

Leistungsfach Englisch

Kursthema: Human Aggression

Facharbeit zum Thema:

Violence and psychology in Peter Shaffer's "Equus"

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Ausgabe des Themas: 08.02.2000

Abgabetermin: 21.03.2000

Die vorliegende Arbeit wird mit \_\_\_\_\_ Punkten bewertet.

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Datum

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Unterschrift der Lehrkraft

## 1.1.Introduction

The drama "Equus", written 1973 by Peter Shaffer, a British author, deals with the seventeen-year old boy called Alan Strang and the frustrated psychiatrist Martin Dysart who works in the Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital in southern England. After blinding six horses with a pick, Alan had to undergo psychiatric treatment at Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital. Martin Dysart adopts the case, although he has a lot to do.

In my Facharbeit, I want to express my opinion to the development of Alan Strang, combined with the relationship of Alan and Dr. Dysart at the beginning and at the end of the drama. Besides that, I want to work with the problems within the family Strang, the very religious mother, a former teacher, and the atheistic father who works a lot in his own printing-house.

## 2.1. Summary:

One of the main characters in the drama "Equus" is the disappointed psychiatrist Martin Dysart, who is the focus of the drama. His office is the frame for the meshing together of the different actions in the drama. On the one hand, there is the psychotherapy of the seventeen-year old Alan, the other main character; on the other hand there is the uncovering of the backgrounds of Alan's bad deed.

One day the magistrate Hesther Salomon visits Martin Dysart and asks for treating Alan in the hospital. Dysart refuses because of too much work but Hesther begs him so long until he admits. Dysart tries to talk to Alan who is singing commercial-songs the whole time. After two days and after having nightmares, Alan begins to speak. He tells that his mother is very intelligent and that she knows very much - much more than Doctor Dysart does.

Martin Dysart pays the Strangs a visit and uncovers Alan's peculiar relationship to horses.

In a shift back, Alan decides to tell about his first meeting with a horse. He and his parents were on a beach - Alan was at the age of six. He was building a sandcastle while a horseman came. Alan was very fascinated of the horse and its rider and rode with the horseman along the beach. His father noticed that and was very shocked and anxious. He knocked Alan down into the sand. Alan couldn't understand his father and started crying.

Dysart gives him a tape recorder where he can talk to, especially his secrets and then give the tape back to Dr. Dysart.

Mrs. Strang tells Dysart the story about the poster, which hung above Alan's bed. It was a reproduction of Jesus, chained and beaten by Roman soldiers. Alan bought it with his own pocket money. One day his father came upstairs and tore the poster off the wall. Alan cried for days and so his father was forced to buy him a new one. It was a horse that stared out of the picture into the room. Alan hung it up on the same place like the one before. He seemed to be happy.

Alan really decided to record the tape. He narrates about his feelings he has when he sees or hears a horse. They attract him and he is really fascinated of horses. Someday a girl came into the electric-shop where Alan works and asks him to

work at Dalton's stables. He admits on condition that he needn't ride. Jill, the girl showed him how to clean and how to groom horses. Alan notices that he's in love with the horses and that he enjoys working in the stables and touching the horses. Jill is minor matter. She is nice but Alan is of prime importance because of the horses at Dalton's. Jill tries to approach Alan and asks him to go out with her. They go into a porno-cinema and watch a porno-film. During the film, Alan's father comes in and takes his son out of the cinema. After cinema they go to the stables and begin to kiss each other but Alan only hears the horses that are scraping under the loft they are standing at. While Alan and Jill are making love, Alan stops and begs Jill to go. Alan is sitting on the floor when he hears Equus, a horse that is his worshiped God, speaking that HE can see him every time and everywhere and HE can see everything he does. Alan doesn't want that and that's the reason why he thinks that he has to blind the horses that are standing below him so that Equus can't see him anymore.

Equus is divided into two acts. The first one describes the first meetings of Dysart and Alan and the first attempts to trust each other. In the second act, Dysart uses his old tricks to get Alan speak. In the second act it becomes more and more clear why Alan did his deed. Dysart reaches Alan to the point that he begins to tell his story and his backgrounds.

## 2.2. Characterization of Alan Strang and Martin Dysart

Alan:

The seventeen-year old boy, Alan, escapes with the worship of horses, from his problems he has at home and at work. His father forbids watching TV because that's a "dangerous drug"<sup>1</sup> and he's really disappointed that a son of a printer doesn't read<sup>2</sup>. Instead of supporting her husband, Dora, Alan's mother allows Alan to go to the neighbours, watching Western and so on:

"Dora: ... we saw an awful lot of Western on the television (...) I used to let him slip off in the afternoon to a friend next door."<sup>3</sup>

Here, the different characters of Mr. and Mrs. Strang become clear. They are working against each other. Dora loves horses and riding...her husband thinks riding is a sport for "upper-class riff-raff"<sup>4</sup>. Frank isn't very trustworthy because he contradicts his own statement. After destroying the reproduction of Jesus, Frank gives Alan a new poster on which a horse is printed. For Alan means that that he has got two different persons who want to educate him in working against each other.

The new poster is a replacement for the old one and should characterize the position of horses for Alan in his life. Dora, who tells him a lot of stories of horse, especially some of the Bible, will support this position. Alan chooses a horse for his cult because he had the drastic meeting at the beach and has from that time on some kind of trauma that means that he's really fascinated of horses and also aroused. Neil Timm describes the situation and the following trauma as follows "In an act of symbolic castration, the father drags the boy off the horse in the beach scene, infringing on his ecstatic experience of sex"<sup>5</sup>. From that moment on Alan only gets satisfaction in context with horses<sup>6</sup>. Alan's God is a jealous God who demands total subordination<sup>7</sup>. This relationship is a contradiction: the total subordination (which Equus demands explicitly) means that Alan can't live a

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<sup>1</sup> Shaffer, Peter, Equus,...., page 27

<sup>2</sup> c.f Equus, page 27

<sup>3</sup> cf. Equus, page 31

<sup>4</sup> cf. Equus, page 43

<sup>5</sup> Iking, Petra, Strukturen gestörter Kommunikation in den Dramen Peter Shaffers, Essen, 1989  
Anglistik in der Blauen Eule Bd.9, p. 131

<sup>6</sup> cf. Equus, page 47

<sup>7</sup> cf. Equus, page 105

normal life because he is isolated and can't have an own identity, because he only lives for Equus and interprets his life totally for him. If he doesn't subordinate himself, the curse of failing will come over Alan. These problems are promoted and supported by his parents who do, instead of helping him, enlarge his repertoire of problems.

Frank catches Jill and Alan in a cinema for pornographic films. That is a decisive moment for Alan in his life. He notices that his father uses the supposed overtime<sup>8</sup> for watching porno-films although he forbids watching TV because of missing education. The authority of Alan's father loses in this moment a lot of its trustworthiness. Alan decides to go with Jill and not with his father. This decision is something new. In former times, Alan, would have gone with his father. The picture of "Frank, the decent citizen" is destroyed. Alan feels free:

Dysart: You felt sort of free, didn't you? I mean free to anything?

Alan [to Dysart, *looking at Jill*]: Yes!<sup>9</sup>

After breaking up the relationship to his parents, Alan fails with Jill. During having sex, Alan stops because he only hears and sees the horses and retires into a corner of the loft. Jill can't help Alan, because he feels the failing as a fair punishment. Because he slept with Jill, Equus punishes him and interferes mental in the sexual intercourse.

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<sup>8</sup>cf. Equus, page 95

<sup>9</sup> cf. Equus, page 97

Dr. Martin Dysart:

Dysart's part in the drama is the role of a game-leader<sup>10</sup> and puts a drama in the drama in the drama<sup>11</sup>. Dysart takes the role of the patient and so the audience is forced to take the role of the psychiatrist. "two tragical heroes in place of the tradition one."<sup>12</sup> During the drama Alan proves to be the healthy one because his pathological behavior is a normal reaction of his environment, while Dysart reveals himself to the patient<sup>13</sup>. At the very beginning of the book, Dysart talks to the audience and tells them his problems and his feelings. Only then he comes to the case "Alan" and starts to tell the backgrounds and the beginning of the, for him really dramatic, drama<sup>14</sup>. The previous part of the book is only an explanation for the setting and the situation of the book. Dysart only starts at page 18 to talk to the audience "Dysart rises, and addresses both the large audience in the theatre and the smaller one on stage"<sup>15</sup>.

Within the drama, Dysart becomes more and more clear that he is envious of Alan because Alan has his own world and his own lifestyle. Alan had found his sorrow and now he can call his life his own<sup>16</sup>. Dysart's life is sad and boring<sup>17</sup>. He lives in the same trot. Every year three weeks all-inclusive holidays in Greece although his wife isn't interested in Mythology and Greece. He and his wife are living side by side in their sleepy marriage. Dysart gives Margaret the guilt for the childlessness, although he did a sperm-test and the result showed clearly that Dysart is infertile. He also wants to have somebody in his life who is interested in his hobbies...in *his* life. He wants to have a God, he can worship, like Alan does. Dysart is fascinated of the centaurs, creatures that have the trunk of a human being and the among part of the body of a horse. Alan succeeds becoming one with the horse "I sit looking at pages of centaurs trampling the soil of Argos – and outside my window he [Alan] is trying to *become one*, in a Hampshire field!"<sup>18</sup> Dysart

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<sup>10</sup>, Susanne Bach, Grenzsituationen in den Dramen Peter Shaffers, Frankfurt am Main 1992, Neue Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik Bd. 55 page 158

<sup>11</sup>cf. Grenzsituationen in den Dramen Peter Shaffers, page 159

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Beyer, Das englische Drama des 20. Jahrhunderts – Eine motiv- und bildgeschichtliche Untersuchung, Tübingen und Basel 1996, page 162

<sup>13</sup>cf. Das englische Drama des 20. Jahrhunderts, page 162

<sup>14</sup> cf. Equus, page 18

<sup>15</sup> cf. Equus, page 18

<sup>16</sup> cf. Equus, page 82

<sup>17</sup> cf. Equus, page 82

<sup>18</sup> cf. Equus, page 83

admires that and consequently Alan, too, but he proceeds from the assumption that it's voluntarily and not a compulsion.

Dysart sees the staring look as some kind of provocation and reproach that he, Dysart, doesn't get the satisfaction he wants to get and that he is too coward to change his life; he flees into some kind of utopia<sup>19</sup>. Hesther gives Dysart the idea that Alan's staring is an imploring for a new life because he is not happy in his hitherto life<sup>20</sup>. This shows that Dysart is very pessimistic. He always thinks of the bad things.

He has a dream in which he is a chief priest in Homeric Greece. He sacrifices 500 children and let his helping priests read out of the innards of the children. Dysart is more disgusted from child to child and dreams that at the end the helping priests will sacrifice him. But then he wakes up. The children, he sacrifices, all have the face of Alan<sup>21</sup>. He has fear that he isn't good anymore for the job. And Alan is the person who causes this fear because he's the reflection of all his wishes and feelings.

Dysart tries to solve a pretence-problem that is principally not solvable. He wants to realize the squaring of the circle<sup>22</sup>. That is the relationship to the setting of the book "A SQUARE of wood set on a circle of wood"<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> cf. Equus, page 87

<sup>20</sup> cf. Equus, page 83

<sup>21</sup> cf. Equus, page 26

<sup>22</sup> cf. Strukturen gestörter Kommunikation in den Dramen Peter Shaffers, page 142

<sup>23</sup> cf. Equus, page 13

### 2.3.1. Relationship Alan - Dr. Dysart:

At the beginning of the book, Hesther has to convince Dysart that Alan needs a therapy and that he only needs Dysart, the respected psychiatrist. Dysart refuses, but as soon he notices that Alan is a very hard case. Alan hasn't got the right confidence and only sings commercial-songs. After the first meeting of Alan and Dysart both of them have bad nightmares. Dysart realizes that there is some kind of special connection between him and Alan. During the drama, he gets that Alan personifies all his wishes and feelings. Alan's confidence grows and he starts to tell Dysart the things he wants to know. The feelings thoughts he doesn't want to expose directly, Alan records on a tape, which he gives to Dysart.

After a while and after some meetings Dysart uses a trick. He gives Alan the "truth drug"<sup>24</sup>. It is only a placebo but Dysart supposes that Alan wants to talk free and easy "He wants a way to speak. To finally tell me what happened in that stable. Tape's too isolated, and hypnosis is a trick. At least that's the pretence"<sup>25</sup>. At least this gesture is the last pint in real trust to Dysart. Alan gives himself up to Dysart and is only possible with great confidence.

Dysart tries to help Alan but he becomes aware of having no chance in helping him " It's all over now, Alan. (...) You'll never see him again, I promise. (...) I'm lying to you, Alan. He won't really go that easily. (...) When Equus leaves – if he leaves at all – it will be with your intestines in his teeth"<sup>26</sup>. Dysart is desperate. He is at a point where he can't work anymore. The joy of his work had lost.

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<sup>24</sup>cf. Equus, page 85

<sup>25</sup> cf. Equus, page 80

<sup>26</sup> cf. Equus, page 107

### 2.3.2. Problems within the family:

Alan's self-realization is lasting impeded from his parents. Alan realizes his father as a personified prohibition: he interrupts Alan's first experience with horses with brutal "care"<sup>27</sup>, forbids watching TV<sup>28</sup>, removes without telling a poster from Alan, spies on Alan under disregard of private life<sup>29</sup>, takes his seventeen-year old boy out of a porno-movie<sup>30</sup>, forbids Alan to bring his girlfriend home<sup>31</sup> and underlines his statements with the words "receive my meaning"<sup>32 33</sup>. After the situation in the cinema, Alan sees his father with other eyes. He knows now that his father isn't such a hard worker he pretends to be. Frank spends his overtime with watching porno-films while his wife is sitting at home waiting for her faithful husband. Frank is now just "a man with a prick", too<sup>34</sup> like all the other men who are watching such films in the cinema.

Alan's mother educates Alan by allowing watching TV although her husband forbids it. Actually, she works with her religious influence much more disastrous than her husband does with his prohibitions. Her picture of God is a controlling voice for Alan, which he can't escape from "God sees you, Alan. God's got eyes everywhere."<sup>35</sup> These words and especially these eyes are the releaser for Alan's deed. There was no way out after this statement. Neither Dora nor her husband ever told Alan the facts of life except the biological ones. Nobody told him the "facts" of love. At this point Alan is left alone with his thoughts and flees into the worship of Equus.

Alan lives in two worlds. On the one hand, the real world with his parents and his work on the other hand his world of satisfaction and contentment. In addition, exactly that is the point Dysart means when he says he is jealous of Alan.

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<sup>27</sup> cf. Equus, page 41

<sup>28</sup> cf. Equus, page 27

<sup>29</sup> cf. Equus, page 50-52

<sup>30</sup> cf. Equus, page 93-94

<sup>31</sup> cf. Equus, page 94

<sup>32</sup> cf. Equus, page 27

<sup>33</sup> cf. Das englisch Drama des 20. Jahrhunderts, page 163

<sup>34</sup> cf. Equus, page 96

<sup>35</sup> cf. Equus, page 49

#### 2.4. Comparison book and film:

The film "Equus" (USA 1977, Regie: S.Lumet) is very similar to the book. It starts equally with the scene or rather the description of the setting and the situation. As in the book, Martin Dysart is the person who leads the audience through the book. His office is the main place of action. Alan's therapy takes place in it and Alan experiences a lot of shift backs that plays in its setting.

In the book, there is only one stage that is main place of acting. It should simultaneously represent the office of Dysart, or rather the hospital where Dysart works, Alan's home, and all the other places of the book. The difference between book and film is that the shift backs, that are expressed in the film, can't take place in the book because if it's one stage.

The film shows very good that the first and the second act are starting with the same scene. Alan is standing in Hampshire's field with the horse Nugget. The camera turns over from Alan to Dysart sitting in his office at his desk.

The script is nearly the same as the book. Some passages are shortened but overall there is no difference.

Alan is embodied as a tall, blond long hair, older-looking boy. He doesn't look like I expected from the book but acts in his role very well. Martin Dysart is personified as a small, bit fat, serious-looking, middle-aged man. He is very convincing and good playing as well. Through the film, it becomes clearer how desperate Dysart really is. He embodies the desperation, which is written, in his face.

## 2.5. Biography of Peter Shaffer

The important playwright Peter Shaffer born 1926 in Liverpool was educated at Cambridge University. He and his twinbrother Anthony Shaffer wrote together some novels, but for the play "Five Finger Exercise" he got the Evening Standards Drama Award and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the best foreign play. 1964 Shaffer wrote the drama "The Royal Hunt for the Sun", about the Spanish destruction of the Inca civilization of Peru, which was also filmed in 1969. "Equus" followed and won the New York Drama Critics and the Antoinette Perry Awards. 1979, "Equus" was filmed by S. Lumet with Richard Burton as Martin Dysart. "Equus" was followed by "Amadeus" in 1979, that describes the conflict between Mozart and Salieri, and some other plays like " Lettice and Lovage" (1987) and "The Gift of the Gorgon" in 1992.

## 3.1. Conclusions:

In my final conclusions, I would like to make a last résumé of my Facharbeit. In the drama, "Equus" Peter Shaffer writes about a story, a friend told him one day, of the seventeen-year old boy Alan who builds up, because of the bad influences of his environment, his own religion. Shaffer stresses on the point that he heard the story of a boy who blinded six horses in a stable. After the friend died, Shaffer thought the drama up except the crime itself. He did very well and created a gripping book. From the beginning on the reader can pursue the dramatically development of the play. Neither the position of Dysart nor the background and the actual course of Alan's deed become clear at the beginning of the drama. Shaffer constructs the exact tension that is necessary to have a good book.

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