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## MOURNING AND HEALING: THE RITUAL IN WALLACE SHAWN'S *THE DESIGNATED MOURNER*<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Wallace Shawn's play *The Designated Mourner* (1996) centers on the relationship among the three characters: Jack, his wife Judy, and his father-in-law Howard. In a memory play structure, Jack remembers not only the tensions in his private life with Judy and Howard but also the social and political unrest that emanates from the totalitarian ideology in public life. Set in an unnamed society, the play displays violence and authoritarianism along with practices of incarceration and execution in which the individuals who may criticize the state policies are punished, silenced, and eliminated. Judy, Howard, and the friends they mention in their monologues, who stand as representatives of high-brow elite intellectuals, are victimized under this fascist, totalitarian state. Since Judy, Howard, and other elites are executed, Jack becomes the only survivor who laments for the deceased. The ritual is one of the most potent and impressive forms in *The Designated Mourner* since the play ends the same way it begins in which Jack introduces himself as "the designated mourner" who grieves for the disappearance of a very special little world. This paper elaborates on how rituals emerge as patterns enabling individuals to overcome crises, focusing on Jack's disorienting experiences in this unnamed fascist society.

**Keywords:** Wallace Shawn, *The Designated Mourner*, Ritual, Mourning, Healing

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**AĞIT VE ŞİFA: WALLACE SHAWN'UN *THE DESIGNATED MOURNER* OYUNUNDA RİTUEL<sup>2</sup>****ÖZ**

Wallace Shawn'un *The Designated Mourner* adlı oyunu Jack, karısı Judy ve kayınpederi Howard arasındaki ilişkiyi merkeze alır. Bir anı oyunu yapısı içerisinde, Jack sadece kişisel hayatında Judy ve Howard ile problemlerini değil aynı zamanda kamusal hayatta totaliter ideolojiden kaynaklanan politik huzursuzluğu da hatırlamaktadır. İsimlendirilmeyen bir toplumda geçen bu oyun, şiddet ve otoriterizmi devlet politikalarını eleştirenlerin cezalandırıldığı, sessizleştirildiği ve engellendiği hapsedilme ve infaz uygulamaları ile beraber sergiler. Üst-sınıf elit bireyleri temsil eden Judy, Howard ve monologlarda bahsedilen arkadaşları bu faşist totaliter devlet tarafından kurban edilmiştir. Judy, Howard ve diğer elitler infaz edildiği için, Jack ölenlerin arkasından yas tutan tek hayatta kalan kişidir. *The Designated Mourner* oyununda ritüel en güçlü ve etkileyici yapılardan biridir çünkü oyun çok özel küçük bir dünya yok olduğu için acı çeken Jack'in kendini "the designated mourner" (belirlenmiş ağıtçı) olarak tanıtmamasıyla başlar ve biter. Bu çalışma, Jack'in bu isimsiz faşist toplumdaki sarsıcı deneyimlerine odaklanarak, ritüellerin bireylerin krizleri atlatmalarını sağlayan modeller olarak kullanımlarını inceler.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Wallace Shawn, *The Designated Mourner*, Ritüel, Ağıt, Şifa

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Set in an unnamed society, Wallace Shawn's play *The Designated Mourner* (1996) depicts the relations among mainly three onstage characters. Jack is the protagonist, Judy is his wife and Howard is his father-in-law; however, as the play progresses, it becomes obvious that Judy and Howard are already dead; they are just on stage to back up Jack's narration and Jack is the only alive character who is designated to remember and mourn. Even though this memory play includes the pasts of these three characters, Jack is "the play's narrator and eponymous mourner" (Schachter, 2000, p. 49). The play has an antitheatrical dramaturgy and favors the monologue style in which the characters directly address the audience and rarely speak to each other (Marranca, 2000, p. 38; Schacter, 2000, pp. 49, 53, 84). These monologues reveal touching and tragic portraits of both private issues—Jack's problems with Judy and Howard and public tensions—the social and political unrest that emanates from totalitarianism and fascism. Jack is mourning for Judy, Howard and the social circle they belong to who are representatives of high-brow elite intellectuals and punished by a fascist and totalitarian rule. The memories of these characters include disturbing scenes of violence and authoritarianism as well as practices of incarceration and execution in which the individuals who may criticize the state policies are brutally punished. In this unnerving play in which various forms of crises are illuminated, the

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eponymous protagonist's ritual of mourning is the dominant motif opening and closing the play. This study, focusing on the way Jack remembers the personal and social conflicts, examines the role and meaning of ritual in overcoming the crises in *The Designated Mourner*.

## 2. Social and Personal Crises in *The Designated Mourner*

The play begins as Jack introduces himself to the audience as “the designated mourner” announcing the death of a very special little world. He explains this important tribal culture in which “Someone is assigned to grieve, to wail, and light the public ritual fire. Someone is assigned when there is no one else” (Shawn, 1996, p. 1). As the play progresses, the three characters give information about the series of events that culminate in the disappearance of this special group. Soloski examines the play as “a shrewd and shifty take on the culture wars” and “an evasive elegy for a lost elite, set in a dystopian city in which ‘highbrow’ pursuits and those who enjoy them face increasing threat” (2013). The elegiac tone for the disappearing community becomes evident in the memories that three onstage characters narrate.

Those memories reveal touching and disturbing ways of both private and public crises for all three characters but this study mainly focuses on Jack's experiences for two reasons. He is basically the main character and “remains the central figure, as he not only does most of the talking but describes so contemptuously the liberal intelligentsia whose irony, detachment, and idealism he chronicles and unmasks, along with his own devolution from highbrow to lowbrow” (Marranca, 2000, p. 38). As Egan explicates, “Jack's compulsive and compelling narration of this process comprises the core action” (Egan, 1997, p. 236). Also, since this study scrutinizes the role of ritual in overcoming crisis as also represented in Wallace's play, this study focuses on the only member of the mourning ritual in *The Designated Mourner* and evaluates Judy and Howard's monologues to understand Jack's psychology in this brutal society.

After Jack introduces himself as the designated mourner at the beginning of the play, Judy sarcastically mentions forms of punishment in society:

I guess the search for more refined forms of punishment never comes to an end. After all, there are so many ways that life can be squeezed out of the human body. ‘Can a method be found that is more in keeping with the essential sweetness of our human nature?’ (Shawn, 1996, p. 1)

Later parts of the play make it evident that this unnamed society is devoid of refined forms of punishment and Judy is sarcastically denouncing the lacking ethical concerns of the rulers or humans in general. Then Judy remembers one of her father's friends saying that it is a miracle that her father was allowed to exist because the "beloved" rulers and leaders felt insecure about some of the lines that Howard wrote in prose in his early career. Then Judy informs about Howard's best prose titled "The Enemy" which was about the dirt-eaters "who were systematically made to eat dirt" (Shawn, 1996, p. 11). In this essay, Howard was inspired by a young poor woman that he invited into his upper-class elite house. Since Howard was coming from another background, he was asking "How could someone like me even begin to imagine the life they lived? No safety. No hope, no shelter. No trees" (Shawn, 1996, p. 11). When Judy says "ten years later, you couldn't have found such a person anywhere," (Shawn, 1996, p. 10) it becomes obvious that these poor people were not only systematically made to eat dirt but also systematically made to die. Even though later Howard stopped writing prose and switched to poetry because he was afraid of possible consequences, this essay, revealing his sympathy for the poor, risked not only Howard but also all the people in his social circle.

Then the characters remember and begin recounting the escalating tension in society not naming it and only referring to those events as "things" indicating how hard it is for them to name the tensions. Jack says "things begin to happen. It was just as if a clock had started ticking . . . in which bad things always were followed by worse only" (Shawn, 1996, p. 16). Judy talks about cabinet shuffles or the replacement of office-holders. Then Judy refers to the subsequent demonstrations and protests, posing several questions about whether they were real or fake or whether they were really done by dirt-eaters because they were told that dirt-eaters no longer existed (Shawn, 1996, p. 21). Judy says "everything" started when they were at a concert when suddenly they heard shots and then everything began to get worse: There were human remains in inappropriate spots such as the carousel in the middle of the park. To control fake or real outbreaks, the repressive apparatuses of the government fought back brutally and many people were getting arrested by the police (Shawn, 1996, p. 27). They had to attend funerals; especially of those people who were shot when they were sitting quietly in restaurants. Furthermore, the economy went so out of control that they could not even find food for their pets (Shawn, 1996, p. 28).

This social unrest and scenes of violence on the streets, in parks, carousels, and restaurants were also reflected in Howard's house. First, there was a rock through Howard's window. Then a group of men came to Howard's house and smashed his face (Shawn, 1996, p. 31). Later, upon hearing a radio broadcast about new people in high positions and new policies, Howard invited his friends for dinner at his house which echoes Last Supper—another ritual—in which Howard eats with his disciples for the last time. Following the constant sounds of explosions and loud shots, a truck

approached and Judy, Howard, and their friends were arrested. Some of them could not survive the prison; Judy and Howard were released after five years. But Howard was attacked and killed after his release; Jack finds it “a little absurd to lock somebody up for five years and then have someone come to his house and shoot him—all basically because of a couple of essays he ‘d written several decades before” (Shawn, 1996, p. 45).

Throughout the play, the public crisis—the violence and disappearance of the high-brow is juxtaposed to private crises—Jack’s private relations with Judy and Howard, and his sense of self. Jack also has to grapple with his identity issues and personal problems with his wife, father-in-law, and members of the high-brow. He always suffered from not belonging to the community that his wife and father-in-law belonged to. This fact also explains how he happens to be designated as a mourner. Like the boy in this ritual, Jack was an outsider, a member of another clan; that is how he survived. Probably Jack remained alive because he moved out of Howard’s house right after Howard was attacked at his house, frightened by the “*Kristallnacht* type of violent threat” (Schachter, 2000, p. 50). Such a decision to leave may not be the sole outcome of survival instinct because Jack always remembers how he felt excluded from this group of people who could read John Donne eloquently. Introducing Howard as “an apostle ...of love, but flying through the day on the wings of scorn” (Shawn, 1996, p. 5), Jack complains about Howard’s capacity for contempt. Jack is not only resentful of these contemptuous attitudes but also criticizes those elite intellectuals in a sarcastic tone. Remembering how the phrases “high-brow” and “low-brow” were first coined in a newspaper, Jack comes up with his own definitions:

a high-brow was a person who liked the finer things . . . saving the Rembrandt from the burning building, rather than the baby or the fried chicken or whatever—while a low-brow was someone who you might say liked to take the easy way in the cultural sphere—oh the funny papers, pin-ups—you know, cheap entertainment. (Shawn, 1996, p. 2)

In the beginning, he resents not belonging to this group of elite intellectuals which constantly led him to think about the idea of self. After leaving Howard’s house and being separated from Judy, he kept being obsessed with the idea of self which he describes as “just a pile of bric-a-brac” (Shawn, 1996, p. 48). He narrates how he confronted his identity, looking at this ludicrous figure, the unpleasant self, and eventually killing it by kicking in the face, choking, and strangling it. He was relieved and confessed to having always been a low-brow at heart (Shawn, 1996, p. 49). Urinating and defecating on a book of poetry, he began to celebrate the pleasure that

television and magazines provide. Bonnie Marranca introduces Jack as “a middle-aged man alternately self-mocking and devastatingly honest, and, by his own estimation, ‘rat’ an ‘asshole,’ mere ‘bric-a-brac’ instead of a self” (Marranca, 2000, p. 38).

Following the narrations of certain private and public crises, there is an experience that leads Jack to be devastated. Towards the end of the play, varying forms of punishment including imprisonment and violent attacks take another level. This new level is executions, which were done, Jack considers in a sarcastic tone, “as the perennial parallel campaign for the betterment of humanity” “to elevate our moral and aesthetic taste” (Shawn, 1996, p. 52). The news on executions further reminds Judy’s sarcastic remark about the human search for more refined forms of punishment at the beginning of the play. Jack remembers the moment he saw this newspaper photograph depicting people sitting in chairs being fitted with tubes and among those people he saw two of Howard’s friends and Judy. Having recognized Judy in the picture, Jack felt lost.

### 3. The Ritual in *The Designated Mourner*

The news of executions broadcasted in the newspaper with a photograph is the final and probably the most troublesome crisis for Jack. Lost and disoriented, he did not know what to do:

I mean, *literally*, what to do—stand up, remain seated, stay in, go out?

I reach for my naked friends in the plastic bag, because here they were on the table right next to me, and I looked at them in the midst of their playing, and their hopeful smiles made me wonder if a more compassionate world might not perhaps come about one day. A tiny personal advertisement near one of the pictures asked the unknown reader a simple question: ‘Have you ever ridden on the train which carries the bodies of the dead?’ it inquired disarmingly, and then it commented, ‘I have, and I was given a berth right next theirs.’

(Shawn, 1996, p. 53)

This is how Jack defines his traumatic experience in an uncompassionate world in which the people around him were killed and he was just a passenger on a train witnessing these dead bodies. Even though he did not know what to

do first, he decided later to go out; he says, “I went out—it was a black afternoon ...I had the terrible feeling of something left undone” (Shawn, 1996, p. 53). The “afternoon” here may indicate the transitional position that Jack is in, and this thing left undone is a meaningful ritual of remembering. He went to a park, sat on a bench, and realized that “everyone on earth who could read John Donne was now dead” and he was the only one left who would be aware of the passing of this peculiar group (Shawn, 1996, p. 53). Right at that moment, his mind went back to a book he’d read when he was very young, about a boy who belonged to an ancient tribe in a distant land (Shawn, 1996, p. 53). At the beginning of the play, he already announced himself as the designated mourner and has explained briefly what a designated mourner is. This time towards the end of the play, he is providing a more detailed account of this ancient ritual:

And in the course of describing all the customs of the tribe, the book explained that, within the tribe, there were many different sub-groups or clans, and that whenever the last surviving member of one of these clans would die, there would naturally be no one from their family around to mourn them, so then someone who in one way or another had known the last survivor—and if no one was left who had known them well, then it would simply be someone who had known them a little—would be appointed to mourn, publicly, in a sacred spot, the passing of that whole extinguished clan—the designated mourner. And I recalled how the boy in the book had performed that function on a certain occasion, lighting a magnificent sacred fire, weeping and remembering. (Shawn, 1996, pp. 53-54)

After giving information about this ancient ritual, he began to perform the ritual. Identifying with this boy or inspired by this ancient public ritual, Jack initiates a private ritual. He sat at a café in the park— so this café becomes his sacred spot—and ordered a cake. After eating the cake, he grabbed some matches and lit the bit of paper under the cake saying “I am the designated mourner” (Shawn, 1996, p. 54). During the ritual, as Jack watched the burning paper, he thought he heard John Donne crying as he plummeted to Hell

(Shawn, 1996, p. 54). He says, “The rememberers were gone, except for me, and I was forgetting: forgetting his name, forgetting him, and forgetting all the ones who remembered him” (Shawn, 1996, p. 54).

Right after the performance of this ancient ritual, there is a change in the way Jack remembers his past. Before the enactment of the ritual, the play illustrates various forms of both private and public crisis; after the ritual, Jack begins narrating memories of taking refuge in nature that further include indications of hope. After the ritual, he left the café and went back to the park and this is how he narrates the change:” Would you believe that things were *already* more peaceful? Well, they were, frankly. I could even feel myself breathing more easily and deeply. Everyone I saw looked calmer than before” (Shawn, 1996, p. 55). He mentions a new habit, a new ritual, sitting on “the customary bench” in that park. These are the moments in which he took solace in nature. He observes nature: “The sun was going down” and “the colours in the park were quite extraordinary” (Shawn, 1996, p. 55) and such observations evidently help him to console himself:

What were we waiting for? The appearance of the Messiah? Was all this nothing? I was quite fed up with the search for protection. And rather amazed by all that I had—the lemonade stand with its lemonade, the café with its irritable customers and staff, the carousel, the squirrels, the birds, the trees. I’m sorry Howard; your favorite grove was cut down. But so much remains. The flowers at my feet, with their petals that kiss my ankles like little lips, were not cut down. The trembling air and the trembling sky were not cut down. (Shawn, 1996, p. 55)

As is indicated by the sun going down, Jack is in a transition; at that moment he is ready to forget: “My sympathy about the loss of your favourite grove is fading out at the end of the day” (Shawn, 1996, p. 55). After performing the ritual, and taking refuge in nature, he is ready to accept the ending of a community or day and ready to grasp a new beginning. Bonnie Marranca evaluates the terse melding of elegiac and sarcastic tones at the end of the play as complicating Jack’s metaphysical paradox (2000, p. 44). Including both elegiac and sarcastic tones, the play ends in a positive pattern in which Jack finds meaning in the “remains of nature” such as the light, the flowers, the air, and the sky. Reminding that the word “remains” in “so much remains” at the



end of the play is reminiscent of the use of that word in Judy's earlier speech about "human remains" (dead people in the carousel), Robinson calls attention to the changing tone of the play saying that at the end "it signifies survival, even rebirth, instead of death" (2009, p. 353). The play finalizes in Jack's narration of sitting "at the customary bench" in the park; he explains this experience as being lost just like his experience of seeing the execution scenes. However, this time he sat "lost—sunk deep—in the experience of unbelievable physical pleasure, maybe the greatest pleasure on earth—the sweet, ever-changing caress of an early evening breeze" (Shawn, 1996, p. 55).

#### **4. The Role and Meaning of Ritual in *The Designated Mourner*: Rethinking the Elements of Mourning and Healing**

Before an analysis of the role of ritual in *The Designated Mourner*, it would be wise to consider the ritual, its meaning, and its function. There is an extensive amount of interest in rituals from anthropological and social-psychological perspectives. In the studies that concentrate on the function of ritual (mainly the so-called functionalist approach), one of the prominent figures is Emile Durkheim who elaborates on the principal modes of ritual conduct in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In addition to outlining the structure and function of rituals, he proposes different types of rituals such as ascetic rites, the rites of offering and communion, mimetic rites, commemorative rites, and piacular rites. Jack's ritual resembles a commemorative ritual not in the sense that he is paying his respect to his ancestors but in the sense that he is remembering them in a ritual that is reminiscent of a "collection of ceremonies whose sole purpose is to arouse certain ideas and feelings, to join the present to the past and the individual to the collectivity" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 382). In Durkheim's typology of rituals, Jack's ritual, in addition to resembling a commemorative rite, is a perfect example of the piacular rites which he defines as "Any misfortune, anything that is ominous, and anything that motivates feelings of disquiet or fear requires a piaculum and is therefore called piacular. This word seems well suited to designating rites that are conducted under conditions of uncertainty or sadness" (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 392-393). Durkheim further adds that "Mourning offers us initial, and important, example of piacular rites" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 393); therefore, Jack's mourning ceremony is clearly a piacular rite.

Another significant scholar in ritual studies is Arnold van Gennep who works on the order of a similar form in various rituals in *The Rites of Passage*. According to van Gennep, "Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage*" (van Gennep, 1960, p. 191). Kimbal in the introduction to *The Rites of Passage* states that "The analysis of ceremonies accompanying an individual's 'life crises' which van Gennep called *rites de passage* is usually considered to be his unique contribution" (Kimbal, 1960, p. vii). In the order and content of *rites de passage*, there are three major

phases: separation, transition, and incorporation and Kimbal reminds us that “van Gennep cautions us that these subcategories are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every set of ceremonies (Kimbal, 1960, pp. vii-viii). Kimbal advocates that van Gennep’s study is a significant contribution to those who “are concerned with individual, group and symbolic thinking” (1960, p. xvi) because the role of ritual in the dynamics between individual and society still needs to be outlined in industrial-urban and secular civilizations:

The continued expansion of an industrial-urban civilization has produced extensive changes in our social system. Prominent among these have been increased secularization and the decline in the importance of sacred ceremonialism. . . . There is no evidence that a secularized urban world has lessened the need for ritualized expression of an individual's transition from one status to another. Obviously, ceremonialism alone cannot establish the new equilibrium, and perfunctory ritual may be pleasant but also meaningless. One of our problems is that we are lacking the empirical studies of ritual behavior and its consequences for life-cycle crises upon which we might assess the relation between crisis and ritual in its current setting. (Kimbal, 1960, p. xvii)

Thus Kimbal appreciates van Gennep’s study for contributing to a deficiency through an analysis of the relation between ritual and crisis concentrating on the nature of symbolism in individual and social behaviors.

Focusing on the “general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals” van Gennep asserts that “man’s life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stays independent” (1960, p. 3). Van Gennep studies the funeral rites within the same schema including the threefold form of separation, transition, and incorporation warning that even though at first glance the most prominent component of funeral ceremonies is a rite of separation, they evidently include elements of transition and incorporation (1960, p. 146). Van Gennep analyzes

the funerals not only from the perspective of the deceased but also of the mourners. Mourning “is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society” (1960, p. 147). From this perspective the transition is for both the deceased and the mourner: “the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased” (1960, p. 147). This threefold analysis of rituals which can be applied also to the ceremonies of funerals or mourning provides an interesting asset to understanding Jack’s reenactment of the old ritual of mourning. Jack’s ritual as a mourner incorporates the three components of van Gennep’s schema since it is a ritual designed for the separation of not only one person but a whole community who could read Jon Donne eloquently. Also, the separation may be related to the experience of Jack who felt excluded from the high-brow circle or who has to cope with his private and public crises. The ritual that Jack reenacts may be regarded as a transitional period that would culminate in a slight indication of reintegration.

Van Gennep’s tripartite analysis of rituals combining separation, transition, and incorporation inspires Victor Turner to develop a similar model of liminality. Turner examines rituals as social dramas that include four phases: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration (Turner, 1974, pp. 38-42). The rituals and social dramas are liminal or transitional experiences; therefore, a person who is a part of a ritual is engaging in a liminal or threshold experience:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (Turner, 1977, p. 95)

From this perspective, Jack as the designated mourner is a liminal *personae* or a threshold person who is trying to make sense of crisis. Jack’s transition is further symbolized by the transitions in daily cycles. Seeing the news of the

executions, he was paralyzed for a minute but later he decided to go out on that “black afternoon” (Shawn, 1996, p. 53). After performing the ritual in the café, he decided to be back to the park and as he was sitting on the “customary bench,” he was enjoying “the sun going down” spreading “extraordinary” colors around (Shawn, 1996, p. 55). Even though these transitional moments from day to night indicate a transition to dark or to an ending, it may signal how Jack as a mourner learns to grasp endings. In *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*, Fuss examines the three voices—the dying voice, reviving voice, and the surviving voice—in modern poetry on death and dying. Analyzing the surviving voice in modern poetry which “proceeds from the premise that poems of loss often simultaneously function as narratives of awakening,” Fuss calls attention to the homonymous “mourning” and “morning” (2013, p. 78). A similar relation between loss and awakening is also evident here: the mourning ritual performed not in the morning but in the afternoon illustrates Jack as a threshold person who is trying to make sense of loss and probably welcoming an awakening about grasping endings.

In addition to anthropological analysis, the rituals have been examined in relation to processing and overcoming grief mainly within the framework of psychotherapy<sup>3</sup>. In “Rituals and the Grieving Process,” Romanoff and Terenzio, for instance, discuss the function of the bereavement process and the use of rituals in an attempt to propose a sound psychotherapeutic model. Asserting that “The distinguishing characteristics of rituals, and their power are contained in the use of symbols within a performance framework” (1998, p. 698), Romanoff and Terenzio highlight the symbolic and transformative power of rituals. The mourner may select a symbolic object or memento in a transformation ritual or say goodbye to the deceased during which symbolic objects are burned, buried, or given away in a leave-taking ceremony (1998, pp. 705-706). This is reminiscent of what Jack is doing; he is remembering the deceased by burning paper indicative of the phoenix whose burning is regenerative. According to Romanoff and Terenzio, the mourner should be given an opportunity

to tell a new story, a story that affirms the past, acknowledges the changed present, and offers hope for the future. The mourner who plants a seedling in memory of the deceased acknowledges the loss,

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the use and significance of rituals in grief or bereavement therapy, see Bolton & Camp, 1987; Reeves & Boersma, 1990; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Sas & Coman, 2016; Sas vd., 2016; van der Hart & Goosens, 1987.

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and waters and nourishes the sapling. Later, he or she sits in the shade of the tree. (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998, p. 709)

This is a perfect portrayal of the role of the mourning ritual on Jack; the ritual provides him to tell his story, link his past to his present, and acknowledge his loss.

Moreover, in an article titled “Designing Personal Grief Rituals: An Analysis of Symbolic Objects and Actions,” Sas and Coman remind the definition of rituals “as formalized patterns of actions for constructing meaning” (2016, p. 558). Covering the studies on ritual and grief therapy, Sas and Coman categorize the rituals under three types: *Rituals of honoring* “which are performed to celebrate the bond and honor the relationship”; *Rituals of letting go* which are “rituals for processing and releasing the negative feelings associated with the loss of loved ones” and *Rituals for self-transformation* which “are rituals where people evaluate their lives, identify negative feelings which need processing” (2016, pp. 561-562). Keeping in mind Jack’s resentful feelings and sarcastic voice about Howard and high-brow people, Jack’s ritual may not be a perfect example of honoring. Jack’s private ritual in which he designates himself as a mourner can be evaluated as “a ritual of letting go” in which he tries to process his negative feelings and “a ritual of self-transformation” in which he evaluates his life and learns to be at peace with it. Sas and Coman also analyze the significance of symbolic objects for remembering and sense-making in rituals calling them “ritual mementos” (2016, p. 565). In this respect, the burning paper in Jack’s personal ritual is a ritual memento helping him to overcome personal and social chaos.

In addition to approaches based on anthropology, sociology, or psychotherapy, the role of ritual has also been examined as a cathartic release. In *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*, Scheff argues that “cathartic crying, laughing, and other emotional processes occur when an unresolved emotional distress is reawakened in a properly distanced context” (Scheff, 1979, p. 13). Applying his theory to psychotherapy, ritual, and drama, Scheff advocates that

most rituals in modern society are overdistanced, that is, they are too vicarious, and therefore do not lead to catharsis. The formula for successful ritual . . . is the same as that for successful drama: the social form must reawaken collectively held distress which is unresolved in everyday life. The reawakening must occur in a context which is

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sufficiently safe so that the distress is not experienced as overwhelming. Under these conditions, catharsis occurs. (Scheff, 1979, p. 13).

After surveying how Scheff's interpretation of emotional distance provides an interesting perspective on ritual and emotion, Jacobs offers "an alternative understanding of the relationship between ritual, catharsis and mental health (Jacobs, 1992, p. 291).

As an interactive process, ritual engages the participant in behaviors that reinforce connection and attachment to significant others. The subject of such attachment may be a divine being, a spiritual leader, a religious community, or an entire society. However, it is the sense of that connectedness that facilitates the cathartic response through which painful emotion can be brought to consciousness, and relived or expressed for the first time. (Jacobs, 1992, p. 291).

Since Jack is the designated mourner who witnesses the passing of a community, he has no one to attach to. The subject of attachment is nature itself which becomes the sacred ceremonial ground and it is a ritual that enables Jack to have catharsis through which his painful emotion can be brought to consciousness and relived. The cathartic power of ritual provides Jack to let go of unresolved emotions. The ritual enables him to heal: "Jack makes peace with the past by letting it disappear" (Schachter, 2000, p. 100).

The effort to come to terms with the personal and social crises is illustrated in the performance of the ritual of a solitary mourner; moreover, the whole play can also be read as a ritual. Even though the text of the play includes no stage directions or stage properties, Schachter mentions a table on the stage: "the seating arrangement with actors looking out at the audience from behind the table, a kind of Last Supper arrangement, could have created the formal feel of a panel discussion, but other production elements create an intimate dinner party tone" (2000, p. 70). Maybe the whole play is a ritual, a communion meal through which the audience is offered a way to digest the ills or crises in both our private relations and violence and inequality in society at large. As well as the Last Supper arrangement of the stage, throughout the play, the memories of the characters include scenes of eating: mealtime

shootings, the last meal at Howard's house, and Jack eating the ceremonial cake. These ceremonies of eating further strengthen the ritual-like form of this memory play in which the grieving main character yearns to acquire meaning and peace and shares this private experience with the audience just like the offering of a communal meal to the public.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Shawn's play depicts the ills of a fascist society in which not only the poor but also the high-brow intellectuals who sympathize with the poor are eliminated. Even though Jack criticizes the mentality of the high-brow at times, "in *The Designated Mourner* there is definitely a sympathy expressed for the decent liberals, who are the last ones among the comfortable class who actually care about their fellow humans," Shawn in an interview states, "and there is a feeling that if they disappear, maybe the world will be in even bigger trouble than it is in today" (McGrath, 1997, p. 25). As Jack mourns for the disappearance of this special group of intellectuals in both elegiac and sarcastic tones, engaging in a ritual of remembering and mourning helps him not only to recover from the ills of that violent authoritarian society but also to come to terms with his inner conflicts. The ritual is a threshold experience for the narrator and protagonist of the play and the ritual—that can be categorized as a piacular rite, life-crisis ritual, leave-taking ritual, ritual of letting go, or a ritual for self-transformation—plays a very significant role to overcome the crises and to provide reintegration or cathartic release. The performance of an ancient ritual further explicates how humans still need rituals to make sense of traumatic experiences in our secular contemporary world. Whether in ancient or contemporary worlds, humans, just like the designated mourner in this play, need ceremonial moments to tell their stories and to link their past to their present. Furthermore, this memory play can be read as a ritual in which the main character finds meaning despite the tensions and brutality of the outer world and the conflicts in his inner world and offers his private experience to the community/audience or readers of the play.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding this research.

## ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL / PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. There are no participants in this study.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This research and all its stages were conducted by one author.

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