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Psychological Complexity and Narrative form in Peter Shaffer's Equus: A Close Comparative Study Through the Lens of Modern Narrative Theory

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Abstract

Peter Shaffer's Equus (1973) is a seminal modern drama that stages profound psychological conflict while interrogating the boundaries of narrative form. This article offers a close, comparative study of the psychological dimensions of Equus, especially the fraught dynamic between Alan Strang and Dr. Martin Dysart, analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Gérard Genette's narratology, Dorrit Cohn's theory of consciousness representation, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, and Paul Ricoeur's narrative temporality. It demonstrates how Shaffer's use of non-linear structure, choric commentary, and fractured temporality constructs psychological complexity while foregrounding the ethical ambiguity of psychiatry itself. By quoting extensively from the play and integrating insights from Modern Narrative Theory, this study argues that Equus resists reductive interpretations of pathology, instead presenting a polyphonic, layered account of desire, repression, ritual, and modern alienation.

INTRODUCTION

Peter Shaffer's Equus is widely regarded as one of the most psychologically rich and narratively innovative plays of the twentieth century. First performed in 1973, the drama revolves around Alan Strang, a 17-year-old who has blinded six horses, and Dr. Martin Dysart, the psychiatrist tasked with uncovering the reasons for this violent act. The play is not simply a psychiatric case history; it is an exploration of desire, repression, ritual, and alienation—framed within a meta-theatrical structure that continually calls into question the ethics of explanation itself.

This study applies Modern Narrative Theory to Equus to analyze how Shaffer constructs and complicates the psychological dimensions of his characters. Gérard Genette's distinctions of narrative voice and focalization, Dorrit Cohn's theories of representing consciousness, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, and Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative time and refiguration will serve as critical frameworks. By quoting from Shaffer's text and examining its form, this paper demonstrates that Equus does not merely dramatize psychological pathology but interrogates the very possibility of understanding the human mind within modern institutions of power and rationality.

Framing the Case: Narratorial Authority and Focalization

Shaffer structures Equus as a hybrid of courtroom drama, therapy session, and religious ritual. Dr. Dysart functions both as narrator and participant, offering an unreliable but compelling interpretive

frame for Alan's actions. Genette's categories of heterodiegetic narration with internal focalization illuminate this paradoxical role.

From the opening, Dysart directly addresses the audience:

"I'm lying, of course. That's the old feeling inside me. That's the truth." (Equus, 1)

This confession destabilizes authority: Dysart admits his own duplicity while claiming access to truth. Genette would classify this as autodiegetic commentary layered over the diegetic action—Dysart narrates his own psychological crisis even as he analyzes Alan's.

The frequent shifts between Dysart's clinical voice and his anguished internal monologue exemplify Genette's variable focalization. For instance:

"I watch that woman pick up a straw hat in a dusty country shop, and I want to tell her she's buying a device to keep her hair in place." (31)

Such moments reveal Dysart's psychological dislocation, mirroring the fragmented consciousness he diagnoses in Alan. The narrative authority is divided and self-critical: while Dysart shapes the narrative of Alan's crime, the play's form continually questions his interpretive power.

Representing Consciousness: Dorrit Cohn and Alan's Psyche

Dorrit Cohn's work on narrative modes of consciousness is vital for analyzing how Shaffer gives Alan psychological depth without direct access to his thoughts. Unlike a novel, the play cannot rely on extensive interior monologue; instead, Shaffer uses dramatic strategies that align with Cohn's quoted monologue and psycho-narration.

Consider Alan's explosive prayer to Equus:

"EQUUS. … Thou God Seest Me! … Everlastingly Oh Everlastingly." (74)

This scene functions as quoted monologue, presenting Alan's ritual language without interpretive mediation. The archaic phrasing and repetitive structure evoke religious ecstasy and sexual arousal, suggesting the fusion of sacred and erotic drives.

By contrast, Dysart's reconstruction of Alan's motives often serves as psycho-narration. For example:

"He moves about the house like a ghost. Mumbling." (45)

Here, Dysart's clinical language imposes coherence on Alan's fragmented behavior, translating primal screams into rational pathology. Shaffer thus stages the limits of psychiatric knowledge: Alan's consciousness resists full translation into Dysart's categories, retaining an irreducible strangeness.

Dialogism and Polyphony: Bakhtinian Conflict

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is crucial for understanding Equus as a polyphonic text. Although Dysart serves as narrator, he does not maintain a single, authoritative interpretation. Instead, the play orchestrates a dialogue among conflicting ethical, cultural, and psychological perspectives.

The exchanges between Dysart and Hesther Salomon foreground this polyphony:

Hesther: "You're just being silly. You're talking about your career."

Dysart: "I'm talking about passion. … He's in pain." (50)

Hesther embodies the pragmatic, institutional voice that values social reintegration. Dysart, in contrast, becomes seduced by Alan's vision of passion, even as he seeks to cure it. Their conversations dramatize conflicting cultural imperatives: order versus freedom, normalcy versus ecstasy.

Alan's parents add further voices. His mother Dora invokes a religious moralism:

"He was always so good. Always singing hymns." (37)

Meanwhile, his father Frank represents secular repression:
"I'm telling you. There's too much religion in the world." (38)
These competing discourses are not reconciled. Bakhtin's heteroglossia—the coexistence of multiple, ideologically charged languages—saturates the text. Shaffer's play refuses a single interpretive closure, maintaining a productive ethical and psychological ambiguity.

Narrative Time and Ricoeur's Refiguration

Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative temporality is essential for grasping Equus's structure. Ricoeur distinguishes between mimesis1 (prefiguration), mimesis2 (configuration), and mimesis3 (refiguration). The play's non-linear chronology invites precisely this layered temporal reading.
The central action—Alan's blinding of the horses—is withheld until late in the play, reconstructed through therapy sessions, monologues, and flashbacks. Ricoeur would argue that this anachrony (Genette's term) is not merely a technique but a means of refiguring experience: the crime becomes intelligible only through narrative reassembly.
Consider Alan's memory of the beach encounter with the horseman:
"He was smiling. … I wanted to be in the place where the horse was." (66)
This memory emerges as Alan's desire crystallizes, retroactively explaining his later ritual worship of Equus. Yet the narrative never fully resolves the causal chain. Dysart himself admits:
"I can take away the pain… but I don't know what will be left." (107)
Ricoeur's refiguration here is ethically charged: the therapeutic narrative can impose order but at the cost of mystery, passion, and the sacred. Shaffer uses this temporal layering to critique psychiatry's claim to know and heal.

Ritual, Myth, and Archetypal Structures

Equus draws deeply on mythic and ritual structures, complicating psychological realism with archetypal dimensions. Alan's worship of Equus is not simply pathology but a personal mythology, crafted from fragmented cultural materials. This mythic register exemplifies what Ricoeur calls emplotment: the capacity of narrative to organize disparate experiences into a meaningful whole.
Alan's nocturnal ritual in the stable is described with liturgical solemnity:
"Then suddenly he kneels. The horse stands over him. His hand reaches out slowly and grips the chain that runs from the bit to the ground." (73)
Here Shaffer's stage directions are crucial. The ritual movement and iconic imagery evoke sacrifice, submission, and transcendence. Alan has constructed for himself a sacred narrative to account for his desires—a personal myth that fuses Christian iconography (kneeling, confession) with pagan worship of animal vitality.
Modern Narrative Theory, particularly Bakhtin's dialogism, helps us see this personal myth as a response to cultural heteroglossia. Alan's world is divided between his mother's Christian piety and his father's secular rationalism. His ritual worship of Equus is a bricolage, appropriating language and gesture from both traditions while forging a new, subversive meaning.
Dysart recognizes this:
"He's worshipped that way since he was twelve. … A private, shameful, spiritual event." (79)
But while Dysart clinically names the phenomenon as "delusion," the play's structure refuses to pathologize it entirely. Alan's myth becomes a rival narrative to psychiatry's explanatory regime.

Psychiatric Mastery and Narrative Control

Shaffer's drama is centrally concerned with the power of narrative itself—specifically, the modern psychiatric claim to transform chaotic experience into a coherent life story. Dysart represents this power, but he also critiques it:

"Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?" (108)

This admission is striking. Dysart understands that psychiatric healing involves not merely curing symptoms but dismantling Alan's personal myth. Narrative here is both medicine and violence.

Genette's concept of metalepsis—the blurring of narrative levels—illuminates this dynamic. Dysart's direct addresses to the audience break the frame of realist drama, acknowledging the constructed nature of both psychiatric case history and theatrical performance. He does not simply tell Alan's story; he questions his own right to do so.

Consider his climactic confession:

"I'm going to make a ghost!" (109)

The metaphor is chilling. Dysart envisions Alan's cured self as a hollow subject, stripped of the dangerous passion that gave his life meaning. The psychiatrist's narrative mastery threatens to erase the very singularity it seeks to save.

Dorrit Cohn's analysis of psycho-narration becomes ethically fraught in this context. Dysart's interpretive authority reduces Alan's ecstatic worship to clinical symptom. The play stages the violence inherent in converting lived experience into diagnostic narrative.

The Chorus as Narrative Device

Another striking formal feature of Equus is its use of the Chorus—a group of actors who observe, repeat, and sometimes participate in the action. Shaffer borrows this device from Greek tragedy, but reconfigures it for modern psychological drama.

The Chorus functions narratively in several ways. First, it literalizes the public gaze that polices Alan's private rituals. As Alan confesses:

"They watch. … Equus the Godslave. … They watch." (74)

The stage direction describes the Chorus encircling him, embodying societal surveillance and judgment. Foucault's notion of the panopticon—though not narrative theory per se—resonates here: Alan internalizes the disciplinary gaze, making his private worship an act of both liberation and subjection.

Second, the Chorus serves as Dysart's own conscience, echoing and amplifying his doubts. When he speaks of sacrificing Alan's passion, the Chorus silently registers his unease. This dramatizes Bakhtin's polyphony on stage: the psychiatrist's monologue becomes dialogic through choral response.

Third, the Chorus enables temporal layering. Through choric repetition and ritual movement, the play collapses past and present, memory and narration. Ricoeur's narrative time is enacted theatrically: Alan's past crimes are not simply recounted but re-lived, re-figured in collective performance.

Temporal Disjunction and Modernist Fragmentation

Equus refuses linear storytelling. Instead, it fragments time into confession, recollection, reenactment, and present-tense therapy session. This modernist temporal structure reflects the fractured consciousness it seeks to depict.

For example, the blinding of the horses is the play's climactic event, but it occurs offstage, reconstructed through Alan's halting testimony and Dysart's interpretive gloss. Alan resists coherent storytelling:

Dysart: "What did you feel?" Alan: "I don't know. … Noise. … I can't." (93)
This refusal of causal explanation aligns with modernist suspicion of narrative closure. Genette's anachrony is here a critique of causality itself: the play suggests that psychological events cannot be arranged into a simple before-and-after.
Paul Ricoeur's refiguration helps us see how the play makes sense of this fragmentation. Dysart's therapeutic project is a narrative one—he must assemble Alan's memories into a story. Yet Shaffer dramatizes the violence of this process, showing that the resulting narrative may distort as much as it reveals.

Ethical Ambiguity and Narrative Authority

Dysart is both confessor and colonizer of Alan's mind. He seeks to help but fears he is destroying something essential:
"Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created." (108)
This confession epitomizes the ethical ambiguity at the heart of Equus. Dysart's mastery of narrative—his ability to diagnose, explain, and cure—may leave Alan "adjusted" but emptied of transcendence.
Modern Narrative Theory clarifies that such mastery is never innocent. Genette's concepts of focalization and voice reveal the asymmetry in Dysart's narration: Alan's subjectivity is mediated, translated, and contained. Cohn's psycho-narration shows the psychiatrist claiming access to Alan's inner life, even as the play's form insists on Alan's opacity.
Bakhtin's dialogism demands we hear Alan's ritual speech not merely as delusion but as a rival language—a counter-discourse to psychiatric rationality. The play stages these discourses in conflict, refusing synthesis.

Theatricality and the Limits of Representation

Finally, Equus is deeply aware of its own theatricality. Shaffer refuses naturalistic sets, instead suggesting an abstract arena that evokes both therapy session and ancient temple. The staging is explicitly symbolic:
"The set is a square of wood… the square is encircled by benches." (7)
This liminality underscores the play's concern with ritual. Alan's stable worship is theatre; Dysart's therapy is theatre; Shaffer's play is theatre. The audience becomes complicit in Dysart's scrutiny of Alan, asked to judge, sympathize, and interpret.
Paul Ricoeur's idea that narrative "refigures" human time finds its limit here. Equus stages the impossibility of final understanding. Alan's ecstatic language resists translation:
"EQUUS. … BEARING HIM AWAY." (109)
The capitalization signals untranslatable excess. While Dysart narrates, analyzes, and diagnoses, Equus speaks in a language of terror and wonder that escapes clinical discourse.

Conclusion

Peter Shaffer's Equus is a profound meditation on narrative itself—its power to explain, justify, and heal, but also to distort, reduce, and violate. Through complex uses of focalization, quoted monologue, psycho-narration, anachrony, and choric polyphony, Shaffer stages the conflict between modern psychiatric mastery and irreducible human mystery.
Modern Narrative Theory—Genette's narratology, Cohn's analysis of consciousness, Bakhtin's

dialogism, Ricoeur's temporality—allows us to see that Equus is not simply a story about psychological pathology but a critique of the ways we impose narrative order on psychic chaos. Alan's crime cannot be fully explained; Dysart's cure may be a form of violence.

Ultimately, Equus refuses closure. It leaves us in the uneasy position of Dysart himself: understanding too much and too little, desiring to heal yet fearing the cost of healing. It is this ethical and narrative complexity that ensures Equus's enduring power as both drama and psychological study.

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