Equus

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PETER SHAFFER

After attending Trinity College, Cambridge, Peter Shaffer worked several jobs before becoming successful as a playwright: he was a "Bevin Boy" coal miner during World War II, and later worked as an assistant at the New York Public Library. His first big break as a playwright was *Five Finger Exercise*, which debuted in 1958 in London. *Equus*, written in 1973, received the Tony Award for Best Play in 1975. He received the same award for the play *Amadeus*. *Equus* and *Amadeus* both hold the special distinction of having run for over 1000 performances on Broadway. In 1987 Shaffer was named a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, in recognition of his significant achievements in the realm of playwriting.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the 1970s, Britain enjoyed increasing economic prosperity among the working class. This influx of wealth, combined with the rise of consumer products, contributed to a general rise in what can be described as "consumerism" within society as a whole. The explosion of affordable, mass-produced technology hastened the homogenization of culture, ushering in what Shaffer calls a "worshipless" way of life. By the 1970s, for example, the vast majority of British citizens owned a television set; the power of mass media is manifested by Alan Strang, who sings advertising jingles in his psychotic state. In addition to the influence of consumer culture, Shaffer's play depicts powerful tension between traditional British values on the wane, and countercultural values that had been gaining traction since the 1960s. The austerity and religiosity of Alan Strang's parents are pitted against liberal values such as freedom of expression, a rejection of material culture, and the erasure of sexual taboos.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Peter Shaffer's work is influenced by Bertolt Brecht's school of theater, which emphasizes the medium's artificiality: in Brecht's view, a play should distance itself from its audience so that viewers may reflect critically on what is happening onstage. Ancient Greek drama is another powerful presence in the play, as evidenced by Shaffer's use of the Greek chorus. There are also important similarities between *Equus* and *The Bacchae* by Euripedes. *The Bacchae* deals with the central conflict of human nature—the struggle between the rational, civilized side of man and the irrational, sensual side.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Equus*
- **When Written:** 1973
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1973
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** The present. Most of the action takes place in Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital in southern England.
- **Climax:** Alan Strang is unable to have sex with Jill Mason, and blinds the horses in Harry Dalton's stable
- **Point of View:** Martin Dysart

EXTRA CREDIT

It runs in the family. Peter Shaffer had an identical twin brother, Anthony Shaffer, who also became a successful playwright and screenwriter. He was most famous for the 1970 play *Sleuth*, which he later adapted into a film starring Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine.

Initial spark. *Equus* was inspired by a true story Shaffer heard from a friend about a stable boy in England who blinded twenty-six horses. Shaffer was fascinated by the event, and without knowing any other details about it, set about imagining, in his words, "a mental world in which the deed could be made comprehensible."

PLOT SUMMARY

Equus, a play in two acts, is set in Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital in southern England. Most of the action takes place in this hospital—specifically in psychiatrist Martin Dysart's office. However, as characters in Dysart's office discuss and reconstruct past events in the life of Alan Strang, the play's central character, they play out these events as full scenes, oscillating between the past and present. The play's form and staging is that of a Greek drama: when actors are not assuming their individual roles, they sit onstage and comprise a chorus. This allows the action of the play to unfold in fluid fashion. Scenes in Dysart's office quickly transition into events that have been drawn from the characters' memories.

Martin Dysart is first introduced to Alan Strang through Hesther Salomon, a magistrate who believes Dysart is the only psychiatrist who might be able to help the boy. Alan, age 17, has blinded six **horses** in the stable where he worked. Hesther swears that there is something "special" about Alan, which

Dysart does not believe until he meets Alan for the first time and is amazed by his stare. During their first conversation, Alan responds to Dysart's questions by singing advertising jingles. But he begins to open up after a series of terrible nightmares. Dysart learns about Alan's atheist father, Frank Strang, whose strict and stubborn attitude create a strained atmosphere at home, and his devoutly Christian mother, Dora Strang, who told him Bible stories when he was a child. During conversations with the Strang parents, the psychiatrist also learns that Alan has always been obsessed with images of Christ's torture, and has always loved horses, though they claim he has also always refused to ride them. However, Harry Dalton, the owner of the stable where Alan worked, tells Dysart that Alan may have been taking horses out on secret midnight rides.

Dysart's investigation of Alan's past reaches its first breakthrough when the doctor hypnotizes his patient and gets him to admit that he has been riding Dalton's horses in secret. Dysart instructs Alan to act out one of these rides, which turns out to be a ritual Alan has created in honor of the god Equus, a deity that he believes speaks from and lives in horses. During the ritual, Alan leads a horse into a field and rides it bareback and naked, shouting in praise of Equus until he reaches a spiritual and sexual climax. Dysart is both bewildered and excited by this revelation, and encourages Alan to reveal more about his crime of blinding the horses by giving him a fake "truth drug," a pill that Alan believes will "force" him to speak the truth. After taking the pill, Alan finally feels that he has been given full permission to speak freely. He confesses that on the night of his crime, he was seduced by Jill Mason, a girl who also worked at Dalton's stable. He and Jill attended a pornographic movie before going to Dalton's stable to have sex. Alan, however, cannot consummate the act because his mind is consumed by thoughts of Equus. Ashamed and embarrassed, he chases Jill out of the stable and then blinds the horses with a **hoof-pick** in an attempt to silence the mocking and judgmental voice of Equus.

Dysart comforts the hysterical and convulsing Alan, assuring the patient that he will be eventually cured of his mental illness. But after Alan falls asleep, Dysart voices his doubts about the effect and purpose of his profession. On the one hand, treating Alan will restore the boy back to normal society and relieve him of his immense pain. But on the other, taking away Alan's unique form of worship will reduce the boy to a mere husk. Caught between the dullness of modern society and the horror of human passion, Dysart stares out into the darkness, utterly ambivalent.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Martin Dysart – A psychiatrist at Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital who takes on Alan Strang's case. Dysart is devoted to his work and generally admired for his skill as a psychiatrist, but throughout the play voices his ambivalence about the true purpose of psychiatry and the way that it often ends up eliminating true passion in an effort to force people into a narrow interpretation of what's normal. Alan's case greatly unsettles Dysart, and forces him to reevaluate the value of his practice, to reflect on his own marriage and the lack of passion in it, and his daily life.

Alan Strang – An intense teenage boy, age 17, with a deep connection to religion, who blinds six **horses** one night in Harry Dalton's stable. He is the son of Frank and Dora Strang. Up until the crime, Alan worked a job that he hated at an appliance store and spent weekends in Dalton's stable, grooming the horses. Sent to psychiatrist Martin Dysart for treatment, Alan slowly discloses details about his repressed childhood and his fascination with horses. He eventually reveals the secret rituals he practices in praise of Equus, the horse-god he has invented.

Frank Strang – Alan Strang's father, a devoted atheist, and a hardworking, "self-improving" man. Frank's strict and sometimes-explosive nature is the main source of tension in the Strang household. In addition, his atheism often comes into conflict with the religious feeling of his wife Dora and son Alan. Though Frank seems to be an exceedingly disciplined and rigid person, his own vices – and needs – are revealed when he is seen at the same pornography theater to which Jill Mason takes Alan.

Dora Strang – Alan Strang's mother. A devout Christian and an indulgent parent, Dora brought up her son by telling him Bible stories and secretly allowing him to watch television, an activity her husband, Frank Strang, forbade. She is heartbroken by Alan's crime, but believes that neither she nor Frank is to blame for his bizarre behavior.

Jill Mason – An employee at Harry Dalton's stable. A kind and free-spirited person, she meets Alan Strang at the appliance store where he works, recognizes that he is often watching the horses at the stable, and gets him the job working weekends at the stable. Jill takes a liking to Alan, and eventually takes him on a date to a pornography theater and then back to the stable for sex. Alan's failure to have sex with Jill is the catalyst for his crime against the horses.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hesther Salomon – A magistrate who convinces the court to send Alan Strang to get psychiatric treatment instead of going to prison. She is also Martin Dysart's close friend and confidante.

Harry Dalton – The owner of the **horse** stable where Jill Mason and Alan Strang work.

Young Horseman – The man who gives Alan Strang his first horseback ride, when he was just a boy.

Nurse – A nurse at Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital who cares for Alan Strang.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PASSION

The place and value of passion in life is the most important issue raised by Shaffer's play. The play portrays a world—and you could certainly argue that the world of the play accurately resembles our own—in which people's deepest human desires are being squeezed out of their lives and replaced by banal and mass-produced pleasures. Alan Strang feels this pressure powerfully: his job at the appliance store emphasizes the profusion of new consumer goods that interfere with and distract from real human activity. An obsession with name brands, convenience, and machines overshadow individual needs and visceral feelings. Instead of doing what he loves, Alan "spend[s] every minute with electrical things."

Alan finds an expression for his primal passions, however, through his creation of Equus, a god that takes the form of a **horse**. Though the people around him characterize his activities as perverse, and his religion eventually leads to the horrific blinding of six horses, Alan is able to feel a passion that no other person in the play has felt before. Psychiatrist Martin Dysart, in treating Alan, actually comes to feel jealous of the boy's obsession. He recognizes the bizarre nature of Alan's behavior, but when he compares Alan's all-consuming passion to his own banal, passionless life, he cannot help but wonder which type of life is more worth living.

At the end of the play, Dysart agrees to cure Alan of his "madness," but also understands that the treatment will come at an enormous cost to Alan. By taking away the boy's passion, Dysart realizes that he will likely turn Alan into a kind of "ghost," a mediocre man living within the strict bounds of societal norms. As he contemplates the treatment and its impact on Alan, Dysart comes to doubt whether his occupation actually helps people. He is at once restoring Alan to normalcy, but also taking away the thing that Alan lives for—the pain and ecstasy that make Alan's life his own. Through Alan's religion and Dysart's questioning, Shaffer's play weighs the benefits of living a healthy, normal life against the possibility of living an extraordinary life of passion, however painful. Dysart's bewilderment and ambivalence in the final scene indicate that this conflict between societal pressure and individual expression may be impossible to resolve.

RELIGION AND WORSHIP

The concepts of passion and worship are intimately related in *Equus*, and over the course of the play, Shaffer complicates our idea of what religion is and should be. The main characters in *Equus* display a wide range of relationships to religion. By exploring these relationships, Shaffer shows us that we all "worship" something in life, whether or not we belong to an "actual" religion. Frank Strang, for instance, is an atheist, but his "worship" takes the form of constant work. Martin Dysart calls him "[r]elentlessly self-improving," and Frank's wife, Dora Strang, calls his beliefs and actions "very extreme." In contrast, Frank does not approve of Dora's devout Christianity. He hates the fact that Dora tells Bible stories to Alan and sees her as indulging Alan's fascination with religious images of pain and suffering. Martin Dysart comes to see himself as a "priest" of modern society: as a psychiatrist, his job is to worship the religion of the "Normal"—to restore his patients to normalcy and turn them into average citizens who fit society's mold. His view of himself as a priest comes from a dream he recounts in Act One, in which he slices open the bodies of children as a sacrifice to the ancient Greek gods.

Given his close relationship with Dora, it's no surprise that Christianity powerfully influences Alan Strang's imagined religion. Alan is obsessed with Bible stories and "religious pictures," especially by images of the torture of Christ. In fact, Alan creates Equus and his horse religion, which echoes many aspects of Christianity, after Frank throws out Alan's picture of Christ being beaten by Roman centurions, and then replaces it with a picture of a horse. Most important in Alan's new religion is the combination of spiritual transcendence with physical pain: Christ's martyrdom is mimicked in Alan's worship of Equus. In one scene, Alan whips his back with a wire hanger while praying to Equus. In another, Alan achieves a sexual and spiritual euphoria while riding Nugget naked, an experience that simultaneously leaves his legs and feet raw and bleeding. Another major theme of Christianity that pervades the play is the idea of original sin, the notion that the moment we are born, we are guilty of sin that we can never escape. Alan and Dysart embody this idea when they imagine themselves as bridled horses. As Dysart says, there is a "sharp chain" in each of our mouths. This means that there are elements of our humanity that we cannot control: our social standing, the society we are born into, and our innate, animal desires. As human beings, we are at once capable of achieving transcendence, but are also slave to our own physical and societal situations. The horse's bit represents our paradoxical desire to master ourselves, and our inability to truly be free.

While Christianity is perhaps the most overt religious influence in the play, the religion of ancient Greece also plays an

important role. Greece first emerges as a subject of Dysart's fascination. To him, Greece is a place with "a thousand local Gods." It's a place where people worship everything around them, where a passion still exists for the "living Geniuses of Place and Person." For the Greeks, nothing was merely "normal." Rather, everything was full of spiritual value and no form of worship is more or less important than another. With a thousand gods, individuals were free to worship in their own unique ways. While Dysart recognizes that certain aspects of Greek religion are horrific—for example, the sacrifice of children to Zeus—he still prefers a society in which the expression of human passion takes many different forms, instead of conforming to the average, dull life that modern society demands.

Though Dysart would characterize himself, Frank, and Dora as "worshippers" of the religion of the "Normal," he distinguishes this blind and lifeless conformation to modern society from "[r]eal worship." In Dysart's view, Alan's worship of Equus is true worship, and he sees the boy as lucky to be able to experience moments of absolute rapture, moments that Dysart has never and will never know. In ancient Greece, Alan's passion for Equus might be seen as one of many ways to interact spiritually with the world. In modern society, however, this type of worship is considered bizarre and inappropriate, and must be eradicated. Dysart realizes that while it would be healthy for Alan to be able to live a normal life, he cannot "think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship." To Dysart—and, one assumes, to Shaffer—the death of passion and "real worship" in modernity spells the death of humanity itself.

SEX AND SEXUALITY

Alan Strang's religion and the rituals he develops around it are highly erotic. His description of riding Nugget in the field highlights the physicality and sensuality of the event, and his desire to be "One Person" with Equus suggests how religion and sex can be transcendent, spiritual activities. As Dora Strang says, sex can be "the most important happening of [one's] life." But Alan's worship of Equus also indicates Alan's wish to be like a **horse**—that is, to express his animal instincts. The ritual of becoming "One Person" with Equus is simultaneously an act of purification and a surrender to bestial desire. In this way, Alan's religious ritual is also a kind of sex act, in its combination of perfect love and animal lust.

It is perhaps because Alan's sexuality is repressed throughout the play that his erotic and religious activity is intertwined, also, with acts of self-harm. While Equus grants Alan a sense of sexual and spiritual freedom, the shame that Alan feels regarding his sexuality forces him to submit himself to immense physical pain. The intensity of Alan's shame is revealed at the end of the play when, after his embarrassing sexual experience with Jill Mason, he blinds the horses in the stable, then begs for his own death. Alan's attempt to have sex with Jill may be read as an attempt to "normalize" his sexuality—that is, to make his sexuality conform to society's expectations. In his failure to become aroused by Jill, he feels at once embarrassed that he is unable to perform what a man "should" be able to perform, and ashamed that he has betrayed his true passion, the horse-god Equus. The shame becomes too much to bear: hearing Equus's accusatory and judgmental voice in his head, Alan blinds the horses in the stable, wanting to silence the force that has ruled his life and made him a societal outcast.

Alan's sexuality is not the only sexuality that is being repressed in Shaffer's play, however. Toward the end of Act Two, when Jill and Alan attend a pornographic movie, the play makes it apparent that society as a whole has repressed the sexual desires of human beings. It is only in the dark that humans are allowed to express their carnal desires. Alan finally realizes that sex is a natural thing for all men when he runs into his father, Frank, in the pornography theater. In that moment he understands that all men have their own secrets, and enact their own fantasies in private. Alan's own passion, however, is too intense to be kept in the darkness of a pornography theater. The collision between his "normal" sexual encounter with Jill and the site of his erotic and spiritual rituals proves too much for Alan, and results in his heinous crime and psychological breakdown.

Alan Strang powerfully embodies the conflict between modern society and human nature. In the beginning of the play, he communicates only by singing advertising jingles; this expression of commercial culture in Alan's psychopathic state stresses the repetitive and dehumanizing nature of modern life. His hatred of modern society emerges in his religion as well: the brands that Alan sells at the appliance store—Hoover, Remington, etc.—become the "foes" that he rides against during his midnight adventure with his **horse**, Nugget. Alan's desire to live outside the bounds of modern society also manifests itself in his admiration for cowboys. In his mind, cowboys are lawless orphans, nomadic individuals who are completely free and uninhibited, untethered from the repression of family and society.

MODERN SOCIETY AND NORMALITY

The commercialized and mechanized society that we live in forms the backdrop to *Equus*, and the play offers a powerful critique of modern society's effect on the individual. Whether one is Christian, agnostic or atheist, modern society is actually its own kind of religion—the religion of the "Normal." As Martin Dysart explains, "The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes," but also "the dead stare in a million adults." In this religion, parts of us that are deemed unhealthy or abnormal must be cut away; our individuality is sacrificed in the name of health and happiness.

Dysart comes to view himself as a "Priest" of this modern religion. As a psychiatrist, he treats individuals with abnormal behavior and, once they become normal, incorporates them back into society. But when Dysart compares Alan Strang's strange life to his own sexless, passionless and boring life, he is no longer sure if it is better to live within the bounds of modern society or to disregard its restrictions.

PSYCHIATRY, REPRESSION, AND MADNESS

According to psychoanalytic theory, the abnormal repression of desires and impulses in an individual can result in mental illness. In Alan Strang's case, it would appear that the repression of his sexuality, combined with the anxiety induced by society and his parents, lead to his self-destructive and antisocial behavior. As a psychiatrist, Martin Dysart's job is to cure Alan's abnormalities. He does this by relieving Alan's repression—that is, by bringing repressed memories and feelings into Alan's consciousness so that he might accept them and move on. We see Dysart trying to bring thoughts and experiences that Alan has repressed to the surface when he hypnotizes Alan and gives him the "truth pill." These techniques allow Alan to discuss his issues with less anxiety, thus allowing him to come to terms with himself.

Peter Shaffer was strongly influenced by the theories of R. D. Laing, a Scottish psychiatrist whose radical ideas were popular at the time Shaffer was writing *Equus*. Laing believed that mental illnesses were not purely biological; rather, what was psychologically normal or abnormal was determined by society and conventional family values. In Laing's view, "insane" individuals may not actually have psychological issues; rather, they may simply be reacting to the world in a way that society deemed wrong. Whereas society saw madness as a horrible illness, Laing saw madness as a unique and potentially transformative experience. In *Equus*, Martin Dysart expresses very similar views. His doubts about curing Alan at the expense of his individuality echo Laing's belief in the creative possibilities of madness. And Dysart's ambivalence goes beyond Alan's individual case. In Act One, Dysart's dream about sacrificing children in ancient Greece comes to represent the idea that he and his profession are sacrificing children's individuality in order to assimilate them into the social norms of the modern world. This tension – between "curing" and "sacrificing" – is one that the play raises but suggests may not be possible to bridge or eliminate.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HORSES

The horse is the primary symbol in *Equus*, and at a glance, it represents everything we might expect a horse to represent: power, freedom, animal desire. Indeed, Alan Strang's worship of the horse-god Equus emphasizes the pure physicality of the horse. His love of stroking horses and riding them naked attests to the sense of emotional, spiritual, and sexual freedom he feels around these animals. However, over the course of the play the horse comes to symbolize the exact opposite. When Alan calls Equus a "Godslave," he means that the horse is powerful, yet cannot control itself. Its speed and force imply great freedom, and yet the saddle and bit that it wears is painfully constricting. In this way, Shaffer draws a parallel between horses and human beings. As humans, we have the capacity to be free and individual; yet the conditions into which we are born immediately limit this capacity. The society we are born into, our economic class, our religious restrictions—so many factors actually control the way that we live in our world. The horse becomes a symbol for our paradoxical position: we are simultaneously powerful and free and helplessly limited.

HOOF-PICK

At the end of the play, Martin Dysart describes himself as "stand[ing] in the dark with a pick in [his] hand, striking at heads." Here, he draws an explicit connection to Alan Strang, who blinded the **horses** in Harry Dalton's stable using a hoof-pick. In Alan's situation, the hoof-pick is a symbol of the brutality and irrationality with which he committed his crime. So when the psychiatrist depicts himself with a hoof-pick in his own hand, this symbol gains a whole new level of meaning. The tool comes to represent the profound irrationality of modern society: Dysart, as the self-described psychiatrist priest of "The Normal," treats children that society has deemed "sick" or "bizarre," but in the process sacrifices their individuality. The idea that Dysart is "striking at heads" in the dark implies that there is little rhyme or reason to Dysart's practice; the doctor no longer knows why he does what he does, and he also doesn't have a solution.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Equus* published in 1984.

Act 1 Quotes

❝ You see, I'm wearing that horse's head myself. That's the feeling. All reined up in old language and old assumptions, straining to jump clean-hoofed on to a whole new track of being I only suspect is there. I can't see it, because my educated, average head is being held at the wrong angle. I can't jump because the bit forbids it, and my own basic force—my horsepower, if you like—is too little. The only thing I know for sure is this: a horse's head is finally unknowable to me.

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this opening passage, the psychiatrist Martin Dysart is musing about his dissatisfaction with his life. Dysart believes that there is a "whole new track of being" somewhere, but he cannot live that way because he is shackled by the language and assumptions of his culture that dictate the way he lives. Dysart compares himself to a horse in that he believes he is naturally free, but bound (metaphorically) by a bit and reins, which represent the ways in which social expectations and assumptions limit the possibilities available to him. This is a surprising opening monologue from a psychiatrist, as it indicates his fundamental mistrust of the forces that define whether someone is normal or abnormal. Typically, a psychiatrist's job is to hew to a socially agreed-upon definition of normal and treat patients' abnormalities until they can be considered normal. This passage indicates that Dysart sees himself as potentially "abnormal" (clinically speaking), in that he lives a normal life but it's not the life he wants.

❝ You sit in front of that thing long enough, you'll become stupid for life—like most of the population. The thing is, it's a *swiz*. It seems to be offering you something, but actually it's taking something away.

Related Characters: Frank Strang (speaker), Alan Strang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

As Dysart begins his treatment of Alan, Alan begins to reveal tensions between himself and his father. Here, Alan recalls his father Frank's removal of the television from their home. Frank removes it because he believes that television is taking away individuality and making people stupid. He wants his son to be exceptional, not like "most of the population" who just sit in front of the television. This interaction takes on deep irony as the play delves deeper into Alan's story. Frank seems to want his son to be unlike others in only very specific ways, but not in the ways that Alan already is unlike others. Alan's passions, for instance, are unique, but Frank insists that they are pathological and must be treated. This passage begins to reveal the hypocrisies and contradictions of a social morality that declares some abnormalities good and others evil (as well as condoning some evil as normal). We begin to get the sense that these delineations are arbitrary, and modern morality cannot be considered wholly rational.

❝ A boy spends night after night having this stuff read to 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. I mean real kinky ones, if you receive my meaning.... Bloody religion—it's our only real problem in this house, but it's insuperable; I don't mind admitting it.

Related Characters: Frank Strang (speaker), Frank Strang, Alan Strang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dysart is speaking with Alan's parents to try to untangle the things in Alan's past that might have led him to mutilate the horses. This passage, spoken by Frank, weaves together religion, violence, and sexuality in a way that will be crucial to the remainder of the play. Frank establishes that Alan is somebody naturally drawn to religion, and particularly to the parts of religion that have to do with punishment. Frank's use of the word "kinky" to describe imagery of the crucifixion is unusual and noteworthy; one would not likelyjump to the conclusion

that someone obsessed with the violence of religion is getting sexual thrill from it. So, while this passage is ostensibly Frank's condemnation of Alan's religiosity, the passage also raises questions about how Frank's parenting has affected Alan. Frank's rejection and sexualization of Alan's religion, for example, may have made Alan feel ashamed, or put ideas into his head about the relationship between sex and violence that he didn't have before. Regardless, Frank's rejection of Alan's passion for religion has made Alan practice in secret, which certainly contributes to the ways in which Alan's religion has diverged from "normal" worship.

❝ 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 way I wanted. All that power going any way you wanted…. It was always the same, after that. Every time I heard one clop by, I had to run and see…. I can't remember when it started. Mum reading to me about Prince who no one could ride, except one boy. Or the white horse in Revelations. 'He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True. His eyes were as flames of fire, and he had a name written that no man knew but himself'…. No one understands! …Except cowboys. They do. I wish I was a cowboy. They're free. They just swing up and then it's miles of grass…I bet all cowboys are *orphans!* …I bet they are!

Related Characters: Alan Strang (speaker), Dora Strang, Young Horseman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alan describes to Dysart his first experience of riding a horse as a child. Alan's narration shows his powerful association of horses with freedom. In light of his controlling father, it makes sense that riding the horse would have given him a feeling of freedom and control for the first time in his life. The description is also evocative of a sexual experience, as Alan describes the physical feeling of being on the horse, particularly the sweat from the horse rubbing off on his legs. In addition to associating this experience with freedom and sex, Alan brings up imagery from the Book of Revelations, which ties horses in with Alan's interest in religion. Clearly, the experience of being on a horse evoked in Alan all of the things about which he cares the most, and also the things which he is denied forcefully by his father--no wonder the experience was powerful. Dysart senses, rightfully, that this experience was formative in Alan's development.

❝ Frank: He took a piece of string out of his pocket. Made up into a noose. And put it in his mouth. And then with his other hand he picked up a coat hanger. A wooden coat hanger, and—and—
Dysart: Began to beat himself?
Frank: You see why I couldn't tell his mother…Religion. Religion's at the bottom of all this!

Related Characters: Martin Dysart, Frank Strang (speaker), Dora Strang, Alan Strang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Frank comes to Dysart in secret to inform him of a few things he knows about Alan that he does not wish his wife to know. One of these things is that Frank witnessed Alan performing a secret ritual in his room, with Alan imitating a horse being ridden. Alan's imitation of a horse, though, also has clear parallels to the violent religious imagery Alan was so drawn to. The whip a rider uses on a horse, for instance, is evocative of the extreme Christian practice of self-flagellation, in which a believer tries to physically understand the pain of Christ. Frank believes, then, that religion is to blame for his son's bizarre behavior. By this point in the play, though, it is beginning to become clear that it is Frank's strict insistence that Alan not pursue his passion for religion that causes Alan to worship in secret and develop more and more bizarre practices. We also get the sense here that Frank has something to hide, too, since he is coming to Dysart in secret. This passage begins to get at the dangers of living in the kind of society in which natural interests and passions cannot be expressed.

I wish there was one person in my life I could show. One instinctive, absolutely unbrisk person I could take to Greece, and stand in front of certain shrines and sacred streams and say 'Look! Life is only comprehensible through a thousand local Gods. And not just the old dead ones with names like Zeus—no, but living Geniuses of Place and Person! And not just Greece but modern England! Spirits off certain trees, certain curves of brick wall, certain chip shops, if you like, and slate roofs—just as of certain frowns in people and slouches' ...I'd say to them—'Worship as many as you can see—and more will appear!' ...If I had a son, I bet you he'd come out exactly like his mother. Utterly worshipless.

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker), Hesther Salomon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dysart is confessing a deep desire of his to his colleague Hesther, and, by implication, also confessing a deep dissatisfaction with his life as it stands. Dysart's dream of going to Greece is one that is nominally about travel, but is really about spirituality. Dysart feels a compulsion to worship beauty and individuality, which he talks about in terms of appreciating the specificity of particular places, and admiring the ancient Greeks who had many local gods. Dysart does not dream about a shared and all-consuming faith, but rather a spirituality that is particular to each individual. For Dysart, this is evoked by the beauty of differences and the specificity of all things that are true to themselves, not homogenized or existing in accord with social pressure. This passage reveals an affinity between Dysart and Alan that was less clear before; Alan has a specific, individual passion of a kind that Dysart admires but is not courageous enough to cultivate.

The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes—all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. It 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 his 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.

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker), Hesther Salomon, Alan Strang

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a continuation of Dysart's explanation to Hesther of his troubles with his life and profession and his doubts about the incompatibility of contemporary morality with individuality. Dysart here positions himself as doing evil work, despite his good intentions. He says that by serving the "God of Health" he sometimes helps people, but he just as often takes from people their individuality and joy in the service of making them normal and acceptable in the eyes of their society. Dysart recognizes that the societal definition of normalcy that his profession serves is arbitrary; it is not a universal standard of health, but rather a confining standard that is particular to a place and time. By using his profession to manipulate people to be more like a socially agreed-upon definition of normal and less like themselves, Dysart fears that he is taking away the most precious parts of a person. He compares himself to someone carrying out human sacrifices, a practice that was once considered essential to society, and is now considered cruel and taboo.

> Alan [*ritually*]: Equus—son of Fleckwus—son of Neckwus—*Walk*.

Here we go. The King rides out on Equus, mightiest of horses. Only I can ride him. He lets me turn him this way and that. His neck comes out of my body. It lifts in the dark. Equus, my Godslave! ...Now the King commands you. Tonight, we ride against them all.
Dysart: Who's all?
Alan: My foes and His.
Dysart: Who are your foes?
Alan: The Hosts of Hoover. The Hosts of Philco. The Hosts of Pifco. The House of Remington and all its tribe!
Dysart: Who are His foes?
Alan: The Hosts of Jodhpur. The Hosts of Bowler and Gymkhana. All those who show him off for their vanity!

Related Characters: Alan Strang, Martin Dysart (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dysart hypnotizes Alan and then convinces him to perform the ritual that he practices with the horses at night. What Alan then reveals is that he strips down in the middle of the night and rides the horses, whom he believes embody Equus, Alan's god. It's significant that Alan calls Equus his "Godslave" and that he compares himself to Equus by wearing his "manbit." This is Alan's acknowledgement that Equus, in some ways, is a way for Alan to make sense of himself. Alan feels within himself the possibility of being free, which means, to him, being true to himself, but Alan also powerfully feels the constricting morals and norms of the society he lives in that limit him and even torture him. Alan feels constricted and insulted by brand-names, which represent the homogenizing force of contemporary culture, and Equus, similarly, feels constricted and insulted by equestrians who subvert and control Equus's true nature in order to stroke their own vanity. This passage gives an idea of the morality Alan has constructed for himself.

> I'm raw! Raw!
> Feel me on you! On you! On you! On you!

I want to be in you!
I want to BE you forever and ever! –
Equus, I love you!
Now! –
Bear me away!
Make us One Person!

Related Characters: Alan Strang (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, part of Alan's re-enactment of his religious rituals under hypnosis, shows the ways in which violence, sexuality, and religion remain intertwined for Alan, and lie at the heart of his troubles and passion. Alan's ride on the horse is shown to be both painful and pleasurable, and his seeming need to be in pain in order to experience pleasure gestures towards a shame that Alan feels surrounding his sexuality. This also shows Alan's intertwining of religion and sexuality, as his way of worshipping Equus is to avow his love for Equus and his desire to be both *in* and *one with* Equus, which is physically manifested as sexual arousal. The ritual leaves little doubt that Alan has created a religion for himself that combines the passions and curiosities from which Alan was most forcefully dissuaded at home: religion, violence, and sexuality. This is further evidence that, as Dysart suspects, diverting somebody from their true self through social pressure or psychiatry might just intensify their need for an outlet and take them further from what is socially acceptable.

Act 2 Quotes

❝ A child is born into a world of phenomena all equal in their power to enslave. It sniffs—it sucks—it strokes its eyes over the whole uncomfortable range. Suddenly one strikes. Why? Moments snap together like magnets, forging a chain of shackles. Why? I can trace them. I can even, with time, pull them apart again. But why at the start they were ever magnetized at all—just those particular moments of experience and no others—I don't know. *And nor does anyone else.* Yet *if* I don't know—if I can never know that—then what I am doing here? I don't mean clinically doing or socially doing—I mean *fundamentally*! These questions, these Whys, are fundamental—yet they have no place in a consulting room.

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker), Alan Strang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this opening to the second act, Dysart tries to account (to himself and Equus) for how a person comes to be who they are, and, specifically, for how Alan might have come to develop such a strange religion. Dysart's beginning with a child using its basic senses to comb through the world shows the influence of psychoanalysis on his understanding of the world, but the fundamental question at which he arrives feels distinctly non-psychiatric. Dysart knows that experiences "snap together...forging a chain of shackles" and he knows that he sometime can, through his practice, "pull [the shackles/moments] apart again," but the real question he puzzles over is what gives those moments their power in the first place. For Dysart, this is the question that most bothers him, and he is distressed that he has found himself in a profession in which this question has no place. Dysart feels himself to be an agent of societal norms, but he doesn't believe that those norms are necessarily good or just. This passage shows how deeply Dysart is doubting his life and profession.

❝ Whatever's happened has happened *because of Alan*. Alan is himself. Every soul is itself. If you added up everything we ever did to him, from his first day on earth to this, you wouldn't find why he did this terrible thing—because that's *him*; not just all of our things added up. Do you understand what I'm saying? I want you to understand, because I lie awake and awake thinking it out, and I want you to know that I deny it absolutely what he's doing now, staring at me, attacking me for what *he's* done, for what *he* is! [*Pause: calmer.*] You've got your words, and I've got mine. You call it a complex, I suppose. But if you knew God, Doctor, you would know about the Devil. You'd know the Devil isn't made by what mummy says and daddy says. The Devil's *there*.

Related Characters: Dora Strang (speaker), Frank Strang, Alan Strang, Martin Dysart

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

This monologue, in which Dora tries to convince Dysart that she and Frank are not to blame for Alan's behavior, echoes the monologue of Dysart's that we've just heard, in which he puzzles over how someone becomes the person he or she is. Dora and Dysart share the acknowledgement that a person's development is mysterious, and it is hard to account for which factors matter and which don't. Dora and Dysart also share, in a sense, a commitment to the idea that each person is an individual who is not wholly accountable to a set of experiences or a culture. But Dora believes that what accounts for Alan's behavior is the Devil. Because of this, Dora doubts the power of psychiatry to address Alan's problems. It's ironic that she and Dysart share this doubt about the power of psychiatry, but for very different reasons. Dysart's doubts about psychiatry are wrapped up in his uncertainty about whether Alan's behavior is evil at all, while Dora doubts the practice because it doesn't address the main issue (as she sees it), that of spiritual warfare.

❝ Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker), Alan Strang, Hesther Salomon, Martin Dysart

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

This quote represents the moral crux of the play. It comes during an exchange between Hesther and Dysart, in which Dysart feels that Alan is almost ready to have a breakthrough that might "cure" him of his worship of Equus. Despite the fact that this would be a professional success for Dysart as a psychiatrist, he expresses his doubts to Hesther about whether "curing" Alan would actually be the right thing to do. To Dysart, relieving Alan of his need to worship Equus would be tantamount to robbing him of what makes him an individual, and, perhaps more severe, robbing him of his passion and joy. As he is, Alan is considered "abnormal"--and clearly has some serious issues with shame and violence--but Dysart can see that his harmful behavior relates more to the ways in which he has been repressed by his family and his culture than his affinity for Equus. Dysart wonders here to what extent Alan should really be seen as insane, since Alan is living a passionate life that is true to himself, and he wonders whether to take that passion away from Alan in service of social norms would actually be to his benefit.

Hesther: I mean he's in pain, Martin. He's been in pain for most of his life. That much, at least, you *know*.
Dysart: Possibly.
Hesther: *Possibly?!* ...That cut-off little figure you just described must have been in pain for years.
Dysart [*doggedly*]: Possibly.
Hesther: And you can take it away.
Dysart: Still—possibly.

Hesther: Then that's enough. That simply has to be enough for you, surely?
Dysart: No!
Hesther: Why not?
Dysart: Because it's his.
Hesther: I don't understand.
Dysart: His pain. His own. He made it.
[*Pause.*]
[*Earnestly.*] Look...to go through life and call it yours—*your life*—you first have to get your own pain. Pain that's unique to you.... He's done that. All right, he's sick. He's full of misery and fear.... But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have *f*elt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it.
Hesther: You can't.
Dysart [*vehemently*]: Don't you see? That's the Accusation! That's what his stare has been saying to me all this time. '*At least I galloped! When did you?*' ...[*Simply.*] I'm jealous, Hesther. Jealous of Alan Strang.

Related Characters: Martin Dysart, Hesther Salomon (speaker), Alan Strang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81-82

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange between Hesther and Dysart is one of the most morally complex of the book, because it delineates two opposed moral positions that both have compelling ideas to support them. Hesther, who represents the prevailing ideas of psychiatry and social norms, believes that it is morally imperative to treat Alan until he no longer worships Equus, because that is the only way to relieve his pain. Obviously, Alan has tremendous pain that has become, for him, wrapped up in his worship, so Hesther's position is reasonable. On the other hand, Dysart's position is that Alan's pain is what makes him an individual, and a way to take control over one's life is to claim pain that is uniquely yours and grapple with it yourself instead of being told what

kinds of pain are acceptable. Dysart explains that Alan's pain enables him to have a passion unlike anything Dysart has seen before, and that it would be cruel to take that away under any circumstances. Here, we see the interweaving of pain and pleasure again, and this time Dysart posits that it is pain and pleasure that make a person who he or she truly is, so it's often unwise to untangle them at all. Society then becomes equated with the flattening of pain and pleasure, which certainly reduces suffering, but also reduces joy.

Poor old sod, that's what I felt—he's just like me! He hates ladies and gents just like me! Posh things—and la-di-da. He goes off by himself at night, and does his own secret thing which no one'll know about, just like me! There's no difference—he's just the same as me—just the same—

Related Characters: Alan Strang (speaker), Martin Dysart, Frank Strang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after Dysart has given Alan a "truth pill" that enables him to talk about the experience with Jill that led up to him mutilating the horses. Alan and Jill went on a date to a pornographic film and Alan saw his father there, which ushered in a new understanding of and sympathy for Frank. It's significant that Alan's prevailing reaction is more relief than shame. Alan's father, who was the single most controlling and repressive force in Alan's life, is revealed to be someone with secrets of his own and with desires and rituals that he feels the need to hide. Instead of resenting his father's hypocrisy, Alan instead finds sympathy for Frank. This shows an incredible generosity and maturity in Alan, qualities that seem at odds with his subsequent behavior towards the horses. This passage shows, more than anything, that social norms cause everybody to repress and keep secrets. Social norms do not tell us much about who people are, but rather they represent an arbitrary standard of behavior that some are able to approximate better than others.

All right! I'll take it away! He'll be delivered from madness. What then? He'll feel himself acceptable! *What then?* Do you think feelings like his can be simply re-attached, like plasters? Stuck on to other objects we select? *Look at him!* ...My desire might be to make this boy an ardent husband—a caring citizen—a worshipper of abstract and unifying God. My achievement, however, is more likely to make a ghost!

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker), Hesther Salomon, Alan Strang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of Dysart's concluding monolgue, in which he surrenders to Hester's voice telling him to cure Alan instead of allowing Alan to continue to worship Equus, as Dysart had wanted. Even while Dysart acquiesces, his bitterness and uncertainty bubble over. He rants here that to take away the object of Alan's passion might be to take away that passion altogether. In other words, Dysart fears that Alan's passion won't necessarily find another outlet, let alone a "proper" outlet like marriage or good citizenship. More than likely, Dysart suggests, Alan will be made "a ghost," by which he means someone void of passion, which is what made him most alive. This is a tragic and ambivalent ending to the story, in which Dysart is in despair over Alan's future and the implications of his own actions in Alan's treatment. In addition, the fact that Dysart gives into social pressure despite his awareness of its problems shows that social pressure has an overwhelming power, which is itself a tragic message on which to end the play.

And now for me it never stops: that voice of Equus out of the cave—'Why me? ...Why me? ...Account for me!' ...All right—I surrender! I say it! ...In an ultimate sense I cannot know what I do in this place—yet I do ultimate things. Essentially I cannot know what I do—yet I do essential things. Irreversible, terminal things. I stand in the dark with a pick in my hand, striking at heads!

...

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.

Related Characters: Martin Dysart (speaker), Alan Strang

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the last one of the play, and it is one of doubt, despair, and hopelessness. Dysart is confessing his greatest uncertainties, and even his fear that he is doing evil. Dysart acknowledges his inability to know the meaning of his life or the morality of what he does, and he feels deeply that it is wrong, in light of his own unknowing, to tell anyone else (particularly in a way that is irreversible) who or what they should be. In this sense, he compares his own work to the crime for which he treated Alan: standing in the dark, blinding people violently (with a horse "pick," no less), irreversibly mutilating them by estranging them from themselves. Dysart ends the play by hoping for "a way to see in the dark" but acknowledging that, instead, he is guided through the dark by the bit in his mouth, which represents the social norms and pressures that dictate his life. It's an ending that leaves little hope for Dysart, or anyone else, to find their way to the "whole new track of being" that Dysart described at the outset.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

Staging. The stage is comprised of a wooden square set on top of a wooden circle. On the square, where the main action will take place, there are three small, wooden benches; there are more benches to the left and right of the circle. The bench to the left of the circle is used by Martin Dysart as a listening station when he is not in the square; it also functions as Alan Strang's hospital bed. Alan's parents sit on the bench to the right of the circle. There are more benches upstage, where the other actors sit. The entire cast sits onstage throughout the play. Actors will rise to perform their scenes, and return to their benches when they have finished. Even further upstage there are audience seats resembling the sorts of "dissecting theatre(s)" that are sometimes seen surrounding operating rooms. At times, Dysart will address both the main body of the audience and the upstage audience, serving as both a character and a narrator. At certain moments the actors on the benches upstage will also form a chorus. The chorus will create the "Equus Noise," a mixture of "humming, thumping, and stamping" that "illustrates the presence of Equus the God."

The stage's minimalist design allows for seamless transitions between locations and times; this supports the structure of the play, which frequently shifts between Dysart's office, the Strang family's home, and Dalton's stable. The entire cast's presence onstage throughout Equus *emphasizes the play's artificial nature: the audience can witness actors step in and out of characters and scenes in a way that is usually hidden during performances. Shaffer's hope may be that the transparency of the "mechanics" of theater in his play will encourage us to think critically about the play's construction—why and how these characters have come to be the way they are. Shaffer's note that the theater itself should resemble an operating room reinforces the sense that audience members are active participants, diagnosing and dissecting a problem.*

Scene 1. The play begins with a dim light on the central square. In the spotlight, Alan Strang caresses a **horse** named Nugget. Lights come up on the outer circle, and we see Martin Dysart, a psychiatrist in his mid-forties, on the left bench, smoking. Dysart describes Alan and Nugget as "a necking couple." But he confesses that his mind is filled not with thoughts of the boy, but of the *horse*: he can't stop thinking about "what it may be trying to do."

Dysart is established from the outset as a character that simultaneously participates in and reflects on the play's events. His description of Alan and Nugget raises questions about the nature of their relationship, but his musings on the horse are even more mysterious—he implies that the horse, rather than just being an animal, may have some kind of conscious purpose.

Dysart rises and, addressing the audience, expresses confusion about his purpose in life. In fact, he himself feels like a **horse**, trapped by his own bit, "[a]ll reined up in old language and old assumptions." He senses that there is a better way to live—"a whole new track of being"—but he cannot make the leap because "the bit forbids it." The doctor also describes his doubts about the field of psychiatry, commenting that he is fundamentally unable to understand the mind of a horse. If he cannot understand a horse's desires and passions, how can he hope to understand a human being's? Dysart says that his doubts about his profession have been growing over the years, but that the "extremity" of Alan Strang's case has brought them to light. He then introduces the next scene as the beginning of his involvement with Alan.

The phrase "reined up in old language and old assumptions" is a direct critique of Dysart's society, which the psychiatrist thinks does not have an adequate vocabulary and value system to fully understand the meaning of existence. As an individual within this society, Dysart compares himself to a bridled horse – his thoughts and actions are dictated by the language and assumptions of society. As a psychiatrist, then, Dysart is in an impossible position: his task is to try to objectively understand his patients using a set of values he does not believe in. At the same time, the play suggests that it is the events of the play that push Dysart to this place of unbelief, raising both the stakes and anticipation for the play about to be performed.

Scene 2. Dysart sits down on a bench in the square—we are presumably in his office—and a Nurse enters to alert him that Hesther Salomon, a magistrate and friend of Dysart's, has arrived. Hesther enters the square and tells the doctor that she has encountered the "most shocking case" of her career. The boy in question, Alan Strang, was going to be sent to prison until Hesther convinced her bench to send him to a hospital instead. Now she wants Dysart to take on Alan's case. The psychiatrist argues that he is too overworked to take on yet another patient, but Hesther insists, saying that no other doctor would be able to treat the boy; they would all be "revolted."

The idea that modern societal values have a powerful effect on how mental illness is perceived and treated is evident in Hesther's claim that Dysart is the only psychiatrist who can treat Alan Strang. Hesther knows that other psychiatrists would be "revolted" by Alan's crime: that is, they would allow their own value judgments about Alan's behavior to influence their diagnoses and treatments.

Hesther proceeds to tell Dysart that Alan Strang, age 17, blinded six **horses** with a **hoof-pick** one night in a stable where he worked on weekends. Hesther remarks that the boy didn't say anything in court— "He just sang." She also says that there is something "special" about Alan: "vibrations" that are "quite startling." Dysart agrees to take the case. As Hesther leaves and returns to her bench onstage, Dysart turns to the audience and remembers that at the time, he didn't expect that this case would be different from his typical cases. He reflects: "One great thing about being in the adjustment business: you're never short of customers." The Nurse enters the square with Alan. Dysart greets him and offers to shake Alan's hand, but the boy "does not respond in any way."

Dysart's comment that he is "in the adjustment business" implies that psychiatry is less a medical than a commercial practice—subject to the whims of consumer beliefs and demands. Society will always deem something and someone "inappropriate" or "imbalanced," so psychiatrists will always have customers. But the "vibrations" that Hesther detects in Alan Strang signal that Alan won't be one of these simple adjustment cases.

Scene 3. Dysart begins to go through Alan's file, and asks the boy questions as he reads. We learn from the file that Alan works at an appliance shop and lives with his parents, but Alan answers Dysart's questions only by singing jingles for brands like Doublemint, Martini, and Typhoo. Dysart, unfazed, pretends to enjoy the jingles, which makes Alan glare at him. Satisfied with their first meeting, Dysart asks the Nurse to take Alan to a private bedroom in the hospital. Before Nurse escorts Alan away, the boy and the psychiatrist exchange a long stare. As Alan departs, Dysart "looks after him, fascinated."

At this point, neither Dysart nor the audience knows the cause of Alan's crime. The boy's singing, therefore, appears to be a defense mechanism, a way to distract both him and Dysart from the heart of the matter—why Alan blinded the horses in Dalton's stable. But the fact that he sings advertising jingles introduces television and consumer culture as powerful forces that pervade society and hide deeper feeling, from both others and ourselves.

Scene 4. The Nurse and Alan walk to the bench on the left side of the circle, which serves as Alan's hospital room. The Nurse tells Alan to behave himself, but the boy swears at her. She leaves, and Alan lies down.

This short scene underscores the volatility of Alan's behavior and the difficulty of engaging with him as a patient.

Scene 5. Dysart stands at center stage and addresses the audience: he relates the dream he had the night after he met Alan Strang. In the dream, he is a priest in ancient Greece. He wears a mask and holds a knife, ready to sacrifice a group of hundreds of children. As two assistant priests hold each child down, Dysart cuts the child down the middle and dissects it with great skill. It is clear that Dysart has a "unique talent for carving" that has made him the chief priest. But he suddenly begins to feel ill. He tries to hide his discomfort because if his assistants saw, they would realize that Dysart is having doubts about the "social good" of this work. Dysart's mask starts to fall off, and Dysart's assistant priests see the sweat on his face. As they snatch the knife from his grasp, Dysart wakes up.

The juxtaposition between Dysart's doubts about psychiatry and this dream about ancient Greek sacrifice throws into question the notion that the modern era is more rational and humane than past eras. Psychiatry is supposed to be based on scientific principles, but Dysart's dream of ancient Greece suggests that the modern psychiatrist could in fact be a cog who operates to maintain the social rules of an equally irrational and brutal modern religion. This fear persists throughout the play.

Scene 6. Hesther enters and tells Dysart not to be "ridiculous." Apparently, it is a few days later, and the doctor has just explained his dream to her. She reassures Dysart that he has done great work treating children's mental illnesses. But Dysart confesses that he doesn't feel that his job is right for him anymore—that "the job is unworthy to fill [him]." He also tells Hesther that in his dream, it was Alan Strang's face that he saw on every child he sacrificed. Alan's stare, he says, is very strange: "It's exactly like being accused." Dysart reveals that Alan has actually begun talking to him in the past couple of sessions. The breakthrough occurred after Alan had a series of bad nightmares that the Nurse witnessed. During these nightmares, Alan repeatedly screamed the word "Ek." The distressing nightmares, Dysart hypothesizes, caused Alan to rush into his office one day and speak.

Dysart's confession that he saw Alan Strang's face on every child in his dream reinforces the connection between the irrationality and savagery of ancient Greek sacrifice and Dysart's own psychiatric practice. His acknowledgement to Hesther that his job is unfulfilling signals that Dysart is aware of, though cannot articulate, possibilities for life that go beyond the roles that modern society dictates. The psychiatrist's doubts are punctuated by Alan's stare, which reverses the accusatory judgment which Alan has had to suffer: here it is Alan accusing Dysart. Shaffer asks his audience to focus less on why Alan himself is to blame for his crime, and to concentrate instead on the societal pressures that have led to this tragedy.

Dysart's description of his encounter with Alan is itself interrupted by the boy, who leaps to his feet and reenacts the moment he barged into the doctor's office. Alan reveals that his father, Frank Strang, hates television, and doesn't allow Alan to watch it. The scene segues into a scene between Frank, Alan's mother Dora Strang, and Alan. Frank claims that TV is like a drug; television "seems to be offering you something, but actually it's taking something away." He demands that Dora get rid of the TV set the next day; both Alan and Dora cry out in protest. Dora contends that "everyone watches television these days," but Frank argues that this is all the more reason *not* to own a television set. He returns to his bench on the right side of the circle.

Frank's description of television—that it seems like a positive force, but in reality strips away one's independence and individuality—is yet another criticism of modernity's homogenizing force. Dora's argument that Alan should be allowed to watch television because everyone else does exemplifies this force perfectly. Yet, ironically, Frank's stubborn rejection of his son's desire to engage with this modern medium alienates Alan from his society and establishes a deeply resentful relationship between father and son.

Back in Dysart's office, the psychiatrist describes Frank as a "[r]elentlessly self-improving" socialist. Dysart goes on to discuss Alan's relationship with Dora; the boy is proud of his mother, and has a close relationship with her. A brief scene plays out onstage in which Alan, trying to prove that Dora is smarter than Dysart, challenges the doctor's knowledge of history. He asks Dysart to identify the author of the quote, "Religion is the opium of the people," and giggles. Dysart observes the "guilty snigger" in Alan's voice, and realizes that religion may be a key to diagnosing Alan's condition. He tells Hesther that he will uncover any "tension over religion" by visiting the Strang family's home over the weekend. They both leave the square. Hesther returns to her bench, while Dysart walks around the stage, transitioning into the next scene.

"Religion is the opium of the people," written by Karl Marx, resonates with Frank's description of television as a drug. In this light, television and consumer culture can be seen as religions to which modern society subscribes. Simultaneously, Dysart's description of Frank as "relentlessly self-improving" suggests that Frank may be preaching a religion of his own—a socialist ethos of self-will and personal improvement that oppresses his son. And both of these "religions" have similarities, in that they oppress the unique individual and separate the individual from the natural world.

Scene 7. Martin Dysart visits the Strang home on a Sunday evening. He meets Dora there, but Frank is still at the printing press—he "doesn't set much store by Sundays," according to his wife. Dysart and Dora begin to talk about Alan's crime. Dora is still incredulous that Alan could do such a thing, especially since he loves **horses**. Dora tells Dysart that Alan has a photograph of a horse hung up in his bedroom, and that when he was a child, Dora would read him a story about a horse named Prince. The horse in the story was so faithful that no one except his master could ride him. Dora also told Alan that when pagans in the New World first saw Europeans on horseback, they believed that the horse and its rider were one person, a strange deity. She mentions that Alan loved to watch Westerns on TV—Dora would let him secretly watch them at a friend's house.

The fact that Frank works on Sundays emphasizes Frank's socialist mentality and strict atheism (which we soon learn about). Meanwhile, Dora's stories about Prince and the pagans' first encounter with horses in the New World give us the first clues as to how Alan came to invent his horse-based religion. Alan's love of Westerns—a genre that celebrates man's freedom and the special bond between a man and his horse—is yet another important influence. The fact that he had to hide this love from his father and watch Westerns in secret parallels the private rituals he develops in his own room.

Frank returns home, and Dora resumes talking. She says that the Strangs have always been a "**horsey**" family. Her grandfather would ride every morning "all dressed up in bowler hat and jodhpurs." She mentions Alan's fascination with the word *equus*, Latin for "horse." She also states that Alan never learned to ride horses, and explicitly refused to—both Dora and Frank found this fact strange. Frank says that Dora has indulged Alan too much—this is why he isn't particularly bright. Furthermore, he says, Dora is "excessively" religious. He tells Dysart that he is an atheist, and that in his opinion, "it's the Bible that's responsible for all this." Alan was always fascinated by "kinky" religious images, pictures of Christ being tortured. Dysart asks the Strang parents how much Alan knows about sex. Dora replies that she told Alan that sex is not only a biological experience, but also a spiritual one. She begins to cry. Frank puts his arms around Dora and leads her back to their bench. The scene ends.

The equine attire that Dora describes—"bowler hat and jodhpurs"—is generally associated with high culture and class. This elitist attitude toward horses directly contrasts the raw and rugged cowboy culture depicted in the Westerns that Alan so loves. In this scene, Frank draws the first explicit connection between religion and Alan Strang's violent crime when he mentions Dora's religiosity and what Frank sees as the "kinky" images of Christ that obsessed his son. At this point, the only detail about Alan's crime we know is that he blinded the horses with a hoof-pick, an act that seems to echo Christ being nailed to the cross.

Scene 8. Alan, in the middle of a nightmare, writhes in bed "as if frantically straining to tug something back." He repeatedly cries out the word "Ek," and as he does, recorded cries of "Ek!" fill the entire theater. Dysart enters the boy's room and witnesses Alan crying "Ek!" one final time before abruptly waking up. There is silence as Alan and Dysart stare at each other. The doctor then leaves and enters the square.

We now know for certain that Alan's cries of "Ek" have something to do with a horse. At the level of staging the play, the recordings of "Ek" that fill the theater give the word an added spiritual power, making the audience feel the power the word has for Alan himself.

Scene 9. The next day, Alan visits Dysart's office for his session. He is evasive, and insists that he will answer the doctor's questions only if Dysart answers some of his in return. Dysart consents, but only if they both tell the truth. Alan agrees to these terms, but it is clear during the doctor's questioning that he is not being honest. Meanwhile, Alan asks the doctor questions about his own dreams and his wife, which makes Dysart visibly uncomfortable. Dysart finally asks Alan what "Ek" is, and Alan responds by singing advertising jingles once again. Dysart abruptly ends the session, which upsets Alan—he wants more time with the psychiatrist. Dysart, though, says that he will not engage with Alan until the boy begins to speak openly about his first memory of a **horse**. At first Alan throws a tantrum, but as he realizes that Dysart will continue to ignore him, he calms down. The actors sitting upstage, forming a chorus, begin to hum the Equus Noise faintly as Alan begins to describe his memory.

Alan is clearly embarrassed by the fact that Dysart witnessed his nightmare the previous night. The doctor's invasion of his privacy prompts Alan to probe into the Dysart's own life, which makes the psychiatrist grow defensive as well. Everyone has private lives they wish to keep to themselves. Alan's singing of jingles to avoid revealing anything about "Ek" again suggests that such jingles and the consumer world they represent create a kind of barrier to the spiritual or religious feeling Alan has within him. But Alan eventually yields to Dysart's demands, which suggests that Alan respects the psychiatrist to a certain degree and is responding to the treatment. The presence of the Equus Noise hints that we are being introduced to a crucial element of Alan's illness.

Scene 10. As Alan describes this memory for Dysart, he walks around the circle and acts it out onstage. He tells Dysart that he was six years old, and on a beach. A Horseman emerges onstage and gallops across the imaginary beach. The Horseman charges toward Alan, who cries out. The rider swerves at the last second and apologizes for not noticing the boy. The man then offers to give Alan a ride. He lifts the boy onto the **horse**—the actor simulates this by lifting Alan onto his shoulders—and they ride together along the beach, faster and faster, until Frank and Dora realize what their son is doing. They yell at the Horseman to stop.

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, this crucial element has to do with a horse. Alan's performance of his own memories throughout the play is an important aspect of psychoanalysis, which encourages patients to release their repressed emotions by "reliving" their traumatic experiences. Dysart will explain later on that acting out these experiences is thought to help patients express themselves and deal with their trauma.


The Horseman stops and Frank confronts him, angry that the man picked Alan up without permission. The Horseman coolly responds that Alan was perfectly safe. Frank tells his son to get off the **horse**, but Alan refuses. Furious, Frank pulls Alan from the Horseman's shoulders and the boy falls off. Frank ignores the fact that his son is now bleeding and continues to argue with the Horseman for putting his son on a "dangerous" animal. After an exchange of insults, the Horseman rides off, splashing the Strangs with water. As Frank yells after the Horseman, still incensed, Dora begins to laugh, "amused" by the fact that they are covered in water and sand. Alan's memory ends here.

Frank's violent action, which forces Alan off of the horse, is traumatic to the six-year-old boy and powerfully shapes his relationship with horses from that moment on. In this moment, the adults are distracted by other things: Frank is more concerned with protecting his own dignity, and Dora is more amused than worried about their situation. Neither parent seems to give much thought to the fact that Alan was physically injured in the confrontation, and certainly they don't recognize the profound impact that the incident and Alan's experience with the horse has had on him.

Dysart thanks Alan for sharing the memory and comments that he has never been on a **horse** before, and Alan says that after his experience with the Horseman, he never rode again. Dysart says that he must have ridden a horse while working in the stables, but Alan denies this, saying that he never particularly cared about it. Dysart gives Alan a tape recorder, and says that if Alan is embarrassed to tell him anything to his face, he can talk into the tape recorder and give it to the Nurse. Alan calls the tape recorder "stupid," but takes the machine anyway and goes to his room.

At this point, we are led to believe that Alan's experience with the horse on the beach was so painful that he was afraid to ride a horse again. But we also suspect that Alan may still be hiding the truth. Dysart suspects this as well, which is why he encourages Alan to reveal his secrets to the tape recorder, which may be more comfortable than confessing them directly to the psychiatrist.

Scene 11. Later that evening, Dora visits Dysart's office; she wants to tell the doctor something important about the **horse** photograph Alan has in his room. She reveals that this photograph actually took the place of a different image, a picture of Christ being tortured by Roman centurions—*Our Lord on his Way to Cavalry*. Frank allowed the first picture to be hung in Alan's room, but one day, after an argument with Dora about religion, he ripped it off the wall and threw it away. Alan was "hysterical" for several days, but felt better after Frank gave him the photograph of the horse. She leaves, and Dysart turns to the audience. He confesses that at after Dora's visit, he felt a sense of "real alarm."

The substitution of the image of Christ's torture for the photograph of the horse is perhaps the most powerful instance of foreshadowing in the play. The horse literally takes the place of Christianity for Alan, and this substitution is powerful enough to cure Alan's "hysterical" reaction to the removal of the Christ image in the first place. It is important that Frank once again plays the role of the aggressor and agitator: just as he forbade Alan from watching television and dragged him off of the horse on the beach, in removing the picture he separates his son from yet another object of passion.

Scene 12. Harry Dalton, the owner of the stable where Alan worked, visits Dysart's office. He says that in his opinion, Alan should be in prison, and tells Dysart that Jill Mason, a girl who also worked at the stable, has had a nervous breakdown. Jill feels partially responsible for Alan's crime. She was the one who first introduced Alan to Dalton's stable. Dalton remarks that Alan was an extremely diligent worker, but reveals his suspicions about Alan's claim that he never rode the **horses**. Dalton discloses that he noticed some strange things about the horses after Alan began working for him. Sometimes a horse would be sweaty in the morning, or sick. Dysart asks why someone would want to ride by himself at night, when he could ride with friends in the daytime. "He's a loony, isn't he?" Dalton replies. Alan's voice interrupts the scene. "It was *sexy*," Alan says. Dysart tells the audience that Alan's tape recording arrived later that evening.

Through Harry Dalton, we get a brief glimpse into the public opinion of Alan Strang: people would rather see him in prison than in treatment, a sign of the extremely negative and unforgiving response to his crime, and that society sees Alan primarily as crazy and a criminal, as abnormal. Dalton and Dysart's hypothesis that Alan was riding horses in secret gives us an important clue to his secret religious rituals. Alan's secrecy about horseback riding makes sense, considering Frank's oppressive attitude toward Alan's other interests. The interjection of Alan's voice describing his horseback riding as "sexy" is not yet explained, but certainly does connect these rituals to a kind of passionate and even sexual connection.

Scene 13. Alan, sitting on his bed, gives the tape recorder to the Nurse, who in turn gives it to Dysart. Dysart turns on the machine and begins to listen. Onstage, Alan recites as Dysart "plays" the recorded message. In the message, Alan resumes talking about his experience with the **horse** on the beach. Alan describes the sweat on his legs from the horse's neck and the power of the animal "going any way you wanted." He also recalls that one of the first things he noticed about the horse was its bit. He remembers asking the horse if the bit hurt. Alan tells Dysart that the horse said something back, but stops short of revealing its response.

Alan's recorded message reveals the sexual dimension of Alan's relationship to horses. His description of the animal "going any way you wanted" suggests his desire to control and possess the horse physically and sexually. Alan's control over the horse gives him a sense of freedom he does not feel at home. And yet, Alan's relationship to the horse goes beyond the sexual; his concern for the horse's pain suggests his emotional investment in the animal, and his treatment of the horse as a sentient being, an equal. It also suggests his recognition that people, too, are held back by bits, though those "bits" are metaphorical and spiritual rather than actual.

Alan continues to describe the erotic feel of **horses**, claiming that his mother would never understand. Dora likes the showiness of horseback riding, Alan says—the bowler hats and jodhpurs—but Alan feels that to treat riding as a straight-laced, upper-class sport is despicable. "To put a bowler on it is *filthy*," he exclaims. He expresses the desire to be as free as a cowboy. "I bet all cowboys are *orphans*!" he says. The Nurse interrupts Dysart to tell him that Frank Strang has arrived to see him. The doctor, surprised, tells the Nurse to show him into the office. Alan, in the middle of rhapsodizing about cowboys, stops suddenly and turns angry. "I've had it!" he shouts, and returns to bed. Dysart shuts off the tape recorder.

Alan uses quasi-religious language to criticize his mother's love of horseback riding. When he calls the bowler hats and jodhpurs "filthy," he doesn't mean that they are dirty; rather, he means that using the horses for upper-class sport is immoral or sinful, in that it is disrespectful because it obscures or damages the essence of the animal. His desire to be like a cowboy is also telling. The equine sport that Alan hates, bound by rules and traditions of high society, is the opposite of the freewheeling, rebellious life of the cowboy, who lives outside of society's laws. Alan's comparison of cowboys to orphans also implies his wish to be free of his parents.

Scene 14. Frank Strang enters the square. Dora doesn't know he is here—he tells Dysart that he must inform him of an event he witnessed eighteen months ago. Late one night, Frank says, he saw Alan performing a sort of ritual in his bedroom. As he describes the ritual, Alan rises and acts it out onstage. First, Frank heard the sound of chanting—Alan reciting a fictitious genealogy of **horses**, including Prince, the horse Dora told him stories about. Then Frank saw Alan standing in front of the photograph of the horse. Alan kneels down in front of the photograph and exclaims: "And he said 'Behold—I give you Equus, my only begotten son!'" Dysart realizes that the word Alan screams in his nightmares—"Ek"—is half of the name of the horse-god Equus.

With Frank's visit, Alan's invented religion finally comes to the surface. The fictitious genealogy that he comes up with is a combination of the children's tales and Biblical stories Dora told him when he was little; it highlights the extent to which his mother and Christianity have influenced him. There is an aspect of this combination that is childish and sort of silly. And yet, Alan also deeply believes in it—his chanting ritual reveals the passion of this belief. It offers a true vision of Alan in a kind of religious ecstasy, in contrast to the kind of hiding that was implied by the way Alan earlier sang advertising jingles.

As Frank continues to describe Alan's ritual, we see Alan put an invisible piece of string in his mouth to simulate a bit, and beat himself with an invisible coat hanger. Frank repeats his belief that religion is the cause of Alan's bizarre behavior, and adds that there is one more thing Dysart should know: on the night that Alan blinded the **horses** in the stable, he had been out with a girl. Dysart asks Frank how he knows, but Frank refuses to say more, and leaves quickly.

Alan's ritual is a direct echo of Christianity's mortification of the flesh, an act in which atoners practice self-whipping to cleanse themselves of sin. It is also, of course, a simulation of riding a horse. Both Alan and the horse, therefore, are transformed into Christ-like figures who inflict pain upon themselves for a greater purpose—a purpose which we have not yet discovered.

Scene 15. Dysart questions Alan about Jill, the girl who introduced Alan to the stable. Alan tells him that they first met at Bryson's, the appliance store where Alan worked. The scene of their meeting is recreated onstage: in Bryson's, aggressive customers call out various brands and appliances that they want, while Alan is clearly overwhelmed by the chaos. Jill enters, and asks Alan for a clipping machine to shear **horses**. Alan recognizes her as the girl who works at Dalton's stable, while Jill also recognizes Alan as "the boy who's always staring into the yard around lunch-time." She offers to introduce Alan to Dalton in case there is a job opening—they always need help on the weekends, Jill says. Alan accepts her offer.

In this scene, Shaffer briefly illustrates the society he criticizes in the play. The customers' clamoring for brand names drowns out any sense of individuality they might have, and cuts off the possibility of meaningful human interaction. The electronic appliances surround Alan in his workplace contrast starkly with his desire for the virility and nakedness of horses.

Scene 16. We hear the "exultant humming" of the Equus Noise, and the sound of **horses**' hooves. Alan stands in the middle of the square, which is now Dalton's stable. Immersed in this "glowing world of horses," Alan is completely mesmerized. He is about to kneel down when Dalton arrives with Jill, interrupting Alan's reverie. Dalton cheerfully shows Alan how to use a **hoof-pick** to take a stone out of a horse's hoof. He then entrusts Alan's training to Jill, who begins to teach Alan how to groom a horse. She introduces him to Nugget and demonstrates how to brush a horse's coat. Alan "watches in fascination." Jill then allows Alan to groom Nugget. The boy begins to brush the horse's coat, responding to Jill's feedback. Satisfied with Alan's work, Jill tells him to finish grooming Nugget and move onto the next horse. She exits the square, leaving Alan alone in the stable.

The humming of the Equus Noise establishes Dalton's stable as a kind of temple for Alan's religion. Indeed, the stable is "glowing," and he almost kneels down in awe. That he does not kneel down at the arrival of Dalton and Jill shows that Alan does recognize the way that others would see his religious feeling about horses as odd or abnormal, how the only way to be near horses is to hide his truest feelings about them. The introduction of the hoof-pick in this scene is an important moment of foreshadowing. Note how for Dalton and Jill the horses are animals to be cared for, but for Alan they are more than that, they are beings to be worshipped.

Alan touches Nugget's shoulder, then slowly feels the **horse**'s neck and back. He smells his palm, drinking in Nugget's scent. Dysart begins to interrogate Alan about the experience. He asks Alan if it felt good to stroke the horses, and Alan moans in agreement. Dysart then asks how Alan felt about Jill. "Did you like her?" he says. "All right," Alan responds. The doctor presses on, trying to get his patient to describe Jill more vividly. Dysart asks Alan if he took Jill out on a date, and keeps pressuring the boy to answer until he can't stand it any longer. Alan flies into a rage and storms around the office, calling Dysart a "Bloody Nosey Parker."

Alan's sexual arousal in the presence of horses, which we have learned about already, is now complicated by Jill's presence in his life. His furious response to Dysart's questioning shows that he is repressing strong feelings related to the girl. Though Alan clearly has a complex relationship to horses and women, his infantile name-calling at the end of the scene also demonstrates that he his incapable of dealing maturely with these emotions.


Scene 17. Dysart apologizes for his persistence, but Alan is still fuming. He demands that the doctor answer some of Alan's own questions. Dysart agrees, and Alan begins to ask sexually explicit questions about Dysart's relationship with his wife, Margaret, a dentist. Alan aggressively provokes Dysart, mocking him for not having sex with Margaret, until the psychiatrist snaps and sends Alan to his room. Dysart turns to the audience and calls Alan "brilliant" for identifying Dysart's "area of maximum vulnerability." Apparently, Alan had walked around the hospital gathering information about Dysart's personal life, which is how he knew which questions would most upset him. Dysart sits down and Hesther enters the square, ushering in the next scene.

Just as Dysart is beginning to probe the most vulnerable areas of his patient's past, Alan does the same to him. The patient and his doctor are revealed as opposites: the intensity and physicality of Alan's love for horses is juxtaposed with Dysart's loveless and sexless relationship with his wife. Alan's passion is contrasted with Dysart's lack of it. And this contrast will make Dysart wonder why his passionless "normality" is seen as better than Alan's ecstatic lack of normality.

Scene 18. Hesther and Dysart discuss the psychiatrist's relationship with his wife. Dysart explains that he and his wife used to get along. "We worked for each other," he says. Their marriage was characterized by "briskness," a sharpness and efficiency that allowed their relationship to develop quickly but also later to decline promptly. Now their lives are dull and passionless. Margaret spends her time knitting clothes for orphans, and Dysart reads books about ancient Greece. Dysart pauses, and then confides his desire to take someone to Greece, a country that fascinates him. He wishes for an "instinctive, absolutely unbrisk person" he could bring to Greece, the land of "a thousand local Gods." He wants someone with whom he can share the spirituality of a place: "Spirits of certain trees, certain curves of brick wall, certain chip shops…." Dysart comments bitterly that if he had a son, he would turn out like Margaret, "Utterly worshipless."

The "briskness" of Dysart and Margaret's relationship implies that they were going through the motions, getting married not because they were in love, but because it was socially appropriate. Perhaps, even, they thought they were in love because it is socially appropriate. Dysart's desire to bring someone to Greece indicates his desire to live a more spontaneous and passionate life. His celebration of "local Gods" and the spirituality of "certain trees" and "certain chip shops" provides an important contrast to the global, homogenizing forces of television and commercialism, which destroy the individuality of people, places, and cultures. Put another way: it is precisely that individuality which is critical, and which is being lost. Dysart's comment that his son would be "worshipless" betrays his belief that in order to live a fulfilling life, one must believe in a higher power, not simply have material goods.

Dysart changes the subject and begins talking about Alan. He asks Hesther what he should be trying to achieve by treating Alan. Hesther replies that he is returning Alan to a "normal life." But Dysart is no longer sure what "normal" means, and presses his friend to clarify what it means to her. "You know what I mean by a normal smile in a child's eyes, and one that isn't—even if I can't exactly define it," she says. Hesther thanks Dysart for all of his work, and takes her leave. Alone, Dysart repeats the word "normal" to himself, clearly still bewildered by its meaning.

Dysart's doubts about the meaning of normality are closely related to his thoughts about Greece. In a place with "a thousand local Gods," it would be impossible to choose which worshippers were "normal" and which were not—they would all simply be unique. Hesther, for her part, does not seem too concerned about the meaning of "normal." To her, normality is a vague combination of health and happiness, and she believes this should be the goal of Dysart's work. While she is sympathetic to the doctor's anxieties, she feels that his job is relatively clear-cut.

Scene 19. Alan and Dysart meet for a session. They have both calmed down since their fight the previous day, and apologize to each other. Dysart introduces the boy to a game called *Blink*, in which Alan fixes his eyes on the wall, and every time Dysart taps his pen, Alan closes or opens his eyes. They begin the game, and Alan relaxes, slowly becoming hypnotized. As this is happening, Dysart talks to the audience about what the "Normal" is. He admits that it can be "the good smile in a child's eyes," but also argues that it is "the dead stare in a million adults." He describes it as a deity that "both sustains and kills," an "indispensable, murderous God of Health." Dysart accuses himself of being a priest in service of this god. As a priest of the "Normal," Dysart has helped many children, but he has also excised aspects of their individuality. He notes that sacrifices to Zeus would take just a minute, but sacrifices to the "Normal" might "take as long as sixty months."

Dysart agrees with Hesther that normality can be a good thing. But since what is "normal" is determined by society, it can also be a crippling phenomenon; it can force people to stop thinking, to become people they are not. Being normal allows you to be part of a society, but you may have to destroy who you truly are in order to do it. The fact that Dysart—the priest of the Normal—hypnotizes Alan as he delivers this monologue emphasizes the power that normality can have over an individual. Dysart compares the sacrifice of individuality to ancient Greek sacrifice, which should remind us of his dream of cutting up children. Dysart casts his own psychiatric practice is cast in a very ominous light.

Once Alan's hypnosis is complete, Dysart instructs the boy to answer all of his questions. He tells Alan to remember his experience with the **horse** on the beach, particularly the moment when he asked the horse if his bit hurt. Alan replies that he offered to take the bit out, and that the horse responded: "It never comes out. They have me in chains." Dysart compares the horse to Jesus, and Alan agrees. "Only his name isn't Jesus, is it?" the doctor asks. Alan admits that the name of his horse-god is Equus, and that Equus lives in and speaks to Alan through all horses. Dysart asks the boy to tell him about his rituals. Alan reveals that Equus is in chains for "the sins of the world," and that he will save Alan by allowing him to ride away. "Two shall be one," Alan says, describing the union of horse and rider.

Equus embodies a paradox: he is at once in chains, yet also has the capacity to be free. Like Christ, Equus must first suffer in order to bring salvation. Alan will be saved, he says, by riding away on Equus—the horse can thus be interpreted as Alan's escape from the pressures of his family life and modern society. "Two shall be one" evokes the transcendent, spiritual union of Equus and Alan, but also a sexual union.

Dysart asks Alan to remember Dalton's stable. He asks Alan if the stable is Equus's temple, and Alan says yes. Dysart asks the boy if Equus told him to ride him at night, and Alan confirms Dysart's suspicion. He tells the psychiatrist that he would ride the **horses** in secret every three weeks. Dysart now tells Alan to imagine that he is actually in front of the stable, and to open the door.

The suspicions and hypotheses Dysart and the audience have been developing throughout Act One continue to be confirmed, as Alan reveals his nighttime rides with the horses of Dalton's stable.

Scene 20. Alan opens the door of the stable and the chorus begins humming the Equus Noise. As Dysart prompts him to explain the midnight ritual, Alan performs it onstage. The audience sees him select the **horse** Nugget and put a bit in his mouth. He slips the bridle onto the horse and leads him out of the stable. He brings Nugget to a field of nettle, which he calls the "place of Ha Ha." Nugget is reluctant to enter, but Alan forces the horse into the square, which is now the field.

The phrase "Ha Ha" is a reference to a Bible story about a horse that Dora told Alan in his childhood. In the Bible, "Ha Ha" is a triumphant call. In Alan's created religion, the field gets that name because it is the site of Alan's religious and sexual rituals with the horses.

Scene 21. Alan undresses and puts a stick, which he calls a "Manbit," in his mouth. He feeds Nugget a lump of sugar, his "Last Supper," then mounts the **horse**, shouting, "*Take me!*" He cries out as the horse's coat rubs painfully against his naked skin. He then commands Equus to walk. Alan praises "Equus the Godslave" and denounces his foes, the "hosts" of Hoover, Philco, Jodhpur, and Gymkhana. Alan rides faster and faster. He describes himself as "stiff" and "raw"; he tells Equus that he wants to be *in* him, and that he wants to *be* him. Alan rides the horse-god harder and harder, screaming with pleasure and pain, "*One Person!*" This continues until, in a final fit of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, Alan "twists like a flame" and drops to the ground. He kisses Nugget's hoof and then "flings back his head," crying, "AMEN!"

By putting the "Manbit" in his mouth, Alan acknowledges that he, like Equus, is in chains. Together, he and Equus ride against those "chains" – the homogenizing and repressive forces of commercial culture represented by the name brands of Hoover, etc. and the high society of "jodhpurs" that Alan sees as trivializing horses. The raw sexual energy that Alan displays in the ritual is combined with immense pain that the boy inflicts upon himself, as if Alan can only grant himself pleasure when it is combined with a cleansing force. Shaffer's comparison of Alan to a "flame" suggests that Alan is simultaneously killing himself and living more passionately than any other human being.

ACT 2

Scene 22. Act 2 begins slightly after Act 1 left off. Dysart is in a reflective mood; Alan has gone to his room, and the psychiatrist is now "alone with Equus." Dysart tells the audience that he can hear Equus's voice: the **horse**-god mockingly asks him, "Do you really imagine you can account for Me?" Dysart acknowledges that this case is the most unsettling he has encountered—it's causing him to ask questions that he has avoided throughout his career. Dysart pauses, then asks himself why a child becomes the person that it becomes. Experiences "snap together like magnets, forging a chain of shackles." Dysart is confounded by this process, and feels that if he cannot understand it, then he can no longer understand the purpose of his practice.

Now that Dysart has a clear picture of Alan's invented religion, he is still left with the task of explaining how Alan came to be this way. But this bewildering task also becomes a larger question for Dysart as he wonders how any one person comes to be the person they are? If our experiences, which are to a certain extent random, come to form our identities, does this mean that our selves are determined by chance events? When Equus asks Dysart to account for him, he is simultaneously asking the psychiatrist how he can account for any of the dark, irrational forces that influence human beings.

The Nurse interrupts Dysart's musings. She tells him Dora has come to visit Alan, and they have begun to quarrel. Mother and son leap up from their respective benches and confront each other downstage. Dora tells Alan not to "look at [her] like that," and slaps him. Dysart disrupts the visit and tells her to leave the room. Dora walks away from Alan and enters the square. Dysart follows her as Alan and the Nurse return to their places.

While the play mostly centers on Alan and Dysart's struggles, Shaffer wants the audience to be aware of the grief that Alan's behavior has caused those around him. Here, we are acutely aware of Dora's strained relationship with her son and the anger and pain that she is suffering.

Scene 23. Dysart asks Dora not to visit again: Alan is at a fragile stage of his treatment and cannot be disturbed. Dora angrily tells Dysart that she deserves more sympathy. She comments that "parent" is a "dirty word" in psychiatric hospitals; most people believe that parents are always to blame for their children's mental illnesses. Dora argues that she and Frank were good parents who shouldn't be treated like "criminals." They loved and cared for Alan. Even though they had occasional troubles, they aren't enough to explain Alan's bizarre behavior. "Alan is himself," she says. "Every soul is itself." Dora insists that the person Alan is today is not the sum of his parents' influences. "I only know that he was my little Alan," she laments, "and then the Devil came." Dora leaves and sits on her bench. Dysart leaves the square to talk to Alan.

Dora's claim that she and Frank are not to blame for Alan's illness is related to Dysart's meditation on how a human being comes to be his or herself. Just as Dysart doesn't understand how a chain of experiences determines a self, Dora argues that her parenting of Alan is not necessarily the sole, or even major, cause of his condition. Dora's claim that "Every soul is itself" is another way of saying that a person can be shaped by irrational forces beyond our understanding. To Dora, these forces are caused by the Devil, who, like Equus, cannot be accounted for.

Scene 24. Dysart assures Alan that he has not told his mother anything that Alan divulged under hypnosis. Alan, glaring at the doctor, denies that anything he said during that session was true, and expresses contempt for all of Dysart's "bloody tricks." He tells Dysart that he knows about the "truth drug," a drug he believes that the psychiatrist will force on him to get him to talk. Dysart quickly leaves Alan's room and reenters the square.

Alan's combativeness actually leads to a breakthrough for Dysart. The psychiatrist realizes that in this encounter Alan has subconsciously betrayed his desire to tell Dysart the truth about his crime.

Scene 25. Incredulous, Dysart relates this encounter to Hesther during their next meeting. He believes that Alan actually *wants* a truth drug; he wants to be able to speak freely. Dysart tells Hesther that he will give Alan a placebo pill to trick him into divulging everything; he thinks Alan is ready to "abreact"—to express the things he has been repressing, and thus begin to overcome his illness. However, Dysart professes that he is ambivalent about this stage of the treatment. "Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?" he asks. Alan worships Equus; to cure him of his fantasy would be to take away the "core of his life." Without it, Alan is just a boy with no education, no friends, and no real engagement with modern society.

In this scene, Dysart clearly lays out what is at stake for Alan. The boy's bizarre religion has turned him into a social outcast, but if Dysart cures him and makes him normal and fit to return to society, Alan will be left with nothing of the intense passion and belief that makes him unique, that makes him who he is . The psychiatrist is unsure which is the worse fate: to suffer from mental illness and live as a social outcast, or to live with no beliefs and no purpose at all.

Hesther argues that Dysart has a chance to relieve Alan of an immense amount of pain. "That simply has to be enough for you, surely?" she asks. But Dysart rejects this idea—because even if Alan is in pain, the pain is uniquely *his*. To Dysart, having and going through one's own pain is an integral part of having one's own life, and Alan has done this to a degree the doctor will never experience. Dysart confesses that he is jealous of Alan's pain and passion. He tells Hesther that he has "settled" for a "pallid and provincial" life; that without "[r]eal worship," he is left imagining what a wild, primitive, pagan existence would be like from the dull comfort of his home. As Dysart flips through pictures of centaurs, Alan is "trying to *become one*, in a Hampshire field!" Hesther replies that all she sees, ultimately, is a boy in pain. She rises, and the two bid each other goodbye.

This scene also reveals how deeply Alan's case has affected Dysart himself. The passion Alan feels for Equus has forced the psychiatrist to reevaluate the emptiness of his own life, so much so that he is jealous of Alan's suffering. While Dysart is more concerned about what will happen to Alan's selfhood when his worship is taken away, Hesther cares more about relieving Alan's pain. Once again, we see that Dysart and Hesther have different ideas of what a humane treatment of Alan Strang would look like. Hesther's opinion fits the norms of modern society—it meets the demands of the "God of Health," as Dysart has previously put it. But Dysart is aware that Alan's pain is what makes him feel alive, and that without it he is nothing.

Scene 26. Dysart reads a letter from Alan apologizing for his previous defensiveness, and admitting that what he said under hypnosis was true. Realizing that a breakthrough is near, Dysart excitedly calls for the Nurse and asks if Alan is awake. She replies that he is up, most likely watching television. The psychiatrist tells her to fetch Alan to his office, and to call his wife and tell her he will be home late. Nurse goes to Alan's bench, whispers Dysart's message in his ear, and goes back to her place. Alan enters the square.

Despite Alan's temper tantrums and verbal attacks, his letter to Dysart shows that he actually trusts the psychiatrist and wants to be helped. He understands that Dysart is the only one who is remotely close to understanding him. Meanwhile, Dysart's decision to stay at the office late into the night indicates his dedication to his patient, one might even say his "passion" for working on this case (as well as his dissatisfaction with his own life).


Scene 27. Dysart thanks Alan for the letter and offers to have a session with him now. This surprises Alan, as it is quite late. Dysart assures the boy that he can trust him. He admits that everything he does as a psychiatrist involves some kind of trick, but in the end his tricks work to help Alan defeat his illness. Dysart then offers Alan a truth drug, which will force Alan "to speak the truth at all costs." He shows the patient a bottle of pills, and asks if Alan wants to try it. The boy initially rejects the pills, but Dysart entices him by saying that after this process he'll be cured of his nightmares. Alan is still hesitant, but takes a pill and swallows it. Dysart tells him that he won't feel any different—that he should just relax and say whatever it is he wants to say.

Dysart uses a combination of truth and deception to get Alan to trust him. He speaks to Alan with a candor that we have not previously seen. (As an aside, Equus was published in 1973, when belief in the effectiveness of the sort of psychiatry practiced by Dysart was stronger than it is today. Put another way, it is unlikely that a modern psychiatrist would be so definitively certain about being able to "cure" someone of their nightmares through a single act, or even at all.)

Dysart opens up to Alan about his life. He tells the boy he is weary of his work—he wants to leave the psychiatric hospital forever and travel to a sea "where the Gods used to go to bathe"—the old gods, "Before they died." Alan rejects the notion that gods can die, but Dysart maintains that they do. Alan asks the doctor how he would be a "Nosey Parker" without his hospital room, and Dysart replies that he would not care; he doesn't like being a psychiatrist. Alan asks Dysart why he does it, if he doesn't enjoy it. "Because you're unhappy," Dysart says. "So are you," Alan replies quickly. Dysart is startled by the boy's words, and Alan "sits up in alarm," stunned that he actually said his thoughts out loud. Dysart tells him the truth drug is working.

The truth pill that Alan takes seems to encourage Dysart to open up about his own feelings, too. However, Dysart's honesty could be another tactic he uses to get Alan to be more comfortable talking about himself. Indeed, their conversation about Dysart's unhappiness as a psychiatrist leads Alan to say something he himself didn't expect, which convinces him of the drug's effectiveness. Dysart's assertion that gods can die refers to the rise and fall of various religions and epochs; it simultaneously foreshadows the death of Equus that will occur once Alan is cured.


Excited by the effect of the placebo truth drug, Alan tells Dysart to ask him a question. Dysart immediately asks him about Jill. Alan turns away, resistant to talk. The doctor asks him repeatedly to describe her, but Alan insists that he doesn't remember anything about her. Dysart gets up and approaches his patient. He sternly tells Alan that he must tell him everything about Jill Mason. "And not just *tell* me—*show* me," he says. He tells Alan to act out what he describes, "to feel free to do absolutely anything in this room." He reassures Alan that the pill and Dysart himself will help. He then asks Alan where Jill lives. After a silence, Alan replies that she lives near the stables. Dysart leaves the square and sits on a downstage bench as Jill enters the square and the next scene begins.

Once again, Dysart encourages Alan to act out what he describes, a psychoanalytic technique that helps patients express their emotions. Alan's unwillingness to talk about Jill on several occasions signals that Alan's relationship with Jill is critical to his crime.

Scene 28. Jill's behavior "is open and lightly provocative." She tells Alan that when her father left her family, her mother was left with no money and had to support the family by herself. As a result, her mother hates men and Jill can never bring boys home with her. Alan tells Dysart that Jill "was always looking" at him, and complimenting his "super" eyes. Alan says that Jill, too, had beautiful eyes. We see Jill sit close to Alan—flustered, the boy moves away. Jill begins a conversation about what girls find attractive about boys. Most girls find "bottoms" attractive, she says, but she thinks the most fascinating part of a boy is his eyes. She asks Alan if he also finds eyes interesting—"Or is it only **horses**' eyes?" Jill tells him that she saw him gazing into Nugget's eyes "for ages" one day. Shocked by her provocation, Alan grows defensive; he says there must have been something in Nugget's eye.

Jill's free-spiritedness is strikingly different from Frank Strang's severity and Dora Strang's religiosity. The fact that Jill grew up in a less traditional home, with only a mother as a role model, seems to have influenced her sense of independence and confidence. Because he is so unused to this type of behavior, Alan does not know how to react to Jill's flirtation. Her ability to talk openly about the human body suggests that she embodies the changing social norms of the 1960s and 1970s, when discussing sex and sexuality became less taboo. Alan's defensiveness about looking into Nugget's eyes again shows how guilty and ashamed Alan feels about his personal religion – a guilt and shame likely built up by the way his father shamed both Dora and Alan about their religious feelings and the "kinky" imagery of the crucified Christ.

Jill tells Alan that she loves **horses**' eyes. "D'you find them sexy?" she asks Alan. Shocked, Alan leaps away from the girl. She continues to talk; she remarks that girls often find horses sexy—it's a normal phase of their lives. Jill herself remembers a time when she pet and kissed horses quite often. "I suppose it's just a substitute, really," she says. Alan says to Dysart that Jill flirted with and provoked him in this way frequently. All of this, Alan says, came to a head "one night…." Dysart pushes his patient to talk about that night. After a pause, Alan divulges that one Saturday night, Jill asked him to take her out to a "skinflick."

In addition to embodying a new spirit of sexual and social freedom, Jill also represents the natural process of sexual development, one unhindered by pain and trauma. Her acknowledgement that she finds horses "sexy" is shocking to Alan, whose infatuation with horses has been so private. Yet while for Jill the "sexiness" of horses is a substitute, with the implication being that it is a substitute for the strength and virility of men, for Alan it is not a substitute – it's the horses that he worships.

Alan is initially hesitant, but Jill persuades him to go with her by evoking images of "heavy Swedes, panting at each other." Alan agrees to go—then steps off the square and tells Dysart that he is tired and wants to sleep. The doctor insists that he cannot end the session here; he wants to hear more about the movie. "It was bloody awful!" Alan shouts angrily, as actors move the benches on the square into rows and pretend to be moviegoers.

Jill's description of the "heavy Swedes" is less sexual than humorous—it again demonstrates Jill's casual relationship to sex. Her carefree nature rubs off on Alan, who is initially excited to see the film. Of course, Alan's desire not to talk further and exclamation that the movie was awful ratchets up the tension about what actually happens.

Scene 29. Alan enters the square again, which is now a darkened movie theater. Together, he and Jill find their way to the downstage bench. Alan tells Dysart that the cinema was "full of men" except for Jill. The two of them sit next to each other and look at the invisible movie screen, above the main audience. Alan describes the film to Dysart. When the girl in the film begins to take a shower, Alan grows excited. Meanwhile, we see Frank Strang enter the back of the square and look for a place to sit. Alan says that this was the first time he had seen a naked woman; he describes the men watching the movie as if "they were in church." Suddenly, Alan and Frank see each other and shout. Mortified, Alan tries to hide behind Jill, but Frank is already advancing down the aisle toward him. Alan and Jill get up and leave the square. The moviegoers replace the benches and leave the square as Dysart enters it.

Alan's description of the movie theater as a kind of church highlights the ritualistic nature of going to the cinema. It is also important that all of these men are at the movies to watch a sex act: sex is depicted in this scene as a kind of religious experience, showing that people need, even worship, sex. And Alan's initial response to the movie is excitement, not that dissimilar to his own religious experiences. And yet shame does intrude on this scene, as it always seems to for Alan, in the form of Frank. In spotting Frank (and being spotted by Frank), society intrudes on this "church of sex" and the social taboos regarding sex return, leading to shame for everyone.

Scene 30. Frank, Alan and Jill stand at a bus stop outside the movie theater. Alan and Jill try to explain themselves—Alan tells his father that he has never gone to this kind of cinema before, and Jill says that it was her idea to do it in the first place. Frank doesn't respond for some time, and then says that he came to the theater for work purposes—to "discuss posters" — and had no idea they showed pornographic movies. The bus arrives, and Frank tells Alan to say goodbye to Jill, but the boy insists on seeing his date home. Frank reluctantly agrees; he exits and returns to his bench. Alan is shaken by this encounter. He tells Dysart that it felt "like a hole had been drilled in [his] tummy."

Frank's story about why he was at the theater is an obvious lie, obvious to both the audience and to Alan. That Frank lies indicates the shame that Frank feels about his presence there, and about sex in general. Alan can see all this, and it is the first time that he can see past his father's outward demeanor of a man of morals and self-reliance to see the more complicated person of needs and insecurities within.

Scene 31. Alan walks around the circle and describes Frank's face as he rode off on the bus as "scared." He bitterly reflects on the times his father told him to be disciplined, to improve his character. Jill runs after Alan and asks him what's on his mind. "Nothing," he says. Jill begins to laugh, and tells Alan that she finds the whole situation "terrible," but also "very funny." She tries to reassure Alan, telling him that this encounter only means that he and his father share something in common. Alan tells Dysart that he realized, then, that all of the men around him were not "just Dads," but also "people with pricks." He tells Jill that Frank is a "[p]oor old sod," and the girl agrees. He surmises that Frank attends the pornography theater because Dora Strang "doesn't give him anything"; she is too prim and proper to be a sexual being.

Frank's hypocrisy makes Alan realize that all men must contend with their sexuality, and that most tend to keep it secret. This scene also marks the first time Alan reflects on his parents' relationship. Where he previously felt closer to his mother and despised his father, he now feels that he understands Frank's inner struggle with his sexual desires. His resentment of his mother for not satisfying Frank shows that Alan is considering his parents' sex life from a male's perspective. That he is realizing any of this at all shows that he is becoming more mature, and seeing the world not just from his own perspective.

Alan now feels sorry for Frank, a man with secret needs and desires, just like himself. Feeling distraught, he asks Dysart to end the session. The doctor pushes him to continue. "You were happy at that second, weren't you?" he asks. Alan affirms Dysart's question: his new perspective on his father made him feel free. He tells Dysart that at this moment, Jill was holding his hand. The doctor asks him what he was thinking at this moment. Alan confesses that he found her eyes alluring, and that he wanted to look at her breasts. Jill kisses Alan, and whispers to him that she knows a secret place where they can have sex. Jill runs across the stage, and Alan realizes that she is going to Dalton's stable.

Alan's realization that all men have and seek to satisfy their sexual desires releases him from any shame about his own sexual desires—probably in part because Frank helped to fill Alan with that shame. Again, Alan seems to be maturing and to be on the verge of having a "normal" sexual experience. And it seems very possible that things would have proceeded in this "normal" manner had Jill not led him back to the Dalton's stable. But, of course, she does lead him to Dalton's stable. And the audience, which already knows of Alan's crime, can sense that the mixture of possible sex with Jill and the presence of the horses and Equus in the stable is likely to be explosive.

Scene 32. The chorus "makes a warning hum" as Alan steps back in horror. Jill pressures him to enter the stable. Alan asks if they can go to Jill's house instead, but she says that her mother doesn't like it when she brings dates home. Alan is still extremely uncomfortable, and tells Jill that it is because they are so close to the **horses**. Jill says they can just shut the door of the barn so that they don't have to see the animals at all.

The possibility of having sex in Dalton's stable is terrifying to Alan. We've already seen that his religion combines aspects of sex and shame. Bringing "normal" sex into the equation only further emphasizes the oddness of his religion. At the same time, such "normal" sex is like betraying the horses. Having sex with Jill in this space would be unfaithful to his religion; it would be akin to desecrating his temple.

Scene 33. Alan and Jill enter the square; he tells her to lock the door to the stable, and she obeys. Dysart tells Alan to describe the barn, and the boy walks around it, commenting that it is a large room with plenty of straw. He picks up a **hoof-pick** and drops it quickly. Upstage, he continues, there is a door with six **horses** behind it. Dysart instructs him to continue the scene.

Alan wants to get as much separation from Equus as possible before having sex with Jill. Alan's momentary interaction with the hoof-pick is another moment of foreshadowing of his crime to come.

Alan and Jill sit down and begin to kiss, but a "faint trampling" startles Alan. Despite his uneasiness, Jill continues to seduce him. The **horses** stamp the ground again, and Alan breaks away , but Jill approaches him and "gently" tells him that she will take her sweater off if he removes his. He stares at her; after a silence, Jill begins to undress. Alan follows suit; they remove their sweaters, shoes, socks, and pants. They meet in an embrace and lay down. Alan gets on top of Jill, ready to have sex, but suddenly the Equus Noise fills the air. Alan goes stiff and "stares straight ahead."

As sexual encounters go, Jill is remarkably tender and considerate. And she clearly has the sense that Alan's nerves are just the nerves of someone who is new to sex. But of course it is Alan's religious connections to the horses that get in the way, as even in the moment when he might be expected to be overwhelmed by sex he is in fact overwhelmed by the Equus noise.

Dysart asks Alan what happened next, and Alan responds that he "put it in her." Dysart, disbelieving, tries to get Alan to elaborate on the sex act, and then demands that the boy tell the truth. Alan screams at the doctor and collapses in anguish. He confesses that he couldn't bring himself to have sex with Jill because "*He* was in the way." Every time he touched Jill, he felt Equus instead. "I couldn't feel *her* flesh at all!" he exclaims. "I wanted the foam off his neck." Alan can no longer bring himself to kiss the girl.

Alan's inability to get an erection and have sex with Jill is the catalyst for his eventual blinding of the horses in Dalton's stable. His distress when describing the experience to Dysart indicates his intense shame and frustration. Alan's confession that Equus was "in the way" and that he wanted the "foam" from its neck implies that the horse remains his true sexual obsession.

Jill sits up and asks Alan what the matter is, but Alan runs into a corner and crouches down, horrified and embarrassed. Jill tries to soothe him, saying that nothing is wrong, and she doesn't mind if they don't have sex. But Alan yells at her, demanding that she leave, even threatening her with the **hoof-pick**. Jill insists that she is Alan's friend and that he shouldn't feel any pressure to have sex. She suggests that they lie down together and talk, but Alan insists that she leave. Jill puts on her clothes, and Alan warns her that she had better not tell anyone about this encounter. Jill reassures him that she won't. She tenderly bids him goodnight, but Alan "turns on her, hissing." Terrified, Jill runs out of the stable.

Jill's kindness and understanding toward Alan shows that beyond being attracted to him, she genuinely likes Alan and wants to befriend him. Her insistence that Alan should not feel embarrassed also demonstrates how much more comfortable she is discussing sex, and offers a general possibility for a less shame-ridden view of sex than that held by either Alan or by someone like Frank. But Alan, in what seems to be a kind of double shame both at his failure to be normal and his failure to be true to Equus, can't experience such kindness. He is overcome by shame.

Scene 34. Alone now, and still naked, Alan hears Equus laughing and mocking him. He begs Equus to forgive him; kneeling down, he promises that he will "never do it again." Dysart asks Alan what Equus says in response. Alan whispers the **horse**-god's words: "I see you. I see you. Always! Everywhere! Forever!" Dysart then channels the voice of Equus. "Lie with anyone and I will see," he says to Alan; "You will see ME—and you will FAIL!" Alan is ashamed and frightened; he clutches his body as horses surround him and the Equus Noise increases.

In this scene we see a crueler side of Equus than we have previously seen. Equus is not only the object of Alan's sexual worship; he also judges Alan's actions, mocks him for being inadequate, and punishes him for being unfaithful. Equus's threat that he is always watching and judging echoes the Christian notion that the Lord is a jealous god—that there is only one true god and any false idols are not of that god.

Terrified, Alan exclaims that Equus sees him with "[w]hite eyes—never closed." However, after a pause, he steels himself and quietly says, "No more, Equus." Alan picks up the **hoof-pick** and walks slowly to Nugget. He strokes the **horse**, talking to him gently, before stabbing out his eyes. The theater is filled with screams and stamps as Alan slashes the eyes of the other horses in the stable. The square "is filled with cannoning, blinded horses"; Alan is among them, running and flailing to avoid them. Eventually the horses "plunge off into darkness" and the Equus Noise dies out. Alan falls to the ground, hysterical. Stabbing at his eyes, he begs Equus to find and kill him.

Alan seeks to free himself from the religion he has created, presumably because he wants to escape this constant judgment and to be a normal person in society. But, of course, his attempt to do this is unsuccessful. Alan's mutilation of the horses can also be understood as a self-mutilation—for his attempt to kill Equus is also an attempt to destroy the most important part of his life. Alan ultimately finds this task impossible and extremely painful, and wishes death on himself.

Scene 35. Dysart wraps a blanket around the convulsing boy and lays him down on a bed, trying to comfort him. He tells Alan that the worst of it is over now, and that he will get well—no more nightmares, no more Equus. He soothes him until the boy falls asleep. Then he stands and moves to center stage. "I'm lying to you, Alan," he says. "When Equus finally leaves—if he leaves at all—it will be with your intestines in his teeth." Dysart says that if Alan knew any better, he would run away from the hospital to escape the treatment.

Dysart presents his treatment as something that can finish what Alan could not do himself. But the psychiatrist knows that, like the blinded horses who have lost their sight, the treatment will leave Alan lacking. In his case, it is not his sight he will lose but his passion, his "guts." the core of Alan's selfhood. Dysart presents himself here as someone who will do the duty society gives him, as the "priest of the normal."

Hesther speaks up from her bench upstage: she says that the boy is in pain, and that Dysart can relieve him. Is that not enough? "*All right! I'll take it away!*" the psychiatrist shouts. But what happens next? He says that his goal may be to turn Alan into "a caring citizen—a worshipper of abstract and unifying God," but the treatment will probably turn Alan into a "ghost." Dysart walks around the square, addressing the audience. He says that he can heal Alan and let him reenter the "Normal world where animals are treated *properly*: made extinct, or put into servitude, or tethered all their lives in dim light, just to feed it." From now on, Alan will "feel nothing at his fork but Approved Flesh." But his life, as a result, will be passionless.

Dysart's direct address to the audience encourages the audience to think critically about Alan's situation and engage in debate. The fact that Hesther speaks up from her bench furthers this effect; it is almost as if she is speaking from outside the bounds of the play. In his final speech, Dysart highlights the ironies of modern society. We perceive Alan's crime as horrendous and unforgivable, yet we think it is "normal" to make animals our slaves. His point is that what is considered normal is not necessarily any more moral or good or right than what we consider immoral. And so, he asks whether it is worth it to make Alan "normal" when the price is the unique passion Alan experiences, even if there is pain as part of that passion.

Dysart addresses Alan, who is still asleep. "You won't gallop any more, Alan," he says. "You will, however, be without pain." He then turns to the theater and confesses that the voice of Equus still haunts him, asking Dysart, "Why Me? ... Account for me!" He says that he surrenders, that he does not know what his purpose is in life: "In an ultimate sense I cannot know what I do in this place—yet I do ultimate things." Bewildered by the irrationality of human nature and of his own practice, Dysart describes himself as "stand[ing] in the dark with a **pick** in my hand, striking at heads!" Dysart sits down on a bench and reflects that he needs "a way of seeing in the dark." He comments that he feels a "sharp chain" in his mouth that will never be removed. He stares out into the darkness of the theater until blackout.

Dysart ends the play completely disenchanted with his job as a psychiatrist and with modern society's presumption that it knows how people should behave. The fact that Dysart does not know what his purpose is in the world rubs uncomfortably with the fact that it is his job to guide other people toward how they should think and feel about themselves. Dysart's description of himself with a hoof-pick is a direct echo of Alan's crime. The psychiatrist believes that he practices a kind of violence on his patients: he destroys their true selves, he blinds them to themselves, and does not really know why. The bit that he feels in his mouth symbolizes Dysart's powerlessness as a subject under the control of societal pressures and norms.

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