

Cruelty and Tragedy: Cathartic Journey in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*

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Abstract: The concept of catharsis has evolved much since Aristotle defined it in *Poetics* as the purgation of feelings such as pity and fear caused by an imitation of a tragic action. Drawing on Aristotelian catharsis, Freudian psychoanalysis also contributes to the understanding of the cathartic effect in Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973). Similarly, as Antonin Artaud argues in *Theatre and Its Double*, the theatre of cruelty aims to arouse a therapeutic effect in order to discharge the negative feelings of the audience. Although the play is widely acknowledged as an example of epic theatre, it also evokes the characteristics of theatre of cruelty with its portrayal of overt violence and its emotional reflections on the main characters. This includes both the purification of feelings and psychological clarification of these characters as represented in the play. The relationship between the psychiatrist Martin Dysart and his patient Alan Strang can be regarded as a mutual play within the play, which makes them each other's audience as well. Relying on Artaudian and Freudian frameworks, this paper aims to illustrate how the play reveals the modern facet of the concept of catharsis by claiming that both Dysart and Alan discharge their negative feelings in a therapeutic relationship.

Keywords:

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Vahşet ve Trajedi: Peter Shaffer'ın *Küheylan* Oyununda Katartik Yolculuk

Öz: Katarsis kavramı, Aristoteles'in *Poetika*'da trajik bir eylemin taklidinden kaynaklanan acıma ve korku gibi duyguların arınması olarak tanımlanmasından bu yana çok gelişmiştir. Aristotelesçi katarsisten yola çıkarak, Freudcu psikanaliz de Peter Shaffer'ın *Küheylan* (1973) oyununda katartik etkinin anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Antonin Artaud'nun *Tiyatro ve İkizi*'nde savunduğu gibi vahşet tiyatrosu izleyicinin olumsuz duygularını boşaltmak amacıyla tedavi edici bir etki uyandırmayı amaçlar. Oyun büyük ölçüde epik tiyatronun bir örneği olarak kabul edilse de şiddeti açık bir şekilde tasvir etmesi ve ana karakterler üzerindeki duygusal yansımalarıyla da vahşet tiyatrosunun özelliklerini çağrıştırmaktadır. Bu, oyunda temsil edildiği şekliyle hem duyguların arındırılmasını hem de bu karakterlerin psikolojik arınmasını içerir. Psikiyatrist Martin Dysart ile hastası Alan Strang arasındaki ilişki, oyun içinde karşılıklı bir oyun olarak değerlendirilebilir ve bu da onları birbirlerinin izleyicisi haline getirir. Artaud ve Freud'un katarsise bakış açılarına dayanarak, bu makale hem Dysart'ın hem de Alan'ın olumsuz duygularını terapötik bir ilişki içinde boşalttıklarını iddia ederek oyunun katarsis kavramının modern yönünü nasıl ortaya çıkardığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

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Against the backdrop of Aristotelian catharsis, the term catharsis has been revisited many times in various fields from literature to psychoanalysis. As Aristotle (384–322 BCE) defined it, the concept of catharsis emerged basically as the purification of feelings, pity and fear, through the imitation of a tragic action. In this sense, Peter Shaffer's (1926–2016) *Equus* (1973), a modern tragedy, provides the audience, the psychiatrist Martin Dysart and his patient Alan Strang, with a cathartic journey. The playwright's aim to shock the audience through Alan's violent and cruel actions towards horses is also in line with Antonin Artaud's (1896–1948) idea that theatre must evoke a therapeutic effect to purge the audience of negative feelings. Referring to Artaud's theatre of cruelty, the relationship between Dysart and Alan operates as a play within the play, where they become spectators of each other's struggles and purify their negative emotions. Furthermore, Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) theories concerning dreams and repressed feelings enrich the understanding of their interaction as a source of catharsis and therapeutic healing. As they engage in this psychological dialogue, both characters discharge their emotions, leading a cathartic journey for Dysart and Alan in *Equus*. This paper aims to explore the modern facet of catharsis through Artaudian and Freudian lenses, claiming that both Dysart and Alan are tragic characters who become one another's audience and witness their tragic downfall.

To begin with, Aristotle defines catharsis as "the pleasure derived from pity and fear by means of imitation" (40). This definition underscores the importance of mimesis within the tragic framework for comprehending catharsis. According to Aristotle, mimesis refers to the imitation of significant "complete actions" that possess a certain "magnitude" and are conveyed through a trajectory of pity and fear, culminating in the emotional purification associated with tragic events (25). Regarding "pity and fear," the former emerges from situations where individuals experience misfortune despite not being "deserving" of it, while the latter pertains to the plight of a character who is "like the rest of mankind" (38). Additionally, key elements of catharsis include "peripety" and "recognition," as well as "the pathos," which encompasses "destructive or painful actions such as deaths on stage, paroxysms of pain, wounding, and similar experiences" (37). It becomes evident that suffering and brutality serve as critical touchstones for catharsis, provided they are accompanied by a reversal of fortune and moments of recognition. Aristotle's notion of catharsis suggests that the feelings of "pity and fear" arise inherently within the audience. This implies that the experience of these emotions is an intrinsic aspect of human nature when confronted with tragic narratives. Thus, Aristotelian

catharsis emphasizes not only psychological dimensions but also aesthetic considerations.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, the concept of catharsis was first introduced by Josef Breuer (1842–1925) through his work with patients suffering from hysteria. His approach involved using what he termed the “talking cure,” where patients would recount their traumatic experiences and emotion. This process, termed catharsis, was thought to relieve psychological symptoms and promote healing. In *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer argue that an individual’s reaction to a traumatic incident is “cathartic” only if there is an adequate response; however, “language provides a surrogate for action and with its assistance the affect can be ‘abreacted’” (39). In line with their argument, Freud and Breuer also adopted the method of hypnosis to reveal the emotional burden of the patient’s trauma. They purport that “distressing things are then, under hypnosis, found to be the foundation of hysterical phenomena” (41). By allowing patients to articulate their feelings and experiences in a supportive environment, they aim to release the repressed emotions. Thus, both psychoanalysts focus on the importance of expressing feelings with a cathartic effect to explore the origin of trauma and to discharge its negative effects. From their perspective, the talking cure and hypnosis are crucial in articulating thoughts and feelings since distressed people can confront and release their emotions with this therapeutic mechanism.

Furthermore, cruelty emerges as one of the key elements in *Equus*, playing a crucial role in understanding the cathartic moments in the play. In *Theatre and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud describes cruelty as a “higher mechanism” that cannot operate without consciousness (102). Artaud discusses that cruelty is not a mere carnage, but a conscious act which has a magnitude. In his manifesto, Artaud claims that “everything that acts is a cruelty” (85) and offers a new “theatre that wakes us up: nerves and heart” (84); each act in society contains a particular violence, which alters the lives of human beings. As Artaud assumes, excessive violence is a means to release the emotions from people’s inner reality in which suppressed feelings such as “obsessions” and “crimes” are stored (92). On the one hand, he states that theatre should represent a bitter reality which has influences on people’s lives in order to be plausible and in line with verisimilitude; however, it should not be a mere “copy of reality”:

We want to make out of the theatre a believable reality which gives the heart and the senses that kind of concrete bite which all true sensation requires. In the same way that our dreams have an effect upon us and reality has an effect upon our dreams, so we believe that the images of thought can be identified with a dream which will be efficacious to the degree that it can be projected with the necessary violence. (86)

Artaud argues that reality and dreams are interconnected and are reflected via adequate cruelty which can be necessary so as to comprehend reality better. On the other hand, the reality mentioned before should not only be about the “external world” but also about the “internal world” (92). The internal reality, which is also metaphysical, includes “crimes,

erotic obsessions, savagery, and even cannibalism” (92). In this respect, the theatre of cruelty offers the audience to deflect their repressed feelings in order to discover the external reality via the use of their inner sources. M. K. MacMurrrough-Kavanagh suggests that the goal of Artaud’s theatre of cruelty is to free the audience from blindly following societal norms, reconnect them with unconscious energies linked to dreams and imagination, and cleanse them of violent impulses that can lead to chaos. Therefore, it can be understood that catharsis in this form of theatre aims to create a therapeutic effect that encourages the audience to release their negative emotions.

As a contemporary tragedy, Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus* explores the complex relationship between a psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Dysart, and a disturbed teenager, Alan Strang, who has committed a violent act against horses. As Dysart delves into Alan’s psyche, he uncovers deep-seated religious and sexual obsessions, leading to questions about the nature of faith, sanity, and societal norms. The play ultimately examines the tension between passion and conformity to society. In understanding how catharsis is created in *Equus*, it is crucial to focus on themes and techniques together in the analysis of the play. The most striking technique paving the way for catharsis in the play is the use of monologues. Monologues play a crucial role in illustrating how catharsis is portrayed in the play. Through his soliloquies, Martin Dysart acts as a spectator to Alan’s actions, providing commentary on the unfolding events:

With one particular horse, called Nugget, he embraces. The animal digs its sweaty brow into his cheek, and they stand in the dark for an hour – like a necking couple. And of all nonsensical things – I keep thinking about the horse! Not the boy: the horse, and what it may be trying to do. I keep seeing that huge head kissing him with its chained mouth. Nudging through the metal some desire absolutely irrelevant to filling its belly or propagating its own kind. What desire could that be? Not to stay a horse any longer? Not to remain reined up for ever in those particular genetic strings? Is it possible, at certain moments we cannot imagine, a horse can add its sufferings together – the non-stop jerks and jabs that are its daily life – and turn them into grief? What use is grief to a horse? (Shaffer 17)

At the very beginning of Act 1 Episode 1, psychiatrist Martin Dysart is introduced to the audience along with his patient Alan Strang and a horse called Nugget. Dysart portrays the relationship between Alan and the horse on the stage in his long monologue, which creates the atmosphere of a play within the play: Dysart appears as an audience who is watching Alan and the horse. Additionally, Stephen Halliwell, a British classicist, states that people derive pleasure from mimetic representations, even when they portray subjects that are distressing to behold in real life, such as the forms of the most repugnant animals and dead bodies (178). In *Equus*, Doctor Dysart experiences a cathartic connection with Alan’s story, with Nugget the horse serving as a ‘mimetic object’ for him. Through this lens, the horse becomes a means for Dysart to examine Alan’s character. Dysart empathizes with Nugget, imagining its suffering, which reflects a transference of his emotions from Alan to the horse. Although the audience may find it unclear why Dysart

struggles to envision the horse's pain, there is a layer of dramatic irony, as he hints at Nugget's impending suffering due to a cruel act. This empathy prompts Dysart to engage in self-reflection later in the play. Thus, the initial instance of catharsis functions both as a foreshadowing element and a process of identification. Moreover, he continues his speech by addressing the audience: "The thing is I'm desperate. You see, I'm wearing that horse's head myself. That's the feeling," and "It's only the extremity of this case that's made them active" (Shaffer 18). In this speech, he directly indicates that he feels the same emotions as the horse and is shocked by the extreme cruelty of the incident that Alan is involved in. Thus, both as a narrator and an audience Dysart describes and prefigures the end of the play.

Acknowledging *Equus* as a modern tragedy, it is crucial to identify the tragic hero in the play within a psychoanalytical context. Drawing on Breuer's concept of catharsis, later psychoanalytical theories expanded on the emphasis on emotional release and the exploration of the unconscious mind became central themes in psychoanalysis. In "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage," Sigmund Freud emphasizes that the release of a person's emotions and the pleasure derived from fulfilling those desires align with the relief experienced from their unrestricted expression, as well as the accompanying sexual arousal ("Psychopathic Characters" 144). Following this argument, Freud proposes three principles concerning the relationship between catharsis and theatre:

- 1) The hero is not psychopathic, but only becomes psychopathic in the course of the action of the play.
- 2) The repressed impulse is one of those which are similarly repressed in all of us, and the repression of which is part and parcel of the foundations of our personal evolution. It is this repression which is shaken up by the situation of the play. As a result of these two characteristics, it is easy for us to recognize ourselves in the hero: we are susceptible to the same conflict as he is, "since a person who does not lose his reason under certain conditions can have no reason to lose".
- 3) It appears as a necessary precondition of this form of art that the impulse that is struggling into consciousness, however clearly it is recognizable, is never given a definite name; so that in the spectator too the process is carried through with his attention averted and he is in the grip of his emotions instead of taking stock of what is happening. ("Psychopathic Characters" 147)

In line with the Aristotelian definition of tragedy and catharsis in *Poetics*, the aforementioned principles imply that the audience identifies themselves with the tragic hero within a process of recognition. From Freud's perspective, the hero is not inherently psychopathic and evolves so as the play progresses. This transformation is tied to commonly shared repressed feelings, which also keeps the spectator emotionally engaged with the hero and the play. Drawing from Aristotelian catharsis, Freud views it as the clear understanding of the gap between what becomes aesthetic pleasure through representation and how the spectator reacts, with the unconscious playing a key role in creating this gap (Vives 1017). In Freudian terms, the mechanism's unconscious functions as a catalyser between what is suppressed and what is reacted. Both views emphasize that

the audience's emotional engagement with the tragic hero arises from a shared process of recognition and transformation, with Freud highlighting the unconscious as a key factor in shaping this dynamic.

Freud's analyses of tragic characters shed light on Alan's emotional turmoil and his tragic downfall caused by his cruel actions in *Equus*. In accordance with their analysis, it can be interpreted that Alan's cruelty is the outcome of his repressed and obsessive feelings deriving from his childhood, rather than being his innate reality:

Frank [*dryly*]: It seems he was perfectly happy raking out manure.

Dysart: Did he ever give a reason for this?

Dora: No, I must say we both thought it most peculiar, but he wouldn't discuss it. I mean, you'd have thought he'd be longing to get out in the air after being cooped up all week in that dreadful shop. Electrical and kitchenware! Isn't *that* an environment for a sensitive boy, Doctor? (Shaffer 32-33)

As Dysart observes, Alan is a "sensitive" boy and was not a psychopath at the beginning, yet he has become a cruel person influenced by his environment since his childhood. Alan's father, Frank Strang, tells Dysart that Alan has been "a weird lad" (33); however, Alan is not innately "weird," but he is transformed into a strange person through his mother's religious impositions, his father's atheist impacts, and the traumatic incidents he underwent in his childhood. As Maria Grazia Turri clarifies, "while the trauma itself was forgotten, the emotional response was 'repressed'," which eventually results in the expression of the repressed affect through the body (372). Thus, Alan's crime is a cruel reflection of his repressed sexual and religious feelings. His crime (blinding the horses) is performed through his bodily actions in a disguised form of sexual and religious practice. Alan's father explicitly explains why Alan has become a stranger and blames Alan's mother for this: "A boy spends night after night having this stuff read into 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" (34). Frank emphasizes that "mooning over" and obsessive religious impositions have made Alan "strange" and affected his life in a bad way. Therefore, it can be claimed that there is a strong relationship between crime and obsession: Obsessive patterns repeated in childhood may cause crimes in certain phases of life such as adolescence. From these points of view, Alan employs violence as a means of expression which functions as a therapy for himself. However, this is not a therapy only for Alan but also for Dysart because as an audience he feels the cathartic effect and has a chance to explore his own unconscious to release his negative feelings such as pity and fear.

As the indicatives of unconsciousness in which the repressed feelings are stored, dreams also play a crucial role in understanding the cathartic moments in the play. In *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserts that "dreams often reveal themselves without any disguise as fulfilments of wishes" (156). From Freud's perspective, it can be assumed that

Dysart is a character who wants to fulfil his wishes through his identification with Alan. For instance, in Act 1 Episode 5, Dysart talks directly to the audience in an upset way explaining his own dream about Homeric Greece where he is a “chief priest” who is carrying out a significant “ritual sacrifice” (Shaffer 24). This dream can be considered a play within the play, and Dysart is both the hero and the audience of this play. As a hero, he accomplishes the tragic act as Alan has done; nevertheless, his function as an audience is more important. Although he is the chief priest conducting the ritual, he secretly feels “agitated” for the children sacrificed. The sacrifice and ritual are quite effective in influencing the audience, Dysart, and discharging his negative feelings, which is the therapeutic effect of catharsis. Secondly, his dream is the reflection of his own unconscious which is affected by the crime Alan Strang commits. In Episode 6, he tells Hesther that he has been seeing Alan's face “on every victim across the stone,” which is the evidence that he is unconsciously influenced by Alan. As an audience, his dream is a reflection of what he feels for Alan's actions: He feels not only pity for the blinded horses but also fear for possible future crimes that Alan may commit. After he has seen such a dream, Dysart begins to experience a cathartic effect by identifying himself with Alan. He also continues to tell his dream: “[T]he dam mask begins to slip. The priests both turn and look at it – it slips some more – they see the green sweat running down my face – their gold pop-eyes suddenly fill up with blood” (25). It is important to state that the masks function as a determining element so as to complete the ritual sacrifice and symbolise the hidden feelings which come out of the masks as a veil for emotions such as pity and fear.

As is represented in Dysart's dream, Dysart is affected by Alan's violent actions as he identifies himself with Alan unconsciously, which creates a cathartic relationship between the two characters. However, *Equus*, as a modern tragedy, is based more on the antagonist rather than the hero. As Diana Culbertson argues, the understanding of tragic catharsis has changed and contemporary tragedy focuses more on the antagonist and the victims rather than on the hero or heroic causes (179–180). Unlike the classical tragedies, *Equus* employs the concept of catharsis through the representation of the antagonist and the victim. For instance, Alan who is a sensitive adolescent later becomes a psychopath and plays the role of both a victim and an antagonist in the play. On the one hand, Alan is a victim because he is an adolescent who tries to become an individual, but is under the influence of his family and environment. On the other hand, he becomes the antagonist in the play with his cruel actions. In both situations, Dysart witnesses Alan's process of subjectivity at first hand. As for Alan's subjectivity, both as the victim and the antagonist, referring to Lacanian concepts can be helpful to note that Alan is divided between the imaginary and the symbolic orders. Jacques Lacan argues that the images of our subject are “enmeshed in the symbolic order, in which the human subject is inducted into an event which is just as coalescing as you might imagine the original relation to be, which we are forced to admit as being a kind of residue of the real” (*The Ego in Freud's Theory* 257). As is implied, identity is intertwined with the symbolic order that shapes our understanding of events, and this connection can be seen as a remnant of the real. From this perspective,

Alan's struggle can be interpreted as his effort to reconcile his desires as the imaginary and societal structures as the symbolic order. Alan's divided subject clearly demonstrates his failure in this reconciliation.

Peter Shaffer's definition of theatre is also vital for reinterpreting the theme of catharsis in *Equus*, particularly in relation to the concept of cruelty. Firstly, according to Peter Shaffer, "the theatre should startle and absorb an audience" (MacMurrough-Kavanagh 17). Furthermore, in this formula, the theatre "should not be concerned with logic and rationality, but should satisfy audience needs associated with instinct and intuition" (17). In understanding of the definition of theatre for Shaffer, it is noted that the unconscious should be reinforced rather than the conscious. According to Shaffer, theatre should prioritize the unconscious over the conscious. He suggests that theatre transcends mere words or dialogue; it serves as a space for the cathartic release of deep-seated archetypal drives, allowing the audience to reconnect with its "memory" and cleanse itself of associated impulses (qtd. in MacMurrough-Kavanagh 18). Shaffer views theatre as a medium for the audience to purify primitive emotions. Similarly, Artaud envisioned theatre as a metaphysical realm that creates a mystical experience, enabling a collective purging of primal energies through performances that rely on an alternative form of "language" beyond just verbal communication (25). In *Equus*, the cruel and violent actions stand for the purification of those inherent and collective primal energies. To illustrate, Alan, the tragic hero, blinds six horses and then his own eyes in Act 2 Episode 34. Dysart, as Alan's immediate audience within the play, learns this tragic action through a stage direction:

[He stabs out NUGGET's eyes. The horse stamps in agony. A great screaming begins to fill the theatre, growing ever louder. Alan dashes at the other two horses and blinds them too, stabbing over the rails. Their metal hooves join in the stamping. Relentlessly, as this happens, three more horses appear in cones of light: not naturalistic animals like the first three, but dreadful creatures out of nightmare...] (Shaffer 105)

In this stage direction, Alan's intense and suppressed emotions manifest through his violent actions. The act of blinding the horses represents his struggle to reconcile his hidden desires with societal expectations. For Dysart, this shocking moment serves as a form of catharsis, as it reveals how Alan's deep-seated instincts are unleashed in this tragic incident. This moment is pivotal in illustrating the profound internal conflict that Alan faces. His violence is not just an act of rebellion; it is a desperate attempt to express feelings he cannot articulate. Dysart's recognition of this chaos provides insight into the therapeutic process, highlighting the importance of confronting repressed emotions in order to find healing.

The cathartic effect in this scene on Dysart arises from his intense self-questioning following Alan's distressing actions in Episode 35. In a moment of desperation, he addresses Hesther, exclaiming, "All right! I'll take it away! He'll be delivered from madness. What then? He'll feel himself acceptable! What then?" (Shaffer 107). This

outburst reflects his deep questioning of his role as a doctor and the societal definitions of 'accepted' and 'normal.' Dysart feels ensnared by the constraints of societal expectations that complicate his understanding of healing. In his soliloquy, he candidly reveals his internal struggle: "I need – more desperately than my children need me – a way of seeing in the dark. What way is this? ... What dark is this? ... 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" (109). His fragmented speech, laden with questions, highlights his uncertainty and deep entanglement in Alan's situation. As Act Two, Episode 22 unfolds, Dysart continues to confront his self-doubt, feeling as if he is emerging from the "black cave of the Psyche" (109). He is nearly lost in his "Psyche" with his "dim little torch" because he is so absorbed in his patient's suffering that he struggles to maintain his own identity (109). This imagery reinforces Dysart's overwhelming immersion in Alan's suffering. Finally, he calls himself "Poor Doctor Dysart" and acknowledges his failure to separate his own unconscious from Alan's actions (109).

Apart from a simple identification with Alan himself, Dysart is also enslaved by his feelings and cannot detach himself from Alan by playing the role of the antagonist. To begin with, he experiences a state of in-betweenness as he struggles between the status quo and his own passions. Dysart feels pity for Alan since he is unable to comply with what is regarded as sane and usual. He addresses the audience: "What did I expect of him? Very little, I promise you. One more dented little face. One more adolescent freak. The usual and unusual. One great thing about being in adjustment business: you're never short of customers" (21). He calls Alan an "adolescent freak" because he does not conform to the societal expectations. Dysart considers his job an "adjustment business," referring to his duty to normalise the "unusual" people by reintegrating them into the society. Like Alan, Dysart, as a professional, is also in between his desires and societal expectations. Secondly, he questions himself and his job as an "adjustment business" as he does not want to interfere with Alan's own worship, which actually points out how Dysart needs to discharge his repressed feelings by transferring his emotions to Alan. For instance, he talks to Hesther and explains how he is jealous of Alan: "Don't you see? That's the Accusation! That's what his stare has been saying all this time. '*At least I galloped! When did you? . . . [Simply.] I'm jealous, Hesther, Jealous of Alan Strang*'" (82). He uses the word "gallop" and again identifies himself with both Alan and the horses. He is envious of Alan since he has an idiosyncratic worshipping of his horse god Equus. His worshipping is untouched and deviant according to society, yet Alan is happy in his own way. Dysart also continues his speech addressing Hesther: "What worship has *he* ever known? Real worship! Without worship you shrink, it's as brutal as that . . . I shrank my *own* life" (82). Moreover, James R. Stacy points out in his article that Dysart is in need of real worship in his life due to sexual impotence in his marriage and dissatisfaction with his life (331). He is unhappy with his "own" conditions although he is a well-respected doctor. Dysart "shrink[s]" because his hidden feelings prevent him from conforming to societal norms, and thus he needs to adopt a new type of worshipping. Thus, Dysart's therapeutic

interactions with Alan can be seen as a projection of his own desires and frustrations, complicating the healing process.

In *Equus*, worship can also be associated with the issue of deviant sexuality in understanding how Alan and Dysart have a cathartic relationship since Alan's sexual disposition is closely interrelated to his way of worshipping, through which he discharges his negative feelings. Una Chaudhuri discusses on this topic that Alan's worship of *Equus* is not completely spiritual, but also sexual experience as a ritual with repeated actions such as a naked gallop at midnight and orgasm (289). Apart from a religious crisis, Alan experiences sexual strife in his life. Referring to Freud and Breuer's methods of talking cure and hypnosis, Dysart makes use of hypnosis in this episode to discover Alan's unconscious and relieve his emotional burden. For instance, Dysart uses tape recordings to help Alan express his suppressed feelings, aiming to uncover his inner world and encourage him to talk about his memories. In episode 13, Dysart learns what happened in Alan's childhood and why he is obsessed with horses through Alan's recording:

That's what you want to know, isn't it. All right: it was. I'm talking about the beach. That time when I was a kid. What I told you about... I was pushed forward on the horse. There was sweat on my legs from his neck. The fellow held me tight, and let me turn the horse which I wanted. All that power going any way you wanted... His sides were all warm, and the smell... The suddenly I was on the ground, where Dad pulled me. I could have bashed him. (Shaffer 48)

Alan talks about his memories in "a great emotional difficulty" since he suffers from mental and physical trauma (48). His feelings about the horse for the first time are related to sexual emotions in an implied way. He describes his emotions with the words "warm" and "smell" which can be associated with sexual desires. In addition, in episode 27, Dysart gives Alan a pill which is supposed to result in a placebo effect, and Alan starts to talk about his memories about Jill in the following episodes. In episodes 32 and 33, Alan continues with his story and Dysart learns that Alan cannot properly perform a sexual intercourse with Jill because he is disturbed by the horses: "I couldn't ... see her [. . .] Only Him. Every time I kissed her – *He* was in the way [. . .] When I touched her, I felt *Him*. Under me... His side, waiting for my hand... His flanks... I refused him. I looked. I looked right at her... and I couldn't do it. When I shut my eyes, I saw Him at once" (102). This passage conveys the internal conflict and emotional turmoil experienced by Alan. The presence of "Him" symbolizes a profound psychological barrier, suggesting that the speaker is unable to fully engage with the person he desires due to an overwhelming sense of guilt, fear, or trauma associated with "Him." This duality reflects a struggle between longing and inhibition, illustrating how past experiences can haunt present relationships. The imagery of touch and the inability to connect highlights the depth of this conflict, emphasizing how deeply rooted feelings can complicate intimacy. Overall, this excerpt underscores Alan's psychological struggle that permeates the narrative.

In a similar vein, I. Dean Ebner states that *Equus* is a powerful critique of society, contrasting deep desires for spiritual and physical connection—such as worship and sexuality—with the influences of corporations, parents, careers, and traditional religion, all of which work together to suppress the mysteries and joys of modern existence (29). Similar to Alan, Dysart is portrayed as a middle-aged professional who experiences a turning point in his life. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan claims that “the subject sustains himself as desiring in relation to an ever more complex ensemble,” and this is obvious in the scenario in which “the subject I more or less recognizable, is somewhere, split, divided, generally double, in his relation to the object, which usually does not show its true face either” (185). Lacan’s assertion that the subject exists in a state of division means that our identities and desires are influenced by various external and internal factors. In a Lacanian sense, Dysart’s struggle to understand Alan Strang’s desire for the divine and the horse symbolizes his own search for meaning and connection:

The Normal is the good smile in a child’s eyes – all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. In both sustains and kills – like a God. It is the Ordinary made beautiful; it is also the Average made lethal. The Normal is the indispensable, murderous God of Health, and I am his Priest. My tools are very delicate. My compassion is honest. I have honestly assisted children in this room. I have talked away terrors and relieved many agonies. But also – beyond question – I have cut from them parts of individuality repugnant to this God, in both his aspects. Parts sacred to rarer and more wonderful Gods. And at what length... Sacrifices to Zeus took at the most, surely, sixty seconds each. Sacrifices to the Normal can take as long as sixty months. (Shaffer 65)

Dysart questions himself as a psychiatrist thinking that he removes the most “sacred” parts from the children like their “individuality” while he “relieve[s]” their “agonies” and tries to turn them into “the Normal.” He understands making children ‘normalised’ as ‘sacrifice’ and feels guilty. In this respect, Dysart is confronted with the limitations of his role as a psychiatrist, representing the societal structures that seek to regulate desire. Another example that shows Dysart’s struggle is his emotional identification with Alan in Episode 34 when he adopts the role of the horse god Equus: “And you will fail! Forever and ever you will *fail!* You will see ME – and you will FAIL! [. . .] The Lord thy God is a jealous God. He sees you. He sees you forever and ever, Alan. He sees you! ... *He sees you!*” (105). In this scene, Dysart is depicted as a struggling character since he cannot differentiate what is real, and cannot undertake a professional role. Within the same scene, he acts both as Equus and the psychiatrist; however, he not only simply identifies himself with Alan but also loses himself in his inner reality which is the source of all his repressed feelings. Similar to Alan, Dysart himself also purifies his unconscious by releasing his negative feelings and imitating Alan’s tragic actions. Thus, this strong identification with Alan demonstrates how Dysart builds a cathartic connection with his patient and discharges his emotions at the same time as he continuously witnesses Alan’s tragic actions and damaged psyche.

In conclusion, Peter Shaffer's *Equus* is a modern tragedy which reflects upon the cathartic journey of the psychiatrist Dysart and his patient Alan. The play intertwines the Aristotelian concept of catharsis with the Artaudian theatre of cruelty and Freudian concepts. On the one hand, the play offers valuable insights into the therapeutic impact of catharsis on the audience, aligning with Artaud's ideas about cruelty. Simultaneously, Freud's theories illuminate Dysart and Alan's struggles between his repressed feelings and societal norms. Moreover, this cathartic journey is also characterised by deviant worship and sexuality in terms of reflecting their subjectivities. Building on Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacanian concepts of desire and subjectivity also elucidate the inner conflicts of the characters and their mutual cathartic process. As mentioned previously in this paper, Dysart himself also undergoes a cathartic journey in which he becomes the audience to his patient upon witnessing his patient's cruel and deviant actions. Their relationship is therapeutic at the same time because they purify their negative feelings in their process of healing. Examining the affective dimensions of the cathartic journey between Dysart and Alan might also provide a deeper understanding of the themes presented in the play. Such inquiries could enhance our appreciation of *Equus* as a complex exploration of human emotion and affective depth.

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