



Peter Shaffer's *Equus* and Equine-assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

Mustafa BAL¹ 



¹Assist. Prof., TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Faculty of Science and Literature, English Language and Literature, Ankara, Türkiye

ORCID: M.B. 0000-0002-4839-1800

Corresponding author:

Mustafa BAL,
TOBB Ekonomi ve Teknoloji Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Söğütözü Caddesi, No: 43, 06560, Ankara, Türkiye

E-mail: dr.mustafabal@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973) is a distinctive play in its representation of complex psychological/psychiatric issues on the theatre stage. As such, the play is one of the most notable theatrical works of psychological realism in English theatre. Peter Shaffer achieves this especially through his characterization of the mentally unstable Alan Strang. Since his childhood, Alan has developed an extraordinary attachment to and obsession with horses, and this eventually results in his blinding six horses and his entrustment to the treatment of the psychiatrist Martin Dysart. Accordingly, *Equus* has been, so far, studied through various – mainly psychological and psychiatric – perspectives. In this sense, the aim of this article is to shed a new light and contribute to these studies by examining the close relations between Peter Shaffer's *Equus* and equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) – an acknowledged method of psychiatric treatment by means of horses that psychiatrist Dysart of the play neglects (or is unaware of) while planning his therapies for Alan, who, due to his intimacy with horses, also as a stable-boy, might benefit from the methods of equine-assisted psychotherapy. For this purpose, this article analyses and reveals the ties between the play and equine-assisted psychotherapy mainly through related studies on the therapy, Shaffer's characterization of Alan, and relevant incidents in the play.

Keywords: *Equus*, Peter Shaffer, equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine therapy, psychology and drama



Introduction

Mental instability, generally known and dubbed as madness, has been of great concern in literature particularly because people with any kind of mental disorder deviate from socially, culturally, and generally accepted normal behavioral patterns. Classical works like *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes confirm to what extent insanity in any of its forms has been valued, problematized, and characterized in fiction. Nevertheless, through drama the *lunatics* receive greater attention since the genre primarily focuses on human action and displays it more directly and more emphatically, making the representation of characters with mental instabilities a more significant issue of artistic and aesthetic attraction for playwrights. Considering the idea that the western theater initially emerged out of festivals that were held to honor Dionysus – the god of insanity – the ties between madness and drama are formed and secured even more strongly. From Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to Anthony Neilson's *Normal* and Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, a good number of very significant plays affirm that madness, in its myriad forms, is one of the most primary notions and problematics of drama, and that it is what renders a harmonious union of psychology and drama.

Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973) is one of the most significant works of psychological drama. As Ashley Woodward notes, "...*Equus* is a rich text that is amenable to various psychological interpretations" (2015, p. 232). Theodore D. George observes that "[i]n *Equus*, the effects of psychiatric discourse are written all over the face of a disturbed, young teenager, a fact which reminds us that the human beings subjected to the mental health care profession are all real, precariously delicate, suffering individuals" (1999, p. 245). As such, *Equus* contributes considerably to the mingling of psychological and psychiatric issues and theories with dramatic works. Among other issues, the play primarily concentrates on the line between madness (mental instability) and sanity, just like Anthony Neilson's *Normal*, and calls into question the professional dynamics of the psychiatric treatment through the character of Dysart the psychiatrist.

A brief literature review shows that *Equus* has received considerable critical attention from literature as well as from psychology and psychiatry scholars. Barry B. Witham in his "The Anger in *Equus*" compares the play with *Look Back in Anger*, claiming that "[i]n its subject matter, its dramatic tradition, *Equus* is still infused with the same philosophical outlook which was so popular and controversial in 1956" (2013, p. 62). Another study

titled “*Equus* and the Psychopathology of Passion” primarily concentrates on the concept of passion as experienced by the major characters of the play (Slutzky, 1976). While Ashley Woodward, in her “Becoming-animal in Shaffer’s *Equus*” defends the play against negative criticisms “by drawing on the conceptual resources of some of the most currently influential philosophy, that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and in particular on the concept of ‘becoming-animal’” (2015, p. 232), Leonard Mustazza, in his “A Jealous God: Ritual and Judgment in Shaffer’s *Equus*,” highlights the theological motives behind Alan’s actions, asserting that “[for] Alan, the horse-god *Equus* starts out as a Christ figure rather than a Dionysian one” (1992, p. 175). However, there is no work that proposes to view the central object of the play – the horse – as a possible agent for the psychiatric treatment of the mentally disturbed character of the play, Alan Strang. In this sense, the aim of this article is to shed a new light and contribute to the studies on this play by examining the close relations between *Equus* and equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) – an acknowledged method of psychiatric treatment by means of horses that psychiatrist Dysart of the play neglects (or is unaware of) while planning his therapies for Alan.

A Synopsis of *Equus* (1973) by Peter Shaffer

Equus is a play about a psychologically disturbed boy, Alan Strang, who is eventually entrusted to the treatment of the psychiatrist Martin Dysart. The play starts and continues with Dysart’s retrospective narration of the significant happenings in his patient Alan’s life and his professional experience with him. Alan is a seventeen-year-old stableboy, whom Dysart meets after the boy blinded six horses and was tried for this crime in court.¹ It all began after the magistrate Hesther Salomon visited Dysart a month earlier and referred to Alan’s trial as “the most shocking case [she] ever tried” (Shaffer, 1977, p. 19). After beginning his therapy sessions with Alan and hospitalizing him, Dysart has a nightmare, in which he is a priest in Ancient Greece, executing a series of gory rituals of violence over boys and girls, and is caught by the other priests when his mask falls

1 At this point, it is useful to know Peter Shaffer’s anecdote about the original story that inspired him to write *Equus*: “The tale told to me by my friend James Mossman of the BBC (now, alas, dead) was not remotely the one I told the audience. In the version which he briefly referred to as we drove through a bleak English landscape composed of stables, the boy was the son of very repressive and religious eccentrics; he had been seduced by a girl on the floor of the stable; he had blinded the animals in a panic to erase the memory of his sin and to prevent them from bearing witness to it before his parents. This climax, allegedly told to Mossman by a magistrate, I found absolutely impossible to write. There was no way in which a boy’s first satisfactory sexual encounter could lead on stage to such horrific violence – unless it had not been satisfactory at all. Unless, that is, the presence of the horses had directly prevented that satisfaction” (1982, p. xiv).

off and his annoyance with the action is revealed. It is understood that not only does Dysart have nightmares but so does Alan. During his sessions, Dysart discovers that Alan's father Frank is a socialist while his mother Dora is a religious person. Dysart visits the family and learns that Dora tried to give Alan a religious personality by depicting his favorite horse character – Prince – from a book as a symbol of faith. However, Frank, as an atheist, does not approve of the theological teachings Dora gives Alan. Dora also gave Alan a rather metaphysical conceptualization of sex.

After a while, Dysart is finally able to establish a question-and-answer session with Alan, which helps him to slightly open up to talking about his memories such as his first recollection of a horse and horse-riding on a beach when he was six. The memory turns into an unpleasant one as his parents ruined the excitement of this first experience with a horse. Later, as one part of further treatment, Dysart gives Alan a tape recorder, which Alan accepts reluctantly. Soon after, when Dora visits, she reveals how Alan, at the age of twelve, cried for days when Frank tore off the Christ picture on his bedroom wall and threw it away, and the boy only stopped when he was given the picture of a white horse. Then, the owner of the stable, Dalton, visits Dysart and tells him about his experiences with Alan, including his peculiar suspicion that Alan might have been riding the horses during the night. In the next scene, Alan narrates openly via the tape recorder his experience with the horse when he was six as well as all his ideas about his attachment to horses.

After a while, Frank unexpectedly visits Dysart and tells him how he once saw Alan chanting or having a ritual before the white horse picture. Then comes the scene when Alan meets Jill, a girl in her twenties, who works at the stable and who had arranged the weekend job for Alan. Later, Dysart ends up questioning normality through his conversation with Hesther about his marital problems. Through a hypnosis session, Dysart learns the truth about Alan's previous experiences and his secret night rituals with the horses. In act two, having first quarreled with Alan at the hospital, Dora tells Dysart that neither she nor her husband have anything to do with Alan's mental instability, and that Dysart cannot treat them as criminals, and that Alan's condition is all due to his own nature which leans towards the ways of the devil.

Using another therapy method, Dysart makes Alan agree to have a placebo truth drug. Under its effect, Alan tells Dysart how Jill convinced him to go to a pornographic movie as a first-time experience for them both. There, Alan saw his father, who came

and loudly insisted that Alan leave the cinema with him – followed by Jill. Thus, Alan learned the truth about his father’s private life. Then, Jill convinced Alan to have sexual intercourse and took him to the stable, where, much distressed by the presence of the horses, Alan eventually blinded six of them. The play ends with Alan confessing the details of the crime and Dysart questioning himself and his profession, and his expression of his doubts about normality and the attempts of healing madness into the ways of the normal.

Equine-assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

Animal-assisted therapy is defined as “the therapeutic use of pets to enhance individuals’ physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functioning. Animal-assisted therapy may be used, for example, to help people receive and give affection, especially in developing communication and social skills” (“Animal-assisted therapy,” 2021). Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), or equine therapy, on the other hand, is described as

a form of animal-assisted therapy in which a licensed mental health professional, in conjunction with an equine specialist, uses handling, grooming, and other activities with specially trained horses as part of psychological treatment for those with emotional and behavioral problems... The goal is to help clients, through attentive interactions with horses, to achieve self-esteem, self-awareness, confidence, trust, and empathy; to gain a sense of responsibility; and to develop better communication, teamwork, leadership, and social skills... the technique has been applied to both children and adults, individually and in groups, and to a variety of conditions, including behavioral problems, relationship issues, grief, anxiety, anger, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, substance dependence, adjustment disorders, and eating disorders. (“Equine-assisted-psychotherapy,” 2021)

Géza Kovács, Annemiek van Dijke, and Marie-Jose Enders-Slegers define EAP as a form of therapy “in which the horse serves as a supporter of psychotherapeutic interventions and as a mediator between psychotherapist and patient. The horse could be introduced in the psychotherapy as a non-verbal reciprocal transference- and transnational object in order to find corrective emotional experiences for the

patient" (2020, p. 2). Furthermore, calling the method Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), Naomi Scott lists the conditions in which the method can be used:

EFP may be used for people with psychosocial issues and mental health needs that result in any significant variation in cognition, mood, judgment, insight, anxiety level, perception, social skills, communication, behavior, or learning. Examples of this are anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, behavioral difficulties, depression, language (receptive or expressive) disorders, major life changes (such as environmental trauma, divorce, grief and loss), mood disorders, personality disorders, post traumatic stress disorder, psychotic disorders, and schizophrenia. (2005, p. 7)

Writing about the history of the medicinal relationships between animals and humans, Michele L. Morrison reports that "[a]nimals and humans have existed in therapeutic relationships with each other for more than 12,000 years" (2007, p. 51). Naomi Scott elaborates the subject by referring to "[a]n ancient Greek sage's observation, 'The outside of a horse is the best thing for the inside of a man,'" as well as quoting from "Hippocrates" who "spoke of 'riding's healing rhythm'" (2005, pp. 3-4). Scott also reports that the use of equine therapy dates to World War I and II (2005, p. 17), and that the Windsor Association of Riding for the Handicapped was formed in 1973 (2005, p. 18), the year *Equus* premiered ("*Equus*," 2022). Hannah Burgon, on the other hand, writing about the history of equine-assisted therapy and learning by referring to the related studies, shows how horses were believed to have magical powers and that horse riding was used as a healing method in different cultures (ancient Greeks, North American Indians, ancient Celts) (2014, pp. 16-17). At this point, we see that Shaffer's preference of the use of the Latin word "equus" as the title of his play as well as his emphasis on classical and mythological concepts, especially through Dysart, parallel and benefit the ancient, historical roots of this therapeutic relationship between horses and humans.

***Equus*, Alan Strang, and Equine-assisted Psychotherapy**

Considering the definitions of EAP above, Alan Strang of *Equus* had already been engaged with the activities (such as handling, grooming, and the like) referred to in the definitions although he lacked any guidance on how to make use of these activities to produce positive, healing results for his psychology and well-being. Alan carries all

the features of a patient for whom EAP, as defined above, could be instrumental. He surely needs 'self-esteem', which he lacks due to the different forms of parental oppression he has endured; he has been in search of 'self-awareness' since his childhood; he craves the 'confidence' he has never fully had; he desires the 'trust' he has been deprived of due to several shocking experiences such as seeing his father in the porn-movies cinema (Shaffer, 1977, p. 92); and he calls for 'empathy' which he tries hard to feel through an animal. Moreover, as an introvert whose life finds outlet only through horses, he is also suffering from the lack of 'better communication' and 'social skills' as proved by the almost absurd expressions he makes use of in his first meeting with Dr. Dysart² (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 22-23) and his intolerably rude attitude toward Nurse (Shaffer, 1977, p. 24). Additionally, Alan's screams, his blinding of the horses, his failing relationship with Jill, and the physical scuffle with his mother (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 76-77) help reveal his poor psychological condition that matches the above APA dictionary's definition of "... behavioral problems, relationship issues... anger..." ("Equine-assisted-psychotherapy," 2021). Hence, even by considering the EAP definitions, one can realize that mentally unstable Alan Strang is trying to fulfil his needs through the means that are suggested by equine-assisted psychotherapy.

Deborah Simkin et al. write, "evidence suggests that EAP may improve engagement in therapy for children and youths who reject or who are unlikely to benefit from traditional office-based therapies" (2017, p. 27). Vallerie E. Coleman states that "[t]hrough interaction with horses, clients learn to trust themselves and are empowered in ways that can't be accomplished solely through talking" (2012, p. 27). These explanations are other indications that EAP could have produced positive results with Alan, who is obstinate about not communicating properly with Dysart and rejects Dysart's therapy methods in general.

To be able to analyze the ties between *Equus*, particularly Alan Strang, and equine-assisted psychotherapy, we need to first see Shaffer's characterization of Alan and realize the peculiarities his actions are based on. Among all Alan's actions, the most striking one, which also puts him at the center of the play right at the beginning, is his

2 The following observation can be helpful to understand Alan's rejection of being involved in a regular communication with Dysart: "Relationships can be terrifying for children who have lacked early secure attachments with care givers. For many of the children and young people we see at the centre, the basic building blocks of relationship are just not there. Insecurely attached young people are highly suspicious of a world that is experienced as hostile, invasive yet unreachable. For many such young people face-to-face encounters with a stranger (the therapist) provoke high anxiety and necessitates activation of psychological defences" (Burgon, Gammage, & Hebden, 2018, p. 8).

blinding six horses with a metal spike, which is the crime for which he is tried at court, where he just sang instead of saying anything (Shaffer, 1977, p. 20). Because of this, he is considered mentally unstable and sent to a psychiatric hospital for diagnosis and treatment where he also just sings when he meets Dr. Dysart (Shaffer, 1977, p. 22) and continues singing commercial rolls for two more days (Shaffer, 1977, p. 26). In general, he seems to be very talented in letters, sounds, music, and rhymes. Even as a child, he was very keen on letters and sounds as when Dora taught him the Latin word *equus* for horse. He was so fascinated with it probably because of the double u's in the word (Shaffer, 1977, p. 32). In the hospital, he generally stares accusingly, mutes himself, rejects speech, gets angry with Nurse, and even swears at her when she tries to help him with advice for his own good (Shaffer, 1977, p. 24). He frequently screams, and during a nightmare he screams the word *Ek!* and when woken up by Nurse, he grabs her arm as if to be protected (Shaffer, 1977, p. 35). He is interested in history as he knows the history of the kings of England, King John being his favorite (Shaffer, 1977, p. 28). He gives and repeats indirect answers to questions whose answers he knows, like "mind your own beeswax" referring to his father's words when he means 'father' as an answer (Shaffer, 1977, p. 29). He also responds to a question with a counter-question as when Dysart asks him if he often dreams, to which he responds, "Do you?" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 36). At times he yells at the person that asks pressuring questions as he does with Dysart's questions to him about dating Jill (Shaffer, 1977, p. 58). Since his childhood he has loved imagining animals talking (Shaffer, 1977, p. 30), showing his wish to communicate with them. He can be quite a reasonable person when he feels no pressure or when someone stops being intrusive to his existence such as when Dysart suddenly ends the session after a very short time, he protests and wants it to be continued (Shaffer, 1977, p. 37). On the other hand, he can easily be violently enraged and threatening when he thinks that something is not fair (Shaffer, 1977, p. 37). When he was twelve, he cried without stopping when his father tore off the picture of Jesus Christ on his wall and threw it away, and only stopped crying when he was given the white horse picture, which he hung exactly on the same spot in his bedroom (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 44-45). Alan can also act quite normally as he did when Dalton, the owner of the stable, first met him and saw his good work afterwards (Shaffer, 1977, p. 46). He can also become sarcastic when he wishes to be, as seen in his conversation with Dysart about the electrical items shop he used to work at (Shaffer, 1977, p. 53). He can also be a strategic arguer, as is evident when he asks provocative questions to Dysart about his private life (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 59-60).

All these personality traits relating to Alan reveal the depth of his complex characterization as a mentally unstable person for whom "[i]t only seems natural that he expects no answer different than disruption, and as such, it is possible that in his subconscious, the two factors of pleasure and chastisement have come to be associated with each other" (Taebi & Razavi, 2020, p. 5). James R. Stacy, too, expresses the psychological complexity of Alan when he writes, "[i]n addition to the eroticism of Alan's midnight rides on Equus, Shaffer presents the boy at a moment of sexual crisis, torn by his devotion to Equus, his mother's strict morals, his discovery about his father's sexual needs, and his own adolescent longing for intercourse with Jill" (1976, p. 333). It is this psychologically labyrinthine character that Dysart tries to heal by applying various treatment methods. He first tries to establish a line of conversation with Alan by talking to him and asking him questions (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 21-23). He places him in a single room instead of on the ward (Shaffer, 1977, p. 23). He gives him one or two sedatives when Alan sees nightmares (Shaffer, 1977, p. 26). Generally, he applies one-on-one question-and-answer sessions to learn of Alan's memories. Moreover, he gives Alan a tape recorder so that he can record himself freely when alone (Shaffer, 1977, p. 43). He also administers hypnosis on Alan with the game of Blink, which people play by fixing their eyes on something and then, with the tapping sound of a pen, opening and closing their eyes consecutively until the therapist says stop (Shaffer, 1977, p. 64). Accordingly, Dysart makes Alan sit down and start watching the stain on the wall while putting his hands by his sides and opening his fingers wide to enable him to feel relaxed and comfortable, and to empty his mind as much as possible (Shaffer, 1977, p. 64). Then, he starts tapping the pen in an even rhythm (Shaffer, 1977, p. 64). Finally, he decides to give Alan a placebo drug like an aspirin to act as a truth drug, thinking that it will lead him to abreaction (Shaffer, 1977, p. 80). However, Dysart neglects administering EAP methods, which might have worked well for Alan. Considering the above-stated methods Dysart applies, Jules Glenn notes that "[t]he treatment that Dr. Dysart carries out is one in which the cure depends on abreaction or catharsis, on the remembering, with an intense emotional counterpoint, a traumatic precipitating event and trauma from childhood or later... the treatment in *Equus* is not psychoanalysis" (1976, p. 482).

It is confusing to realize that Dysart, as an experienced child psychiatrist, never mentions equine-assisted psychotherapy as a part of his treatment processes for an adolescent like Alan, who has always had such a strong attachment to horses. This might be partly because Dysart has difficulties in reaching clear judgments, having

second thoughts throughout the play. Anthony V. Corello's observations are illuminating about Dysart's character:

From an egological point of view, the doctor seems seriously fragmented. His intellectual, professional, and "adult" functions are highly developed (perhaps counterphobically, warding off a confrontation with more underdeveloped parts). Yet in many areas both cognitive and affective processes seem arrested at a quite early stage of evolution. He frequently fails to discriminate his internal and external environment; functions of memory, attention, anticipation, judgment, and evaluation are faulty or missing altogether. Fantasy and reality, self and other, past present and future often condense into amorphous, undifferentiated amalgams. Elements which in reality are clearly distinct are at times experienced as fused; organic totalities are perceived as composed of separate bits pasted together. To mention but one instance, he worries whether curing Alan is like pasting Band Aids on him. (1986, p. 196)

Hannah Burgon, writing of the studies on equine-assisted therapy and learning by referring to related research, shows to what extent healing or treatment methods with horses can be helpful for prisoners, children with certain disadvantages and problems, and adults with psychological problems (2014, pp. 19-24). Besides, one particular method that could be applied by means of horses – animals with which Alan feels safe and content – would be the utilization of mythological/hero stories, with which Dysart is intellectually much engaged, for bettering Alan's situation. The method seems to be tailored exactly for Alan and Dysart. Stanton, McKissock, and Dailey explain this method in detail in their work (2012, pp. 201-218), but it is helpful to quote the following excerpt to see how it could fit into the context of horse-lover Alan and mythology-lover Dysart: "Usually, clients engaged in this therapy are prompted to begin due to a *call* to action, not unlike a tragedy, unpleasant situation, or moment of reckoning. By answering this call and thus embarking on the journey of treatment, clients will tend to follow the same behavioral or experiential pattern as the hero does during the mythological journey brought to life in many works of fiction" (Stanton et al., 2012, p. 202). As these studies show, the EAP methods which Dr. Dysart neglects could potentially have been helpful for Alan Strang.

Negligence starts in Alan's family, as a matter of fact. John Bowlby states that "[c]hildren who have parents who are sensitive and responsive are enabled to develop

along a healthy pathway. Those who have insensitive, unresponsive, neglectful, or rejecting parents are likely to develop a deviant pathway which is in some degree incompatible with mental health" (1988, p. 136). This comes true in the case of Alan and his parents. Alan had always needed special care since his childhood, but he had received none, neither from his parents nor from anybody else in the society in which he lived, until he was taken to Dysart. While there is no account about his having any friends that he could spend time with, there is also the fact that his parents, who seem to be a perfect mismatch in opposing each other seriously in terms of worldviews, philosophies and beliefs, isolated Alan even more from regular interaction with the world. The TV problem illustrates this point. His father Frank forbids Alan to watch TV, distancing him from popular culture, fictional works, and documentaries, but suggests reading instead (Shaffer, 1977, p. 27). He, as a printer, wants Alan to be mentally engaged in knowledge rather than passively staring at a screen (Shaffer, 1977, p. 27). However, the TV issue is actually about a bigger problem between the parents that causes the lack of special care which Alan needed. Frank wants the TV gone from the house while Dora opposes this idea (Shaffer, 1977, p. 28). Frank, being an "Old-type Socialist" sees the TV as an agent of "Mindless violence! Mindless jokes" and as a means of selling things to people – capitalism (Shaffer, 1977, p. 28). Moreover, Frank, probably to provoke religious Dora, indoctrinates Alan by telling him of Marx's idea that religion is the opium of the people (Shaffer, 1977, p. 29), while Dora does the opposite through her religious teachings. Among such parental disagreements, Alan has been neglected, ignored, not cured, and in the face of such parental polarizations and ignorance about his unhealthy mental development as a boy, Alan himself might be subconsciously leaning towards the help of horses for a possible cure. In this sense, the following words seem to entirely match Alan's case and his search for safety and comfort with horses as animals which can detect danger/threat and get away from it:

As prey animals, horses lack an ability to develop ambiguity. For their survival they need to see the world in stark good or bad, or rather, "safe" or "dangerous" terms. Despite their domestication, horses remain especially adept as [*sic*] recognising danger. At times, they will react as if there is a threat where no threat exists. It could be said then that horses operate by default from this splitting defence mechanism. Fear will be the default position for a horse that has experienced harm. Many children, particularly those who have experienced neglect, abuse and fractured attachments, operate largely from this "fight-or-flight" position. They are hyper alert,

looking for the signs of danger (whether or not they actually exist in external reality), because they have learned that the world is a dangerous place and survival is key. (Burgon et al., 2018, p. 8)

Alan's attachment to horses is another point to further the analysis of the relation between *Equus* and equine-assisted psychotherapy. There is certainly close connection, intimacy and a strong bond between Alan and horses. The play opens with a scene of attachment between Alan and a horse (Nugget), where "[Alan's] head is pressed against the shoulder of the horse, his hands stretching up to fondle its head. The horse in turn nuzzles his neck" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 17). Then, Dysart, who speaks the first words in the play, gives the details of the close connection between the horse and the boy: "The animal digs its sweaty brow into his cheek, and they stand in the dark for an hour – like a necking couple" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 17). What is striking here is that Dysart's initial focus is not on Alan's feelings but on those of the horse, which he reveals with the following expressions: "And of all nonsensical things – I keep thinking about the *horse!* Not the boy: the horse, and what it may be trying to do" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 17). These expressions indicate that Dysart is trying to concentrate on establishing empathy with the horse rather than with the boy. His empathy, combined with his further questionings about the existence of the horse, "What desire could that be? Not to stay a horse any longer? Not to remain reined up forever in those particular genetic strings? (Shaffer, 1977, p. 17), may be further interpreted as a reflection of Dysart's own professional/identity crisis as a psychiatrist and as a husband who wishes to get rid of the bonds of his currently unsatisfying professional and marital life. He is also curious to see if a horse can transform the physical loads and chores of its daily life into a feeling of grief (Shaffer, 1977, p. 17). He calls all he sees about the intimacy between the boy and the horse "nonsensical" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 17), not understanding the depth of the interaction and attachment going on between the two. Thus, the play starts with an ontological questioning of the existence of a horse within the context of its attachment to a human-being, and more particularly, with Alan's need to establish connection with horses to sooth his feelings. In relation to this, Burgon et al. write that "horses are social beings by nature and finely tuned to body language. Horses are therefore highly sensitive and responsive to the behavior of others which includes humans. This innate responsiveness means they are able to provide feedback which facilitates the therapeutic process of EAT/L" (2018, pp. 4-5). Yet, Dysart does not apply EAP treatment on Alan, who has strong ties with horses. What Dysart neglects in the play is practiced by Molly DePrekel and Kay Neznik, who as experts "working with clients who are survivors of trauma" report

their experiences, when they write, "...in the process of developing a relationship with an equine partner, an adolescent is often better able to move beyond initial discomfort and build trusting relationships. Clients grow in confidence and gain a more positive sense of power in a world where they have historically felt powerless" (2012, p. 41). Alan, who "...lifts his palm to his face and smells it deeply, closing his eyes" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 57) after caressing Nugget's shoulder for the first time, certainly displays his experience of the sense of confidence and power stated in these observations.

Alan's intimacy, or his obsession, with horses started when he was a child. Perhaps it was because he was searching for a way to communicate well with others as "[c]hildren who have trouble relating to humans often learn through interactions with horses how to communicate with peers" (Dingman, 2008, p. 13). His mother Dora tells Dysart that when Alan was just seven or eight, she would read him the same book "over and over, all *about* a horse" called "Prince" that "no one could ride" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 30). Alan also hung on the wall of his bedroom a picture of a white horse (which took the place of the Jesus Christ-in-chains portrayal on his wall) that his father had given him a few years previously, and never took it down from there (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 44-45). Dora combined Alan's love of animals, especially of horses, with her religious doctrines and used it to train him to be a religious person. Prince, who became Alan's favorite character, used to say, (Dora impersonating it with a proud voice): "Because I am faithful" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 30). Moreover, Dora strengthened Alan's connection to horses and her use of horses for her religious indoctrination of her son by telling him "a funny thing" that happened "when Christian cavalry first appeared in the New World, the pagans thought horse and rider was one person /... Actually, they thought it must be a god /... It was only when one rider fell off, they realized the truth" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 31). Dora continued her religious indoctrination of Alan through horses by teaching him passages about horses from the Bible (Shaffer, 1977, p. 31), where the horse is shown as a mighty animal. More, she, without the knowledge and consent of his father, took Alan to one of the neighbors so that he could watch Westerns on TV (Shaffer, 1977, p. 31). In addition, Dora expresses that they had "always been a horsey family"; that her grandfather would practice "equitation," and tells Dysart that she "always wanted the boy to ride himself. He'd have so enjoyed it" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 32). Frank, on the other hand, tells Dysart that "[Alan's] always been a weird lad", thinking that "his mother indulged him" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 33). He is so critical of Dora as well. For example, he says "[s]he doesn't care if he can hardly write his own name" as a school teacher (Shaffer, 1977, p. 33). Frank also admits that Alan and Dora have always been closer to each

other, and that Dora would read him the Bible for long hours in his room (Shaffer, 1977, p. 33). By contrast, he admits that he is an atheist, and thinks that the Biblical stories are responsible for the crime Alan committed when he blinded the six horses because the Bible is about narratives of “an innocent man tortured to death – thorns driven into his head – nails into his hands – a spear jammed through his ribs” (Shaffer, 1977, p. 34). Furthermore, it was also Dora who tried to give Alan some sex education, showing sex as “the most important happening of his life” for which he must prepare himself (Shaffer, 1977, p. 35).

All these complexities and disagreements about child-raising might have been the cause of Alan's obsessively intimate relationship with horses. Dora's teachings and indoctrination of Alan as well as Frank's attitudes may have created a problem of trust, putting a high pressure of responsibility on Alan, who, later in his life, has difficulties in forming emotional and physical relationships with people, and who finds a sort of solace in horses. In relation to this, Julian Stamm observes a link between Alan's obsession with horses and his relationship with his parents: “Concomitantly with his passion for horses, Alan retreated from life and from people. In fact, with the final discharge of his murderous rage culminating in the emotional blinding of the horses, his sense of reality and reality testing are lost, and he sinks into a transient psychotic state, thus achieving revenge against the mother and father” (1976, p. 458). Hannah Burgon, on the other hand, referring to a related study about attachment and trust between horses and participants, writes: “...the horses seemed to enable some of the young people who found it difficult to show affection to humans – due to the dysfunctional ways in which they may have experienced affection and physical contact previously – to show affection and empathy towards the horses” (2014, p. 57). Alan is certainly in need of a person or animal with whom he can form a relationship based on trust, which is also evident in Dysart's following observation, through the end of the play, after all his therapy methods: “Under all that glowering, he trusts me” (Shaffer, 1977, p. 80).

During one of his therapy sessions, Dysart finally manages to get a few words from Alan's mouth about his first memory of a horse: “On a beach...” (Shaffer, 1977, p. 38). It was a horse called Trojan, ridden by someone that looked like a college boy who gave Alan a chance to ride with him on the horse (Shaffer, 1977, p. 39). The first words he ever told a horse was “Bear me away!” for a faster ride (Shaffer, 1977, p. 40). At this point, in one of the most euphoric moments of Alan's life, his parents become an obstacle for such happening to reach a satisfactory conclusion, and stop the horseman and grab

Alan forcefully down from the shoulders of the horse, turning the whole event into a very bad memory to be remembered in the future (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 40-41), probably unwillingly causing a traumatic event to be occasionally remembered in negative feelings by Alan. EAP also has the potential of helping with such cases like Alan's here as

The horse also responds to the here and now, thus helping PTSD patients concentrate on the present. Feedback from the horse is immediate, direct and honest, and enables learning of behaviors required to achieve the desired outcome. This is an essential aspect in building relationships for those suffering from PTSD who might have trouble in interpersonal relationships because of impatience and nervousness. (Shelef et al., 2019, p. 395)

What is more, Dora the religious and Frank the atheist polarization also saw another fight that had a huge effect on Alan's psychology and his later obsessive attachment to horses: Frank tore off the Christ picture and threw it away, which caused Alan to go hysterical and cry for days only to find a consolation when he was given the photo of the white horse (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 44-45). This happened when Alan was twelve (Shaffer, 1977, p. 45). The peculiar thing with the white horse picture is that the horse stares directly at the person who looks at it (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 45-46). This is the reason why Alan blinds those six horses. He does not want to be seen by the questioning gazes of the horse that he put in place of the god for himself. He confirms this when he confesses his true feelings into the tape recorder: "No one ever says to cowboys 'Receive my meaning'!... Or 'God' all the time. [*Mimicking his mother.*] 'God sees you, Alan. God's got eyes everywhere –" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 49). Again, with the help of the tape recorder, Alan reveals his true experience and feelings when he met a horse for the first time at the age of six: "All that power going in any way you wanted" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 48). He also reveals his imagining a conversation with the horse as he asked it "'Does it hurt?' And he said – the horse said – said –" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 48). Alan will later deny that horses can talk when Dysart asks a question about this (Shaffer, 1977, p. 53). Then, Alan narrates the history of his intimacy, or rather his obsession, with the horses after his first experience with them:

It was always the same, after that. Every time I heard one clop by, I had to run and see. Up a country lane or anywhere. They sort of pulled me. I

couldn't take my eyes off them. Just to watch their skins. The way their necks twist, and sweat shines in the folds... I can't remember when it started. Mum reading to me about Prince who no one could ride, except one boy. Or the white horse in Revelations... Words lie reins. Stirrup. Flanks... Even the words made me feel – Years, I never told anyone. Mom wouldn't understand. She likes 'Equitation'. Bowler hats and jodhpurs! 'My grandfather dressed for the horse,' she says. What does that mean? The horse isn't dressed. It's the most naked thing you ever saw! ... Even the most broken down old nag has got its *life!* To put a bowler on it is *filthy*... Putting them through their paces! Bloody gymkhanas!... No one understands!... Except cowboys. They do. I wish I was a cowboy. They're free... I bet all cowboys are *orphans!*... (Shaffer, 1977, p. 49)

In time, more events furthered Alan's intimacy and obsession with horses. Frank reveals that he once (eighteen months previously) saw Alan chanting, having a ritual before the white horse picture (Shaffer, 1977, p. 50). He was chanting the genealogy of horses, which was followed by his putting a noose into his mouth and bridling himself and beating himself harshly with a wooden coat hanger (Shaffer, 1977, p. 51). Here, Alan mimics being a horse. When Alan starts to work at the stable, he finds a kind of haven "in this glowing world of horses" where "...he starts almost involuntarily to kneel... in reverence" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 56). As Jill shows Alan how to groom a horse, Alan "watches in fascination as she brushes... scraping the dirt and hair off..." (Shaffer, 1977, p. 57). The first instance when we see a sort of politeness, kindness, elated behavioral pattern of action from Alan is when he starts grooming the horse himself for the first time in his life: "Gingerly he rises and approaches NUGGET. Embarrassed and excited, he copies..." (Shaffer, 1977, p. 57). This is a clear indication that Alan can be a gentle, careful, cautious boy when he interacts with a horse. If so, one might argue that through a dedicated, disciplined EAP, he could have learned how to get rid of his traumas and behave more normally, had Dysart given him a chance. Accordingly, Shelef et al. in their study find out that equine assisted therapy helps with the amelioration of PTSD cases, and write

Riding skills, grooming and working with the horse at ground level, face-to-face, enable the acquisition of effective learning and coping strategies. These skills directly affect one's emotional state and contribute to raising one's sense of self-worth, self-efficacy and control of the horse and body

during riding. EAT helps to increase the capacity to control anger, anxiety, and relationships. This principle of restoring control is a guiding principle in the treatment of PTSD sufferers and a significant factor in the therapeutic process. (2019, p. 395)

Alan's first experience of equitation (with the help of the rider of Trojan), when he was just six, ended disappointingly as he was forcefully taken down from the shoulders of the horse (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 38-43). This may have caused a trauma that may have later caused his mental instability and evolved into PTSD. That his first desire to experience the power or whatever a horse meant symbolically for him was not met may have opened a huge abyss in his mind. Alan affirms Dysart's question "Do you think of that scene often?" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 43), revealing the impact of that traumatic memory on his present life.

Alan's connection with horses has even deeper levels. Dysart, through hypnosis as one of his therapy methods, manages to learn the truth about Alan's past experiences: Alan equates horses, which are chained like Jesus was, with Jesus the God, and he believes that his name is Equus and that he lives in all horses (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 65-66). He further reveals that horse and rider shall be united and be one person, and that the stable is Equus's shrine, that he instructed him to ride him but did not show him how to do it because, according to his Straw Law, it is either ride or fall (Shaffer, 1977, p. 67). Alan also reveals that he first administers some rituals before starting to ride the horse without a saddle and then shows himself fully naked to his god and bows before him (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 69-70). He also speaks of how he uses a sacred stick he calls Manbit to bite on while carrying out his rituals and mentions that he offers sugar to the horse to take his sins and eat them for his sake (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 71-72). Alan further reveals that Equus is his Godslave who as a mighty being obeys what he wishes to do with it, that they have enemies, that he wants to be the horse forever, and that he finally expresses his love to it (Shaffer, 1977, pp. 72-74). The whole scene ends with the end of Alan's rituals and with amen from his mouth (Shaffer, 1977, p. 74). Alan's obsession with and belief in Equus eventually prevents him from having sexual intercourse with Jill, making him beg for pardon from the animal with an oath not to do it again: "I'll never do it again...I swear!..." (Shaffer, 1977, p. 105). After the hypnosis session, Dysart comes to the conclusion that Alan is someone whose core action, feeling, and objective in life is worship as he is deprived of his own readings, knowledge of physics or engineering, artistic taste of painting or music, history save for tales from his mother,

and friends to socialize with (Shaffer, 1977, p. 81). Dysart, in a sense, understands the motivation of Alan's obsession with horses.

Conclusion

One of the significant points this article detects is psychiatrist Dysart's avoidance or ignorance of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Its lack within Dysart's therapy list, and hence in the play, might even be a deliberate choice by the playwright Peter Shaffer. Close contact with horses helps clients like Alan. Yet, in contrast to this, Peter Shaffer, while depicting how the acting of the horses should be on the stage, asks for an emotional distance to the animals, when he writes: "Any literalism which could suggest the cozy familiarity of a domestic animal – or worse a pantomime horse – should be avoided" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 15). He wants the representation of the horses to be as unrealistic and incongruous as possible, which is evident in the directions: "The actors should never crouch on all fours, or even bend forward. They must always ... stand upright, as if the body of the horse extended invisibly behind them. Animal effect must be created entirely mimetically..." (Shaffer, 1977, p.15). In this sense, we can conclude that the playwright might be against the idea of including equine-assisted psychotherapy in his play.

In the light of all the above stated arguments and observations, this article discovers a close relationship between Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* and equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP). Alan Strang, who is strongly attached to or obsessed with horses, either as just "a sensitive boy" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 33), as his mother says, or as one of those "advanced neurotics" (Shaffer, 1977, p. 60), as Dysart observes, or "...was at least borderline and probably psychotic" (Glenn, 1976, p. 479), befits the type of client/patient that could potentially benefit from EAP methods. The study shows the ties between the play and EAP especially through related studies on EAP, Shaffer's characterization of Alan, and related happenings in the play. Alan's poor communication with his parents, religious and perspectival polarizations between Frank and Dora, and hence their dysfunctional marriage and negligence of their child's healthy development, Alan's eventual strong intimacy with horses and his inability to form regular emotional and physical relationships are primary dynamics in the play that pave the way for the ties with EAP. Furthermore, the mythological/hero story technique, EAP as a helpful therapy for those patients who reject regular conversational therapy methods (such as Alan), Alan's probable empathy with horses as animals that are alert to the dangers and threats around, horses as

sensitive and responsive beings that may give Alan what he needs and that can alleviate PTSD cases strengthen the relation. All in all, the interdisciplinary perspective between drama and psychiatry/psychology that this study has worked through while analyzing the relations between *Equus* and EAP may lead to other, richer analyses of the play.³

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3 This study is by no means a medical/psychiatric research and as such does not verify, propose, suggest, prescribe any methods of medical/psychiatric treatment. It is based on the fictional world Peter Shaffer creates in *Equus*, and hence, is a literary analysis that benefits from psychiatry theories, without any claims to applicability of the stated psychiatric methods in real life.

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