion which he is meant to cure in Alan is missing in him (Brown, 1982: 30). Dysart, through his curing sessions, realizes that ‘normal’ people that fit to the norms of societal rules are unaware of the passion, which makes the souls alive. Removing passion from the souls of children like Alan could possibly make them hollow beings. Shaffer presents both the nature of human desire and the desire of men for passion in a meaningless modern world. However, although Dysart admires Alan’s passion, he unwillingly decides to act according to the norms of his profession and society even it means destroying Alan’s passion:
Dysart [crying out]: All right! I’ll take it away! He’ll be delivered from madness. What then? He’ll feel himself acceptable! What then? ….My desire might be to make this boy an ardent husband – a caring citizen- a worshipper of abstract and unifying God. My achievement, however, is more likely to make a ghost!.. I’ll give him the good Normal world where we’re tethered…Hopefully, he’ll feel nothing at his fork but Approved Flesh. (Shaffer, 1973: 107-8).

In the end, the cure therapy starts for the boy and Alan would be in ‘chains’ of the society. This guilt will also provide Dysart a ‘Normal’ and appropriate life in society that lacks passion:

Dysart: I cannot call it ordained of God: I can’t get that far. I will however pay it so much homage. There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it never comes out. (Shaffer, 1973: 109).

Apart from Dora and Frank, other clashing figures in Equus are the two protagonists, Alan and Dysart. Their clash represents the struggle between Apollo and Dionysus. According to Plunka, Equus reflects ‘the ritualistic nature …the Apollonian-Dionysian struggle on the stage’ (167). The rational Dysart is an Apollonian man and the passionate boy Alan has the Dionysian spirit: ‘While observing Alan’s ritualistic behavior, Dysart…matures and begins to reach a new level of understanding’ (Plunka, 1988: 167). The ritualistic worshipping of Alan awakens Dysart, who longs for free spirit released from the chains of society. Dysart, as mentioned before, is fond of myths of Greece, which has led him imagine the lives of primitive mythological figures in the books while Alan has lived in them: ‘I sit looking at pages of centaurs trampling the soul of Argos – and outside my window he is trying to become one, in a Hampshire field!...’ (Shaffer, 1973: 83).

The struggle between the Dionysian boy leads Dysart to become conscious of his artificial existence. According to Kavanagh, in many of his plays, Shaffer tries to present not right or wrong but the clash between two rights (1997: 102). Therefore, Dysart (playing the role of Apollo) represents the conscious forces of logic, order, reason and control and thus, guides Alan to find peace in the society. On the other hand, Alan (acting as the passionate god Dionysus) represents the contrasting forces of unconscious instinct and passion and thus, is guided by the wise god to learn the ethics of the society (Kavanagh, 1997: 103). Their clash leads to inner clashes of both individuals and the readers/audience. Throughout the end of the play, Dysart becomes the new object of reverence for Alan. Equus is the destructive god which has led him to violence and crime while Dysart is a helpful guide for the boy. In a sense, it appears that Alan has been in search of father, rather than a god, who can guide him in life and the impotent psychiatrist has been longing for a son to teach about ancient Greece and life:

Dysart: …I wish there was one person in my life I could show. One instinctive, absolutely un brisk person I could take to Greece, and stand in front of certain shrines and sacred streams and say ‘look! Life is only comprehensible through a thousand local Gods…’ (Shaffer, 1973: 62).

Peter Shaffer sets his play on a real platform, resembled to a boxing-ring, on which two protagonists struggle in question-and-answer format. The question-answer –format, according to Kavanagh, ‘pitches the desire [in his characters] to reveal against the desire to conceal’ (36). In the deeper structure, the stage design of the play reflects the questioning confused minds of
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individuals. The inner struggles of Alan and Dysart mirror the questions raised by Shaffer for his readers: Should Dysart cure Alan to turn him a normal person? Would it kill Alan’s passion? Is Christianity the best dogma for people? Should we remove passion in our souls to adapt the society’s rules and norms? Is being normal an innate quality or imposed by society? What is and who is normal? Was primitive man happier and more liberated? For Shaffer, modern life had weakened man’s interrelation with nature and the mechanized cultures impose rules on people. There is little place for passion in our lives and without passion, men have become hollow beings. Although human beings long for passion in life, they are unable to break their chains and live willingly in enthusiasm.

3. Summary and Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be said that ‘no other of Shaffer’s previous plays has received so much attention…as did Equus’ (Klein, 1993: 119). The play is based on the themes of human dilemma, worship, passion, freedom and normalcy that are derived from the social changes and transitions of Victorian period to modernism in Britain during the 1960s. The clashes between the ideas and individuals portray the gaps between the traditional Victorian generation and the generation surrounded by modern technological life. Moreover, Equus seems to touch the readers/spectators at the most basic level of emotions by depicting Alan living on a primitive level, free from the norms and rules of a society.

Alan has created his own method of worship like the primitive men, but this is restricted by Dysart, who has been part of a ‘civilized culture’. In short, the ‘passionate’ free individual is cured (killed) by the ‘impassionate’ civilized stereotype. In our inner struggles as that of Apollo-Dionysus, we frequently long for passion which is restricted by society imposing ‘normalcy’. Peter Shaffer with Equus presents his message of the dangers of extremity in life through the struggle of Dionysus (Alan) and Apollo (Dysart). As indicated by Dysart, the Apollo of the play, the main struggle for the individuals for any period in history can be concluded as: ‘The extremity is the point!’ (Shaffer, 1973: 18).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


